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Talking to the Dead

Written by Harry Bingham

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TALKING TO THE DEAD

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1

Interview, October 2006

Beyond the window, I can see three kites hanging in the air over Bute Park. One blue, one yellow, one pink. Their shapes are precise, as though stencilled. From this distance, I can't see the lines that tether them, so when the kites move, it's as though they're doing so of their own accord. An all-encompassing sunlight has swallowed depth and shadow.

I observe all this as I wait for DCI Matthews to finish rearranging the documents on his desk. He shuffles the last file from the stack before him to a chair in front of the window. The office is still messy, but at least we can see each other now.

'There,' he says.

I smile.

He holds up a sheet of paper. The printed side is facing him, but against the light from the window I see the shape of my name at the top. I smile again, not because I feel like smiling but because I can't think of anything sensible to say. This is an interview. My interviewer has my CV. What does he want me to do? Applaud?

He puts the CV down on the desk in the only empty patch available. He starts to read it through line by line, marking off each section with his forefinger as he does so. Education. A levels. University. Interests. Referees.

His finger moves back to the centre of the page. University.

'Philosophy.'

I nod.

'Why are we here? What's it all about? That sort of thing?'

'Not exactly. More like, what exists? What doesn't exist? How do we know whether it exists or not? Things like that.'

'Useful for police work.'

'Not really. I don't think it's useful for anything much, except maybe teaching us to think.'

Matthews is a big man. Not gym-big, but Welsh-big, with the sort of comfortable muscularity that suggests a past involving farm work, rugby and beer. He has remarkably pale eyes and thick dark hair. Even his fingers have little dark hairs running all the way to the final joint. He is the opposite of me.

'Do you think you have a realistic idea of what police work involves?'

I shrug. I don't know. How are you meant to know if you haven't done it? I say the sort of thing that I think I'm meant to say. I'm interested in law enforcement. I appreciate the value of a disciplined, methodical approach. Blah, blah. Yadda, yadda. Good little girl in her dark grey interview outfit saying all the things she's meant to say.

'You don't think you might get bored?'

'Bored?' I laugh with relief. That's what he was probing at. 'Maybe. I hope so. I quite like a little boredom.' Then, worried he might feel I am being arrogant – prize-winning Cambridge philosopher sneers at stupid policeman – I backtrack. 'I mean, I like things orderly. *I*s dotted, *t*s crossed. If that involves some routine work, then fine. I like it.'

His finger is still on the CV, but it's tracked up an inch or so. A levels. He leaves his finger there, fixes those pale eyes on me and says, 'Do you have any questions for me?'

I know that's what he's meant to say at some stage, but we've got forty-five minutes allocated for this interview and we've only used ten at the outside, most of which I've spent

watching him shift stationery around his office. Because I'm taken by surprise – and because I'm still a bit rubbish at these things – I say the wrong thing.

'Questions? No.' There's a short gap in which he registers surprise and I feel like an idiot. 'I mean, I want the job. I don't have any questions about that.'

His turn to smile. A real one, not fake ones like mine.

'You do. You really do.' He makes that a statement not a question. For a DCI, he's not very good at asking questions. I nod anyway.

'And you'd probably quite like it if I didn't ask you about a two-year gap in your CV, around the time of your A levels.'

I nod again, more slowly. Yes, I would quite like it if you didn't ask about that.

'Human resources know what's going on there, do they?'

'Yes. I've already been into that with them. I was ill. Then I got better.'

'Who in human resources?'

'Katie. Katie Andrews.'

'And the illness?'

I shrug. 'I'm fine now.'

A non-answer. I hope he doesn't push further, and he doesn't. He checks with me who's interviewed me so far. The answer is, pretty much everyone. This session with Matthews is the final hurdle.

'OK. Your father knows you're applying for this job?'

'Yes.'

'He must be pleased.'

Another statement in place of a question. I don't answer it.

Matthews examines my face intently. Maybe that's his interview technique. Maybe he doesn't ask his suspects any questions, he just makes statements and scrutinises their faces in the wide open light from the big Cardiff sky.

'We're going to offer you a job, you know that?'

'You are?'

'Of course we are. Coppers aren't thick, but you've got more brains than anyone else in this building. You're fit. You don't have a record. You were ill for a time as a teenager, but you're fine now. You want to work for us. Why wouldn't we hire you?'

