Opening Extract from...

NIGHT MUSIC: Nocturnes Volume 2

Written by John Connolly

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I

Let us begin with this:

To those looking at his life from without, it would have seemed that Mr Berger led a dull existence. In fact, Mr Berger himself might well have concurred with this view.

He worked for the housing department of a minor English council, with the job title of Closed Accounts Registrar. His task, from year to year, entailed compiling a list of those who had either relinquished or abandoned the housing provided for them by the council, and in doing so had left their accounts in arrears. Whether a week's rent was owed, or a month's, or even a year's (for evictions were a difficult business and had a habit of dragging on until relations between council and tenant came to resemble those between a besieging army and a walled city), Mr Berger would record the sum in question in a massive leather-bound ledger known as the Closed Accounts Register. At year's end, he would then be required to balance the rents received against those owed. If he had performed his job correctly, the difference between the two sums would be the total amount contained in the register.

Even Mr Berger found his job arduous to explain. Rare was it for a cab driver, or a fellow passenger on a train or bus, to engage in a discussion of Mr Berger's livelihood for longer than it took him to describe it. Mr Berger didn't mind. He had no illusions about himself or his work. He got on perfectly well with his colleagues, and was happy to join them for a pint of ale – but no more than that – at the end of each week. He contributed to retirement gifts, and wedding presents, and funeral wreaths. At one time it had seemed that he himself might become the cause

of one such collection, for he entered into a state of cautious flirtation with a young woman in Accounts. His advances appeared to be reciprocated, and the couple performed a mutual circling for the space of a year until someone less inhibited than Mr Berger entered the fray, and the young woman, presumably weary of waiting for Mr Berger to breach some perceived exclusion zone around her person, went off with his rival instead. It says much about Mr Berger that he contributed to their wedding collection without a hint of bitterness.

His position as registrar paid neither badly nor particularly well, but enough to keep him clothed and fed, and maintain a roof above his head. Most of the remainder went on books. Mr Berger led a life of the imagination, fed by stories. His flat was lined with shelves, and those shelves were filled with the books that he loved. There was no particular order to them. Oh, he kept the works of individual authors together, but he did not alphabetize, and neither did he congregate books by subject. He knew where to lay a hand on any title at any time, and that was enough. Order was for dull minds, and Mr Berger was far less dull than he appeared. (To those who are themselves unhappy, the contentment of others can sometimes be mistaken for tedium.) Mr Berger might sometimes have been a little lonely, but he was never bored, and rarely disconsolate, and he numbered his days by the books that he read.

I suppose that, in telling this tale, I have made Mr Berger sound old. He was not. He was 35 and, although in no danger of being mistaken for a matinée idol, was not unattractive. Yet perhaps there was in his interiority something that rendered him, if not sexless, then somewhat oblivious to the reality of relations with the opposite sex, an impression strengthened by the collective memory of what had occurred – or not occurred – with the girl from Accounts. So it was that Mr Berger found himself consigned to the dusty ranks of the council's bachelors and spinsters, to the army of the closeted, the odd, and the sad, although he was none of these things. Well, perhaps just a little of the latter:

although he never spoke of it, or even fully admitted it to himself, he regretted his failure to express properly his affection for the girl in Accounts, and had quietly resigned himself to the possibility that a life shared with another might not be in his stars. Slowly he was becoming a kind of fixed object, and the books that he read came to reflect his view of himself. He was not a great lover, and neither was he a tragic hero. Instead, he resembled those narrators in fiction who observe the lives of others, existing as dowels upon which plots hang like coats until the time comes for the true actors of the book to assume them. Great and voracious reader that he was, Mr Berger failed to realize that the life he was observing was his own.

