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Written by James Oswald

Published by Penguin Books

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Natural Causes

JAMES OSWALD



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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

Published in electronic edition by Penguin Books 2012
Published in this edition 2013
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Set in 12.5/14.75 pt Garamond MT
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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ISBN: 978–1–405–91314–0

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

To my parents, David and Juliet.
I wish you were here to share in this.

1

He shouldn't have stopped. It wasn't his case. He wasn't even on duty. But there was something about the blue flashing lights, the Scene of Crime van and uniforms setting up barriers that Detective Inspector Anthony McLean could never resist.

He'd grown up in this neighbourhood, this rich part of town with its detached houses surrounded by large walled gardens. Old money lived here, and old money knew how to protect its own. You were very unlikely to see a vagrant wandering these streets, never mind a serious crime, but now two patrol cars blocked the entrance to a substantial house and a uniformed officer was busy unwrapping blue and white tape. McLean fished out his warrant card as he approached.

'What's going on?'

'There's been a murder, sir. That's all anyone's told me.' The constable tied off the tape and started on another length. McLean looked up the sweeping gravel drive towards the house. A SOC van had backed halfway up, its doors wide; a line of uniforms inched their way across the lawn, eyes down in search of clues. It wouldn't hurt to have a look, see if there was anything he could do to help. He knew the area, after all. He ducked under the tape and made his way up the drive.

Past the battered white van, a sleek black Bentley glinted in the evening light. Alongside it, a rusty old Mondeo lowered the tone. McLean knew the car, knew its owner all too well. Detective Chief Inspector Charles Duguid was not his favourite superior officer. If this was one of his investigations, then the deceased must have been important. That would explain the large number of uniforms drafted in, too.

'What the fuck are you doing here?'

McLean turned to the familiar voice. Duguid was considerably older than him, mid-fifties at least; his once-red hair now thin and greying, his face florid and lined. White paper overalls pulled down to his waist and tied in a knot beneath his sagging gut, he had about him the air of a man who's just nipped out for a fag.

'I was in the neighbourhood, saw the patrol cars in the lane.'

'And you thought you'd stick your nose in, eh? What're you doing here anyway?'

'I didn't mean to butt in to your investigation, sir. I just thought, well, since I grew up in the area, I might've been able to help.'

Duguid let out an audible sigh, his shoulders sagging theatrically.

'Oh well. You're here. Might as well make yourself useful. Go and talk to that pathologist friend of yours. See what wonderful insights he's come up with this time.'

McLean started towards the front door, but was stopped by Duguid's hand catching him tight around the arm.

'And make sure you report back to me when you're

done. I don't want you sloping off before we've wrapped this up.'

The inside of the house was almost painfully bright after the soft city darkness descending outside. McLean entered a large hall through a smaller, but still substantial, porch. Inside, a chaos of SOC officers bustled about in white paper boilersuits, dusting for fingerprints, photographing everything. Before he could get more than a couple of steps, a harassed young woman handed him a rolled-up white bundle. He didn't recognise her; a new recruit to the team.

'You'll want to put these on if you're going in there, sir.' She motioned behind her with a quick jab of her thumb to an open door on the far side of the hallway. 'It's an awful mess. You'd no' want to ruin your suit.'

'Or contaminate any potential evidence.' McLean thanked her, pulling on the paper overalls and slipping the plastic covers over his shoes before heading for the door, keeping to the raised walkway the SOC team had laid out across the polished wood floor. Voices muttered from inside, so he stepped in.

It was a gentleman's library, leather-bound books lining the walls in their dark mahogany shelves. An antique desk sat between two tall windows, its top clear save for a blotter and a mobile phone. Two high-backed leather armchairs were arranged either side of an ornate fireplace, facing the unlit fire. The one on the left was unoccupied, some items of clothing neatly folded and placed across the arm. McLean crossed the room and stepped around the other chair, his attention immediately

drawn to the figure sitting in it, his nose wrinkling at the foul stench.

The man looked almost calm, his hands resting lightly on the arms of the chair, his feet slightly apart on the floor. His face was pale, eyes staring straight ahead with a glazed expression. Black blood spilled from his closed mouth, dribbling down his chin, and at first McLean thought he was wearing some kind of dark velvet coat. Then he saw the guts, blue-grey shiny coils slipping down onto the Persian rug on the floor. Not velvet, not a coat. Two white-clad figures crouched beside them, seemingly unwilling to trust their knees to the blood-soaked carpet.

'Christ on a stick.' McLean covered his mouth and nose against the iron tang of blood and the richer smell of human ordure. One of the figures looked around and he recognised the city pathologist, Angus Cadwallader.