I could think of a couple of possible answers to that, but I don't volunteer them. I'm suddenly aware of being intensely relieved, which scares me a bit, because I wasn't aware of having been anxious. I'm standing up. Matthews has stood up too and comes towards me, shaking my hand and saying something. His big shoulders block my view of Bute Park and I lose sight of the kites. Matthews is talking about formalities and I'm blathering answers back at him, but my attention isn't with any of that stuff. I'm going to be a police-woman. And just five years ago, I was dead.

2

May 2010

It's true – I do like routine work – but you can have too much of a good thing.

A copper with the Met in London – twenty-two unblemished years on the force – was obliged to retire following an injury received in the line of duty. He took a job as bursar of a Roman Catholic boys' school in Monmouthshire. He started nicking bits of money. Didn't get caught. Nicked more. Didn't get caught. Went crazy: bought himself an upright piano, a golf-club membership, two holidays, a conservatory, a share in a racehorse.

The school authorities were dopey but not actually brain dead. They came to us with evidence of wrongdoing. We investigated and found a whole lot more evidence, then arrested the suspect, Brian Penry, and took him in for interview. Penry denied everything, then stopped talking and saw out the session staring at the wall and looking like crap. On the tape, you can just about hear his slightly asthmatic breathing, a thin nasal whine sounding like a note of complaint between our questions. We charged him on eleven counts of theft, but the correct number is probably somewhere closer to fifty.

He's still denying everything, which means that we have to prepare the case for court. Five minutes before the trial starts, Penry will change his plea, because he's completely stuffed and he knows it and it won't make much difference to his

sentence whether he pleads guilty now or on the day itself. In the meantime, I've got to go through every single detail of his bank records over the last six years, every single card payment, every single withdrawal from the school's bank account and identify each and every rogue transaction. I've got to do all that and document it so meticulously that a defence lawyer won't be able to pick trivial little holes in our case when it comes to court, which, as I say, it never will, because Penry is stuffed and he knows it.

My desk is covered with paper. I loathe all banks and card companies. I hate every digit between zero and nine. I despise every dopily run Catholic boys' school in South Wales. If Brian Penry were in front of me now, I would try to force-feed him my calculator, which is as large and chewable as a Bakelite phone.

'Having fun?'

I look up. David Brydon, a detective sergeant, sandy-haired, thirty-two, a moderate case of freckles and a disposition so friendly and open that I sometimes find myself saying something obnoxious because too much of a good thing can be disconcerting.

'Sod off.'

I don't count that. That's just my version of friendly.

'Still on Penry, is it?'

I look up properly. 'His correct title is Bastard, Thieving, Wish-He'd-Go-and-Drown-Himself Penry.'

Brydon nods sagely, as though I said something sensible. 'I thought you had sophisticated views on moral responsibility.' He holds up two mugs. Tea for him, peppermint for me. Sugar in his, none in mine.

I stand up. 'I do, just not when I have to do this.' I gesture at the desk, already hating it a bit less. We go over to a little seating area in the window. There are two chairs there and a sofa, the sort you get in offices and airport lounges and

nowhere else, with tubular chrome legs and stain-resistant grey upholstery. There's a lot of natural light here, though, and a view of the park. Plus I do actually like Brydon. My bad mood is increasingly just for show.

'He'll plead guilty.'

'I know he'll plead guilty.'

'Got to be done, though.'

'Ah, yes, forgot it was State the Obvious Day. Sorry.'

'Thought you might be interested in this.'

He passes me a clear plastic evidence bag that contains a Visa debit card. Lloyds Bank. Platinum account. Expiry date October last year. Name of Mr Brendan T. Rattigan. Card neither shinily new nor badly marked. It is a dead card, that's all.

I shake my head. 'Nope. Don't think so. Not interested at all.'

'Rattigan. Brendan Rattigan.'

The name means nothing to me. Either my face says it or I do. I sip the tea – still too hot – rub my eyes and smile an apology at Brydon for being a cow.

He wrinkles his face at me. 'Brendan Rattigan. Newport's finest. Scrap-metal man, moves into steel. Mini-mills, whatever they are. Then shipping. Worth some ridiculous amount of money. A hundred million pounds or something.'

I nod. I remember now, but it's not his wealth that I remember or care about. Brydon is still talking. There's something in his voice that I haven't yet identified.

'He died nine months back. Light-aircraft accident in the estuary.' He jerks his thumb in the general direction of Roath Dock in case I don't know where the Severn Estuary is. 'No cause established. Co-pilot's body recovered. Rattigan's body never was.'

'But here's his card.' I stretch out the clear plastic around the card, as though getting a clearer look at it will unlock its secrets.

'Here's his card all right.'

'Which hasn't spent nine months in salt water.'

