

The Wasp Factory

Iain Banks

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Extract

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The Sacrifice Poles

I had been making the rounds of the Sacrifice Poles the day we heard my brother had escaped. I already knew something was going to happen; the Factory told me.

At the north end of the island, near the tumbled remains of the slip where the handle of the rusty winch still creaks in an easterly wind, I had two Poles on the far face of the last dune. One of the Poles held a rat head with two dragonflies, the other a seagull and two mice. I was just sticking one of the mouse heads back on when the birds went up into the evening air, kaw-calling and screaming, wheeling over the path through the dunes where it went near their nests. I made sure the head was

secure, then clambered to the top of the dune to watch with my binoculars.

Diggs, the policeman from the town, was coming down the path on his bike, pedalling hard, his head down as the wheels sank part way into the sandy surface. He got off the bike at the bridge and left it propped against the suspension cables, then walked to the middle of the swaying bridge, where the gate is. I could see him press the button on the phone. He stood for a while, looking round about at the quiet dunes and the settling birds. He didn't see me, because I was too well hidden. Then my father must have answered the buzzer in the house, because Diggs stooped slightly and talked into the grille beside the button, and then pushed the gate open and walked over the bridge, on to the island and down the path towards the house. When he disappeared behind the dunes I sat for a while, scratching my crotch as the wind played with my hair and the birds returned to their nests.

I took my catapult from my belt, selected a half-inch steelie, sighted carefully, then sent the big ball-bearing arcing out over the river, the telephone poles and the little suspension bridge to the mainland. The shot hit the 'Keep Out – Private Property' sign with a thud I could just hear, and I smiled. It was a good omen. The Factory hadn't been specific (it rarely is), but I had the feeling that whatever it was warning me about was important, and I also suspected it would be bad, but I had been wise enough to take the hint and check my Poles, and now I knew my aim was still good; things were still with me.

I decided not to go straight back to the house. Father

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didn't like me to be there when Diggs came and, anyway, I still had a couple of Poles to check before the sun went down. I jumped and slid down the slope of the dune into its shadow, then turned at the bottom to look back up at those small heads and bodies as they watched over the northern approaches to the island. They looked fine, those husks on their gnarled branches. Black ribbons tied to the wooden limbs blew softly in the breeze, waving at me. I decided nothing would be too bad, and that tomorrow I would ask the Factory for more information. If I was lucky, my father might tell me something and, if I was luckier still, it might even be the truth.

I left the sack of heads and bodies in the Bunker just as the light was going completely and the stars were starting to come out. The birds had told me Diggs had left a few minutes earlier, so I ran back the quick way to the house, where the lights all burned as usual. My father met me in the kitchen.

'Diggs was just here. I suppose you know.'

He put the stub of the fat cigar he had been smoking under the cold tap, turned the water on for a second while the brown stump sizzled and died, then threw the sodden remnant in the bin. I put my things down on the big table and sat down, shrugging. My father turned up the ring on the cooker under the soup-pan, looking beneath the lid into the warming mixture and then turning back to look at me.

There was a layer of grey-blue smoke in the room at about shoulder level, and a big wave in it, probably

produced by me as I came in through the double doors of the back porch. The wave rose slowly between us while my father stared at me. I fidgeted, then looked down, toying with the wrist-rest of the black catapult. It crossed my mind that my father looked worried, but he was good at acting and perhaps that was just what he wanted me to think, so deep down I remained unconvinced.

‘I suppose I’d better tell you,’ he said, then turned away again, taking up a wooden spoon and stirring the soup. I waited. ‘It’s Eric.’

Then I knew what had happened. He didn’t have to tell me the rest. I suppose I could have thought from the little he’d said up until then that my half-brother was dead, or ill, or that something had happened *to* him, but I knew then it was something Eric had done, and there was only one thing he could have done which would make my father look worried. He had escaped. I didn’t say anything, though.