'Ah, Tony. Come to join the party have you?' He stood, handing something slippery to his assistant. 'Take that will you, Tracy.'

'Barnaby Smythe.' McLean stepped closer.

'I didn't realise you knew him,' Cadwallader said.

'Oh, yes. I knew him. Not well, I mean. I've never been in this place before. But sweet Jesus, what happened to him?'

'Didn't Dagwood brief you?'

McLean looked around, expecting to see the chief inspector close behind and wincing at the casual use of Duguid's nickname. But apart from the assistant and the deceased, they were alone in the room.

'He wasn't too pleased to see me, actually. Thinks I want to steal his glory again.'

'And do you?'

'No. I was just off up to my gran's place. Noticed the cars . . .' McLean saw the pathologist's smile and shut up.

'How is Esther, by the way? Any improvement?'

'Not really, no. I'll be seeing her later. If I don't get stuck here, that is.'

'Well, I wonder what she'd have made of this mess.' Cadwallader waved a blood-smeared, gloved hand at the remains of what had once been a man.

'I've no idea. Something gruesome I'm sure. You pathologists are all alike. So tell me what happened, Angus.'

'As far as I can tell, he's not been tied down or restrained in any way, which would suggest he was dead when this was done. But there's too much blood for his heart not to have been beating when he was first cut open, so he was most likely drugged. We'll know when we get the toxicology report back. Actually most of the blood's come from this.' He pointed to a loose red flap of skin circling the dead man's neck. 'And judging by the spray on the legs and the side of the chair, that was done after his entrails were removed. I'm guessing the killer did that to get them out of the way whilst he poked about inside. Major internal organs all seem to be in place except for a chunk of his spleen, which is missing.'

'There's something in his mouth, sir,' the assistant said, standing up with a creak of protest from her knees. Cadwallader shouted for the photographer, then bent forward, forcing his fingers between the dead man's lips and prising his jaw apart. He reached in and pulled a slimy, red, smooth mess out of it. McLean felt the bile rise in his gorge and tried not to retch as the pathologist held the organ up to the light.

'Ah, there it is. Excellent.'

Night had fallen by the time McLean made it back out of the house. It was never truly dark in the city; too many street lights casting the thin haze of pollution with a hellish, orange glow. But at least the stifling August heat had seeped away, leaving a freshness behind it that was a welcome relief from the foul stench inside. His feet crunched on the gravel as he stared up at the sky, hopelessly looking for stars, or any reason why someone would tear out an old man's guts and feed him his own spleen.

'Well?' The tone was unmistakable, and came with a sour odour of stale tobacco smoke. McLean turned to see Chief Inspector Duguid. He'd ditched the overalls and was once more wearing his trademark over-large suit. Even in the semi-darkness McLean could see the shiny patches where the fabric had worn smooth over the years.

'Most probable cause of death was massive blood loss, his neck was cut from ear to ear. Angus . . . Dr Cadwallader reckons time of death was somewhere in the late afternoon, early evening. Between four and seven. The victim wasn't restrained, so must have been drugged. We'll know more once the toxicology screening's done.'

'I know all that, McLean. I've got eyes. Tell me about Barnaby Smythe. Who'd cut him up like that?'

'I didn't really know Mr Smythe all that well, sir. He kept himself to himself. Today's the first time I've ever been in his house.'

'But you used to scrump apples from his garden when you were a boy, I suppose.'

McLean bit back the retort he wanted to give. He was used to Duguid's taunting, but he didn't see why he should have to put up with it when he was trying to help.

'So what do you know about the man?' Duguid asked.

'He was a merchant banker, but he must have retired by now. I read somewhere that he donated several million to the new wing of the National Museum.'

Duguid sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. 'I was hoping for something a bit more useful than that. Don't you know anything about his social life? His friends and enemies?'

'Not really, sir. No. Like I said, he's retired, must be eighty at least. I don't mix much in those circles. My gran would have known him, but she's not exactly in a position to help. She had a stroke, you know.'

Duguid snorted unsympathetically. 'Then you're no bloody use to me, are you. Go on, get out of here. Go back to your rich friends and enjoy your evening off.' He turned away and stalked towards a group of uniforms huddling together smoking. McLean was happy to let him go, then remembered the chief inspector's earlier warning about sloping off.

'Do you want me to prepare a report for you, sir?' he shouted at Duguid's back.

'No I bloody well don't.' Duguid turned on his heel, his face shadowed, eyes glinting in the reflected light of the street lamps. 'This is my investigation, McLean. Now fuck off out of my crime scene.'