In the autumn of 1968, on Mr Berger's 36th birthday, the council announced that it was moving offices. Its various departments had until then been scattered like outposts throughout the city, but it now made more sense to gather them all into one purpose-built environment and sell the outlying buildings. Mr Berger was saddened by this development. The housing department occupied a set of ramshackle offices in a redbrick edifice that had once been a private school, and there was a pleasing oddness to the manner in which it had been imperfectly adapted to its current role. The council's new headquarters, meanwhile, was a brutalist block designed by one of those acolytes of Le Corbusier whose vision consisted solely of purging the individual and eccentric and replacing it with a uniformity of steel, glass and reinforced concrete. It squatted on the site of what had once been the city's glorious Victorian railway station, itself now replaced by an unappealing bunker attached to a new shopping precinct. In time, Mr Berger knew, the rest of the city's jewels would also be turned to dust, and the ugliness of the built environment would poison the population, for how could it be otherwise?

Mr Berger was informed that, under the new regimen, there would be no need for a Closed Accounts Register, and he would be transferred to other duties. A new, more efficient system was

to be put in place, although, as with so many other such initiatives, it would later be revealed as less efficient, and more costly, than the original. This news coincided with the death of Mr Berger's elderly mother, his last surviving close relative, and the discovery of a small but significant bequest to her son: her house, some shares, and a sum of money that was not quite a fortune but would, if invested carefully, enable Mr Berger to live in a degree of restrained comfort for the rest of his life. He had always had a hankering to write, and he now had the perfect opportunity to test his literary mettle.

So it was that Mr Berger at last had a collection taken up in his name, and a small crowd gathered to bid him farewell and good luck, and he was forgotten almost as soon as he was gone.

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Mr Berger's mother had spent her declining years in a cottage on the outskirts of the small town of Glossom. It was one of those passingly pretty English settlements, best suited to those whose time on this earth was drawing slowly to a close, and who wanted to spend it in surroundings that were unlikely to unduly excite them, and thereby hasten the end. Its community was predominantly High Anglican, with a corresponding focus on parish-centred activities: rarely an evening went by without the church hall being occupied by amateur dramatists, or local historians, or quietly concerned Fabians.

It seemed, though, that Mr Berger's mother had rather kept herself to herself, and few eyebrows were raised in Glossom when her son chose to do the same. He spent his days outlining his proposed work of fiction, a novel of frustrated love and muted social commentary set among the woollen mills of Lancashire in the nineteenth century. It was, Mr Berger quickly realized, the kind of book of which the Fabians might have approved, which put something of a dampener on his progress. He dallied with some short stories instead, and when they proved similarly unrewarding he fell back on poetry, the last resort of the literary scoundrel. Finally, if only to keep his hand in, he began writing letters to the newspapers on matters of national and international concern. One, on the subject of badgers, was printed in the *Telegraph*, but it was heavily cut for publication, and Mr Berger felt that it made him sound somewhat obsessive about badgers when nothing could have been further from the truth.

It began to dawn on Mr Berger that he might not be cut out

for the life of a writer, gentleman or otherwise, and perhaps there were those who should simply be content to read. Once he had reached this conclusion, it was as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He packed away the expensive writer's notebooks that he had purchased from Smythson's of Bond Street, and their weight in his pocket was replaced by the latest volume of Anthony Powell's *roman-fleuve*, *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

In the evenings, Mr Berger was in the habit of taking a walk by the railway line. A disused path, not far from the back gate of his cottage, led through a forest and thus to the raised bank on which the railway ran. Until recently, trains had stopped four times daily at Glossom, but the Beeching cuts had led to the closure of the station. Trains still used the lines, a noisy reminder of what had been lost, but soon even the sound of them would disappear as routes were reorganized. Eventually, the lines through Glossom would become overgrown, and the station would fall further into disrepair. There were those in Glossom who had suggested buying it from British Railways and turning it into a museum, although they were unclear as to what exactly might be put in such a museum, the history of Glossom being distinctly lacking in battles, royalty, or great inventors.

None of this concerned Mr Berger. It was enough that he had a pleasant place in which to walk or, if the weather was conducive, to sit by the lines and read. There was a stile not far from the old station, and he liked to wait there for the passing of the last train south. He would watch the businessmen in their suits flash by, and experience a surge of gratitude that his working life had reached a premature but welcome end.

