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Written by Henry Porter

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THE DYING LIGHT

HENRY PORTER



PHOENIX

1

A Death Explained

First was the fall, then came the death, and the death erased all memory of the fall, which was in any case handled in a very British way. The story of how David Eyam was cast from the highest circles of government was no more than a footnote at the inquest, which followed hearings into a teenage road fatality and the electrocution of a tractor driver whose grab snagged overhead power lines.

Yet if there had been a programme that March morning for High Castle's newly refurbished coroner's court, David Eyam's name would have been at the top, as much due to his former positions as acting head of the Joint Intelligence Committee and a succession of unspecified roles in the prime minister's inner circle, as to the tourist's film from Cartagena in Colombia, which contained the record of his very last moments on earth.

The recording was played on three television screens and the sounds of the Colombian evening filled the provincial calm of the court with the heat and exuberance and doom of Central America. The camera jerked from a bell tower, around which white doves circled, to a line of balconies bedecked with flowers, typical of Cartagena's colonial district, then to a street vendor carrying baskets of fruit from a yoke that seemed to be made from part of a bicycle frame. It moved with such speed that the people sitting nearest the screens recoiled as though this would steady the shot for

them. Kate Lockhart, seated in the second row, remained still, her eyes watching the clock on the top right-hand corner of the screen – the last minutes and seconds of her friend's life being counted off.

The camera came to rest briefly on the name 'Bolivar Crêperie', written across the length of a red awning under which there was some kind of juice bar with perspex cylinders of fruit and a cashier's desk. Then it swerved to two women and a man – all in shorts – sitting at one of several tables in front of the restaurant. Here, after a wobble, it settled. The party of three produced long-suffering smiles; sunglasses were raised and tall glasses of beer hoisted to the lens. The image froze and the coroner leaned forward and nodded to the clerk.

'This is the important part,' said the coroner's clerk, pointing at the screen in the centre of the court with a remote control. 'Pay attention to the top left-hand corner, where you will see the deceased in a navy-blue shirt and cream jacket, and then to what happens in the background on the far side of the street – over here.' He tapped the screen with the remote.

But Kate could see David Eyam nowhere. She searched the screen frantically again. The pale jacket at the top – no, that wasn't Eyam. Not that jacket, not that lank hair, not that beard, not that emaciated angularity. The man was far too thin. Christ! They'd made a mistake. The fools had got the wrong man. Eyam must be alive. Ever since she'd received the email from the firm of lawyers handling his estate a couple of weeks back, she had felt a kind of incredulity at the idea of Eyam's death. The extinction of one of the foremost intellects of his generation by a blast in some seedy quarter of a tropical port, without the world

knowing for an entire month, as if Eyam was some useless hippy or boat bum, was unfeasible . . . unsustainable . . . incredible.

The film was started again: the new shot was in a wider frame. The camera had evidently been placed on a tripod because a second man appeared in front of the lens and adjusted something, during which process his face loomed in grotesque close-up, then sat down with the other three and swivelled his cap so the peak was at the front. Kate's eyes darted to the top of the screen. The man in the pale jacket had not moved. No, that wasn't Eyam: far too untidy. But then he turned to talk to a dark, thickset indvidual with wraparound shades and a black polo shirt on his right, and his face became animated. At a pinch it could be him. The parting was the same, although the hair was a lot longer than she had ever seen it, and the cast of his eyes, his brow and the shape of the nose all did a fair impression of Eyam. Then he handed a book to his neighbour with the sunglasses and he seemed to start talking about it: the court could hear nothing of what was said. The mannerisms of her friend in full flow were unmistakable. He sat back in the chair, caught hold of his right elbow and seemed to draw down the points he was making by opening and bunching his pianist's fingers. When the other man, who was now examining the back cover of the book with his sunglasses propped on his forehead, replied she saw his head go back with his mouth slightly open in anticipation. Even at that distance she could see the eagerness and fun in his expression. This was David Eyam. It couldn't be anyone else.

The cameraman had now taken the role of reporter and, using a small microphone held under his chin, addressed the lens – in what the clerk explained was Swedish. But the

noise of the street drowned what he was saying and once or twice he looked round with dismay as a motorbike or truck passed.

