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**Opening Extract from...**

# Broken Homes

Written by Ben Aaronovitch

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# BROKEN HOMES

BEN AARONOVITCH





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*This book is dedicated to all the people who get up and do something about it, whatever 'it' is and however small the thing it is they do.*

*The problem of the house is a problem of the epoch. The equilibrium of society today depends upon it. Architecture has for its first duty, in this period of renewal, that of bringing about a revision of values, a revision of the constituent elements of the house. We must create the mass production spirit.*

Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier)

# 1

# Perfectly Human Monsters

At twenty-three minutes past eleven Robert Weil drove his 53 registered Volvo V70 across the bridge that links Pease Pottage, the improbably named English village, with Pease Pottage, the motorway service station. We know the exact time because the Highway Agency cameras picked him up at this point. Despite the rain and the poor visibility, image enhancement of key frames clearly show that Robert Weil was alone in the front of the car.

Driving with what looks like, in hindsight, suspiciously deliberate care Robert Weil turned left at the roundabout to join the loop of road that curves around the service station and heads for Crawley proper across the second bridge above the M23. There's a tricky intersection there where traffic coming off the motorway slip road crosses traffic coming across the bridge – it's controlled by traffic lights to prevent accidents. We don't know why Robert Weil ran those lights. Some believe that it was a cry for help, an unconscious desire to be caught. Others say that he was in a hurry to get home and took a calculated risk – which wouldn't explain the sedate thirty miles per hour he was going when he went through them. I think that he was concentrating so

hard on keeping his speed legal and avoiding attention that he didn't even notice the lights – he had a lot on his mind.

We don't know what Allen Frust was thinking as he came up the motorway slip road, at right angles to Robert Weil, at an estimated fifty-three miles an hour in his five-year-old Vauxhall Corsa. The light was in his favour and so he continued bearing left and was halfway across the intersection when he hit Robert Weil's Volvo in the side just ahead of the front passenger door. Sussex Police's Forensic Collision Investigation Team determined later that neither vehicle slowed or took evasive action prior to the crash, leading them to conclude that in the dark and rainy conditions neither driver was consciously aware of the other.

The impact drove the Volvo onto the grassy verge and into the crash barrier where it stopped almost immediately. The Vauxhall, travelling at nearly twice the speed, spun several times in the wet conditions before rolling over and tumbling to crash into the line of trees further along. It was determined that while Allen Frust's life was saved in the first instance by his seatbelt and airbag, the belt unfortunately failed as the car tumbled and he was thrown against the roof, breaking his neck.

The first police officer in attendance was PC Maureen Slatt based at the nearby Northgate Police Station in Crawley. She'd been on a solo patrol less than a kilometre to the north and, despite the worsening weather conditions, arrived on the scene in less than two minutes.

Nothing kills and injures more police than attending a traffic accident on a fast road, so the first thing she did

was park her Incident Response Vehicle in the 'fend-off position' at the intersection with its lightbar, headlamps and hazard lights all switched on. Then, with that meagre protection from insane night-time drivers in place, she ventured first to the Volvo to find Robert Weil groggy but responsive and then to the Vauxhall to find Allen Frust limp and seriously dead. After a quick sweep of her torch to ensure no passengers had been thrown clear into the bushes along the verge, she went back to Robert Weil to see if she could help. It was at this point that PC Slatt, and I bet she got stick for that name, proved that she was a proper copper and not just a uniform hanger with good driving skills.

The Volvo V70 is a large estate car and upon impact its rear door had sprung open. Traffic cop lore is full of gruesome tales of unsecured family pets, grannies and even children being flung around the back of cars, so PC Slatt figured she should check.

She immediately recognised the smears of blood on the side panels, fresh enough to still glisten in the light of her torch. It wasn't much blood but it was enough to make her concerned – she searched thoroughly, but there was nobody in the back of the car or in a surrounding ten-metre area.

By the time she'd finished searching, the traffic cops had rolled up in their BMW 520 estates stuffed full of barriers, warning lights and enough reflective signs to set up a second runway at Gatwick. They quickly isolated the lane and got the traffic safely moving again. An ambulance arrived soon after and, as the paramedics fussed over Robert Weil, PC Slatt raided his glove

box for his registration papers. Before the ambulance could leave, Slatt climbed in the back and asked Robert Weil whether anyone else had been in the car with him.

'He was absolutely terrified,' she told detectives later. 'Not only was he petrified by the question, but he was even more scared by the fact that I was police.'