‘Eric has escaped from the hospital. That was what Diggs came to tell us. They think he might head back here. Take those things off the table; I’ve told you before.’ He sipped the soup, his back still turned. I waited until he started to turn round, then took the catapult, binoculars and spade off the table. In the same flat tone my father went on, ‘Well, I don’t suppose he’ll get this far. They’ll probably pick him up in a day or two. I just thought I’d tell you. In case anybody else hears and says anything. Get out a plate.’

I went to the cupboard and took out a plate, then sat down again, one leg crossed underneath me. My father

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went back to stirring the soup, which I could smell now above the cigar smoke. I could feel excitement in my stomach – a rising, tingling rush. So Eric was coming back home again; that was good-bad. I knew he'd make it. I didn't even think of asking the Factory about it; he'd be here. I wondered how long it would take him, and whether Diggs would now have to go shouting through the town, warning that the mad boy who *set fire to dogs* was on the loose again; lock up your hounds!

My father ladled some soup into my plate. I blew on it. I thought of the Sacrifice Poles. They were my early-warning system and deterrent rolled into one; infected, potent things which looked out from the island, warding off. Those totems were my warning shot; anybody who set foot on the island after seeing them should know what to expect. But it looked like, instead of being a clenched and threatening fist, they would present a welcoming, open hand. For Eric.

'I see you washed your hands again,' my father said as I sipped the hot soup. He was being sarcastic. He took the bottle of whisky from the dresser and poured himself a drink. The other glass, which I guessed had been the constable's, he put in the sink. He sat down at the far end of the table.

My father is tall and slim, though slightly stooped. He has a delicate face, like a woman's, and his eyes are dark. He limps now, and has done ever since I can remember. His left leg is almost totally stiff, and he usually takes a stick with him when he leaves the house. Some days, when it's damp, he has to use the stick inside, too, and I can

hear him clacking about the uncarpeted rooms and corridors of the house; a hollow noise, going from place to place. Only here in the kitchen is the stick quieted; the flagstones silence it.

That stick is the symbol of the Factory's security. My father's leg, locked solid, has given me my sanctuary up in the warm space of the big loft, right at the top of the house where the junk and the rubbish are, where the dust moves and the sunlight slants and the Factory sits – silent, living and still.

My father can't climb up the narrow ladder from the top floor; and, even if he could, I know he wouldn't be able to negotiate the twist you have to make to get from the top of the ladder, round the brickwork of the chimney flues, and into the loft proper.

So the place is mine.

I suppose my father is about forty-five now, though sometimes I think he looks a lot older, and occasionally I think he might be a little younger. He won't tell me his real age, so forty-five is my estimate, judging by his looks.

'What height is this table?' he said suddenly, just as I was about to go to the breadbin for a slice to wipe my plate with. I turned round and looked at him, wondering why he was bothering with such an easy question.

'Thirty inches,' I told him, and took a crust from the bin.

'Wrong,' he said with an eager grin. 'Two foot six.'

I shook my head at him, scowling, and wiped the brown rim of soup from the inside of my plate. There was a time when I was genuinely afraid of these idiotic

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questions, but now, apart from the fact that I must know the height, length, breadth, area and volume of just about every part of the house and everything in it, I can see my father's obsession for what it is. It gets embarrassing at times when there are guests in the house, even if they are family and ought to know what to expect. They'll be sitting there, probably in the lounge, wondering whether Father's going to feed them anything or just give an impromptu lecture on cancer of the colon or tapeworms, when he'll sidle up to somebody, look round to make sure everybody's watching, then in a conspiratorial stage-whisper say: 'See that door over there? It's eighty-five inches, corner to corner.' Then he'll wink and walk off, or slide over on his seat, looking nonchalant.

