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Written by Matthew Frank

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Between the Crosses

MATTHEW FRANK



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To Sid and Christine, beloved parents,
for everything.

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

The 'Ode of Remembrance' from Laurence
Binyon's poem *For the Fallen*, 1914

Prologue

Sunday, 11 November 1984

Foul mud sucked at Neville's boots as he slipped and squelched from the rusty old ladder towards the shape rapidly being reclaimed by the inky waters of Deptford Creek – a corpse; that much was obvious, even from yards away in the dark, half submerged. London's latest flotsam.

River police were on their way but Inspector Smith wanted this one for Greenwich, and the tide was rising fast. So Sergeant Darlington's best boots and uniform were getting ruined. He doubted the smell would ever come out. But he could hardly ask Constable Cartwright to do this on his first week on the job, his first body. The rope bit into his waist and dragged more with every step. Cartwright's police-issue torch shone weakly from the embankment above, barely reaching. Neville's own had been plunged elbow-deep into the mire with his first slip and promptly died of shame.

At times like this, Neville could see the appeal of the investigative branch and a nice warm desk.

He waded into the icy water with a sharp intake of breath, and rolled the body on to its back.

A man. Twenties. Face water-swollen and filthy. Forehead bullet wound.

Christ knew where he'd gone in: it could have been here in the creek, but more likely somewhere up the

Ravensbourne or one of its tributaries. The rivers were high and fast with the heavy rains but the creek was low with the tidal Thames. If the damn thing had snagged on the opposite silt bank some unlucky sod from Lewisham station would be down here instead of offering cheerful advice from their side of the creek.

Breathing through his mouth, telling himself it was the reek that made him want to vomit, Neville searched pockets for ID. Nothing. No wallet, wristwatch, rings or chain.

There was something on the neck. Neville rubbed at the dirt.

A tattoo. Crude. Self-administered, prison job perhaps. One word . . . *Billie*.

Sunday, 12 November 1989

The rotating patrol car lights blurred and flared in the lancing rain, illuminating the street with their eerie blue pulse. There could be little hope of finding anything useful in such a downpour. The scene-of-crime officers had already given it up as a bad job but the two CID detectives stalked back and forth with their torches, perhaps just for the show of the thing.

A girl was missing.

Michael didn't know her name. No one had bothered to tell him and a police constable's job was to pound their beat, not to ask questions of serious detectives. He'd tried eavesdropping but the hissing roar of the rain was like a badly tuned radio. All he knew was that a sixteen-year-old had left her friend's house after dark but not arrived home. Her home was in the next road.

The elderly couple from the nearest house had heard screaming and peeped out into the dark to see two figures struggling. One dragged the other away. The wife phoned the police while the husband ran outside; he'd found nothing but the girl's handbag in the street. He was one of the stubborn onlookers huddled around the perimeter, residents drawn from their warm suburban homes by the spectacle. Now that he knew a girl was missing, the husband was rebounding between guilt and anger, between how he'd done what he could and what he'd do to the thug responsible, harping on at anyone who'd listen. He seemed convinced a thug was responsible. Thugs were definitely a pet topic of his. His wife had furnished him with an umbrella and steaming mug of tea so he was in it for the long haul. Still, you had to hand it to him; he'd run out into the rain in his slippers to help; he was a game old codger.

Michael tried to keep that in mind as the old boy embarked on a fresh tirade – the youth of today not knowing they're born and how he hadn't fought the Japanese so this sort of thing could happen in his street on Remembrance Sunday of all days. Michael tried to keep in mind that preserving the scene of a crime and keeping order was a vital task, imperative to the investigation. He tried not to think that he was wasting time here when he should be helping to search the woodland at the end of the road with Tony and the other PCs. He tried to ignore the water running off the front peak of his custodian helmet in a constant stream and the fact that it had long since seeped through his clothes.

Suddenly the rain stepped up from steady torrent to biblical deluge and the assorted onlookers finally dissolved back into their warm, cosy homes, their warm,

cosy lives. Not to mention their warm dinners. Michael's stomach growled. Sergeant Cooper had his Thermos and Tupperware in the car, courtesy of Mrs C. Thirty years of corned beef sandwiches and wincingly sweet tea had left the old sergeant as rotund as he was cheerful. Michael had nothing but the distant prospect of dry toast and beef Cup-a-Soup when he eventually made it back to Shooters Hill nick.

