Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Dying Hours

Written by Mark Billingham

Published by Little, Brown

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE DYING HOURS

Mark Billingham



Little, Brown

LITTLE, BROWN

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Little, Brown

Copyright © Mark Billingham Ltd 2013

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978-1-84744-423-3
Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-84744-424-0

Typeset in Plantin by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Little, Brown are from well-managed forests and other responsible sources.



Little, Brown
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

For Katie. I could not be more proud.

Revenge is a kind of grace ...

Tim Lott, *Under the Same Stars*

PROLOGUE

How much blood?

When he'd finally found the right website, once he'd waded through all the mealy-mouthed crap about having something to live for and trying to seek some kind of professional help, once he'd found a site that really told him what he needed to know, that was the one question they hadn't answered. All the other stuff was there: How and where to cut, the bathwater helping when it came to raising the body temperature and engorging the veins or whatever it was. Keeping the flow going . . .

It was irritating, because once he'd decided what he was going to do he was keen to get everything right. To have all the information at his fingertips. So, how much blood did the body have to lose before . . . the end? Pints of the stuff, presumably. It certainly looks to have lost a fair amount already. He watches the clouds of claret swirl in the water, sees it sink and spin until finally there isn't an inch of water that isn't red. Until he can't see the knife on the bottom of the bath anymore.

Shocking, just how much of it there is.

He thinks about this for a few minutes more and finally

decides that in the end, it doesn't really matter. He might not know exactly how much blood will need to be lost, how many pints or litres or whatever it is now, but there is one obvious answer and it'll certainly do.

Enough.

Not painful either, at least not after the initial cuts which had definitely stung a bit. He'd read that it was a pretty peaceful way to go, certainly compared to some and they weren't an option anyway. This was perfect. Messy, but perfect.

There's another question he's been wrestling with on and off since he'd made his mind up and as far as he knows there isn't any website that can give him so much as a clue with this one.

What comes afterwards?

He's never been remotely religious, never had any truck with God-botherers, but right now he can't help wondering. Now, sitting where he is. Christ on a bike, had the water level actually *risen*? Was there really *that* much blood?

So . . . the afterwards, the whatever-ever-after, the afterlife.

Nothing, probably. That was what he'd always thought, just darkness, like when you're asleep and not dreaming about anything. No bad thing, he reckons, not considering the shit most people wade through their whole lives, but even so, it might be nice if there was a bit more going on than that. Not clouds and harps, choirs and all that carry-on, but, you know . . . peace or whatever.

Yeah, peace would be all right. Quiet.

He looks up when the man in the bath, the man who is actually doing all the bleeding, starts to moan again.

'Shush. I've told you, haven't I?'

The man in the bath moves, his pale body squeaking against the bottom of the tub. He begins to thrash and cry out, blubbing and blowing snot bubbles, spraying blood across the tiles and sending waves of bright red water sloshing out on to the bathmat.

The man watching him adjusts his position on the toilet seat and moves his feet to avoid the water. ‘Take it easy,’ he says. He gently lays his magazine to one side and leans towards the figure in the bath. ‘Why don’t you calm down, old son, and have another mouthful of that Scotch?’ He nods towards the blood-smeared bottle at the end of the bath. ‘It’ll help, I read that. Just have another drink and close your eyes and let yourself drift off, eh?’ He reaches for his magazine.

‘Soon be over, I promise . . . ’

PART ONE

CROSSING THE BRIDGE

ONE

Tom Thorne leaned down and gently lifted the small glass bottle from the bedside table. It was already open, the white cap lying next to the syringe, a few drops of cloudy liquid pooled beneath the tip of the needle. He raised the bottle and took a sniff. The faint smell was unfamiliar; something like sticking plasters or disinfectant. He offered it up to the woman waiting behind him, raised it towards her face.

'What do you reckon?'

He had spent the last half an hour taking a good look around the house. In the bathroom he had found plenty of medication, but that was not particularly surprising given the ages of those involved. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed and there were no signs of forced entry, save for the broken window in the back door. That was down to the woman now taking a good long sniff at the bottle, a young PC named Nina Woodley. She and her partner had been the first officers at the scene after the dispatch had been sent out.

