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Opening Extract from...

A Meditation on Murder

Written by Robert Thorogood

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For Katie B

Prologue

Aslan Kennedy had no need of an alarm clock. Instead, he found he woke every morning quite naturally as the sun began to peek over the horizon.

In fact, he'd been waking with the sun ever since he'd decided a few years back that he no longer believed in alarm clocks. Any more than he believed in money, the internet, or any kind of 'one cup' tea bag. For Aslan—hotel-owner, yoga instructor and self-styled Spiritual Guru—the wrist-watch, with its arbitrary division of seconds, minutes and hours, was a potent symbol of enslavement. A manacle mankind wore while they worshipped at the false idol they called progress.

It made making appointments with him a little trying, of course. But that wasn't Aslan's problem. Not the way he saw it.

On this particular morning, Aslan lay quietly in bed (mahogany, Belle Epoque) until he felt his chakras align. He then swung his legs out onto the teak floorboards (Thai, imported) and padded over to a floor-length mirror (gilt-framed, Regency) where he inspected his reflection. The man who stared back at him looked much older than his fifty-six years—if only because his flowing white hair, beard and white cotton nightshirt gave him a Jesus/Gandalf vibe. But, as Aslan would be the first to admit, the miracle was that he was alive at all. And, as far as he was concerned, the reason why he'd been able to turn his life around was entirely down to his wonderful wife, Rianka.

Aslan turned back to look at Rianka as she slept twisted in the cotton sheets of their bed. She looked so at peace, Aslan thought to himself. Like a beautiful angel. And, as he'd told himself a thousand times over the last decade and a half, he owed everything that was now good in his life to this woman. It was that simple. And debts like that could never be repaid.

Once Aslan had got dressed, he swept down the mahogany staircase of The Retreat, careful his white cotton robes didn't knock over any of the artfully arranged ethnic icons or trinkets that variously stood on pedestals or hung from the wall. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned into the hotel's ultra-modern kitchen and was pleased to see that someone had already laid out a willow pattern teapot and porcelain cups on a tray for him.

Aslan started the kettle boiling and looked out of the window. Manicured lawns stretched down through an avenue of tall palm trees to the hotel's beach, where the Car-

ibbean sea sparkled emerald green as it lapped against the white sand. With a smile, Aslan saw that the guests for the Sunrise Healing were already on the beach, stretching and taking the air following their early-morning swim.

Mind you, his eyesight wasn't what it once was, and, as he looked more closely at the five people in their swim things, he found himself frowning. Was that really who was going to be in the Sunrise Healing session with him? In fact, Aslan realised, if that's who was attending the session, then something had gone seriously wrong.

Aslan's attention was brought back to the room as the kettle came to the boil with a click. He poured the water into the pot and let the familiar smell of green tea calm him. After all, he had much more in his life to worry about than who was or wasn't attending one of his therapy sessions. Perhaps this was no more than karma realigning itself?

He couldn't hide from his past forever, could he?

By the time Aslan took the tray of tea outside, he'd decided that he'd just carry on as normal. He'd lead the guests to the Meditation Space. Just as normal. He'd lock the room down. Just as normal. He'd then share a cup of tea with them all and start the Healing. Just as normal.

'Good morning!' Aslan called out to get the attention of the five guests down on the beach. They all turned and looked up at him. A few of them even waved.

Yes, he decided to himself, it was all going to be just fine.

It was half an hour later when the screaming started.

At the time, most of the hotel guests were finishing their breakfast in the outdoor dining area, or were already wearing white cotton robes and heading off to their first treatment of the day. As for Rianka Kennedy, Aslan's wife, she was sitting out on the hotel's verandah, a wicker basket of sewing at her feet as she darned one of her husband's socks.

The scream seemed to be coming from one of the treatment rooms that sat in the middle of The Retreat's largest lawn: a timber and paper Japanese tea house that Aslan and Rianka had christened the 'Meditation Space'.

When a second scream joined the first, Rianka found herself running across the grass towards the Meditation Space. It was a good hundred yards away and, when Rianka had covered about half the distance, Dominic De Vere, The Retreat's tanned and taut handyman, appeared as if by magic from around the side of a clump of bougainvillea. As usual he was wearing only cut-off jeans, flip-flops and a utility belt full of various tools.

'What's that racket?' he asked somewhat redundantly as Rianka flashed past him. After a moment, he turned and trotted after her.

Rianka got to the door of the Meditation Space, and, as there was no handle on the outside of it, tried to jam her fingers into the gap between the door and the frame with no success. It wouldn't budge—it was locked from the inside.

'What's going on?' she called out over the sound of screams.