The clerk cleared his throat and pointed to Eyam. 'The deceased is talking to a Detective Luis Bautista,' he said, glancing at a pad. 'He is an officer with the Cartagena Police. He was meeting his girlfriend at the café and was off duty at the time.'

'We shall be hearing from him later,' said the coroner, looking round the courtroom over his glasses with his eyebrows rising and falling independently of any expression. 'Detective Bautista is with the local anti-terrorist force and is coincidentally a specialist in the sort of attack we are about to witness.' His eyes went to the clerk. 'Mr Swift, you may proceed.'

Kate's mind protested. No, she would not sit calmly like the others, now peering at the film with an indecent anticipation, to watch Eyam being atomised. She drew the small shoulder bag towards her and looked for the easiest way out of the crowded courtroom, but then found herself drawn to the sight of her friend helplessly sitting there, and she remembered the first time she had set eyes on him in a student common room in Oxford twenty years before: the dark, oblique presence, the swarming intelligence in his eyes, his habit of moving a hand through his hair when asked a question and then leaning forward with his fingers momentarily pressed to his mouth and blocking the inquiry with some diversionary enthusiasm that was so interesting you overlooked the failure to disclose. Two decades ago, Eyam was simply luminous – the smile of reason almost never left his face. She saw him now through the eyes of the people in court: a tourist, good-looking in a dishevelled

way, yes, but also a man who seemed washed up and might easily be suffering from some form of midlife crisis, or addiction.

The dozen or so reporters leaned forward with fascination. 'Any moment now,' said the clerk, 'you will see the white Honda van approach from the right. This vehicle was carrying the device. It parks in the alley, which is bordered by the party headquarters' – he consulted his pad – 'of the People's Party for Unity, which was the target of the attack.'

The van appeared from the right but was held up first by a group of youths crossing the street, then by two men pushing a cart loaded down with bags of nuts and fruit and some kind of cooker. An arm appeared out of the driver's side and waved languidly; a glint of light on the windscreen meant no face was visible as it turned. The van entered the alley and parked but the driver found he couldn't open the door far enough to get out, and had to reverse out then park again. Presently a stocky man wearing sunglasses and a cap appeared from the shadows. He paused in a splash of evening sunlight, rubbed his forearms, glanced down the street then sauntered off without the least hurry.

On the near side of the street, the policeman had shifted his chair round to face Eyam, who was gesturing towards the book and nodding. She saw now that he meant the book as a gift. The detective seemed overwhelmed and rose and shook his hand, then returned to his seat and began to thumb through what she could see was a slim paperback. Nothing happened for a few seconds, then Eyam slipped a hand inside his jacket, removed a phone and made a call seemingly without dialling. At that moment a wedding party came into view on the other side of the street: the newlyweds – a beautiful mulatto couple – were followed by

some children and about twenty guests. A band of five musicians brought up the rear of the procession. They soon moved out of shot. She looked back to Eyam, who had finished his call and was returning the phone to his jacket. He had spoken for no more than thirty seconds. With a start she remembered the call she'd received from him out of the blue one Saturday in January, the first contact since they had fallen out and drifted irrevocably apart. It was at the weekend, and she'd gone to stay with old man Calvert in Connecticut. She returned the call to the unfamiliar number but had got no answer. After trying a dozen or so times over the next week she gave up, assuming he would eventually respond. His message was short – he said he felt like speaking to her – and it was still there. She was sure of that because she was in the habit of methodically erasing all those to do with her work as she dealt with them. But she'd kept this one, out of sentiment and guilt and a hope that the chill between them had ended; also because she meant to copy this new number to her list of contacts.

She watched the film, aware of her short, shallow breaths. The detective's attention was drawn to someone out of shot, and he began to wave. From the right of the screen came a woman dressed in a dark red flared skirt and a white shirt that was knotted at the waist like a fifties pin-up. The detective was saying something about her to Eyam. She paused before reaching the tables, put her index finger to her chin, then raised her hand theatrically and clicked her fingers to suggest she had just remembered something. With a swirl of skirts, she almost pirouetted and walked across the road where she pretended to window-shop, bending over and then stretching upwards to examine something at the top of the display, and showing off her

figure to maximum effect. She moved out of shot. The detective slapped his thighs with mock exasperation and threw himself back in his chair as though to say he could play it cool, too. Eyam nodded sympathetically, then drained his drink and got up.

