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Dead Souls

Written by Ian Rankin

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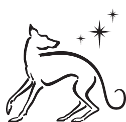
IAN RANKIN

DEAD SOULS



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To my long-suffering editor,
Caroline Oakley

The world is full of missing persons, and their numbers increase all the time. The space they occupy lies somewhere between what we know about the ways of being alive and what we hear about the ways of being dead. They wander there, unaccompanied and unknowable, like shadows of people. Andrew O'Hagan, *The Missing*

Once I caught a train to Cardenden by mistake . . . When we reached Cardenden we got off and waited for the next train back to Edinburgh. I was very tired and if Cardenden had looked more promising, I think I would have simply stayed there. And if you've ever been to Cardenden you'll know how bad things must have been.

Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*

Prologue

From this height, the sleeping city seems like a child's construction, a model which has refused to be constrained by imagination. The volcanic plug might be black Plasticine, the castle balanced solidly atop it a skewed rendition of crenellated building bricks. The orange street lamps are crumpled toffee-wrappers glued to lollipop sticks.

Out in the Forth, the faint bulbs from pocket torches illuminate toy boats resting on black crêpe paper. In this universe, the jagged spires of the Old Town would be angled matchsticks, Princes Street Gardens a Fuzzy-Felt board. Cardboard boxes for the tenements, doors and windows painstakingly detailed with coloured pens. Drinking straws could become guttering and downpipes, and with a fine blade – maybe a scalpel – those doors could be made to open. But peering inside . . . peering inside would destroy the effect.

Peering inside would change *everything.*

He shoves his hands in his pockets. The wind is stropping his ears. He can pretend it is a child's breath, but the reality chides him.

I am the last cold wind you'll feel.

He takes a step forward, peers over the edge and into darkness. Arthur's Seat crouches behind him, humped and silent as though offended by his presence, coiled to pounce. He tells himself it is papier-mâché. He smooths his hands over strips of newsprint, not reading the stories, then realises he is stroking the air and withdraws his hands, laughing guiltily. Somewhere behind him, he hears a voice.

In the past, he'd climbed up here in daylight. Years back, it would have been with a lover maybe, climbing hand in hand, seeing the city spread out like a promise. Then later, with his wife and child, stopping at the summit to take photos, making sure no one went too close to the edge. Father and husband, he would tuck his chin into his collar, seeing Edinburgh in shades of grey, but getting it into perspective, having risen above it with his family. Digesting the whole city with a slow sweep of his head, he would feel that all problems were containable.

But now, in darkness, he knows better.

He knows that life is a trap, that the jaws eventually spring shut on anyone foolish enough to think they could cheat their way to a victory. A police car blares in the distance, but it's not coming for him. A black coach is waiting for him at the foot of Salisbury Crags. Its headless driver is becoming impatient. The horses tremble and whinny. Their flanks will lather on the ride home.

'Salisbury Crag' has become rhyming slang in the city. It means skag, heroin. 'Morningside Speed' is cocaine. A snort of coke just now would do him the world of good, but wouldn't be enough. Arthur's Seat could be made of the stuff: in the scheme of things, it wouldn't matter a damn.

There is a figure behind him in the darkness, drawing nearer. He half-turns to confront it, then quickly looks away, suddenly fearful of meeting the face. He begins to say something.

'I know you'll find it hard to believe, but I've . . .'

He never finishes the sentence. Because now he's sailing out across the city, jacket flying up over his head, smothering a final, heartfelt cry. As his stomach surges and voids, he wonders if there really is a coachman waiting for him.

And feels his heart burst open with the knowledge that he'll never see his daughter again, in this world or any other.

Part One
Lost

We commit all sorts of injustices at every step without the slightest evil intention. Every minute we are the cause of someone's unhappiness . . .

1

John Rebus was pretending to stare at the meerkats when he saw the man, and knew he wasn't the one.

For the best part of an hour, Rebus had been trying to blink away a hangover, which was about as much exercise as he could sustain. He'd planted himself on benches and against walls, wiping his brow even though Edinburgh's early spring was a blood relative of midwinter. His shirt was damp against his back, uncomfortably tight every time he rose to his feet. The capybara had looked at him almost with pity, and there had seemed a glint of recognition and empathy behind the long-lashed eye of the hunched white rhino, standing so still it might have been a feature in a shopping mall, yet somehow dignified in its very isolation.