'That's insulin,' Woodley said, finally. 'My brother's a diabetic, so . . . '

Thorne put the bottle back. He pulled off the thin plastic gloves and stuffed them back into the pocket of his Met vest.

'Thing is,' Woodley said, 'it's normally prescribed.'

'So?'

'There's no label on the bottle.'

They both turned as the bedroom door opened and one of the PCs who had been stationed downstairs stuck his head around it. Before the officer could speak, the on-call doctor pushed past him into the room; young, rosy-cheeked and rugger-bugger-ish. He spent no more than a few minutes examining the bodies, while Thorne watched from the corner of the room. Downstairs, Woodley hammered a small piece of MDF in place across the broken window downstairs while another PC made tea for everyone.

'Right then,' the doctor said. He closed his bag and checked his watch to get an accurate time for the pronouncement. 'Life extinct.' He sounded rather more cheerful than anyone had a right to be at quarter to four on a drizzly October morning.

Thorne nodded, the formalities out of the way.

'Nice easy one for you.'

'How long?' Thorne asked.

The doctor glanced back at the bodies, as though one final look might make the difference. 'At least twenty-four hours, probably a bit more.'

'Sounds about right,' Thorne said. The emergency call had come in just after 1.00 a.m. One of the children – a man, now living in Edinburgh – was concerned that he had not been able to get either of his parents on the phone since teatime the previous day. Neither of his parents was reliable when it came to answering their mobile phones, he had told the operator, but there was no reason why they should not be picking up at home.

Searching the house an hour before, Thorne had found both

mobiles, side by side in the living room. Half a dozen missed calls on each.

'Assuming they go to bed nine, ten o'clock,' the doctor said, 'dead pretty soon after that, I would have thought. Obviously it depends on what they did, how long they waited before . . . you know, but insulin's a good way to do it. The right dosage and it's all over in about an hour.'

'Right.'

'Very popular with doctors, as a matter of fact. As a way to go, I mean. If you're that way inclined.'

Thorne nodded, thinking that coppers were more likely to be 'that way inclined' than almost anybody else he could think of. Wondering how most of them would choose to do it.

How *he* would choose to do it.

The door opened again and Woodley appeared. 'CID's here.'

'Here we go,' Thorne said. 'Fun and games.'

'I'll leave you to it then,' the doctor said.

Thorne said, 'Right, thanks,' and watched the doctor gather up his jacket from the corner of the bed and leave the room without bothering to close the door. Pills, most probably, Thorne decided, but he guessed that if he were feeling desperate enough, then he might have other ideas.

Just a shame that the quickest ways were also the messiest.

He turned back to look at the bodies on the bed.

They look tired, Thorne thought. Like they'd had enough. Paper-thin skin on the woman's face. The man: spider webs of cracked veins on his cheeks . . .

He could already hear the voices from the hall below; a bored-sounding, mockney twang: 'Up here, is it?' Heavy footsteps on the stairs, before the man appeared in the doorway and stood, taking a cursory look around the room.

Detective Inspector Paul Binns was based at Lewisham police station, as Thorne was, though CID worked on a different floor,

so their paths had crossed no more than a few times in the three months Thorne had been working there. Binns was several years younger than Thorne, somewhere in his mid-forties, and he was carrying a lot less weight. He had shaved what little hair he had left to the scalp and over-compensated for the appearance and demeanour of a cartoon undertaker with a grey suit and a tie that might have been a test for colour blindness. He gave Thorne a nod and walked over to the bed as though he were browsing in the furniture department of John Lewis.

'So?' he asked after a minute. 'What am I doing here?'

Before Thorne could answer, a message came through from one of his team's patrol cars. Things were kicking off at a house party on the Kidbourne estate and it was suggested that Thorne might want to get down there. He said that he was still tied up, ordered two more units to head across, then turned the volume on his radio down. 'I told one of my constables to call you,' he said.

'Yeah, I know why I'm here.' The nod from the doorway had clearly been as polite as the detective intended to get. He pointed towards the bodies, straightened his cuffs. 'Seems fairly straightforward, doesn't it?'

What the doctor had said.

