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Highbridge

Written by Phil Redmond

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PHIL REDMOND

HIGHBRIDGE



CENTURY

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Prologue

Like most people, Janey knew she was going to die. But like everyone else she just didn't know when. She never imagined nor expected it to be outside the Co-op.

Like a lot of people she was simply looking forward to a great Friday night out with her sister-in-law and gang of mates, so had stopped at the cash machine. She had just got back to her car and was fumbling for her keys when she felt the shove that sent her one way and her bag and keys the other.

Lying sprawled on the ground she saw the indicators flash, heard the doors unlock, and realised she was being mugged. As the engine started she pushed herself up and leaned over the front of the bonnet holding her hands out, instinctively, perhaps in the vague hope that whoever it was would stop before running her down. But when

her eyes locked with the wild, dilated ones peering over the nodding Buddha she kept on the dashboard, she knew there was no hope.

The Peugeot 207's low-profiled front end did what it was designed to do and scooped her up to prevent her being run down. Before the car swerved right to throw her off – where she smashed her skull against the car park wall. This in itself might have been fatal, but the carjacker couldn't know this.

But those wild eyes had seen hers. And her eyes had seen the face that contained them. That was why the car stopped. Then reversed. At speed. To run her over.

Then, just in case, the car jumped forward and crushed any remaining life out of Janey. Then, again, to make sure, reversed. Then leapt forward over what was now nothing more than a lifeless shape. To escape. Swinging out into the High Street and off into the night.

The withdrawal receipt from the cash machine fluttered and blew in the backdraught, coming to rest against the lamppost that illuminated the place where Janey had died. The latest random casualty of the so-called war on drugs.

The receipt was for £45. It was all she had had. Just enough for a night out. Or a night's supply.

Janey never knew her killer. Neither did Buddha. Three years on, nor did anyone else.

1

Coming Home

The trouble with living in a mediocre town is that you end up having to support a mediocre football team. Something might happen every forty years when, somehow, they get to something like the semi-final of a cup competition. Everyone gets excited. Mayors make fatuous speeches about it being an historic day. Then 95 per cent of the fans are disappointed because the ground is too small to hold them all. Then they get whacked and everybody goes back to sleep for another forty years. But at least they tried. Typically British tosh.

Well, it used to be like that until Sky Sports came along. Now you can see Arsenal and Chelsea shirts in every High Street. And even Man U in cities like Newcastle and Liverpool. At one time that would have been like wearing a suicide vest. These days, it's just kids following the telly, isn't it?

It was one of Joey Nolan's recurring themes as he drifted in and out of consciousness, during his weekly journey home. Back to Highbridge. Where once was a rural village with rural villagers with rural mentalities is now a sprawling urbanised place on a map. A collective of urban dwellers. With urban dwellers' mentalities. Home is where the Internet is.

The town owed a lot to its inn, the Lion, still at its centre but once a famed stopover for its game pies. Then the canal came by and after that the railways, which took the pies the length and breadth of Britain and then the four corners of the Empire. In Rawalpindi and Christchurch they knew of Highbridge pies. And in return people came to see for themselves. This tiny village that supplied the Empire with pies. And so the street market that sold the pies grew. To become a thing in itself.

Joey grinned when he recalled this bit of history. How where he lived was because someone, at some time, made a great pie. But everything has to start with one idea, he mused, just as the train crossed the motorway. The latest transport revolution, with the strings of pearls and rubies of commuter traffic stretching into the distance. No time for buying pies or napping in that lot, he thought, starting to stir himself as he knew it was now only a few minutes to where the Romans once paused, as did the Saxons, long before it had become the site for a new town, complete with its own industrial estate built not on any entrepreneurial

instinct, like that of the piemakers, but from a post-Second World War recovery plan and managed economy.

Out went rationing and dried bananas and in came nylons and the transistor. Gone was rural deference and knowing one's place, replaced by the promise of a welfare state and the white heat of technology where people never had it so good. Or so everyone thought.

