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Not Safe After Dark

Peter Robinson

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Extract

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INTRODUCTION

I remember once talking to a famous crime writer about getting a short story out of my home being burgled, and she replied, 'I get a short story out of everything.' That certainly put me in my place. It also serves as useful opening to this introduction because some writers I know find that short stories come easily, whereas I don't.

I think this is partly because I have become so used to thinking in terms of the novel, with the broad canvas it offers, that it's hard to work in miniature. I carry a novel around in my head for a long time – at least a year, waking and sleeping – and this gives me time to get under the skin of the characters *and* the story. Also, plotting is probably the most difficult part of writing for me, and being asked to write a short story, which so often depends on a plot twist, a clever diversion or a surprising revelation, guarantees that I'll get the laundry done and probably the ironing, too.

That said, there is nevertheless a great deal of satisfaction to be had from writing short stories. Partly, of course, it's the quick payoff. A short story is, by definition, *short*. Consequently, you get that wonderful rush of having *finished* something far more quickly than you do with a novel.

But it isn't only the instant gratification that makes short stories so attractive to me, it's also the new possibilities they offer. When you work primarily as a series writer, as I do, most of your time goes into the creation of that series. That, of course, is as it should be: I wouldn't be writing the Inspector Banks books if I didn't want to. But there's always the temptation to try something different,

and to risk a week or so doing this is a lot easier than to risk a year or more on a project that might easily meet with rejection.

Short stories also offer a wonderful opportunity for the series writer to spread his or her wings and fly to new, exotic places, to meet different people and to try out different techniques. The Inspector Banks series is set, for the most part, in Yorkshire, but these stories range from Toronto to Paris, from Florida to California. The Banks books are third-person narratives, while many of the stories are first-person. Banks is a policeman, but you'll find very few policemen between these covers. A number of the stories, such as 'Murder in Utopia' and 'Missing in Action', are set in different periods of history.

While short stories come from the same seeds as novels, usually they come as ideas that can *only* be developed into short stories. 'Innocence' was one exception to this rule. After writing the story, I couldn't let go and went on to write an entire novel from Reed's point of view, expanding the events of the story, but my publishers turned it down. I put it aside for a while, then thought that perhaps if Banks was there it might work better. Thus, Reed became Owen and 'Innocence' (1990) became *Innocent Graves* (1996). Both the short story and the novel won Arthur Ellis awards in Canada.

A sense of place has always been important in my work and is no less so here. In Florida one December I witnessed a Christmas singalong around the swimming pool, Santa in his usual outfit leading the crowd on electric piano. Only this took place in twenty-seven degree heat and they were singing 'White Christmas', something I think they don't usually have down there. Needless to say, the absurdity of the scene was not lost on me, and in 'Some Land in Florida' Santa ends up in the pool with his electric piano thrown after him – still plugged in!

The first historical story I wrote, 'The Two Ladies of Rose Cottage', was inspired by both a place and by my interest in Thomas Hardy. I once paid a visit to the house where he was born in Bockhampton, Dorset, and stood in the room where he was cast aside as dead by the doctor who delivered him, only to be revived

by a quick-thinking nurse. As I looked out of his upstairs window on much the same view he often enjoyed as he wrote his early books, this short story of murder and deceit ranging over more than a hundred years began to form in my mind, and Hardy himself even makes a brief appearance in it.

Other stories have their origins in such diverse sources as an unusual piece of information ('Carrion'), fragments of dreams ('Fan Mail'), stories recounted by others ('The Wrong Hands' and 'Memory Lane') and research for other works. I doubt that I would ever have written 'In Flanders Field' or 'Missing in Action', for example, if I hadn't spent so much time researching the Second World War for *In a Dry Season*.

Sometimes, as in 'Gone to the Dawgs' and 'The Duke's Wife', I was asked for a story on a specific topic – in these cases, American Football and Shakespeare respectively. But no matter how much or how little is given, or demanded, there is always a lot to change and more to add, all subjected to the constant 'What if?' of the writer's imagination.

While I did mention earlier that most of the stories here represent a break from Inspector Banks, there are three Banks short stories in the collection. In a way, they were the hardest for me to write because I'm so used to giving Banks plenty of space. There's little room for significant character or plot development in a short story, or for the creation of multiple points of view. Still, it was impossible to resist the temptation to try, especially to have Banks attempt to solve the mystery of a man who claims to have been murdered in a previous lifetime, as happens in 'Summer Rain'. You'll have to judge the results for yourself.