2

The Western General Hospital smelled of illness; that mixture of disinfectant, warm air and leaked bodily fluids that clung to your clothes if you spent more than ten minutes in the place. The nurses at reception recognised him, smiling and nodding him through without a word. One of them was Barbara and the other Heather, but he was damned if he could remember who was who. They never seemed to be apart for long enough to work it out, and staring at the too-small badges on their chests was just embarrassing.

McLean walked as quietly as the squeaky linoleum floor would allow along the soulless corridors; past shuffling men in skimpy hospital smocks, clutching their wheeled intravenous drip stands with arthritic claws; busy nurses weaving their way from one crisis to another; pallid junior doctors looking like they were about to drop from exhaustion. It had all long since ceased to shock him, he'd been coming here that long.

The ward he was looking for was at a quiet end of the hospital, tucked away from the hustle and bustle. It was a nice room, with windows looking out over the Firth of Forth to Fife. It always struck him as a bit daft, really. This would be a better place to put people recovering from major operations or something. Instead it was home to those patients who couldn't care less about the view or

the quiet. He wedged open the door with a fire extinguisher, so the distant hum of activity would follow him, then stepped into the semi-darkness.

She lay propped up on several pillows, her eyes closed as if she were sleeping. Wires flowed from her head to a bedside monitor, which ticked a slow, steady rhythm. A single tube dripped clear liquid into her wrinkled and liver-spotted arm and a slim white continuous pulse monitor was clamped onto one withered finger. McLean pulled up a chair and sat down, taking his gran's free hand and staring at her once-proud and lively face.

'I saw Angus earlier. He was asking after you.' He spoke softly, no longer sure she could hear him. Her hand was cool, room temperature. Apart from the mechanical rising and falling of her chest, his grandmother didn't move at all.

'How long have you been in here now? Eighteen months is it?' Her cheeks had shrunk away more since the last time he had visited her, and someone had cut her hair badly, making her skull look even more skeletal.

'I used to think you'd wake up eventually, and it would all be the same. But now I'm not sure. What is there for you to wake up to?'

She didn't answer; he hadn't heard her voice in over a year and a half. Not since she had phoned him that evening, saying she didn't feel well. He remembered the ambulance, the paramedics, locking up the empty house. But he couldn't remember her face when he had found her, unconscious in her armchair by the fire. The months had wasted her away, and he had watched her fade until all he knew was this shadow of the woman who had raised him since he was four.

'Who's done this. Honestly.' McLean looked around, startled by the noise. A nurse stood in the doorway, struggling to remove the fire extinguisher. She flustered in, looking around and then finally seeing him.

'Oh, Mr McLean. I'm so sorry. I didn't see you there.'

Soft Western Isles accent, her pale face topped with a bob of flame-red hair. She wore the uniform of a ward sister and McLean was sure he knew her name. Jane or Jenny or something. He thought he knew the names of almost all the nurses in the hospital, either from work or his regular visits to this quiet little ward. But for the life of him, as she stood staring, he couldn't remember hers.

'It's OK,' he said, standing up. 'I was just going.' He turned back to the comatose figure, releasing her cold hand. 'I'll come see you again soon, Gran. I promise.'

'D'you know, you're the only person who comes here to visit regularly,' the nurse said. McLean looked around the ward, noting the other beds with their silent, motionless occupants. It was creepy, in a way. Queued up for the morgue. Waiting patiently for the Grim Reaper to get around to them.

'Don't they have family?' he asked, nodding his head in the direction of the other patients.

'Sure, but they don't visit. Oh they come at first. Sometimes every day for a week or two. Even a month. But over time the gaps get longer and longer. Mr Smith over there's not had a visitor since May. But you come here every week.'

'She doesn't have anyone else.'

'Well, still. It's not everyone would do what you do.'

McLean didn't know what to say. Yes, he came to visit

whenever he could, but he never stayed long. Not like his gran, who was condemned to spend the rest of her days in this quiet hell.

'I have to go,' he said, making for the door. 'I'm sorry about the fire extinguisher.' He stooped, lifting it back onto its hook on the wall. 'And thank you.'

'For what?'

'For looking after her. I think she would have liked you.'

The taxi dropped him off at the end of the drive. McLean stood for a while in the evening coolness, watching the steam of the retreating exhaust dissipate into nothing. A lone cat strode confidently across the road not more than twenty yards away, then stopped suddenly as if realising it was being watched. Its sleek head moved from side to side, sharp eyes scanning the scene until it spotted him. Threat detected and assessed, it sat down in the middle of the road and began licking a paw.

He leant against the nearest in a line of trees that burst through the paving slabs like the end of civilisation, and watched. The street was quiet at the best of times, almost silent at this hour. Just the background quiet roar of the city to remind him that life went on. An animal shriek in the distance stopped the cat mid-lick. It peered at McLean to see whether he had made the noise, then trotted off, disappearing into a nearby walled garden with an effortless leap.