He took a couple of paces, said something over his shoulder – probably his last words – paused at the kerb for a truck carrying a gang of workers to pass, then crossed over and entered the alley, squeezing past the white van into the dark of the tunnel.

The clerk pressed a button on the remote and the picture froze again, causing Kate's eyes to settle on the clerk's head and neck, which rose from his shoulders like a cork in a bottle. 'At this moment,' said the clerk, turning with a sudden movement to the court, 'the detective heard the first detonator and realised what was going to happen, which explains his quick reaction. The delay between the first and second detonators, usual in this kind of bomb, was probably intended, but it may have been simply an indication of the amateurishness of the bomb-maker.'

'However,' said the coroner, 'the Colombian authorities believe that the delay was designed to allow maximum dispersal of the gas before detonation.' The clerk nodded agreement.

The film was started again. The field of the shot seemed to have changed, as though the camera had been loosened on its stand and the lens had drifted upwards a few degrees. There was an odd moment of stillness when nothing much happened. In the foreground the tourists stared about them without speaking. No vehicles passed. Then the detective sprang out of his chair and sprinted across the street waving frantically for the girl to get down. His shouts were picked

up by the camera's microphone. The girl stepped back from the shop window with an appalled and strangely embarrassed expression and began to walk towards him, her arms held outwards interrogatively. The detective reached her, hooked his arm around her waist, lifting her off the ground in one clean movement, then ran three or four paces until they were out of shot. At this moment the cameraman bobbed up to see what was going on and blocked most of the view. A beat later he was surrounded by a halo of flame that expanded fifty yards away from him. Then a shock wave propelled his body to the left and rippled outwards. Even though the clerk had aimed the remote to turn down the volume, the roar that followed filled the courtroom. Astonishingly, the camera remained upright, possibly because its owner had shielded it from the main blast, and the film ran on for a few seconds until the camera was toppled by something falling from above. By this time there was very little to be seen except a ball of fire billowing outwards to touch everything in shot. The street vendors vanished. The people, the buildings, the parked cars, the sunlight and shadows – all were obliterated by the sudden cosmic flare of destruction.

The screens around the court went blank. One or two people murmured their shock but for the most part they were silent. Kate found herself staring vacantly at the courtroom's awful new royal-blue carpeting. There had been no time for Eyam to pass through that tunnel. He would have been killed instantly. It was as if she had just watched his death in real time and had been unable to shout a warning to him. She looked up through the windows. Outside in the March morning some scaffolding was being erected. A man warmed his hand round a cup

that steamed in the wind. Eyam had gone. People were oblivious. Life went on.

The coroner glanced down at the lawyer appointed by David Eyam's stepmother. 'Would it suit you, Mr Richards, if we rose now and resumed at – say – two o'clock?'

'By all means, sir,' said the man, moving to his feet with his fingers tucked into the back of his waistband. 'May I ask if you think it likely that the remains will be released for burial? My client would like to set the funeral arrangements in train as soon as possible. A provisional date of next Tuesday – the twelfth – has been suggested. There is much to organise.'

'Yes, I think that can be taken as read. Please inform Lady Eyam that she may go ahead.' He paused. 'We will leave evidence of identification and the interview with Detective Bautista until this afternoon.' He turned to reporters, who were occupying the benches that would have been used by the jury had the coroner exercised his option to call one. 'A copy of this film will be released after I deliver a verdict, which I expect to be at the end of the afternoon.' With this he rose and left through a door behind the chair.

Outside the court, Kate switched on her phone and worked her way back through the messages from colleagues all expressing disbelief at her sudden departure from the head office of Calvert-Mayne in Manhattan. There was a score of callers wondering why she had left one of the most important jobs in the law firm for an unspecified role in the backwater of the London office. At length she came to Eyam's call on the Saturday of his death. 'Hello there, Sister – it's me. Eyam,' he started. He sounded relaxed. 'I felt like having a chat, but it seems you're busy and I now

realise it's not ideal this end either because I'm sitting outside in a street bar and a bloody wedding party has just appeared, so you wouldn't be able to hear much anyway. But, look, I miss you and I'd really love to see you when I get back. Perhaps we should meet in New York. We *will* see each other.' He paused. 'You are in my thoughts, as always, and there's much I want to discuss with you, but now I'll just have to make do with the charming policeman whom I am sitting here with. Speak to you soon – all my love.'