Now, as winter began to close in, he still took his evening strolls, but the fading of the light and the growing chill in the air meant that he did not pause to spend time with his book. Nevertheless, he always carried a volume with him, for it had become his habit to read for an hour at the Spotted Frog over a glass of wine or a pint of mild.

On the evening in question, Mr Berger had paused as usual to wait for the train. It was, he noticed, running a little late. It had recently begun to do so more and more which led him to wonder if all of this rationalization was really leading to any kind of improvements at all. He lit his pipe and looked to the west to witness the sun setting behind the woods, the last traces of it like flames upon the denuded branches of the trees.

It was at this point that he spotted a woman passing through the overgrown bushes a little farther down the line. He had noticed before a trail of sorts there, for the branches of shrubs had been broken in places, but it was a poor substitute for his own path, and he had no desire to damage his clothing or his skin on briars. The woman wore a dark dress, but what caught Berger's eye was the little red bag that she carried on her arm. It seemed in such stark contrast to the rest of her attire. He tried to see her face, but the angle of her progress concealed it from him.

At that moment he heard a distant whistle, and the stile beneath him started to vibrate. The express, the last train of the evening, was approaching. He could see its lights through the trees as it came. He looked again to his right. The woman had stopped, for she too had heard the sound. Mr Berger expected her to pause and wait for the train to pass, but she did not. Instead she hastened her steps. Perhaps she wishes to be across the track before it comes, thought Mr Berger, but that was a risky business. It was easy to misjudge distances under such circumstances, and he had heard tales of those who had caught a foot on a sleeper, or stumbled while rushing, and the train had been the end of them.

'Ho!' he called. 'Wait!'

Instinctively he stepped down from the stile and walked quickly towards her. The woman turned at the sound of his voice. Even from a distance, Mr Berger could see that she was beautiful. Her face was pale, but she did not seem distressed. There was about her an eerie, unsettling calm.

'Don't try to cross!' he shouted. 'Let the train pass.'

The woman emerged from the bushes. She hitched up her skirts, showing a pair of laced ankle boots, and proceeded to climb up the embankment. Now Mr Berger was running, but he continued to call to her, even as the express grew louder before passing him in a flash of noise and light and diesel. He saw the woman cast aside her red bag, draw her head between her shoulders and, with her arms outstretched, throw herself on her knees before the train.

Mr Berger flinched. The angle of the line meant that he did not witness the moment of impact, and any sounds of distress were lost in the roar of the engine. When he opened his eyes, the woman was gone and the train was continuing on its way.

Mr Berger ran to the spot at which he had last seen the figure in the dress. He steeled himself for the worst, expecting to find the track mired with gore and body parts, but there was nothing. He had no experience of such matters, though, and had no idea whether a train striking a person at such a speed would leave a great mess or none at all. It was possible that the force of it had sent fragments of the woman in all directions, or even that it had carried her broken frame farther down the track. After searching the bushes by the point of impact he followed the line for a time, but discovered no blood, and no sign of a body. He could not even find the woman's discarded red bag. Still, he had seen her, of that he had no doubt. He had not imagined it.

He was now closer to the town than he was to his home. There was no police station in Glossom, but there was one in Moreham, some five miles away. Mr Berger walked quickly to the public telephone at the old station house, and from there he called the police and told them of what he had witnessed. Then, as instructed, he sat on the bench outside the station and waited for the patrol car to arrive.

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The police did much the same as Mr Berger had done, only with greater numbers and at greater expense in man-hours and overtime payments. They searched the bushes and the track, and inquiries were made in Glossom in case any female residents had gone missing. The driver of the train was contacted, and the train was kept on the platform at Plymouth for an hour while its engine and carriages were examined for any sign of human remains.