For a decade or two they made white goods, nuclear components and secretive parts for the military. But with old technology. And an increasingly expensive as well as increasingly unwilling workforce. The signs of decline were there but nobody wanted to look. Nylons and fresh veg were gradually squeezed out of the market by tights, bin bags and previously owned DVDs. The pies of Empire are still sold in the supermarket where the cattle market used to be, but now they come in artificial atmosphere packaging, delivered by tailored Euro-lorries from the factory in Kent which is owned by a secretive family from Wisconsin who promised to protect jobs but never said which or where.

The factories were razed. Industrial estates became business or retail parks and every now and then money arrived from various European social funds to build inappropriate leisure facilities in inappropriate places. Rural idyll replaced by political ideal. But there are only so many discount three-piece suites you can buy and only so many hours at the health club when either you don't have a job or spend all your time commuting, thought Joey, watching

the metal lattice of the railway bridge glide past the window as the train slowed on its approach to Highbridge Station.

He once asked his dad why it was called Highbridge and was told it was because it was higher than the old road bridge. For years he believed this, until Sister Maria had pointed out that it had been called that in the Domesday Book, long before Robert Stephenson and his dad George gave railways to the world. Amazing what you take off your dad when you're a kid.

Joey stood and stretched his aching six-foot frame, then reached up for his holdall. It wasn't there. What the—? He looked up and down the carriage but half were asleep and the others a thousand miles away, tethered to the Internet or their iPods. Then he saw it. The luminous logo. Passing the window.

He grabbed his coat and went up the carriage in the same direction, hitting the platform just in time to see his oversized sports bag heading up the stairs, across the bridge, over the track and towards the station exit. With the weary commuters and weekenders congealing on the stairs and the train still blocking the route across the tracks, Joey decided to go under them. Over the fence into the overflow car park, down the slope and through the underpass.

As Joey turned into the underpass, a couple of miles away, on the hill overlooking Highbridge, his lifelong friend and brother-in-law, Luke Carlton, was pressing his

weather-worn face against the buffer, looking down the scope of a Barrett M82A1 suppressed sniper rifle. 'Where'd Billy get this?' he asked.

'Where'd you think? He's just got back home.'

'God Bless America. God Bless al-Qaeda,' whispered Luke, as he turned the ring on the Leupold scope to bring the fat target in the chippy into sharp focus. Nearly a mile away. One squeeze. No frying tonight.

Just under a mile from Luke, on the other side of the hill, Joey's brother Sean was coddling his suntanned face in thick Egyptian cotton as he emerged from his waterfall shower. As always, Sean took too long in the shower for the environmentalists but he reckoned he'd already put in a life's worth of sacrifice as a child, when he, his brother and sister were allowed just one bath a week and then only after the immersion heater had been on for twenty-five minutes. No more. No less. Regardless of time of year, regardless of the water temperature. Now he enjoyed the luxury, probably indulgence, of having constant hot water, his conscience salved by the fact that the water came from a water butt, was heated by solar, used less than a bath and was more fun for two to share.

That would be part of the theme of his speech tonight. Another after-dinner. He'd talk of those memories. The clichéd tales of waking up to iced-up toilets and curtains frozen to the windows. But as he always said, clichés were only clichés because they were truisms. Like, how do you

break the chain that stretches from childhood poverty to adult crime?

Yes, he'd give the tale another outing tonight. How he and his siblings had started in deprivation but by their own endeavours were now doing relatively well. How their friends all took different routes but only a few followed a criminal path, and even then often through circumstance rather than choice. And now, how he is wealthy enough to have constant hot water and a body dryer, despite the angst around global warming competing with that instilled by the Christian Brothers, and how the Venerable Bede, the patron saint of writers, taught him to fight for the things you think are important. The things you cherish. Like your life. On the number 10 bus. A memory that took him to where he didn't want to be. Remembering what had happened to his sister.

It was that same early education in survival that drove Joey, as he came out of the underpass and vaulted the fence into the car park opposite the station exit. He came up behind a parked Audi Q7 and, as he passed, tapped on the window and dropped his shoulder bag on the bonnet, nearly causing his wife Natasha to spill her cappuccino into her lap, but then watch, first puzzled, then with rising alarm as she saw her husband slip into that all too familiar purposeful swagger. Even under the bulk of the CAT insulated twill jacket that masked his fit but slender body shape, she could see him stiffen. Shoulders back, arms

at his side, fists clenching and unclenching. Then she saw the spin of his hand. She started up and waited. For trouble. For someone.