She held the phone to her ear for a few seconds, thinking that if she had answered the call she might have delayed him leaving his table in the bar. The tourists and the policeman escaped with their lives; only the people in the confined space of the alley were killed. She snapped the phone shut, lit a cigarette – one of a ration of five – and then opened it again to search the phone's memory for the time of the call. Five forty-five in the afternoon. She could probably work out exactly what she was doing at that precise moment, but what was the point? Eyam was dead. She just had to get used to the idea.

Part of her wanted to return to the Bailey Hotel rather than go back into the inquest, but then it occurred to her that Eyam needed a friendly face at his inquest. There was no family to speak of. His disabled brother had died while they were at Oxford, his mother succumbed to cancer soon afterwards and she had read that Eyam's father, Sir Colin, a holder of numerous engineering patents, a wily financier and discreet philanthropist, had died the previous year. So it was as an act of friendship as well as a witness that at one forty-five p.m. she worked her way along the bench to sit behind a flustered middle-aged woman and wait for the coroner to reappear. She wondered about the other people

in the public benches, particularly a tall man with large glasses, stiff, wavy, dark hair and an expression of courteous disengagement. She had stood by him when filling in the register required of those attending the court – a new procedure presented as a survey – and read the name Kilmartin but not his address, which was illegible. From his clothes came the particular smell of a bonfire; the pockets of his coat were stuffed with rolled-up catalogues; and he held the *Financial Times* and a journal to his chest.

While they sat waiting in the benches, the woman in front of her turned round and, with her hand rising to pat the flushed skin at the top of her bosom, introduced herself as Diana Kidd. 'Did you know David?' she asked.

Kate nodded, aware of a blousy old-fashioned scent reaching her nostrils.

'Were you an *old* friend?'

'I suppose you could say that. We met at college.' She could see that the woman was trying to work her out: the traces of the East in her appearance – the looks of her father, Sonny Koh – the straight-backed Englishness of her mother, and the American accent which overlaid the voice of a public schoolgirl.

'I began to know David really quite well, considering,' continued the woman.

'Considering what?' said Kate.

The woman ignored the question. 'He threw himself into the local arts scene here. He had one of the most formidable minds I've ever had the privilege to encounter, but you know he was never pushy or domineering.' With each statement her eyes darted about the court. 'He never made people feel ill at ease with that great mind of his. And impeccable manners, of course. Unimpeachable! Kept himself

to himself, though: an invisible barrier around him, if you know what I mean.'

Kate did, though she wouldn't have put it like that. Eyam was capable of warmth and loyalty but he had no interest in explaining himself and was impatient when others expected him to. The woman asked if she was family, then if she had visited David since he had moved to High Castle. Kate shook her head to both questions and murmured that she hadn't seen him for some time. She did not mention the email from Russell, Spring & Co., a firm of local solicitors, which had been forwarded to her by her old assistant in New York and was how she had learned of his death nearly six weeks after it had occurred.

Once Diana Kidd had decided that Kate had not been a lover and possessed no greater claim on the memory of David Eyam than she did, her interest seemed to wane. However, she told Kate a bit more about Eyam's circumstances. He had bought and restored a black and white A-frame cottage on the edge of the woods overlooking the Dove Valley; he did not seem to have a job; he attended recitals and concerts, and joined the local film society and a reading group, the novelty of which was that books were discussed on rambles through the Marches of Wales.

What utter bloody hell, thought Kate, and not for the first time wondered what had driven Eyam to this provincial limbo on the English–Welsh border. The Eyam she knew was compelled by the centre of things; it was unthinkable that he'd opt for life in the back of beyond nourished only by cultural chats with Diana Kidd.

'Why was he in Colombia?' Kate asked. 'Did he tell you he was going?'

Mrs Kidd shook her head as though this was an

extremely stupid question. 'No, he just vanished two or three weeks before Christmas. No one knew where he had gone or for how long. The next thing we heard was about this bomb, but that took several weeks to filter through because no one suspected that he was involved. I mean, how could they?' She hissed this last observation as the coroner entered and the clerk asked them to rise.