It's a police mantra that all members of the public are guilty of something, but some members of the public are more guilty than others. When the ambulance left for the slog up the M23 to the casualty unit at Redhill, PC Slatt was following close behind. While she drove she was on her radio recommending to the duty inspector at Force Command and Control that CID have a look. Nothing ever gets done quickly at two o'clock in the morning, so it was dawn by the time the DC from the nearby Crawley nick deemed it worth calling in his DI. They stamped their feet, cursed the early morning commuters who honked and grumbled at the delay and decided that it was worth making this somebody else's problem. It went to the joint Sussex and Surrey Police Major Crime Team because that's what they were there for.

It takes more than a bit of a mystery to prise a senior DCI out of his nice warm bed so when Douglas Manderly, designated Senior Investigating Officer, arrived at his office he already had a couple of luckless DCs out at the scene, a DC heading for the West Surrey Hospital to relieve PC Slatt and his office manager had powered up the HOLMES suite and assigned the operation a name – 'Sallic'.

Little did Douglas Manderly suspect that as soon

as Robert Weil's name was entered into HOLMES it would trigger a flash I'd inveigled out of a civilian tech in technical support, which sent an email to my computer. My computer then texted my phone which went 'ping' just as me and Toby were out for a walk in Russell Square.

I say a walk, but actually the pair of us had sloped off through the thin winter drizzle to the café in the park where I had coffee and Toby had cake. I checked the details as best I could on my phone, but it's not secure enough for the sensitive stuff so we squelched back to the Folly. To save time we went round the back door, through the rear courtyard and up the exterior spiral stairs to the loft conversion above the garage. There I keep the computers, the plasma TV, the sound system and all the other accoutrements of twenty-first-century life that, for one reason or another, I daren't keep inside the Folly proper.

I'd got my cousin Obe in after Christmas to fix a master power switch by the door. It cuts off the mains to everything electrical in the loft except the lights – very ecologically friendly, but that's not why I installed it. The truth is that when you do magic any microprocessor in the immediate vicinity gets slagged and, since these days just about everything with an on-switch has a microprocessor, that can get expensive really quick. Now, a bit of experimentation on my part revealed that the aforesaid microchips have to be powered up to fail – hence the off switch. I made sure Obe chose an old-fashioned toggle switch that was stiff enough to deter any casual use. When I reached out to flip it that morning

I found it was already on. Now, I knew it wasn't me because just over a year of having my shit blown up by magic has made me very particular about these things. And it wasn't Lesley because she was currently in hospital having yet another operation on her face. I knew Nightingale occasionally sneaks up for illicit rugby, so it might have been him.

As soon as I was inside, with Toby shaking his wet fur and getting under foot, I fired up my Dell that is tasked as our AWARE terminal, fielded an email reminder that I was due to take my Officer Safety refresher in two weeks and rechecked the alert which referred me to Operation Sallic on HOLMES – which wouldn't give me access. I considered logging in using Nightingale's warrant card, which seems to have access to everything, but the powers that be had been getting twitchy over unauthorised access to databases recently. So I asked myself what would Lesley say in this circumstance, which was, *Call the incident room, duh!*

So I did and after ten minutes on the phone talking to the MCT office manager I rushed off to tell Nightingale all about it – but I made a point of switching off the master switch as I went out.

An hour later we were heading south in the Jag.

Nightingale let me drive, which was good, though he still won't let me solo in the Jag until I've done the Met's advanced driving course. I've got my name down but the trouble is that just about every officer in the Met wants to take that course and priority goes to the boy- and girl-racers who drive the response cars for

the borough commands. I had a tentative spot open in June. Until then I had to be content with being supervised as I opened up the inline-six engine and did a restrained seventy-six mph down the M23. She did it without any appreciable effort, which is not bad for a car that's almost as old as my mother.

'He was on the list that Tyburn gave us,' I told Nightingale once we'd mercifully escaped the terrifying traffic singularity that is Croydon.

'Why haven't we spoken to him before now?' asked Nightingale.

We'd been tracking former members of an Oxford University dining club called the Little Crocodiles ever since we'd discovered that a former wizard named Geoffrey Wheatcroft had, against custom and practice, been teaching them magic. He'd been doing this since the early fifties so, as you can imagine, there were a lot of names to cover. Tyburn – that's Lady Ty to you, peasant – genius loci of one of the lost tributaries of the Thames and Oxford graduate herself had spotted some members of this clique during her time there. She claimed, and I believed her, to be able to literally smell a magical practitioner. So we gave her list priority.

And our Volvo driver was on it.

'Robert Weil,' I said. 'With a W. We were working through the list alphabetically.'

'Just goes to show that there's such a thing as being too methodical,' said Nightingale. 'I presume you have been pillaging the computer records – what have you found out?'

Actually the office manager I'd talked to had emailed

me the results of their inquiries, but I wasn't going to tell Nightingale that.

'He's forty-two years old, born in Tunbridge Wells, dad was a barrister, mum stayed at home. Educated privately at Beachwood Sacred Heart—' I said.