Two miles further on, three girls were walking down the appropriately named Hill Street towards the equally appropriately named High Street.

'I'm just saying, he's a psycho.'

'You think everyone's a psycho.'

'Five per cent of people are psychos.'

'You just hate him because he's foreign.'

'Christ, will you two give it a rest.' It was the tall one, Tanya Nolan, Sean's niece, Joey's daughter. The one with the ASOS oversized bucket bag. She was walking between her two friends, Becky, the short one, with the now scuffed Stella McCartney Python tote bag, and Carol, the medium one, with a leather Topshop slouchy holdall. All were in jeans. Parkas pulled tight and arms folded, huddled against the cold. They were all in boots. Tanya and Carol in worker's. Becky in biker's.

'It's five per cent are deviants. Not psychos,' Tanya added as she hit the pedestrian crossing button but didn't stop to wait for green.

'Well, he's a deviant, then,' insisted Carol, following automatically.

'What about hating foreigners? That's deviant,' countered Becky, as she hesitated and looked right, left and right again. But quickly.

'It isn't. Deviancy is when you stray from the norm. Right, Tan?'

Tanya refused to comment. She, like her dad, always seemed to end up playing the role of mediator. And like her dad, sometimes wished other people would sort out their own issues.

'You saying that being racist is the norm?' Becky fired back at Carol.

'No.'

'You just did. You said hating foreigners is normal.'

'I didn't.'

'You did.'

'What am I supposed to do now? Say "didn't"? And then we grab hair and have a catfight?'

'You said—'

But Tanya cut across them. 'Will you stop it? It's like a bad version of some big celebrity reality slag-off.'

Back at the station, two other deviants from the norm were about to collide as Joey's bag came out of the door. The guy carrying it was busy checking back over his shoulder so had no idea that Joey was about to stand in front of him; no idea that Joey was pulling his beanie down to cushion his own forehead, nor any warning that Joey's head was about to hit his own. He went down under the force and a cascade of sincere-sounding apologies from Joey.

'Sorry, mate. Really sorry. You OK?'

This had the desired effect of guiding the slowing onlookers on their way. Especially as Joey knelt down as though to administer further aid. The guy looked far from OK. Groggy. Blood running from his nose.

'Don't move too quickly. Take it easy.' Then, more quietly, 'It's not like on the telly, is it? It really hurt, yeah?' Then quieter as he leaned in. Closer. And flicked the bagman's nose. 'Like that. Looks broken. Hope so anyway.'

Bagman was now starting to look more wary than shocked.

'Yeah. Weren't expecting that, were you? Like I wasn't expecting you to carry me bag off the train for me, you thievin' get. Now go, before I break every other bone in your body.' Joey leaned back, with a cheery smile for the benefit of the last onlookers. 'You'll be OK, mate.'

Bagman hesitated, but saw the cheery smile fade and didn't like what replaced it. He rolled to one side and was already up and running as a jobsworth approached from the station.

'Oi. Did you just go over the fence on the other side?'

'Yep. And?'

'Do you have a ticket?'

'For what? Jumping the fence?'

'Don't get smart with me, lad.'

'OK,' said Joey, handing over the ticket.

'Then why did you jump the fence?'

'Never been one for sitting on them.' Joey turned and walked away towards the car park. He never saw the bag

snatcher again. He didn't want to and he didn't care. His body loosened. His smile returned. His mind had already moved on. To Natasha. As she brought the Q7 alongside.

Sean was standing under the body dryer for a last blast of warm air to help dry his hair and beard, looking across to the floor to ceiling mirror. Sandra's right, he thought, we shouldn't have that mirror there. There are other ways of demonstrating success than carrying round a pot belly, even it was all paid for. She preferred jewellery. He liked having a body dryer in his bathroom. The eco-warriors and anti-carbonists would hate it, though. Having an electric heater to save drying yourself with a towel is a bit OTT, he knew. But it was fun.