A filmed interview of Detective Bautista by a British consular official in Cartagena was shown. Bautista's English was reasonably good but every so often he struggled for a word and looked off-camera to ask for translation. He appeared in front of a white backcloth wearing a neck brace, with a bandage on his forearm and two small strips of plaster above his left eye. Kate put his age at about forty. He had Indian ancestry – an aquiline nose, narrowed eyes and full lips. He talked rapidly, often repeating a question on the in-breath then answering as he breathed out.

The diplomat timed and dated the interview – eleven a.m., Friday February 18th. An oath was taken, then Bautista told the camera that he shouldn't have been at that restaurant when the bomb went off. In fact he had arranged to meet his girl, Mira, the night before at the Bolivar Crêperie, but there had been an incident down in the port – a murder. He was unable to keep the date and then he'd forgotten to phone her. She was mad with him. He blew out his cheeks and made a chopping motion with his right hand into his palm to underscore that this was a woman you would not want to anger too often.

So that was how he came to be sitting drinking bourbon outside the restaurant the following day. And of course she had been late just to make her point, and he'd fallen into conversation with the man he now knew to be David Eyam

and they talked about the book he was reading – *The Story of A Shipwrecked Sailor* by Gabriel García Márquez. It was incredible how much this Englishman knew about the book, about this shameful period in the history of Colombia and how the author had exposed the corruption of the dictator General Pinilla. He seemed to have so much in his head about everything, this Englishman, and the gift of the book now meant a great deal to him. It was the last act of a true gentleman, and he didn't mind saying that with the book some kind of good luck had passed from Eyam to him, which resulted in his and Mira's survival. He felt in his pocket, pulled out the book, looked at the cover and held it to the camera.

'What was it that made you run to save your girlfriend, detective?'

'It is the sound of detonator,' he replied, now holding an unlit cigarette. 'You know at the back of my mind I thought there was something wrong about that vehicle. It was there in my head all the time but I was not thinking. Why would anyone park there and block the alley? That was the question in my mind. And then I heard the detonator and I knew what was going to happen. I know this sound well since I study at the Explosives Unit and Bomb Data Center.'

'The Explosive Unit of the FBI – in the United States?' said the official.

'Of the FBI, yes, that is correct, señor. And the Hazards Devices School at Huntsville, Alabama. I study in that place also.'

'You attended training at these institutions last year?'

'That is correct: the programme was six months.' He paused. 'And so, señor, that is why I know the noise of a

detonator. It lives in my mind and when I hear it on the street I know that another detonator will follow.'

'Could you explain?'

Bautista put his hands together and began to talk fluently, as though being tested by an examination board. 'This type of bomb need two detonations. The first detonation, this blows the valves on the containers of liquefied gas and so the gas is spread. When it has mixed with the air the second explosion comes in a tiny little core of PETN.' He held up a finger and thumb pinched together.

'That is explosive material?'

'Yes, that is pentaerythritol tetranitrate,' he said with a flourish. 'When the second explosion takes place the large volume of oxygenated gas is detonated. In the regular bomb, the energy comes from the tightly packed core and drive outwards like so.' He clasped his hands in a ball then threw them apart. 'But in this devil, señor, in this devil the detonation ignites clouds of gas and there occurs an explosion with a force that becomes greater and greater, moving outwards and outwards gaining power all this time.' His hands mimed a billowing motion, then he picked up a glass of water and drank. 'It was this type of bomb used to attack the party headquarters.'

'The regional headquarters backs onto the alley where the van was parked? That was the target?'

'Correct.'

'From your expertise, would you say that Mr Eyam had any chance of escaping the explosion?'

He pouted regretfully and shook his head. 'The cloud of gas was too large. We believe there were many containers in that vehicle and there was much gas in the . . .'

'Released into the confined conditions of the alley?'

'Yes.'

The British official spoke his last question.

'From your knowledge of the investigation and your colleagues' work, is there any suspicion that the bomber was not primarily interested in the headquarters?'

The detective seemed surprised. 'Are you saying this bomb was to kill Señor Eyam?'

'No,' said the voice. 'I am asking whether there are any foreign groups who may have perpetrated this crime. And if you are sure that the headquarters was the target.'

'We know who made the attack, señor. This was the activities of a terrorist group here in Colombia.'

