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Opening Extract from...

The Empathy Problem

Written by Gavin Extence

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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THE EMPATHY PROBLEM

GAVIN EXTENCE



HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2016
by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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

Hardback ISBN 978 1 473 60521 3
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 60522 0
eBook ISBN 978 1 473 60523 7

Typeset in Guardi 10/16 pt by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

For my parents, who taught me:

1. There are many things more important than money.
2. It's OK for boys to cry.

PART 1

The Tumour





Malignant

It was the size of a golf ball and lodged deep in something called his anterior insular cortex. And now everything should have fallen into perspective; that was the platitude. Minor inconveniences, trivial delays, the petty irritations of day-to-day life – none of these things should have mattered any more. Traffic jams should not have mattered any more. But the reality of having a malignant brain tumour, Gabriel found, was not nearly so edifying.

Petty irritations were more irritating than ever before, and being stuck in a traffic jam was a luxury he could ill afford.

Under normal circumstances – circumstances before the tumour – he would have utilised this time productively. He would have checked the overnight news on his iPad, looking for anything that might affect the markets when they opened in ninety minutes' time. This was the way he had started every working day for the past ten years. Now, instead, he found himself calculating how much of his remaining life had been wasted in this line of unmoving cars.

The answer was one seventeen-thousandth. According to his consultant at the clinic on Harley Street – Armstrong or Anderton, or whatever the hell his name was – Gabriel Vaughn could reasonably expect to live for six more months. And this morning he had spent an unacceptable proportion of that stuck in stationary traffic.

He hadn't planned to move. In fact, he didn't know he was moving until his index finger made contact with his chauffeur's left shoulder – and once it had, it was difficult to tell who was the more surprised. In the last three years, ever since Gabriel had been given a chauffeur, the journey to work had followed an unwavering regimen of absolute silence. Every morning at six o'clock precisely, the car – a Mercedes-Benz S-Class in gunmetal grey – would be waiting outside Gabriel's apartment block. The chauffeur would open the door and utter a polite 'Good morning, sir,' and, if he was lucky, Vaughn would reciprocate with a curt nod. There had never once been physical contact. Now, it caused both men to jolt, as if by a mild electric shock.

Gabriel was the first to recover. He settled back in his seat and glared at the anxious, disembodied eyes in the rear-view mirror. 'Let me out,' he said.

'Sir?'

'I want to get out.'

'Um . . . here?' The chauffeur gestured at the surrounding traffic, an uncertain, wobbly gesture, such as might be made by a man treading water in the middle of a vast lake. 'There's not really anywhere I can—'

'Never mind that. Just let me out.'

The chauffeur hesitated, looked around briefly, then tightened

his hands on the steering wheel. They were just outside Deutsche Bank, penned into the inside lane of the dual carriageway by a taxi, two BMWs and a Bentley. ‘You want me to . . . open the door?’

In all honesty, it hadn’t occurred to Gabriel that there was any viable alternative to this. He hadn’t considered the possibility that he might cut out the middleman and simply open the door for himself. After all, he had never had to do this before; and, on reflection, he had no intention of starting now. Given the circumstances, he saw no sensible way of retracting his demand. He wasn’t going to show weakness in front of the chauffeur.

‘I’m going to walk,’ Gabriel said. ‘It will be quicker.’ He managed to intone the latter as a rebuke rather than an explanation, as if his driver were personally responsible for the state of the roads that morning.

There was only a flicker of hesitation. The next moment, the handbrake had been applied and blind obedience took over. To a chorus of blaring horns, the chauffeur got out and opened the rear passenger door.

‘Have a good day, sir.’

Gabriel didn’t answer. He didn’t nod either. He grabbed his briefcase from the back seat, then disappeared through a momentary gap in the traffic.



The Camp

Gabriel did not blame his chauffeur, not really. He blamed the camp. Because there was no good reason for the City to be this busy first thing on a Monday morning. Granted, the financial sector did go to work two or three hours before everyone else, so it was a given that there would be *some* traffic. And it was at least plausible that something else had caused this gridlock: a major pile-up or a breakdown in a bottleneck or a suicide on the Central Line. But in his gut, Gabriel knew this was far too much to hope for. This was purposeful disruption; he would have bet his chauffeur's life on it.

It was only a ten-minute walk to St Paul's, but this was ten minutes more than he would have chosen to spend power-walking on a public pavement. It wasn't that he was averse to exercise; he spent a minimum of forty minutes in the gym every day, in the pool or on the weights or rowing machine. Naked, in front of the mirror, his muscles could fairly be described as 'sculpted', even though he seldom used them for any practical purpose. They were essentially cosmetic.