'Day boy or boarder?' asked Nightingale.

I've picked up a smattering of posh since working with Nightingale, so at least I understood the question.

'The school's in Tunbridge Wells, so I'd guess a day boy,' I said. 'Unless his parents were really keen to have him out of the house.'

'And thence presumably to Oxford,' said Nightingale.

'Where he studied biology—' I started.

'Read,' said Nightingale. 'You read subjects at university.'

'Where he read biology, graduating with a second,' I said. 'So not the brightest banana in the bunch.'

'Biology,' said Nightingale. 'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

I was thinking of the Faceless Man's chimeras, the manufactured cat-girls and tiger-boys that had issued from what we'd taken to calling The Strip Club of Doctor Moreau. That and the Pale Lady who'd done away with people by biting their dicks off with her vagina dentata. And the other things in the club that Nightingale had deemed too horrible for me to see.

'I really hope not,' I said but I knew, I really *was* thinking what he was thinking.

'And after he graduated?' asked Nightingale.

He'd gone to work for ICI for ten years before moving into the burgeoning field of environmental impact

assessments. Worked for the British Airport Authority as an environmental control officer until he was sold, along with the rest of Gatwick Airport, in 2009.

'Made redundant last year,' I said. 'He was management so he got a good package and he's currently listed as being a consultant.'

The Incident Room had been established at Sussex House on the outskirts of Brighton in what looked like a 1930s light-engineering plant converted into offices. At some point in the last thirty years the site had sprouted warehousing, a Matalan and an ASDA the size of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. It was the sort of out-of-town development that causes sober environmentally minded men and women to foam at the mouth with outrage and bite the rim of their Prius's steering wheel but I couldn't help thinking from a copper's point of view it would be bloody convenient for shopping after work. In fact, given that the Brighton Detention Centre was stuck just behind it, it was convenient for the suspects as well. And there was a Big-Box Self-Storage next door which would be handy if the cells ever got overcrowded.

DCI Douglas Manderly was a copper in the modern mould, understated tailored pinstripe suit, brown hair cut short, blue eyes, an up-to-date mobile in his pocket. Sober, works late, drinks lager in halves and knows how to change a nappy. He'd be looking to make Detective Superintendent soon-ish but only for the extra pay and pension. Good at his job, I guessed, but probably not at ease with things that fall outside his comfort zone.

He was going to love us.

He met us in his office to establish his authority but stood and shook our hands in turn to evoke the correct collegial atmosphere. We sat in the offered seats and accepted the offered coffee and did about a minute and a half of the niceties before he asked us straight out what our interest was.

We did not tell him we were witch hunting, as that sort of things tends to cause alarm.

'Robert Weil is possibly connected with another inquiry,' said Nightingale. 'A series of murders that took place over the summer.'

'Would this be the Jason Dunlop case?' he asked.

Better than just good at his job, I thought.

'Yes,' said Nightingale. 'But not directly related.'

Manderly looked disappointed. People have got the wrong idea about police territoriality – a full-scale murder inquiry is going to set you back a quarter of a million quid minimum. If Manderly could dump it on the Met then it would be our budget and our problem, not to mention it would improve his crime counting at the end of the year. He certainly didn't want to assign one of his precious DCs to escort us around, but he wasn't particularly pleased when Nightingale asked for PC Maureen Slatt.

'That's a matter for her line manager,' said Manderly.

Then he asked whether, given our interest, he should be looking for anything in particular.

'You could inform us if you discover anything out of the ordinary,' said Nightingale.

'Does that include a body?' he asked.

Technically, you don't have to have a corpse to convict for murder but detectives always feel better when they've found your actual victim – they're superstitious like that. Plus nobody wants to think they might be blowing a quarter of a million only to have the victim turn out to be living in Aberdeen with an insurance salesman called Dougal.

'Are we sure there was a body in the Volvo?' I asked.

'We're still waiting on DNA but the lab has confirmed that the blood is human,' said Manderly. 'And that it came from a body in the early stages of rigor mortis.'

'So not a kidnapping then,' said Nightingale.

'No,' said Manderly.

'Where is Mr Weil now?' asked Nightingale.

Manderly narrowed his eyes. 'He's on his way here,' he said. 'But unless you have something substantial to add to his interview I'd rather you left it to us.'

Now that it was clear that we weren't going to relieve him of this troublesome case he wasn't going to let us near the prime suspect until he had that case tied up in a neat bow.

'I'd like to talk to Constable Slatt first,' said Nightingale. 'I assume that Weil's home has been searched already?'

'We have a team there,' said Manderly. 'Is there anything specific you're looking for?'

'Books,' said Nightingale. 'And possibly other paraphernalia.'

'Paraphernalia,' said Manderly.

'I shall know it when I see it,' said Nightingale.

*