Finally, Mr Berger, who had remained seated on a stile throughout the search, was interviewed for a second time by the inspector from Moreham. His name was Carswell, and his manner when he confronted Mr Berger was colder than it had originally been. A light rain had begun to fall shortly after the search for a body had commenced, and Carswell and his men were now damp and weary. Mr Berger was also wet, and found that he had developed a slight but constant shiver. He suspected that he might be in shock. He had never witnessed a person's death before. It had affected him deeply.

Now Inspector Carswell stood in the growing dark, his hat jammed on his head and his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his coat. His men were packing up, and a pair of dogs that had been brought in to help with the search was being led back to the van in which they had arrived. The townspeople who had gathered to watch were also drifting away, but not without a final curious glance at the figure of Mr Berger.

'Let's go through it again, shall we?' said Carswell, and Mr Berger told his story one last time. The details remained the same. He was certain of what he had witnessed.

'I have to tell you,' said Carswell, when Mr Berger had finished speaking, 'that the driver of the train saw nothing, and was unaware of any impact. As you can imagine, he was quite shocked to hear that a woman had been reported as throwing herself under his wheels. He aided in the examination of the train himself. It turns out that he has some unfortunate experience of such matters. Before he was promoted to driver, he was a fireman on an engine that struck a man near Coleford Junction. He told us that the driver saw the man on the rails but couldn't brake in time. The engine made a terrible mess of the poor fellow, he said. There was no mistaking what had happened. He seems to think that, if he had somehow hit a woman without knowing, we'd have no trouble finding her remains.'

Carswell lit a cigarette. He offered one to Mr Berger, who declined. He preferred his pipe, even though it had long since gone out.

'Do you live alone, sir?' asked Carswell.

'Yes, I do.'

'From what I understand, you moved to Glossom fairly recently.'

'That's correct. My mother died, and she left me her cottage.'

'And you say that you're a writer?'

'Trying to be a writer. I've started to wonder if I'm really destined to be any good at it, to be honest.'

'Solitary business, writing, or so I would imagine.'

'It does tend to be, yes.'

'You're not married?'

'No.'

'Girlfriend?'

'No,' said Mr Berger, then added, 'Not at the moment.'

He didn't want Inspector Carswell to think that there might be anything odd or unsavoury about his bachelor existence.

'Ah.'

Carswell drew deeply on his cigarette.

'Do you miss her?'

'Miss who?'

'Your mother.'

Mr Berger considered it an odd question to ask, but answered nonetheless.

'Of course,' he said. 'I would visit her when I could, and we spoke on the telephone once a week.'

Carswell nodded, as if this explained a lot.

'Must be strange, coming to a new town, and living in the house in which your mother died. She passed away at home, didn't she?'

Mr Berger thought that Inspector Carswell seemed to know a lot about his mother. Clearly he had not just been asking about a missing woman during his time in Glossom.

'Yes, she did,' he replied. 'Forgive me, Inspector, but what has this got to do with the incident on the line?'

Carswell took the cigarette from his mouth and examined the burning tip, as though some answer might be found in the ash.

'I'm beginning to wonder if you might not have been mistaken in what you saw,' he said.

'Mistaken? How can one be mistaken about a suicide?'

'There is no body, sir. There's no blood, no clothing, nothing. We haven't even been able to find the red bag that you mentioned. There's no sign that anything untoward happened on the track at all. So . . .'

Carswell took one last drag on his cigarette, then dropped it in the dirt and ground it out forcefully with the heel of his shoe.

'Let's just say that you were mistaken, and leave it at that, shall we? Perhaps you might like to find some other way to occupy your evenings, now that winter is setting in. Join the bridge club, or take up singing in the church choir. You might even find a young lady to walk out with. What I'm saying is, you've had a traumatic time of it, and it would be good for you not to spend so many hours alone. That way, you'll avoid making mistakes of this nature again. You do understand me, don't you, sir?'

The implication was clear. Being mistaken was not a crime, but wasting police time was. Mr Berger climbed down from the stile.

'I know what I saw, Inspector,' he said, but it was all that he could do to keep the doubt from creeping into his voice, and his mind was troubled as he took the path back to his little cottage.