Turning back to the driveway, McLean faced the blank edifice of his grandmother's house, the dark windows as empty as the old lady's coma-shrunk face. Eyes shutter-closed against the never-dark night. Visiting the

hospital was a duty he undertook willingly, but coming here felt more like a chore. The house he'd grown up in was long gone, the life of the place leached out of it as surely as it had been leached out of his grandmother until there was nothing left but bones of stone and memories gone sour. He half wished the cat would come back; any company right now would be welcome. But he knew it was really just a distraction. He'd come here to do a job; might as well get on with it.

A week's worth of junk mail littered the front hallway. McLean scooped it up and took it through to the library. Most of the furniture was covered in white sheets, adding to the other-worldliness of the house, but his grandmother's desk was still clear. He checked the phone for messages, deleting the telesales offerings without bothering to listen to them. Should probably switch the machine off, really, but you never knew if some old family friend might be trying to get in touch. The junk mail went into the bin, which he noticed would need emptying soon. There were two bills that he'd have to remember to forward on to the solicitors dealing with his grandmother's affairs. Just the walk-around and he could go home. Maybe even get some sleep.

McLean had never really been afraid of the dark. Perhaps it was because the monsters had come when he was four, taken his parents away from him. The worst had happened and he'd survived. After that, the darkness held no fear. And yet he found himself switching lights on so that he never had to cross a room in darkness. The house was large, far larger than one elderly lady needed. Most of the neighbouring houses had been turned into at least two

apartments, but this one still held out, and with a substantial walled garden surrounding it. Christ alone knew what it was worth; one more thing he'd have to worry about in the fullness of time. Unless his grandmother had left everything to some cat charity. That wouldn't really surprise him; definitely her style.

He stopped, hand reaching up to flick off the light switch, and realised it was the first time he'd thought about the consequences of her being dead. The possibility of her dying. Sure, it had always been there, lurking at the back of his mind, but all the months he'd been visiting her in the hospital it had been with the thought that eventually there would be some improvement in her condition. Today, for whatever reason, he had finally accepted that wasn't going to happen. It was both sad and oddly relieving.

And then his eyes noticed where he was.

His grandmother's bedroom was not the largest in the house, but it was still probably bigger than McLean's entire Newington flat. He stepped into the room, running a hand over the bed still made up with the sheets she'd slept in the night before she'd had her stroke. He opened up wardrobes to reveal clothes she'd never wear again, then crossed the room to where a Japanese silk dressing gown had been thrown over the chair that stood in front of her dressing table. A hairbrush lying bristles up held strands of her hair; long white filaments that glinted in the harsh yellow-white glow of the lights reflected in an antique mirror. A few bottles of scent were arranged on a small silver tray to one side of it, a couple of ornately framed photographs to the other. This was his

grandmother's most private space. He'd been in here before, sent to fetch something as a boy or nipping through to the bathroom to pinch a bar of soap, but he'd never lingered, never really taken much notice of the place. He felt slightly uneasy just being in here, and at the same time fascinated.

The dressing table was the focus of the room, much more so than the bed. This was where his grandmother prepared herself for the world outside, and McLean was pleased to see that one of the photographs was of him. He remembered the day it was taken, when he passed out of Tulliallan. That was probably the tidiest his uniform had ever been. Police Constable McLean, on the fast track sure, but still expected to pound the beat like any other copper.

The other photo showed his parents, taken at their wedding. Looking at the two pictures together, it was clear that he'd inherited most of his looks from his father. They must have been similar ages when the two photographs were taken, and apart from the difference in film quality, they could almost have been brothers. McLean stared at the image for a while. He barely knew these people, hardly ever thought about them anymore.

Other photographs were dotted about the room; some on the walls, some in frames on the top of a wide, low chest of drawers that undoubtedly contained underwear. Some were pictures of his grandfather, the dour old gentleman whose portrait hung above the fireplace in the dining room downstairs, presiding over the head of the table. They charted his life, from young man through to old age in a series of black-and-white jumps. Other pic-

tures were of his father, and then his mother too as she came into his life. There were a couple of McLean's grandmother too, as a strikingly beautiful young woman dressed in the most fashionable of 1930s clothes. The last of these showed her flanked by two smiling gentlemen, also dressed for the period, and in the background the familiar columns of the National Monument on Calton Hill. McLean stared at the photograph for long moments before he realised what was bothering him about it. On his grandmother's left was his grandfather, William McLean, quite obviously the same man who appeared in so many of the other pictures. But it was the man on her right, one arm around her waist and smiling at the camera as if the world were his oyster, who looked the spitting image of the photos of the newly married man and the fresh out of training college police constable.