Dominic finally flapped over on his flip-flops and caught up with Rianka, if not the situation.

‘What’s happening?’ he asked.

‘Dominic, get that door open!’

‘I can’t. There’s no door handle.’

‘Use your knife! Just cut through the paper!’

‘Oh! Of course!’

Dominic grabbed the Stanley knife from the pouch at his belt and clicked the triangular blade out. He was about to slash through the paper of the tea house’s wall when they both saw it: a bloody hand pressed up against the inside.

They then heard a man’s voice, thick with fear: ‘Help!’

And then a different female voice: ‘Oh god! Oh god!’

There was a scrabbling while someone wrestled with the lock on the inside of the door. A few moments later, the door was yanked inwards by Ben Jenkins, who then just stood there in lumpen horror.

Ignoring Ben, Rianka stepped into the Meditation Space and saw that Paul Sellars was lying on his back on a prayer mat, having difficulty waking up. Ann, his wife, was kneeling at his side shaking his shoulders. Rianka could see that both of them had spots of blood on their white cotton robes. As for Saskia Filbee, she was standing off to one side, her hands over her mouth, stifling another scream. There was blood on her sleeve as well.

But it was the woman standing in the centre of the room that drew Rianka’s attention. Her name was Julia Higgins. She was in her early twenties, she’d been working at The Retreat for the last six months, and in her left hand she was holding a bloody carving knife.

At Julia's feet a man was lying quite still, his once white robes, beard and hair now drenched in blood, a number of vicious knife wounds in his back.

Aslan Kennedy—hotel-owner, yoga instructor and self-styled Spiritual Guru—had clearly just been viciously stabbed to death.

'I killed him,' Julia said.

And now it was Rianka's turn to scream.

Chapter One

A few hours before the murder of Aslan Kennedy, Detective Inspector Richard Poole was also awake. This wasn't because he'd trained himself to turn delicately to each day's sunrise like a flower; it was because he was hot, bothered, and he'd been awake since a frog had started croaking outside his window—inexplicably—just before 4am.

But then, Richard thought to himself, this was entirely typical, because if he wasn't being assaulted by frog choruses in the middle of the night, it was torrential downpours like a troupe of Gene Kellys tap-dancing on his tin roof; or it was whole dunes of sand being blown across his floorboards by the hot Caribbean wind. In fact, Richard considered, in all ways and at all times, life on the tropical island of Saint-Marie was a misery.

Admittedly, he'd collected empirical evidence that sug-

gested that Saint-Marie was a popular holiday destination for tens of thousands of other people, but what did other people know? This was an island where it was sunny every second of every single day apart from the ten minutes each morning and night when a tropical storm would appear out of nowhere and rain hard enough to flatten cows. And that wasn't even counting the three months of the year when it was no longer the hot season because it was now the hurricane season—which, in truth, was just as hot as the hot season, but altogether more hurricaney.

And none of this even included the constant and unrelenting humidity, which—Richard often found himself claiming—was well over one hundred per cent. (Of course, Richard knew that this was scientifically impossible, but he also knew that the one time he'd received a precious box of Walker's crisps in the post from his mother, the crisps had gone soggy within minutes of him opening any of the packets. It was like some exquisite punishment that had been specifically designed to torture him. The insides of each packet contained perfect crisps right up to but not including the precise moment he opened the packet and tried to eat one, at which point they immediately went stale in the sultry tropical air.)

This and other wild roller coasters of despair looped through Richard's mind as he lay in bed, wide awake, his bedside alarm clock clicking from 04:18 to 04:19, surely the most miserable minute in the twenty-four hour clock, Richard found himself musing.

A slick of sweat slipped down his neck and into the collar of his Marks and Spencer pyjamas, and before he could

stop himself, Richard became a kicking machine, scissoring his legs in a frenzied attack on his sheets until they'd been balled up and dashed to the floor.

He slumped back onto the old mattress and exhaled in exasperation. Why did everything have to be so hard?

There was nothing for it, he might as well get up.

He turned on the lights and padded into the tiny kitchenette and washroom that had somehow been crammed into the inside porch of his shack as if by someone who no doubt felt that the galley kitchens on sailboats were altogether too roomy. Surely there was a way of packing even more cooking and cleaning equipment into even less space?

He went to the metal sink that was squashed in between his fridge and his front door, and discovered that he wasn't the only person looking for a drink. A bright green lizard was already in the sink catching drops of water as they fell from the tap above.

The lizard was called Harry. Or, rather, Richard had named the lizard Harry when he'd discovered that the shack he'd been assigned to live in already came with a reptilian sitting tenant. And, like every flat-share Richard had ever been involved in, it had been a disaster from the start.