'No.'

'And you found it where exactly?'

Brydon's face hangs for a moment. He's stuck between two alternatives. Part of him wants to enjoy his little triumph over me. The other part of him is sombre, a fifty-year-old head on younger shoulders, gazing inward at the dark.

The sombre part wins.

'Not me, thank God. Neath police station gets a call. Anonymous caller. Female. Probably not elderly, probably not a kid. She gives the address of a house here in Cardiff, Butetown, says we need to get over there. A couple of uniforms do that. Locked door. Curtains over the windows. Neighbours either out or unhelpful. Uniforms go round the back. Back garden is' – Brydon turns his hands palm upward and I know immediately what he means – 'rubble. Bin bags that the dogs have been at. Rubbish everywhere. Weeds. And shit. Human shit . . . The drains inside are blocked and you can imagine the rest. The uniforms had been hesitating about going inside, but not any more. They break down a door. The house is worse than the garden.'

Another short pause. No theatre this time. Just the awful feeling that decent human beings have when they encounter horror. I nod, to say that I know what he feels, which isn't true but is what he needs to hear.

'Two bodies. A woman, maybe twenties. Red-haired, dead. Evidence of class-A drug usage, but no cause of death established. Not yet. And a little girl. A cutie, apparently. Five, maybe six. Thin as a matchstick. And . . . Christ, Fi, somebody had dropped a fucking sink on her head. A big Belfast jobbie. The sink didn't break, it just crushed her. They hadn't even bothered to fucking move it afterwards.'

Brydon has emotion in his eyes, and his voice is crushed

too, lying under that heavy stoneware sink in a house that stinks of death, even from here.

I'm not that good at feelings. Not yet. Not the really ordinary human ones that arise from instinct like water bubbling up from a hillside spring, irrepressible and clear and as natural as singing. I can picture that house of death, because the last few years have taken me to some pretty bad places and I know what they look like, but I don't have Brydon's reaction. I envy it but can't share it. But Brydon is my friend and he's in front of me, wanting something. I reach for his forearm with my hand. He's not wearing a jacket and the exchange of warmth between his skin and mine is immediate. He breathes out through his mouth. Noiselessly. Releasing something. I let him do it, whatever it is.

After a moment, he throws grateful eyes at me, pulls away and drains his tea. His face is still sombre, but he's one of those elastic sorts who'll be fine. It might have been different if he'd been one of the ones finding the bodies.

Brydon indicates the Platinum account card. 'In amongst the crap, they find that.'

I can imagine it. Dirty plates. Furniture too large for the room. Brown velour and old food stains. Clothes. Broken toys. A TV. Drug stuff: tobacco, needles, lighters. Plastic bags filled with useless things: car mats, clothes hangers, CD cases, nappies. I've been to those places. The poorer the house, the more the stuff. And somewhere in among it, on a dresser under a pile of enforcement notices from utility companies, a single Platinum debit card. A single Platinum card and a little girl, a cutie, with her head smashed to nothing on the floor.

'I can imagine.'

'Yeah.' Brydon nods, bringing himself back. He's a DS. This is a job. We're not in that house, we're in an office with low-energy ceiling lights and ergonomic desk chairs and

high-output photocopiers and views out over Cathays Park. 'Major hoo-ha.'

'Yes.'

'Jackson is running the inquiry, but it's an all-hands-on-deck affair.'

'And he wants my hand on his deck.'

'He does indeed.'

'This card. Why it was there.'

'Yep. It's probably just some druggy card-theft type thing, but we need to follow the lead anyway. Any connections. I know it's a long shot.'

He starts telling me things about the investigation. It's being called Operation Lohan. Daily briefing at eighty thirty sharp. Sharp means sharp. Everyone expected to show, that includes non-core team members like me. The press has a very brief statement, but all further details to be kept quiet for now. Brydon tells me all this and I only half hear him. It's called Lohan because there's an actress called Lindsay Lohan who's a redhead and has had drink and drugs issues. I only know this because Brydon tells me, and he only tells me because he knows I'd have no idea otherwise. Famous for my ignorance, me.

'You got all that?'

I nod. 'You OK?'

He nods. Attempts a grin. Not a brilliant attempt, but more than passable.

I take the card back to my desk, pulling the plastic bag tight round my finger and tracing the outline of the card with the thumb and forefinger of my free hand.

Somebody killed a young woman. Somebody dropped a heavy sink onto a little girl's head. And this card – belonging to a dead millionaire – was there as it happened.

Routine is fine. Secrets are better.