Ever since I can remember there have been little stickers of white paper all over the house with neat black-biro writing on them. Attached to the legs of chairs, the edges of rugs, the bottoms of jugs, the aerials of radios, the doors of drawers, the headboards of beds, the screens of televisions, the handles of pots and pans, they give the appropriate measurement for the part of the object they're stuck to. There are even ones in pencil stuck to the leaves of plants. When I was a child I once went round the house tearing all the stickers off; I was belted and sent to my room for two days. Later my father decided it would be useful and character-forming for me to know all the measurements as well as he did, so I had to sit for hours with the Measurement Book (a huge loose-leaf thing with all the information on the little stickers carefully recorded according to room and category of object), or go round

the house with a jotter, making my own notes. This was all in addition to the usual lessons my father gave me on mathematics and history and so on. It didn't leave much time for going out to play, and I resented it a great deal. I was having a War at the time – the Mussels against the Dead Flies I think it was – and while I was in the library poring over the book and trying to keep my eyes open, soaking up all those damn silly Imperial measurements, the wind would be blowing my fly armies over half the island and the sea would first sink the mussel shells in their high pools and then cover them with sand. Luckily my father grew tired of this grand scheme and contented himself with firing the odd surprise question at me concerning the capacity of the umbrella-stand in pints or the total area in fractions of an acre of all the curtains in the house actually hung up at the time.

'I'm not answering these questions any more,' I said to him as I took my plate to the sink. 'We should have gone metric years ago.'

My father snorted into his glass as he drained it. 'Hectares and that sort of rubbish. Certainly not. It's all based on the measurement of the globe, you know. I don't have to tell you what nonsense *that* is.'

I sighed as I took an apple from the bowl on the window sill. My father once had me believing that the earth was a Möbius strip, not a sphere. He still maintains that he believes this, and makes a great show of sending off a manuscript to publishers down in London, trying to get them to publish a book expounding this view, but I know he's just mischief-making again, and gets most of

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his pleasure from his acts of stunned disbelief and then righteous indignation when the manuscript is eventually returned. This occurs about every three months, and I doubt that life would be half as much fun for him without this sort of ritual. Anyway, that is one of his reasons for not switching over to a metric standard for his stupid measurements, though in fact he's just lazy.

'What were you up to today?' He stared across the table at me, rolling the empty tumbler around on the wooden table-top.

I shrugged. 'Out. Walking and things.'

'Building dams again?' he sneered.

'No,' I said, shaking my head confidently and biting the apple. 'Not today.'

'I hope you weren't out killing any of God's creatures.'

I shrugged at him again. Of course I was out killing things. How the hell am I supposed to get heads and bodies for the Poles and the Bunker if I don't kill things? There just aren't enough natural deaths. You can't explain that sort of thing to people, though.

'Sometimes I think you're the one who should be in hospital, not Eric.' He was looking at me from under his dark brows, his voice low. Once, that sort of talk would have scared me, but not now. I'm nearly seventeen, and not a child. Here in Scotland I'm old enough to get married without my parents' permission, and have been for a year. There wouldn't be much point to me getting married perhaps – I'll admit that – but the principle is there.

Besides, I'm not Eric; I'm me and I'm here and that's

all there is to it. I don't bother people and they had best not bother me if they know what's good for them. *I* don't go giving people presents of burning dogs, or frighten the local toddlers with handfuls of maggots and mouthfuls of worms. The people in the town may say 'Oh, he's not all there, you know,' but that's just their little joke (and sometimes, just to rub it in, they don't point to their heads as they say it); I don't mind. I've learned to live with my disability, and learned to live without other people, so it's no skin off my nose.

My father seemed to be trying to hurt me, though; he wouldn't say something like that normally. The news about Eric must have shaken him. I think he knew, just as I did, that Eric would get back, and he was worried about what would happen. I didn't blame him, and I didn't doubt that he was also worried about me. I represent a crime, and if Eric was to come back stirring things up *The Truth About Frank* might come out.

I was never registered. I have no birth certificate, no National Insurance number, nothing to say I'm alive or have ever existed. I know this is a crime, and so does my father, and I think that sometimes he regrets the decision he made seventeen years ago, in his hippy-anarchist days, or whatever they were.