Perhaps I should include that in the talk tonight, he mused. How the carbonists had started to make everyone feel guilty about switching on anything electrical. And never mind all the talk of asking the Indians and Chinese not to follow the same path to industrialisation that we had trodden, it's hard enough for people like himself, who had had to develop mountaineering skills to traverse from the bedroom he shared with his brother Joe to the kitchen. Every morning. Clothes bundled in his arms he'd go down the wooden banister, then use the skirting boards to shimmy his way along the hallway before swinging on the kitchen door to land on the seat near the cooker. All to avoid having to walk on the glacial surface of the quarry-tiled floors. He'd light the grill to warm up the kitchen

while he got washed and dressed at the sink, using the pan of water his mother had boiled before heading off for work as a cleaner at the local Comp where Joe and Janey ended up going.

Those skills were learned because he had passed the old eleven-plus, which meant he had to go to the grammar school across town. Which meant he had to get a bus. Which meant he had to leave the house by 7.30 and be in school at 8.30, while the others fell out of bed to a warmed-up house at 8.30 to walk the 300 yards to the Comp. And they would be home at four, while Sean had to battle his way back across town to get back by five. His parents might not have named him Sue, but they certainly sent him out with a target on his chest. That badge of St Bede on his blazer pocket.

The childhood memory, like all the others, had started to become bittersweet, taking on the rosy tint of lost innocence. A time before responsibility pressed in and grief started to visit. Like every child who wakes up suddenly an adult, he had come to accept that one day he would lose his mum and dad – but not his sister Janey. Even the cat and dog fights he and Joey had had with her were becoming cherished memories. Which was why he was now spending less and less time fretting over trying to persuade the Chinese to buy an extra sweater rather than build another power station, and more and more poncing about, as his brother Joe put it, with after-dinner speeches on the charity circuit. If they couldn't stop people

like Janey being killed on their own streets, then what was the point of everything else?

'What was all that about?' Natasha asked as Joey dropped into the car and leaned over to kiss her. She smelt good. She always did.

'Mediocre dickhead in a mediocre town. Product of what our Sean calls the cycle of deprivation.'

She knew better than to take the bait, so pointed the car in the direction of home, via the underpass Joey had just run through. He looked at the graffiti and piss stains and smiled as he let his mind go back to the time he kissed Margi Hewland under there when he was fourteen. That's the thing about kids today, he thought. They never get to learn the shortcuts. No need. No hot pursuit. No door to door. No reading the clues trying to track the gang. Now it was all precision rendezvouses by GPS. Live feeds from their mobiles.

'You have to break the continuum, don't you?' It was Luke's spotter, Matt O'Connor, lying next to him. And, like him, wearing black Gelert packaway waterproofs over his Helly Hansen jacket and jeans. Equally effective in the dark, cheaper and less conspicuous than cammos. Matt rolled to one side, reached down and massaged the scar on his inner thigh. He'd started to notice that the pressure cramps were coming more frequently, a consequence of age. And weight. Although medium build, he'd always been referred

to as stocky in youth, then as a bull of a man, but now he was veering towards rounded. One of life's natural sociologists, always quick to find the black humour in life, believing it was naïve to be surprised by anything people do. They are, as he often says, only human, but Matt also believed that every day is a crossroads and it is up to everyone to decide which turning to take next. Some choose a selfish route, others tend towards helping others. Each is a choice. Each comes with its own consequences.

'Take out all the warlords at once,' he continued as he shifted his weight from the scar. 'Otherwise, pop one, another steps up. Slot 'em all. Or, give their women the vote. They'd soon be bogged down putting up shelves and decorating instead of blowing up marketplaces. Democracy. They're going to have it whether they like it or not.'

'Great idea. And end up like us? Not having a clue who or what we are voting for?'

'You never voted.'

'That's not the point.' Luke turned, his tall frame extending a foot or so beyond Matt's boots. He was still trim, almost angelic looking. When he chose to be. More often the angel of death, but the transitions were getting harder as the ageing cracks started to multiply. If Matt was the sociologist, Luke was the philosopher. Which made him one of life's squad leaders, but also deepened the cracks. Understanding why people committed evil did not prevent it. Or excuse them. But it made killing them easier.