Nevertheless, the minimal effort required to propel his body half a mile through central London should not have been a problem; except that he hated to exert himself outside of a controlled climate. The sensation of sweating under a shirt and long autumn coat was deeply unpleasant. When Gabriel Vaughn sweated, he liked to know that he would be washing the sweat away within the hour.

Compounding his physical discomfort was the mental distress that came with being late for work. Gabriel was a man who thrived on routine, not because of some innate psychological predisposition but rather because he needed a vice-tight schedule in order to optimise his day. Thus he should have been behind his desk twenty minutes ago, no later than twenty past six; and ten minutes ago, he should have been walking into Mason's office for the first meeting of the day (the pre-meeting meeting). Of course, it was entirely possible that Mason had also been held up, depending on the level of chaos these protesters had managed to engineer. But that was not the point. Gabriel wasn't paid 3.4 million a year to roll into the office whenever he felt like it.

By the time he reached Cheapside, he had regained most of his composure. There was no sign, yet, of anything out of the ordinary, no early morning marches or assemblies, no barricades in the streets. But this did nothing to dispel his certainty regarding the cause of this morning's traffic jam. Simultaneously, as Gabriel approached the west side of the cathedral, he was able to bolster his conviction that most of the protesters were far too lazy to be up and organised this early in the day. Under normal circumstances, this apparent contradiction might have been problematic. But when it came to the camp, Gabriel was willing to lower his

usual standards of logic and rationality by a considerable margin.

They had arrived ten days ago, one bright and seemingly unremarkable Saturday morning, armed to the teeth with banners and tents and tarpaulins. The first he'd heard of it was via a text from Mason.

Turn on the fucking news.

Nothing else. Gabriel hadn't received a message like this since Lehman Brothers went belly-up in 2008.

What confronted him, this time, was a roiling sea of people on the steps of St Paul's. They had beards and tattoos and piercings and megaphones. They had placards bearing slogans such as **WE ARE THE 99%** and **WHY SHOULD WE PAY FOR THEIR CRISIS?** According to the BBC, there were several thousand of them. They had been planning to occupy Paternoster Square, home to the London Stock Exchange, but had been thwarted by a last-minute court order and a police blockade. Like much of central London, Paternoster Square appeared to be public land but was actually private property.

It belonged to the Mitsubishi Corporation.

Gabriel had never been so relieved to discover that half an acre of his native soil had been acquired by a Japanese conglomerate. The only downside was that all those people had to end up somewhere. And they had ended up just round the corner, right on his doorstep.

So for six consecutive working days, Gabriel had had to walk through their midst just to get into the office. It was unavoidable. Mason Wallace Capital Management was based in Stanton House, the entrance to which faced directly on to St Paul's

Churchyard. Directly on to the camp. And since the whole area was pedestrianised, this was one of the few situations in which having a personal chauffeur conferred no real advantage. Traffic jam or no, for the last fifty metres of his commute, Gabriel was on his own.



Assets and Liabilities

Today, he was able to slip round the periphery of the camp without major incident. He was snarled at by a woman with a face like a hunting accident – all metal and misaligned teeth – but he'd grown used to this over the past week. Even when he wasn't stepping out of his chauffeur-driven Mercedes, it was impossible to mistake Gabriel Vaughn for anything less than what he was. A man who had made more money in the past six months than anybody in that camp would earn in a lifetime.

To make matters worse, he was also relatively young – thirty-two – and extremely handsome, though it was only in the last week that Gabriel had appreciated how his wealth and youth and looks could be a liability as well as an asset. But what could he do? He only owned expensive suits, and even if he'd had the wardrobe or inclination to dress down, that still wouldn't have solved the problem of his exceptional face. Gabriel had been born beautiful, and, short of wearing a balaclava, there was no way to remedy this. He just had to accept the resentment his features sometimes provoked.

As always, there were two security guards posted in the foyer of Stanton House, and Gabriel managed a cheery wave as he passed them on his way to the lift. Not easy, but well worth the effort, given the situation outside. Gabriel habitually divided the rest of humanity into two distinct categories: people who were useful and people who were irrelevant. Needless to say, the second group was a thousand times larger than the first, and it was almost impossible to transition from one to the other. But over the past ten days, the security guys had done just that. With the barbarians hammering at the gates, you wanted to make damn sure the men guarding the gates felt appreciated.



Steel and Glass

From the outside, Stanton House was fairly nondescript. It looked much like any other office block – high-end, but nothing spectacular, not by London standards. On the inside, however, it was exquisite. There was a central atrium that flooded the interior with natural light. The offices were panelled with polished wood, and leased by an international cartel of lawyers, accountants and money managers. The Internet connection was so fast you could download a terabyte of porn in less than seventeen minutes. It was a twenty-first-century temple.