Finally, the Inspector Banks novella 'Going Back' is a special case and has never been published before. I wrote it early in 1999, so it came between *In a Dry Season* and *Cold Is the Grave*. At that point I didn't know that I was going to send Banks home to deal with his old school friend's disappearance in *The Summer that Never Was* (2003) and I wanted to show him interacting with his family and responding to the place where he grew up. In manuscript,

it reached 106 pages, too long for any of the magazines or anthologies that regularly published my stories, and too short for separate book publication. And so it sat there gathering dust until I came to write *The Summer that Never Was*, when I incorporated parts of the novella into the novel – mostly details about the street Banks grew up on, his relationship with his parents, the music he listened to and the books he read as an adolescent.

When I came to revise 'Going Back' for this collection, I had to shift it chronologically, so that it now falls between *The Summer that Never Was* and *Playing with Fire*. I also had to try to avoid too much repetition of details I had cannibalized for the novel without spoiling the original conception. It was a difficult balancing act, but I hope you enjoy the final result, along with the rest of the stories in this collection.

PETER ROBINSON
FEBRUARY, 2004

SUMMER RAIN

AN INSPECTOR BANKS STORY

1

'And exactly how many times have you died, Mr Singer?'

'Fourteen. That's fourteen I've managed to uncover. They say that each human being has lived about twenty incarnations. But it's the last one I'm telling you about. See, I died by violence. I was murdered.'

Detective Constable Susan Gay made a note on the yellow pad in front of her. When she looked down, she noticed that she had doodled an intricate pattern of curves and loops, a bit like Spaghetti Junction, during the few minutes she had been talking to Jerry Singer.

She tried to keep the scepticism out of her voice. 'Ah-hah. And when was this, sir?'

'Nineteen sixty-six. July. That makes it exactly thirty-two years ago this week.'

'I see.'

Jerry Singer had given his age as thirty-one, which meant that he had been murdered a year before he was born.

'How do you know it was nineteen sixty-six?' Susan asked.

Singer leaned forward. He was a remarkably intense young man, Susan noticed, thin to the point of emaciation, with glittering green eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. He looked as if the lightest breeze would blow him away. His fine red hair had a gossamer quality that reminded Susan of spiders' webs. He wore jeans, a red T-shirt and a grey anorak, its shoulders darkened by

the rain. Though he said he came from San Diego, California, Susan could detect no trace of suntan.

'It's like this,' he began. 'There's no fixed period between incarnations, but my channeller told me—'

'Channeller?' Susan interrupted.

'She's a kind of spokesperson for the spirit world.'

'A medium?'

'Not quite.' Singer managed a brief smile. 'But close enough. More of mediator, really.'

'Oh, I see,' said Susan, who didn't. 'Go on.'

'Well, she told me there would be a period of about a year between my previous incarnation and my present one.'

'How did she know?'

'She just *knows*. It varies from one soul to another. Some need a lot of time to digest what they've learned and make plans for the next incarnation. Some souls just can't wait to return to another body.' He shrugged. 'After some lifetimes, you might simply just get tired and need a long rest.'

After some mornings, too, Susan thought. 'OK,' she said, 'let's move on. Is this your first visit to Yorkshire?'

'It's my first trip to England, period. I've just qualified in dentistry, and I thought I'd give myself a treat before I settled down to the daily grind.'

Susan winced. Was that a pun? Singer wasn't smiling. A New Age dentist, now there was an interesting combination, she thought. Can I read your tarot cards for you while I drill? Perhaps you might like to take a little astral journey to Neptune while I'm doing your root canal? She forced herself to concentrate on what Singer was saying.

'So, you see,' he went on, 'as I've never been here before, it *must* be real, mustn't it?'

Susan realized she had missed something. 'What?'

'Well, it was all so familiar, the landscape, everything. And it's not only the *déjà vu* I had. There was the dream, too. We haven't even approached this in hypnotic regression yet, so—'

Susan held up her hand. 'Hang on a minute. You're losing me. What was so familiar?'

'Oh, I thought I'd made that clear.'

'Not to me.'

'The place. Where I was murdered. It was near here. In Swainsdale.'

2

Banks was sitting in his office with his feet on the desk and a buff folder open on his lap when Susan Gay popped her head around the door. The top button of his white shirt was undone and his tie hung askew.