Thorne moved to join Binns at the end of the bed. 'There's something off.'

Binns folded his arms, barely suppressed a long-suffering sigh. 'Go on then, let's hear it.'

'The old woman took her teeth out,' Thorne said.

'What?'

'False teeth. Top set. They're in a plastic case in the bathroom, probably the same place she leaves them every night.'

'So?'

'You take your teeth out when you're going to bed. When you're going to sleep, right? That's what you do on an ordinary

night, isn't it? It's not what you'd do if you were planning to do . . . this. It's not what you'd do if you and your old man were going to take an overdose of insulin and drift off to sleep in each other's arms. Not if you knew you weren't ever going to wake up.'

Binns stared at him.

'It's not how she would have wanted to be *found*,' Thorne said.

'You knew her, did you?' Binns shook his head, sniffed, snapped his fingers. 'Next!'

Thorne took a breath, took care to keep his voice nice and even. 'Where did they get the insulin from? There's no label on the bottle, so it obviously wasn't prescribed. Nothing anywhere else in the house to suggest either of them was diabetic.'

'They could have got it anywhere.'

'So could a third party.'

'I'm not exactly getting excited here.'

'Where did it come from?'

'How should I know?' Binns said. 'Internet? I saw there was a computer downstairs.'

'I don't think so.'

'Come on, you can find anything on there, you look hard enough.'

'Maybe.'

'You decide to top yourself, you find a way, don't you?'

Thorne said nothing.

'That it, then?' Binns asked. 'The false choppers and the insulin? Seriously?'

Thorne stared down again at the bodies of John and Margaret Cooper, aged seventy-five and seventy-three respectively. The duvet had been pulled up high, but it was obvious that Margaret Copper's arm was wrapped around her husband's chest, her face pressed against his shoulder. Spoons, he thought. Couples 'spooned' in some of the old songs his mother had listened to, crooning love's tune or whatever it was; the same songs this pair

might have heard on the radio when they were teenagers. The old woman's mouth hung slightly open. The cheeks, hollowed. The top lip sucked in towards the gap where the plate would otherwise have been. Her husband's lips were curled back, yellowing teeth showing, a sliver of greyish tongue just visible. His eyes were screwed tightly shut.

They had died pressed close to one another, but Thorne could not pretend that they looked remotely peaceful.

'Anything else?' Binns asked. 'I've got paperwork I could be getting on with.'

There *was* something. Thorne *knew* there was.

His eye had taken something in within those few seconds of entering the room for the first time: a piece of visual information that had not quite made sense, but which his brain had so far failed to process fully. A shape or a shadow, a *something* that was wrong. It stubbornly refused to come to him, like a tune he recognised but could not place.

Without making it too obvious, he looked around the room again.

The wardrobe, closed. The curtains, drawn. Cosmetics and other bits and pieces on the dressing table: hairbrush, wallet, wet-wipes. A few coins in a small china bowl. A woman's dressing gown draped across one chair, a man's clothes neatly folded on another. Shoes and slippers underneath. A biro, book and glasses case on the wife's bedside table, a paperback book of crossword puzzles on the floor by the side of the bed, a large black handbag hung on the bedstead. The bottle and syringe on the husband's side. A half-empty water glass. A tube of ointment, a can of Deep Heat . . .

What was wrong with the picture?

'There isn't a note,' Thorne said.

Binns turned round, leaned back against the bedstead. 'You know that means nothing,' he said.

Thorne knew very well, but it had been the best he could come up with while he tried and failed to identify what was really bothering him. His friend Phil Hendricks had told him a great deal about suicide during the last investigation they had worked on together . . . the last case Thorne had worked as a detective. The pathologist had recently attended a seminar on the subject and delighted in giving Thorne chapter and verse. The fact was that in the majority of cases, people who killed themselves did not leave notes. One of the many myths.

'I know what you're doing, by the way,' Binns said.

'Oh, you do?' Thorne ignored the burst of twitter from his radio. Reports of a suspected burglary in Brockley. The violence escalating at the house party on the Kidbourne. 'I'm all ears.'