Mason Wallace Capital Management was situated on the top and most expensive floor, having moved up from the third floor, the one below, after the previous occupant had imploded during the 2008 crash. There were some who had questioned the cost-benefit ratio of moving the entire office up one flight of stairs, especially when it would necessitate a full refit to bring the 'new premises' up to spec. But Mason had been swift to dismiss their lack of vision.

'For God's sake, people!' he'd admonished.

Mason's managers were all men; but in this instance, rhetoric was far more important than accuracy.

'Vaughn!' Mason's arm swung in a wide arc over the board table, like a compass needle seeking magnetic north. 'Help me out here. Why should we move? Please explain this to Sherman et al.'

Gabriel fixed Sherman with a shark-eyed stare. 'Image.'

'Image! Vaughn, you've just added another ten K to your bonus.' Mason leaned back in his chair and cracked his knuckles theatrically. 'Sherman, let me clarify this for you. Imagine, just for one second, you're a client looking to invest twenty-five million. There are two funds you need to decide between – both with great records, annual returns north of fifteen per cent. But one's on the third floor and the other's in the penthouse. Which do you pick?'

A deep silence hung in the boardroom. No one chose that moment to point out that the fund in the penthouse had recently gone bust. That was why the space was now available.

'Image, people! We're looking to grow our assets by forty per cent minimum in the next three years. And this,' he pointed both index fingers at the ceiling, 'is just the start.'

His words had been prophetic. In the next three years, Mason had grown the fund faster than anyone would have believed possible, and today, assets under management stood at just below four billion pounds – a figure higher than the GDP of a number of African nations. But even Gabriel found it difficult to attribute too much of this growth to the change of office. Most of it had come from betting on the collapse of the Greek economy.



Mason

Today he was standing in front of the window, his back to the door. As with most of the executive offices on the fourth floor, Mason's overlooked St Paul's Churchyard. Until ten days ago, this had been a good thing.

'Look at them,' Mason spat. 'Just look at them!'

Gabriel didn't know if this request was rhetorical or not, but he wasn't going to spend the next fifteen minutes talking to Mason's back. He closed the door behind him, then joined the other man by the window.

'I've been thinking.' Mason jabbed his finger against the triple glazing. 'We need to hire a hitman. Just one Russian with an AK-47, that's all it would take.' He stepped back and, squinting through an imaginary sight, performed the universal mime for death by machine gun. 'What do you think? Have a quick whip-round after the morning meeting?'

Gabriel pretended to weigh this proposition. 'How much would we need?'

Mason shrugged. 'Going rate's a quarter of a million per victim,

but I'm sure we could negotiate a discount for buying in bulk. How many of them are there?'

'A few hundred.'

'Fuck it. We'll ask the investors to chip in too.'

'Or we could just move to Mayfair.'

'Ha!' It was Mason's standard laugh, a single explosive guffaw. 'Vaughn, we're going nowhere. It'll be winter soon. Then we'll see how much those cocksuckers like their tents.'

He spun and slapped Gabriel on the shoulder, gesturing with his other hand to the black leather sofa, perpendicular to his desk. It was where the most important clients – those with the highest net worth – sat when they visited the office, and it was where Gabriel sat for fifteen minutes every day during the pre-meeting meeting. Mason seemed too agitated to sit this morning. He paced for a while and then half-perched on the corner of his desk. He could do this because his desk was always kept entirely free of clutter. The only things on it were a couple of computer screens, a phone and a small engraved sign, which read:

THE BUCK $TOPS HERE.

Mason had stolen the idea from President Truman, who had kept a similar sign on his desk in the Oval Office.

'OK, Vaughn. To business. What's going on this morning? Where the fuck is everyone?'

'The City's gridlocked. I had to get out at Deutsche Bank and walk. Something to do with our friends down there, I'd imagine.' Gabriel gestured at the window. Mason nodded grimly. 'You might want to push the meeting back. Kilner and Shipman have

made it in, but it looks like anyone coming by road from the east is basically fucked.'

'Fine. We'll give the rest until twenty past. After that, no excuses. Anything major from the weekend?'

Brain tumour.

'The Euro summit went pretty much as expected. Lots of strong statements, no real action. Certainly nothing to bolster the markets. Spanish and Italian bonds are still in freefall.'

'Awesome. What's this I'm hearing about an earthquake in Turkey? CNN says the death toll's a hundred and rising.'

'Eastern Turkey. Bunch of goat herders. Doesn't affect us.'

'What about Syria?'

'Getting more interesting by the day. The whole region is ready to blow. Arms are a potential goldmine. As is oil.'

Mason grinned, showing all his teeth. 'So what's new? High risk, though.'

'It's just a matter of timing. Get that right and we'll make a fucking fortune.'

'Get it wrong and we're liable to get our balls blown off.'