The old boy was the last to admit defeat. His wife, to whom Michael couldn't help appending the words long-suffering, stood silhouetted in their front doorway, beckoning him to march his silly old bones inside before he caught his death. 'Thugs, the lot of them!' he sounded in retreat.

Sheltering beneath the meagre leaves still clinging to a nearby tree, shielding his cigarette from the rain, Sergeant Cooper finally took pity on his bedraggled constable and beckoned him over.

'Nice weather for ducks,' commented Cooper cheerfully. Droplets rattled off his new plastic police poncho with a lively popping noise. They struck Michael's sodden greatcoat with no discernible sound at all. 'Cheer up, lad,' chuckled Cooper, offering the fag.

Cupping it in his hands, Michael took a long, blessed drag.

Cooper retrieved his pack from under his helmet, lit another, and set about coughing profusely. 'Mrs C says I should give up, says they'll be the death of me.' He frowned at the warning message on the pack. *'Warning, by H. M. Government, smoking can damage your health. "Can," I says to Mrs C, "can damage your health"; not does. "Scientists say they do," she replies. Killjoys. Still, always nice to*

know she cares.’ He glanced at Michael. ‘Not married, are you, Mickey?’

‘No, Sarge.’ He wasn’t fond of the name Mickey and worried it might catch on.

‘You should, lad your age. Get yourself a nice chubby wife like my Beryl. Always a hot meal waiting in the oven when you get home, whatever ungodly hour.’ Cooper’s grin and girth spoke to the truth of that. ‘And always a hot welcome waiting in the bed,’ he added with a filthy chuckle that turned into another bout of coughing.

Michael shook his head to dispel any mental image of that and thought instead about Alison. She wasn’t in the least chubby, Michael knew nothing of her culinary prowess and with only one tentative night out so far it was too soon to hope for anything hotter than a snog in a Vauxhall Nova. Not that he didn’t hope quite fervently.

Cooper laughed and slapped him hard on the back. ‘Got a lucky girl in mind, I see. Well, don’t hang about, Mickey lad; with a face like yours best bag her while she’s amenable!’

An ill-timed droplet did for what remained of Michael’s fag with a hiss and he flicked the sodden butt out into the rain with a sigh. ‘D’you know the girl’s name, Sarge?’

‘Kimberly Bates.’

‘Will they find her, do you think?’

Cooper’s cheer dimmed. ‘One way or another, lad. One way or another.’

Michael stared back towards the woods, imagining his fellow constables walking in a line ten paces apart, torches scanning back and forth like lighthouses long after the ship has foundered.

Cooper stared that way too. The look in his eyes said

what they were both thinking. There was a chance the girl was sheltering from the rain in a phone box, her emergency ten-pence gone towards cigarettes or lipstick. There was a chance she was hiding out at a girlfriend's house, mooning over the latest pop heartthrob in *Just Seventeen* while neglecting to call her mother, wilfully or otherwise. There was a chance she was huddled under a bus shelter snogging a boyfriend, forgetting their quarrel and lost handbag the way only teenagers could. But there was a chance she lay dead under a bush, and on a night like this it was hard to imagine any of the happier endings.

The detectives got in their car and drove away. DI Grove and DS Darlington. Michael didn't envy them. Their work began at unhappy endings. At least on the beat you had a chance of preventing them. There were ugly rumours that CID had their eye on him, that he was being 'considered'. Michael was determined to evade them. Uniform had been good enough for his dad and his granddad and it was good enough for him.

Cooper was watching him. 'There's more to policing than helping old biddies across the road and chasing shoplifters,' he said, strangely. There were times when Michael wondered if Cooper wasn't a good deal more perceptive than he appeared. He couldn't recall seeing the fat old sergeant running after anyone, ever, but *could* recall occasions when Cooper happened to be hovering in just the right place to be run *into*.

Cooper's smile crept back and he slapped Michael on the shoulder. 'Right, that's enough loafing, Constable Groombridge . . . back out on parade!'

PART ONE

I

Sunday, 14 November 2010

A stiff northerly breeze whipped down Whitehall, biting through the back of Stark's damp uniform coat as he stood between the Women Of World War II monument and the Cenotaph trying not to lean on his cane. He'd been standing here an hour and the cold was seeping into his hip. Behind him over eight thousand veterans, relatives and representatives of other organizations and associations stretched all the way up to Trafalgar Square. Army, Navy and RAF service personnel in immaculate ceremonial uniform lined the road either side of the Cenotaph, with the massed band on the far side forming the Hollow Square.