Not that I've suffered, really. I enjoyed it, and you could hardly say that I wasn't educated. I probably know more about the conventional school subjects than most people of my age. I could complain about the truth of *some* of the bits of information my father passed on to me, mind you. Ever since I was able to go into Porteneil

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alone and check things up in the library my father has had to be pretty straight with me, but when I was younger he used to fool me time after time, answering my honest if naïve questions with utter rubbish. For *years* I believed Pathos was one of the Three Musketeers, Fellatio was a character in *Hamlet*, Vitreous a town in China, and that the Irish peasants had to tread the peat to make Guinness.

Well, these days I can reach the highest shelves of the house library, and walk into Porteneil to visit the one there, so I can check up on anything my father says, and he has to tell me the truth. It annoys him a lot, I think, but that's the way things go. Call it progress.

But I am educated. While he wasn't able to resist indulging his rather immature sense of humour by selling me a few dummies, my father couldn't abide a son of his not being a credit to him in some way; my body was a forlorn hope for any improvement, so only my mind was left. Hence all my lessons. My father is an educated man, and he passed a lot of what he already knew on to me, as well as doing a fair bit of study himself into areas he didn't know all that much about just so that he could teach me. My father is a doctor of chemistry, or perhaps biochemistry – I'm not sure. He seems to have known enough about ordinary medicine – and perhaps still have had the contacts within the profession – to make sure that I got my inoculations and injections at the correct times in my life, despite my official non-existence as far as the National Health Service is concerned.

I think my father used to work in a university for a few years after he graduated, and he might have invented

something; he occasionally hints that he gets some sort of royalty from a patent or something, but I suspect the old hippy survives on whatever family wealth the Cauldhames still have secreted away.

The family has been in this part of Scotland for about two hundred years or more, from what I can gather, and we used to own a lot of the land around here. Now all we have is the island, and that's pretty small, and hardly even an island at low tide. The only other remnant of our glorious past is the name of Porteneil's hot-spot, a grubby old pub called the Cauldhame Arms where I go sometimes now, though still under age of course, and watch some of the local youths trying to be punk bands. That was where I met and still meet the only person I'd call a friend; Jamie the dwarf, whom I let sit on my shoulders so he can see the bands.

'Well, I don't think he'll get this far. They'll pick him up,' my father said again, after a long and brooding silence. He got up to rinse his glass. I hummed to myself, something I always used to do when I wanted to smile or laugh, but thought the better of it. My father looked at me. 'I'm going to the study. Don't forget to lock up, all right?'

'Okey-doke,' I said, nodding.

'Goodnight.'

My father left the kitchen. I sat and looked at my trowel, Stoutstroke. Little grains of dry sand stuck to it, so I brushed them off. The study. One of my few remaining unsatisfied ambitions is to get into the old man's study. The cellar I have at least seen, and been in occasionally;

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I know all the rooms on the ground floor and the second; the loft is my domain entirely and home of the Wasp Factory, no less; but that one room on the first floor I don't know, I have never even seen inside.

I do know he has some chemicals in there, and I suppose he does experiments or something, but what the room looks like, what he actually does in there, I have no idea. All I've ever got out of it are a few funny smells and the tap-tap of my father's stick.

I stroked the long handle of the trowel, wondering if my father had a name for that stick of his. I doubted it. He doesn't attach the same importance to them as I do. I know they are important.

I think there is a secret in the study. He had hinted as much more than once, just vaguely, just enough to entice me so that I want to ask what, so that he knows that I want to ask. I don't ask, of course, because I wouldn't get any worthwhile answer. If he did tell me anything it would be a pack of lies, because obviously the secret wouldn't be a secret any more if he told me the truth, and he can feel, as I do, that with my increasing maturity he needs all the holds over me he can get; I'm not a child any more. Only these little bits of bogus power enable him to think he is in control of what he sees as the correct father-son relationship. It's pathetic really, but with his little games and his secrets and his hurtful remarks he tries to keep his security intact.