As Harry turned his attention back to catching drops of water with his pink-flashing tongue, Richard found himself thinking—not for the first time—that he should just get rid of the bloody creature.

But how to do it, that was the question.

A few hours later, Richard was sitting behind his desk in Honoré Police Station using the internet to research legal and possibly not-so-legal methods of household pest con-

trol when Detective Sergeant Camille Bordey swished over to his desk, a gleam in her eye.

‘So tell me...what do you want for lunch?’

Camille was bright, lithe, and one of the most naturally attractive women on the island, but as Richard looked up from his reverie—irked at the interruption—he frowned like a barn owl who’d just received some bad news.

‘Camille, don’t interrupt me when I’m working.’

‘Oh, sorry,’ Camille said, not sorry at all. ‘What are you working on?’

‘Oh, you know. Work,’ he said, suspiciously. ‘What do you want?’

‘Me? I just wanted to take your lunch order.’

Richard finally looked at his partner. She was young, fresh-faced, and threw herself at life with a wondrous abandon that Richard didn’t even remotely understand. In fact, as Richard considered Camille, he found himself once again marvelling at how much his partner was a complete mystery to him. In truth, he knew that he was limited in his understanding of women by the fact that he’d been educated at a single-sex boarding school and hadn’t had any kind of meaningful conversation with a woman who wasn’t either his mother or his House Matron before the age of eighteen, but Camille seemed even more impossible to comprehend than most women.

To begin with, she was French. To end with, she was French. And in between all that, she was French. This meant—to Richard’s mind at least—that she was unreliable, incapable of following orders, and was, all in all, a wild card and loose cannon. In truth, Richard was scared witless of

her. Not that he'd ever admitted as much. Even to himself.

'You know what I want for lunch, Camille,' he said imperiously, trying to take back control of the conversation. 'Because I've had the same lunch every single day I've been on this godforsaken island.'

'But *Maman* says she's got some spiced yams and rice she can plate up for us all. Or there's curried goat left over from—'

'Thank you, Camille, but I'd much rather just have my usual.'

Camille looked at her boss, her eyes sparkling as she got out her police notebook and made a big show of writing down his lunch order. 'One...banana...sandwich.'

'Thank you, Camille,' Richard said, somehow aware that he'd been made to look stupid, but not knowing quite how it had happened.

Camille grabbed up her handbag, sashayed out of the room, and Richard waited to see who of Dwayne or Fidel would appear first from behind their computer monitors.

It was Ordinary Police Officer Dwayne Myers. But then, as the elder statesman of the station, this was no real surprise.

Richard tolerated Dwayne—liked him, even—but it was always against his better judgement. Dwayne was in his fifties but looked like he was no older than thirty and, while he wore non-regulation trainers and a bead necklace with his uniform, he was always immaculately turned out. In fact, it was something Richard had always felt he and Dwayne had in common, their sartorial precision. And while Richard knew that Dwayne wasn't really very interested in be-

ing thorough, punctual or following any kind of orders, he was a marvel at digging up information through ‘unofficial’ channels. And on a small tropical island like Saint-Marie, there were a lot of unofficial channels.

‘Seriously, Chief,’ Dwayne said. ‘You can’t have the same lunch day after day.’

‘I went to boarding school for ten years. Watch me.’

And now Sergeant Fidel Best’s head appeared to the side of his monitor, his young and trusting face puzzled. Fidel was a proper copper, Richard felt. He was meticulous, keen, utterly tireless, and, above all else, he knew correct procedure. The only downside to Fidel was that he was overly keen, so he’d sometimes continue with a line of inquiry long after it was sensible to drop it. Like now, Richard found himself thinking, as Fidel said, ‘But, sir, don’t you get bored eating the same meal every day of your life?’

‘Yes. Extremely. But what can I do?’

‘Well, sir, order a different lunch?’

‘No, I think I’ll stick to my banana sandwich, if you don’t mind. You know where you are with a banana sandwich.’

‘I know,’ Dwayne said, almost awestruck by his boss’s dogged determination never to embrace change. ‘Eating a banana sandwich.’

The office phone rang and Richard huffed. ‘No, it’s alright, you two stay where you are, I’ll get it.’

Richard went to the sun-bleached counter and plucked up the ancient phone’s handset.

‘Honoré Police Station, this is Detective Inspector Richard Poole speaking. How can I be of assistance?’

Richard listened a moment before cupping the phone and turning back to his team.

‘Fidel. Phone Camille. Cancel the banana sandwich. There’s been a murder.’