As the Blackwatch bagpipes laced the air with lament Stark read for the hundredth time the words chiselled into the Cenotaph's Portland stone – THE GLORIOUS DEAD. Had Rudyard Kipling come to regret those words after his only son joined their ranks? The stone wreath carved above them stood out in sharp relief accentuated by the dark staining of the rain.

The poppy wreath in Stark's free hand hung like a dead weight, as though it too was carved from stone. It bore no name – commemorating the death, just days earlier, of the last combat veteran of World War One and all those gone before. Stark had intended to take part in the

veterans' march past, of course, as he had the previous year, but the ancient mariner's quiet passing had prompted a call from Stark's personal albatross, Major Pierson. Who better to lay the wreath, she insisted, than Sergeant Joseph Stark of Her Majesty's Territorial Reserve, recipient of the nation's highest military award for valour? So here he stood, plucked from the inconspicuous ranks and thrust front and centre once more.

The final note of music faded away and the world stood still, waiting for the tolling of the bell.

Stark's phone chose that moment to vibrate in his pocket. He closed his eyes, thanking the stars that he'd put it on silent. He wasn't on call, but the Murder Investigation Team were chronically shorthanded and DCI Groombridge had decreed that phones must be switched on at all times. He wouldn't have meant this, but orders were orders.

From the Foreign and Commonwealth Office off to Stark's right, the Cross Bearer led out the Chapel Royal party and the Bishop of London. Next came the Major General of the Household Division, then the politicians, service and civilian chiefs, Commonwealth High Commissioners and the other religious leaders, each taking up station around three sides of the Cenotaph.

At two minutes to eleven the parade was brought to attention. The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh led the military royals out to line up with their backs to Stark, each with their equerry behind holding their wreath, enclosing the Inner Square.

Stark's phone vibrated again. Surely no one he knew, no one who knew him, would call him at this time on this day. If it was another bloody cold call . . .

On cue the Palace of Westminster clock-tower quarter bells struck the familiar full-hour chimes of Westminster Quarters and then, in perfect time with the single boom and echo from the field gun in Horse Guards, the Great Bell, Big Ben itself, began the eleven sonorous chimes to mark the hour.

A detonation of silence expanded across London.

Across the land those that remembered, those not caught up in life or disinterested, replaced speech with thought for two long, poignant minutes, perhaps glancing surreptitiously at their watches, perhaps embarrassed before colleagues and friends, perhaps moved near to tears for people they'd never met.

It began to drizzle again.

The gun fired once more on the one hundred and twentieth second and the Royal Marine Buglers sounded the Last Post.

The Queen's equerry presented her wreath, which she placed on the base of the Cenotaph. Then the other royals, one by one, and assembled dignitaries in turn. And then Stark. He limped forward to the base of the monument and bent low to place the wreath, stepped back, stood to attention, saluted and returned to his spot at the head of the march.

The massed bands began a moving piece Stark ought to know but couldn't name. The Bishop led a short service, interspersed with hymns and culminating in the 'Ode of Remembrance' and its final line – *we will remember them*.

'We will remember them,' those assembled repeated, a solemn drum-roll murmur on a dim, cold, wet, blustery morn.

The bands played the national anthem; then the royals departed followed by all the others as they had come, and the Hollow Square were stood at ease.

Stark's hip was singing its own hymn now. He was never sure whether standing was worse than walking. Rain dripped from the peak of his cap.

The Trustees of the Royal British Legion and other service charities laid their wreaths. The band struck up with 'A Long Way to Tipperary' and Stark joined the procession of veterans in their march, eyes left as they passed the monument, maintaining a steady stride as best he could all the way round to Horse Guards Parade, where the Princess Royal received their salute.

His hip had not ached this much in a year, the march adding fire to the earlier ice. As they disbanded he felt drained and energized in equal measure.

Major Pierson met him beneath the barracks portico with her customary Cheshire Cat timing, minus the grin. She stamped to attention and snapped off a vicious salute, which he returned with equally good-natured venom. She outranked him, but not the medal on his chest.

Her sour expression said she hadn't forgiven him for wearing police uniform rather than his army regimentals. She had probably received a dressing down for it, but there had to be give and take and the MoD were too used to taking.

He wasn't theirs any more. He was a copper now.

'How did I do?' he asked.

'Bloody shambles. I'll face a court martial for sure.' Their habitual exchange.

'And so soon after your promotion – shame.' The

crown on her epaulettes had not long replaced captain's pips.