Rebus felt isolated, and about as dignified as a chimpanzee. He hadn't been to the zoo in years; thought probably the last time had been when he'd brought his daughter to see Palango the gorilla. Sammy had been so young, he'd carried her on his shoulders without feeling the strain.

Today, he carried nothing with him but a concealed radio and set of handcuffs. He wondered how conspicuous he looked, walking such a narrow ambit while shunning the attractions further up and down the slope, stopping now and then at the kiosk to buy a can of Irn-Bru. The penguin parade had come and gone and seen him not leaving his perch. Oddly, it was when the visitors moved on, seeking excitement, that the first of the meerkats appeared, rising on its hind legs, body narrow and wavering, scouting the territory. Two more had appeared

from their burrow, circling, noses to the ground. They paid little attention to the silent figure seated on the low wall of their enclosure; passed him time and again as they explored the same orbit of hard-packed earth, jumping back only when he lifted a handkerchief to his face. He was feeling the poison fizz in his veins: not the booze, but an early-morning double espresso from one of the converted police boxes near The Meadows. He'd been on his way to work, on his way to learning that today was zoo patrol. The mirror in the cop-shop toilet had lacked any sense of diplomacy.

Greenslade: 'Sunkissed You're Not'. Segue to Jefferson Airplane: 'If You Feel Like China Breaking'.

But it could always be worse, Rebus had reminded himself, applying his thoughts instead to the day's central question: who was poisoning the zoo animals of Edinburgh? The fact of the matter was, some individual was to blame. Somebody cruel and calculating and so far missed by surveillance cameras and keepers alike. Police had a vague description, and spot-checks were being made of visitors' bags and coat pockets, but what everyone really wanted – except perhaps the media – was to have someone in custody, preferably with the tainted tidbits locked away as evidence.

Meantime, as senior staff had indicated, the irony was that the poisoner had actually been good for business. There'd been no copycat offences yet, but Rebus wondered how long that would last . . .

The next announcement concerned feeding the sealions. Rebus had sauntered past their pool earlier, thinking it not overly large for a family of three. The meerkat den was surrounded by children now, and the meerkats themselves had disappeared, leaving Rebus strangely pleased to have been accorded their company.

He moved away, but not too far, and proceeded to untie and tie a shoelace, which was his way of marking the quarter-hours. Zoos and the like had never held any

fascination for him. As a child, his roll-call of pets had seen more than its fair share of those listed 'Missing in Action' or 'Killed in the Line of Duty'. His tortoise had absconded, despite having its owner's name painted on its shell; several budgies had failed to reach maturity; and ill-health had plagued his only goldfish (won at the fair in Kirkcaldy). Living as he did in a tenement flat, he'd never been tempted in adulthood by the thought of a cat or dog. He'd tried horse-riding exactly once, rubbing his inside legs raw in the process and vowing afterwards that the closest he'd come in future to the noble beast would be on a betting slip.

But he'd liked the meerkats for a mixture of reasons: the resonance of their name; the low comedy of their rituals; their instinct for self-preservation. Kids were dangling over the wall now, legs kicking in the air. Rebus imagined a role reversal – cages filled with children, peered at by passing animals as they capered and squealed, loving the attention. Except the animals wouldn't share a human's curiosity. They would be unmoved by any display of agility or tenderness, would fail to comprehend that some game was being played, or that someone had skinned a knee. Animals would not build zoos, would have no need of them. Rebus was wondering why humans needed them.

The place suddenly became ridiculous to him, a chunk of prime Edinburgh real estate given over to the unreal . . . And then he saw the camera.

Saw it because it replaced the face that should have been there. The man was standing on a grassy slope sixty-odd feet away, adjusting the focus on a sizeable telescopic lens. The mouth below the camera's body was a thin line of concentration, rippling slightly as forefinger and thumb fine-tuned the apparatus. He wore a black denim jacket, creased chinos, and running shoes. He'd removed a faded blue baseball cap from his head. It dangled from a free finger as he took his pictures. His hair was thinning and

brown, forehead wrinkled. Recognition came as soon as he lowered the camera. Rebus looked away, turning in the direction of the photographer's subjects: children. Children leaning into the meerkat enclosure. All you could see were shoe-soles and legs, girls' skirts and the smalls of backs where T-shirts and jerseys had ridden up.