That morning, he was supposed to be working on the monthly crime figures, but instead, through the half-open window, he listened to the summer rain as it harmonized with Michael Nyman's soundtrack from *The Piano*, playing quietly on his portable cassette. His eyes were closed and he was daydreaming of waves washing in and out on a beach of pure white sand. The ocean and sky were the brightest blue he could imagine, and tall palm trees dotted the landscape. The pastel village that straddled the steep hillside looked like a cubist collage.

'Sorry to bother you, sir,' Susan said, 'but it looks like we've got a right one here.'

Banks opened his eyes and rubbed them. He felt as if he were coming back from a very long way. 'It's all right,' he said. 'I was getting a bit bored with the crime statistics, anyway.' He tossed the folder onto his desk and linked his hands behind his head. 'Well, what is it?'

Susan entered the office. 'It's sort of hard to explain, sir.'

'Try.'

Susan told him about Jerry Singer. As he listened, Banks's blue eyes sparkled with amusement and interest. When Susan had finished, he thought for a moment, then sat up and turned

off the music. 'Why not?' he said. 'It's been a slow week. Let's live dangerously. Bring him in.' He fastened his top button and straightened his tie.

A few moments later, Susan returned with Jerry Singer in tow. Singer looked nervously around the office and took the seat opposite Banks. The two exchanged introductions, then Banks leaned back and lit a cigarette. He loved the mingled smells of smoke and summer rain.

'Perhaps you'd better start at the beginning,' he said.

'Well,' said Singer, turning his nose up at the smoke, 'I've been involved in regressing to past lives for a few years now, partly through hypnosis. It's been a fascinating journey, and I've discovered a great deal about myself.' He sat forward and rested his hands on the desk. His fingers were short and tapered. 'For example, I was a merchant's wife in Venice in the fifteenth century. I had seven children and died giving birth to the eighth. I was only twenty-nine. In my next incarnation, I was an actor in a troupe of Elizabethan players, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. I remember playing Bardolph in *Henry V* in 1599. After that, I—'

'I get the picture,' said Banks. 'I don't mean to be rude, Mr Singer, but maybe we can skip to the twentieth century?'

Singer paused and frowned at Banks. 'Sorry. Well, as I was telling Detective Constable Gay here, it's the least clear one so far. I was a hippie. At least, I think I was. I had long hair, wore a caftan, bell-bottom jeans. And I had this incredible sense of déjà vu when I was driving through Swainsdale yesterday afternoon.'

'Where, exactly?'

'It was just before Fortford. I was coming from Helmthorpe, where I'm staying. There's a small hill by the river with a few trees on it, all bent by the wind. Maybe you know it?'

Banks nodded. He knew the place. The hill was, in fact, a drumlin, a kind of hump-backed mound of detritus left by the retreating ice age. Six trees grew on it, and they had all bent slightly to the south-east after years of strong north-westerly winds. The drumlin was about two miles west of Fortford.

'Is that all?' Banks asked.

'All?'

'Yes.' Banks leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk. 'You know there are plenty of explanations for déjà vu, don't you, Mr Singer? Perhaps you've seen a place very similar before and only remembered it when you passed the drumlin?'

Singer shook his head. 'I understand your doubts,' he said, 'and I can't offer concrete *proof*, but the *feeling* is unmistakable. I have been there before, in a previous life. I'm certain of it. And that's not all. There's the dream.'

'Dream?'

'Yes. I've had it several times. The same one. It's raining, like today, and I'm passing through a landscape very similar to what I've seen in Swainsdale. I arrive at a very old stone house. There are people and their voices are raised, maybe in anger or laughter, I can't tell. But I start to feel tense and claustrophobic. There's a baby crying somewhere and it won't stop. I climb up some creaky stairs. When I get to the top, I find a door and open it. Then I feel that panicky sensation of endlessly falling, and I usually wake up frightened.'

Banks thought for a moment. 'That's all very interesting,' he said, 'but have you considered that you might have come to the wrong place? We're not usually in the business of interpreting dreams and visions.'

Singer stood his ground. 'This is real,' he said. 'A crime has been committed. Against me.' He poked himself in the chest with his thumb. 'The crime of murder. The least you can do is do me the courtesy of checking your records.' His odd blend of naivety and intensity charged the air.

Banks stared at him, then looked at Susan, whose face showed sceptical interest. Never having been one to shy away from what killed the cat, Banks let his curiosity get the better of him yet again. 'All right,' he said, standing up. 'We'll look into it. Where did you say you were staying?'