Binns smiled. 'Yeah, I mean considering where you were before and where you are *now* . . . it makes perfect sense that you're going a bit stir crazy, or whatever. Only natural that you might want to make something ordinary like this into . . . something else.' He casually checked the mobile phone that had not left his hand. 'I understand, mate. I sympathise, honest.'

Patronise, Thorne thought.

'If I was in your position, *Christ* knows what I'd be doing.'

'You'd be getting pissed off with smartarse detectives who think they know it all.'

'Really?' Binns feigned a shocked expression. 'What type did *you* used to be then?'

Thorne wrapped his hand around the old-fashioned metal bedstead and squeezed. 'I want to get the HAT car round,' he said.

It was the job of detectives on the Homicide Assessment Team to evaluate any possible crime scene and to collect vital evidence where necessary before handing the case over. It was solely their decision as to whether or not a 'sudden' death had occurred. A *suspicious* death.

'Well, you know how *that* works.' Binns walked across and leaned back against a wall next to an old-fashioned dressing table. 'Different system these days. Between your lot and my lot, I mean. Different to your day anyway, I would have thought.'

'You'd have thought right,' Thorne said.

Your day. Nearly twenty-five years since Tom Thorne had pulled on the 'Queen's Cloth' every day to go to work. Since he'd worn a uniform.

Crisp white shirt with his two shiny inspector's pips on the epaulettes.

Black, clip-on tie.

The fucking cap . . .

'It's my decision,' Binns said. 'Whether or not to bring the HAT team in.'

'I know how it works,' Thorne said.

Binns told him anyway. 'Only a Detective Inspector can make that call.'

'Got it,' Thorne said. 'So, on you go.' Binns had been right to suggest that the procedure had been somewhat different two decades earlier. The protocol a little more flexible. The chain of command not followed quite so religiously. There might have been a few less backsides covered, but it was certainly quicker.

'Frankly, I can't really see the point.'

'Can't you?' Thorne said.

'That stuff about the false teeth is near enough laughable and I don't think anyone's going to give a toss where the insulin came from.' Binns cast an eye around the room and shrugged. 'I pull Homicide in here and they're only going to say the same thing, aren't they? You know, we both end up looking like idiots.'

'All the same,' Thorne said, 'I'd be happier if you made the call.'

Binns shook his head. 'Not going to happen.'

'Right,' Thorne said. He could feel the blood rising to his face. 'Because of where *you* are and where *I* am. Prick . . . '

Binns reddened too, just a little, but otherwise gave a good impression of being impervious to an insult he'd clearly been on the receiving end of before. 'You think whatever you like, pal, but I'm not going to waste anybody else's time just because you're seeing murders where there aren't any.' He walked towards the door, then turned. 'Maybe you should have taken a bit more time off after what happened. Maybe you should have chucked it in altogether. King of all cock-ups, that one.'

Thorne could not really argue, so did not bother trying.

'Take this up with the MIT boys if you want,' Binns said, gesturing back towards the bed. 'You've got a Murder Investigation Team at Lewisham, haven't you? A nice big one.'

A team just like the one Thorne used to be part of. 'Yeah, well, I might just do that.'

'I mean it's up to you, if you want even more people taking the piss.'

Thorne was suddenly more aware than usual of the various *pro-active* items attached to his Met vest.

Cuffs, baton, CS gas . . .

'I'll be off then,' Binns said, straightening his cuffs one final time. 'Leave you to wind this up.' The detective turned away and was checking his BlackBerry again as he walked out of the bedroom.

Thorne took half a minute, let his breathing return to normal, then bellowed for Woodley. He told her to contact Lothian and Borders police and get someone to deliver the death message to the Coopers' son in Edinburgh. He told her to find out if the dead couple had any other children, and, if so, to make sure the message was delivered to them wherever they were. He told her to stay put until the on-call Coroner's officer arrived.

‘Try not to disturb anything in this room though,’ he said. ‘Not just yet.’

Woodley raised an eyebrow. ‘Guv.’

Thorne took one last look round, grabbed his raincoat and cap then hurried downstairs and out to the car. No more than a few minutes with the blues and twos to the Kidbourne and if things were still lively he really felt like wading in. There was every chance he would find himself on the end of a smack or two, but it could not make him feel any worse.