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Killing for England

Iain McDowall

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Extract

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Prologue

New Year's Day

Despite the strong current, the body hadn't travelled far. There'd been a storm – and storm damage – back at the start of December. Uprooted trees had been washed down from upstream, junk of all sorts following in their wake. On the stretch of the River Crow that flowed eponymously through Crowby itself, debris still clogged the banks. And debris had halted the progress of Darren McGee's corpse, had held it fixed between sodden oak bark and the twisted remains of a rusted mountain-bike.

The Crowby Diehards made the discovery, had called off their famous swim for the first time in their history as a mark of respect. For fifty-one years, they'd gathered at the same spot at the same time. New Year's Day, Riverside Walk, eight thirty am. Across from the Riverside Hotel and just to the side of the Memorial Bridge. Twenty or so swimmers plus a small crowd of supporters. Their numbers had fluctuated over the years but three of the original members still turned out, still flourished. *We wore nowt but swimming trunks in those days*, Harold Fletcher, the oldest of them, and not the slowest, was fond of saying. But nowadays, like every other Diehard, he wore a wet suit – while a support team stayed close with a motorised dinghy in case any of them got into difficulties. Even Fletcher

conceded that it was common sense. The River Crow was wide and as cold as ice – cold enough for cardiac arrest – cold enough for unconsciousness and death.

Fletcher hadn't been the first to see it though. That distinction had gone to Gemma Reed – the Diehards' New Year's Day swim had long since ceased to be a single-sex tradition – and Gemma Reed had usefully been a probationer, six months uniformed service in. She was working a shopping-centre beat, kids nicking fags and dropping litter, but she knew an opportunity when she saw one. Everybody away from the edge except you, Geoff, and you, Keith. Everybody else stay back. Who's got a mobile handy? Give it here for Christ's sake. She'd dialled the number and then the three of them had hauled Darren McGee on to the bank. His head had been face down and submerged lower in the water than the rest of his body so that she knew he was dead – at least knew it theoretically – before they'd even touched him. But she remembered her training, remembered her lectures. The pulse-taking and the check with the mirror were what you did first. No matter what. Always. Invariably. *The immediate priority is to take what life-saving measures may be necessary or possible.* It was only secondly that you thought about preserving a potential crime scene. *Thereafter avoid all unnecessary further contact.* OK, that's it, he's a gonner. Everybody just stand clear till the experts get here. They'd laid him out on the bank and then kept their distance. *Establish an interim cordon as soon as possible.* It was her first dead body, apart from the obligatory training visit to the morgue. But that had been different, had been anticipated, planned for. This was unscheduled, out of the blue, the real thing. She'd had to stay closer than the others of course. They were her mates but they were also civilians. She was the professional: the one who had to keep guard, the one who had to keep looking.

His clothes were wet, green-weeded, yet there was something almost neat about the way they clung to his tall,

gangly frame. She knew he hadn't been in the water for long. There were no bite marks on the face, no sign yet of the head swelling, the trunk bloating. What there *was*: a welter of bruising, ugly and scarring. Probably from collisions with rocks and the remains of trees, or maybe from hitting the bridge supports, if that was the way he'd gone in. And as she'd stood watching, something foul and slug-like had crawled out of his left nostril. Oh Jesus, please don't let me be sick.

Chapter One

Wednesday April 20th

Chief Inspector Jacobson left his office on the dot of six o'clock, glad to be going. His cases right now were routine, low-level, tedious. It was one of those interludes when real badness had slipped off the radar, biding its time, drawing its breath. As a citizen, you welcomed its absence. But as a copper, you twiddled your thumbs, rearranged your desk ornaments, watched and waited. He bought a copy of the *Evening Argus* from the news stand in the pedestrianised square which filled – or compounded – the void between the comforting geometry of the Town Hall and its unlovely neighbours: the Divisional building, the public library-stroke-NCP multistorey, the pimply, unwashed rear of the shopping centre.

'There's nothing in it, mate,' the vendor told him despondently.

It wasn't the best sales technique Jacobson had ever witnessed. He pocketed his change and folded the paper under his arm. He was headed across the square in the direction of Silver Street, the fastest route he knew to the dark, smoky interior of the Brewer's Rest.

There were daffodils blooming in the floral borders and overhead the early evening sky was irritatingly blue. To the conventional mind, spring was a Good Thing, a harbinger,

something to be looked forward to after the grey months of an English winter. But Jacobson had never really cared for it, thought that it was probably his least favourite season. The sudden brightness of the days startled you like an alarm clock you'd forgotten had been set. And there was too much that was transitional about it, too much that was uncertain. You never knew whether to grab your coat or leave it at home. You never knew whether the sun would shine or the rain would piss down. How completely and utterly marvellous the season of renewal was, according to the greetings card industry and the more sentimentally-inclined nature poets. Sap rising. New life spilling forth all over the shop. As if there wasn't enough of the bastarding stuff around already. Bristling, seething, greedy. All of it eating the other bits. Or being eaten by them.

He let Henry Pelling, the *Evening Argus*'s chief crime reporter, buy him a drink. The quid pro quo was a wary, mutual update that consisted of not very much on either side. But then Pelling's regular work cronies poured in, brimming over with office politics and professional jealousies. Although the *Argus* was located out at the Waitrose complex these days, the journos preferred to be downtown of an evening. There was a new face amongst them. Male, twenty-something, smartly dressed. Jacobson paid him no more attention than he did the others except to clock that he was black. Rationally and intellectually, Jacobson was the precise opposite of a racist. But he'd still lived all his life as a white man in England. The labels of his school shirts had proclaimed Made In The British Empire. He still noticed Otherness, couldn't not do. Scrupulously, he ordered another Guinness for Pelling and then extricated himself to a quiet corner with his second pint.

The Brewer's Rest was selling genuine Czech Budweiser on draft now – a brew not to be confused, in Jacobson's view, with the better-known 'Bud' favoured by teenage hoodlums and no-taste Yanks. It was a significant compensation in the face of the BR's latest measures – karaoke, a

big screen PlayStation – to weather the competition from the fun pubs, sports bars and pole-dancing clubs which seemed to be taking over the night life of the town centre. Jacobson sipped his beer, glanced at the court reports. His B & H packet and his silver lighter were secure inside his jacket pocket and he was making an attempt – with how much seriousness remained to be seen – to leave them that way as much of the time as possible. The figure might have been standing there whole minutes before he finally glanced up, took it in that somebody wanted to speak to him.

'Chief Inspector Jacobson?' Pelling's new arrival asked.

Not nervously exactly. More that the speaker was conscious of a level of importance which would attach itself to any further interchange.

'Who wants to know?' Jacobson challenged, taking another sip.

'My name is Paul Shaw,' Paul Shaw said.

He produced ID from his wallet, passed it over: an NUJ card. It was up-to-date, the genuine article as far as Jacobson could tell without fishing his underused reading glasses out of his spectacle case. He handed it back with his left hand, continued to hold the *Argus* in his right.

'Old Henry usually introduces his new lads to me personally—'

Shaw had pulled out an empty chair from the table while Jacobson had studied the press card. Now he sat down abruptly, pulled it back in.

'No, Chief Inspector, that's not it. I'm not with the *Argus* – I'm freelance, from London. I've never even been in Crowby until this last week.'

'Congratulations on that score. So why spoil a good track record now?'

Shaw coughed, cleared his throat. His suit didn't look cheap, neither did his shirt, the collar fashionably open, the top button undone. He placed a laptop case in front of him. The kind that held the computer secure but still left ample room for other essential stuff: documents, mobile phones,