Gabriel shrugged. 'That's why we'll get it right. I'm very fond of my balls.'

'Ha!' Mason slapped his leg. 'Vaughn, you're a man after my own heart. Anything else I need to know?'

The tumour: it's grade four. That means it's large and extremely aggressive. Also, it's inoperable. Conventional surgery would likely do more harm than good. And it's stuck in a part of my brain that's involved in 'emotional processing', which is one of the reasons my moods have been so fucking weird lately. Don't worry, though. I'm not going to let it affect my work.

'Nope. That's everything.'



One Month Ago

He was crying on the Tube. That was the moment the balance tipped, when suspicion became certainty. Something was terribly wrong.

At first, he'd tried to convince himself that there must be a simple, non-life-threatening reason for his tears. The mere fact that he was on the Tube might even be explanation enough. After all, Gabriel had not used the Tube since 2005. That he was doing so now was the result of a series of awful misjudgements.

It had all started the previous evening, when he'd phoned Chelsea Courtesans to try to make an appointment with Melissa.

Gabriel had been using escorts, on and off, for the past decade, and during this period the experience had generally got better and better. As with so many service industries, prostitution had come on in leaps and bounds with the development of online shopping. By the late noughties, it wasn't that different from going on Amazon. You could flick through galleries, check profiles and even read user reviews. But, unfortunately, no one had

managed to eradicate the problem of direct human interaction entirely. All of the online agencies still insisted on some minimal vetting to check you weren't a psychopath, and this meant talking to you on the phone. Usually, these conversations were brief and straightforward, but every so often, you encountered an operator who made matters more complicated than they should have been.

This was the case that Saturday.

Admittedly, it was short notice, but Gabriel had made it clear that he was willing to pay significantly more than the going rate.

'Three thousand pounds,' he told the operator.

'Sir, she really isn't available. If you—'

'Five thousand.'

This was Gabriel's solution whenever he encountered a seemingly intractable problem. He threw money at it.

'Just do your job and pass the offer on,' he said.

The operator ignored this demand and tried to redirect him to some newbie called Nikita. Twenty years old, probably fresh off the plane that morning. But Gabriel was not in the mood for something new. He wanted the comfort of familiarity. Even odder, he wanted a woman who might be able to hold down a conversation for more than two minutes. And with these eastern Europeans, that was by no means a given.

He should have cut his losses at this point. Instead, he ended up going out for 'drinks' with Ainsley and Shipman. They met in a bar in Fitzrovia. Shipman was dating a model, and she had brought along one of her friends, also a model. The whole evening was excruciating.

It wasn't that Gabriel felt awkward being the 'third wheel'. The problem was that Ainsley's date – the other model – made it

clear from the outset that she was more interested in Gabriel than in Ainsley. This was understandable since Gabriel was far more interesting than Ainsley. Plus Ainsley really didn't know how to talk to these women. It was embarrassing to watch. Here was a man on a seven-figure salary, but put him next to a beautiful woman and he was completely out of his depth. Gabriel, in contrast, had never had the slightest problem talking to models. Why would he? In a different life, he could have been a model himself.

'So, Gabe. You seeing anyone at the moment?'

She had to shout it across the table to make herself audible over the music. This was after two hours of being politely brushed aside. She'd just been to the bathroom to powder her nose, apparently in preparation for this last dignity-destroying gambit. Unfortunately, Ainsley had likewise spent half the evening icing his beak. Now he was sweating like a fat man in a sauna, while imagining he was James fucking Bond.

'Ha! Gabe doesn't really do relationships, do you, Gabe? Just prostitutes.'

Gabriel smiled thinly. He had half a mind to take the model home with him, just to teach Ainsley a lesson. Not that there was anything inaccurate about what the other man had said. Gabriel didn't do relationships – not since the Catherine debacle. Still, he wasn't going to tolerate being undermined like this.

He went to the bar, ordered a Scotch that cost more than a plane ticket to Scotland, then sought out the most attractive non-prostitute he could find. She was an actress, apparently, and seemed to find it hysterical that Gabriel had heard of neither her nor her TV show.

'I'm in finance,' Gabriel told her.

She found this hysterical too. In fact, she seemed to find everything Gabriel said hysterical, and she had a laugh like a penguin being murdered. But that was neither here nor there.

'Are you, like, one of those evil bankers who make a million pounds in bonuses every year?' She licked her lips while jabbing him repeatedly in the chest with her index finger. 'You look like one of those evil bankers.'

'No, not at all like that. I co-run a hedge fund. And my bonus is dependent on how I perform. Last year it was two and a half million.'

At this point she spilled most of her drink over the bar.

'Let me get you another.'

Three drinks later, she asked him if he wanted to come back to her apartment.

'I have toys,' she added.