I leaned back in the wooden chair and stretched. I like the smell of the kitchen. The food, and the mud on our wellingtons, and sometimes the faint tang of cordite

coming up from the cellar all give me a good, tight, thrilling feel when I think about them. It smells different when it's been raining and our clothes are wet. In the winter the big black stove pumps out heat fragrant with driftwood or peat, and everything steams and the rain hammers against the glass. Then it has a comfortable, closed-in feeling, making you feel cosy, like a great big cat with its tail curled round itself. Sometimes I wish we had a cat. All I've ever had was a head, and that the seagulls took.

I went to the toilet, down the corridor off the kitchen, for a crap. I didn't need a pee because I'd been pissing on the Poles during the day, infecting them with my scent and power.

I sat there and thought about Eric, to whom such an unpleasant thing happened. Poor twisted bugger. I wondered, as I have often wondered, how I would have coped. But it didn't happen to me. I have stayed here and Eric was the one who went away and it all happened somewhere else, and that's all there is to it. I'm me and here's here.

I listened, wondering if I could hear my father. Perhaps he had gone straight to bed. He often sleeps in the study rather than in the big bedroom on the second floor, where mine is. Maybe that room holds too many unpleasant (or pleasant) memories for him. Either way, I couldn't hear any snoring.

I hate having to sit down in the toilet all the time. With my unfortunate disability I usually have to, as though I was a bloody woman, but I hate it. Sometimes in the

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Cauldhame Arms I stand up at the urinal, but most of it ends up running down my hands or legs.

I strained. Plop splash. Some water came up and hit my bum, and that was when the phone went.

'Shit,' I said, and then laughed at myself. I cleaned my arse quickly and pulled my trousers up, pulling the chain, too, and then waddling out into the corridor, zipping up. I ran up the broad stairs to the first-floor landing, where our only phone is. I'm forever on at my father to get more phones put in, but he says we don't get called often enough to warrant extensions. I got to the phone before whoever was calling rang off. My father hadn't appeared.

'Hello,' I said. It was a call-box.

'Skraw-aak!' screamed a voice at the other end. I held the receiver away from my ear and looked at it, scowling. Tinny yells continued to come from the earpiece. When they stopped I put my ear back to it.

'Porteneil 531,' I said coldly.

'Frank! Frank! It's me. Me! Hello there! Hello!'

'Is there an echo on this line or are you saying everything twice?' I said. I could recognise Eric's voice.

'Both! Ha ha ha ha ha!'

'Hello, Eric. Where are you?'

'Here! Where are you?'

'Here.'

'If we're both here, why are we bothering with the phone?'

'Tell me where you are before your money runs out.'

'But if you're *here* you must know. Don't you know where you are?' He started to giggle.

I said calmly: 'Stop being silly, Eric.'

'I'm not being silly. I'm not telling you where I am; you'll only tell Angus and he'll tell the police and they'll take me back to the fucking hospital.'

'Don't use four-letter words. You know I don't like them. Of course I won't tell Dad.'

"Fucking" is not a four-letter word. It's . . . it's a seven-letter word. Isn't that your lucky number?'

'No. Look, will you tell me where you are? I want to know.'

'I'll tell you where I am if you'll tell me what your lucky number is.'

'My lucky number is *e*.'

'*That's* not a number. That's a letter.'

'*It is* a number. It's a transcendental number: 2.718—'

'That's cheating. I meant an integer.'

'You should have been more specific,' I said, then sighed as the pips sounded and Eric eventually put more money in. 'Do you want me to call you back?'

'Ho-ho. You aren't getting it out of me that easy. How are you, anyway?'

'I'm fine. How are you?'

'Mad, of course,' he said, quite indignantly. I had to smile.

'Look, I'm assuming you're coming back here. If you are, please don't burn any dogs or anything, OK?'

'What are you talking about? It's me. Eric. I don't burn dogs!' He started to shout. 'I don't burn fucking dogs! What the hell do you think I am? Don't accuse me of burning fucking dogs, you little bastard! *Bastard!*'

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‘All right, Eric, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ I said as quickly as I could. ‘I just want you to be OK; be careful. Don’t do anything to antagonise people, you know? People can be awful sensitive . . .’