'The *actions* of a terrorist group: can you be more specific?'

'We know who these people are. They want to destroy the party headquarters. We know this, señor. We investigate these people.'

The interview ended. Detective Bautista nodded to the camera and struggled up from his chair. Then the screen went blank.

The coroner leaned forward to Eyam's lawyer. 'Mr Richards, I regret that you will not have the chance to question the witness, as I am afraid that the court's budget did not extend to bringing Detective Bautista to England. Are there any observations that you wish to make for the record?'

'Not at this stage, sir,' replied Richards.

'Then we shall proceed with the evidence concerning identification. Is Sergeant Hallam in court?'

A short man in a grey suit and dark shirt nodded and walked to the stand where, after taking an oath, he turned to the coroner.

'Sergeant Hallam, you were responsible for identifying the remains of Mr Eyam. Is that right?'

'In so far as there were remains, sir.'

'What can you tell the court about their condition?'

'The blast created considerable destruction in the area and there was much difficulty in locating and removing the victims from the scene. This was compounded by the collapse of two buildings after the fire, and the heavy plant that was required to shift the rubble.'

'You're saying the bodies were recovered after a lengthy time? How many were there?'

'It is very difficult to know, sir – maybe three.'

'All those killed were in or near that alley? The alley was an inferno. Is that right? There wasn't much left to go on?'

'Yes, sir, a lot was lost in the fire and the operation to clear the area. Some remains were located but the Colombian authorities insisted that DNA tests were carried out locally so as to make certain the right set of remains was sent to Britain.'

'Please tell the court what procedures were followed.'

'Hair samples were collected from Mr Eyam's home in Dove Valley and sent with his dental records to Colombia, where a match was made with some of the remains found in the alley. We received confirmation of this on February fifteenth.'

'Let me be clear on this. Was the readout of Mr Eyam's genetic profile sent to Colombia, or were the samples?'

'Both, sir.'

'And then Colombian authorities did their own test on the remains and found a match?'

The police officer nodded. 'They have a fully operational lab for this kind of forensic work, sir. It is perhaps a . . .

er . . . a more sophisticated operation than you would expect in that country.'

The coroner nodded and looked at his papers. 'Thank you. That will be all, sergeant.'

After asking Lady Eyam's lawyer if he had any questions and receiving a shake of the head, the coroner turned to the court. 'We have heard how David Lucas Eyam, formerly a government official who worked in Downing Street, left the United Kingdom for an extended holiday in December last year. Given Mr Eyam's exceptional qualities and outstanding service to this country and to the Prime Minister, it is only right for me to extend the court's sympathy to his family and friends and many colleagues in government at the manner of his untimely death.' Mr Richards bowed his head to accept the words on behalf of his client. 'In the matter of David Lucas Eyam's death,' he said more loudly and formally, 'I find that while holidaying in Central America he visited the Colombian port of Cartagena. On January twelfth this year at approximately five forty-five p.m. he was in the Colonial District of the city when an explosion took place that killed him outright. Accordingly, I record a verdict that Mr Eyam was killed unlawfully by persons unknown.'

The incontrovertible fact of Eyam's death was established. As Kate rose and worked her way along the bench, her resignation was replaced by anger at the waste of the last two years. God knows how things would have been if they had talked on that Saturday – if they had been talking through the two years of his exile in High Castle.

She came to the entrance, where there was a crush of reporters crowding round the clerk who was handing out DVDs of the film of the explosion. She turned to find the

tall man – Kilmartin – looking down at her. When the way cleared he gestured for her to go ahead of him and gave a regretful, thin-lipped smile that seemed to solicit something at the same time as suggesting postponement. She recognised that look: the steadiness of the gaze and the tiny pulse of energy in the eyes – the freemason's handshake of the intelligence services – and she wondered about Mr Kilmartin with his smell of bonfires, his academic journals and well-thumbed pamphlets, which she now saw were seed catalogues. What was he doing there? Checking that nothing inconvenient was being alleged in open court? Making sure the government was not being accused of anything low or underhand? The former head of the Joint Intelligence Committee – even if only for a reluctant and brief period – being blown up in a terrorist attack was, after all, something that must still concern the Secret Intelligence Service. She nodded to him and left the court, dodging the television cameras outside.