She made a face and jerked her head for him to follow. His civilian suit was waiting for him in the solitary little room where he'd changed earlier. Wishing he'd had the foresight to bring spare socks and shoes, he placed both on the huge iron heating pipes while he changed. They were still damp when he pulled them back on but deliciously hot.

With a perfunctory knock Pierson entered with a bottle and two glasses. 'Courtesy of you-know-who,' she said, cracking open the seal. Royal Lochnagar Selected Reserve – single malt distilled near Balmoral Castle, the Queen's Highland retreat. 'Not that you deserve such lofty favour. I trust you're taking care of that,' she indicated the cane leaning against a chair. It was she who'd scrounged it on his behalf on the day of his medal award to save him hobbling before his Queen on crutches; an elegant masterpiece, the arched silver handle a leaping tiger, and the snakewood shaft with its tiger-like variegated grain and secret sting. Property of the Duke of Edinburgh before he'd insisted Stark keep it. Lofty favour, as she'd alluded. She meant was he looking after himself, of course, but would never say as much.

'I am,' he smiled. 'Sweet of you to ask.'

She pulled a face. Their relationship had begun with intense friction and settled into a kind of sibling *détente*, with her the disapproving older sister. Sometimes Stark thought back with a tinge of nostalgia to the days when everything he did or said left her spittingly angry. But you could say one thing for Pierson, she never poured short measure and she knew how to enjoy a good whisky in

comfortable silence. Today though she looked uncharacteristically pensive. ‘Have you given more thought to the events schedule?’

‘No more than the last time you asked.’ The Ministry of Defence were constantly trying to trot him out on parade and he was constantly refusing. ‘Today was remembrance. The rest is PR.’

‘You really are consistently irksome.’

‘A message that doesn’t seem to get through.’

‘We’re not done talking about this.’

‘We are today,’ he replied flatly.

The Major bit down her frustration, and nodded. Today wasn’t the day. Another skirmish. Another ceasefire. ‘Still seeing that girl, Kelly?’ she asked. An unusual topic. Stark shook his head, eliciting a disapproving tut. ‘Pillock.’ Stark shrugged. ‘Her decision or yours?’

‘Mine.’ Not his proudest moment. Pierson arched an eyebrow, waiting for him to expand, but Stark had nothing more to say. If he closed his eyes he could still see Kelly’s frustration, her tears. It was seven weeks now. He missed her. That was that.

Pierson turned back to the window. ‘Was it the future that spooked you, or the past?’

Stark searched for a way out of the conversation. ‘Both.’

She shook her head. ‘Always the throwaway truth, the one-word dodge.’

Stark said nothing and she continued to stare out at the leaden sky. ‘Would you go back?’ she asked quietly. ‘If you could?’

It was clear what she meant. Another topic usually skirted. ‘Yes.’

‘Unfinished business?’

‘I suppose.’ It wasn’t that simple. War never was.

She nodded. ‘What if you could go back in time too, would you do things differently?’

‘Yes.’

‘What would you change?’

‘Everything I could,’ he answered honestly. But there was no time machine. He’d taken lives, saved lives and failed to save others; there was no way now to alter the tally. Grasping at if-onlys gave no comfort. He looked at her, struck by this atypical conversation, but she offered no explanation.

She turned to look at him, her expression unreadable, then smiled faintly and raised her glass. ‘Life is for the living.’

‘If you say so,’ replied Stark, chinking crystal.

They both drank, then she turned back to the window and they lapsed into silence again.

Stark took a long swig and closed his eyes at the delicious burning, tasting the rich aroma in the back of his nose, feeling himself relax for the first time that day.

‘I think your phone’s buzzing somewhere,’ commented Pierson.

The damn thing had slipped his mind. Muttering a curse, he fumbled for it in his coat but it stopped before he could fish it out. Seven missed calls, Stark read with a sinking feeling. Not a cold caller – the office. No messages. Fran despised voicemail. And she never called with good news.

Giving Pierson an apologetic look, he took a deep breath and called back. ‘Sarge?’

‘Where the *bloody* hell have you been?’ she demanded.

‘Seriously?’ he asked, deadpan.

He could almost imagine her checking her watch and rolling her eyes. ‘Yeah, all right . . . but where are you *now*?’

‘Dimly lit room with a bottle of single malt and a dangerous dame.’

‘Hilarious. How soon can you get here?’

‘Why?’ There could only be one reason. There was little use reminding her that he was on leave, but he wasn’t going to make it easy for her.

‘Just get your arse in. We’ve got a grisly double murder to pin on someone.’