‘Well . . .’ I could hear him say. I listened to him breathing, then his voice changed. ‘Yeah, I’m coming back home. Just for a short while, to see how you both are. I suppose it’s just you and the old man?’

‘Yes, just the two of us. I’m looking forward to seeing you.’

‘Oh, good.’ There was a pause. ‘Why don’t you ever come to visit me?’

‘I . . . I thought Father was down to see you at Christmas.’

‘Was he? Well . . . but why don’t *you* ever come?’ He sounded plaintive. I shifted my weight on to my other foot, looked around the landing and up the stairs, half-expecting to see my father leaning over the banister rail, or to see his shadow on the wall of the landing above, where he thought he could hide and listen to my phone calls without me knowing.

‘I don’t like leaving the island for that long, Eric. I’m sorry, but I get this horrible feeling in my stomach, as though there’s a great big knot in it. I just can’t go that far away, not overnight or . . . I just can’t. I want to see you, but you’re so far away.’

‘I’m getting closer.’ He sounded confident again.

‘Good. How far away are you?’

‘Not telling you.’

‘I told you my lucky number.’

'I lied. I'm still not going to tell you where I am.'

'That's not—'

'Well, I'll hang up now.'

'You don't want to talk to Dad?'

'Not yet. I'll talk to him later, when I'm a lot closer. I'm going now. See you. Take care.'

'*You* take care.'

'What's to worry about? I'll be all right. What can happen to me?'

'Just don't do anything to annoy people. You know; I mean, they get angry. About pets especially. I mean, I'm not—'

'What? *What?* What was that about pets?' he shouted.

'Nothing! I was just saying—'

'You little shit!' he screamed. 'You're accusing me of burning dogs again, aren't you? And I suppose I stick worms and maggots into kids' mouths and piss on them, too, eh?' he shrieked.

'Well,' I said carefully, toying with the flex, 'now you mention it—'

'Bastard! *Bastard!* You little shit! I'll kill you! You—'
His voice disappeared, and I had to put the phone away from my ear again as he started to hammer the handset against the walls of the call-box. The succession of loud clunks sounded over the calm pips as his money ran out. I put the phone back in the cradle.

I looked up, but there was still no sign of Father. I crept up the stairs and stuck my head between the banisters, but the landing was empty. I sighed and sat down on the stairs. I got the feeling I hadn't handled Eric very

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well over the phone. I'm not very good with people and, even though Eric is my brother, I haven't seen him for over two years, since he went crazy.

I got up and went back down to the kitchen to lock up and get my gear, then I went to the bathroom. I decided to watch the television in my room, or listen to the radio, and get to sleep early so I could be up just after dawn to catch a wasp for the Factory.

I lay on my bed listening to John Peel on the radio and the noise of the wind round the house and the surf on the beach. Beneath my bed my home-brew gave off a yeasty smell.

I thought again of the Sacrifice Poles; more deliberately this time, picturing each one in turn, remembering their positions and their components, seeing in my mind what those sightless eyes looked out to, and flicking through each view like a security guard changing cameras on a monitor screen. I felt nothing amiss; all seemed well. My dead sentries, those extensions of me which came under my power through the simple but ultimate surrender of death, sensed nothing to harm me or the island.

I opened my eyes and put the bedside light back on. I looked at myself in the mirror on the dressing-table over on the other side of the room. I was lying on top of the bed-covers, naked apart from my underpants.

I'm too fat. It isn't that bad, and it isn't my fault – but, all the same, I don't look the way I'd like to look. Chubby, that's me. Strong and fit, but still too plump. I want to look dark and menacing; the way I ought to look, the

way I should look, the way I might have looked if I hadn't had my little accident. Looking at me, you'd never guess I'd killed three people. It isn't fair.

I switched the light out again. The room was totally dark, not even the starlight showing while my eyes adjusted. Perhaps I would ask for one of those LED alarm radios, though I'm very fond of my old brass alarm clock. Once I tied a wasp to the striking-surface of each of the copper-coloured bells on the top, where the little hammer would hit them in the morning when the alarm went off.

I always wake up before the alarm goes, so I got to watch.