Rebus knew the man. Context made it easier. Hadn't seen him in probably four years but couldn't forget eyes like that, the hunger shining on cheeks whose suffused redness highlighted old acne scars. The hair had been longer four years ago, curling over misshapen ears. Rebus sought for a name, at the same time reaching into his pocket for his radio. The photographer caught the movement, eyes turning to match Rebus's gaze, which was already moving elsewhere. Recognition worked both ways. The lens came off and was stuffed into a shoulder-bag. A lens-cap was clipped over the aperture. And then the man was off, walking briskly downhill. Rebus yanked out his radio.

'He's heading downhill from me, west side of the Members' house. Black denim jacket, light trousers . . .' Rebus kept the description going as he followed. Turning back, the photographer saw him and broke into a trot, hindered by the heavy camera bag.

The radio burst into life, officers heading for the area. Past a restaurant and cafeteria, past couples holding hands and children attacking ice-creams. Peccaries, otters, pelicans. It was all downhill, for which Rebus was thankful, and the man's unusual gait – one leg slightly shorter than the other – was helping close the gap. The walkway narrowed just at the point where the crowd thickened. Rebus wasn't sure what was causing the bottleneck, then heard a splash, followed by cheers and applause.

'Sea-lion enclosure!' he yelled into his radio.

The man half-turned, saw the radio at Rebus's mouth,

looked ahead of him and saw heads and bodies, camouflaging the approach of any other officers. There was fear in his eyes now, replacing the earlier calculation. He had ceased to be in control of events. With Rebus just about within grabbing distance, the man pushed two spectators aside and clambered over the low stone wall. On the other side of the pool was a rock outcrop atop which stood the female keeper, stooping over two black plastic pails. Rebus saw that there were hardly any spectators behind the keeper, since the rocks obstructed any view of the sea-lions. By dodging the crowd, the man could clamber back over the wall at the far side and be within striking distance of the exit. Rebus cursed under his breath, lifted a foot on to the wall, and hauled himself over.

The onlookers were whistling, a few even cheering as video cameras were hoisted to record the antics of two men cautiously making their way along the sharp slopes. Glancing towards the water, Rebus saw rapid movement, and heard warning yells from the keeper as a sea-lion slithered up on to the rocks near her. Its sleek black body rested only long enough for a fish to be dropped accurately into its mouth, before turning and slipping back into the pool. It looked neither too big nor too fierce, but its appearance had rattled Rebus's quarry. The man turned back for a moment, his camera bag sliding down his arm. He moved it so it was hanging around his neck. He looked ready to retreat, but when he saw his pursuer, he changed his mind again. The keeper had reached for a radio of her own, alerting security. But the pool's occupants were becoming impatient. The water beside Rebus seemed to flex and sway. A wave foamed against his face as something huge and ink-black rose from the depths, obliterating the sun and slapping itself down on the rocks. The crowd screamed as the male sea-lion, easily four or five times the size of its offspring, landed and looked around for food, loud snorts belching from its nose. As it opened its mouth and let out a ferocious wail, the

photographer yelped and lost his balance, plunging into the pool and taking the camera bag with him.

Two shapes in the pool – mother and child – nosed towards him. The keeper was blowing the whistle strung around her neck, for all the world like the referee at a Sunday kickabout faced with a conflagration. The male sea-lion looked at Rebus a final time and plunged back into its pool, heading for where its mate was prodding the new arrival.

'For Christ's sake,' Rebus shouted, 'chuck in some fish!'

The keeper got the message and kicked a pail of food into the pool, at which all three sea-lions sped towards the scene. Rebus took his chance and waded in, closing his eyes and diving, grabbing the man and hauling him back towards the rocks. A couple of spectators came to help, followed by two plain-clothes detectives. Rebus's eyes stung. The scent of raw fish was heavy in the air.

'Let's get you out,' someone said, offering a hand. Rebus let himself be reeled in. He snatched the camera from around the drenched man's neck.

'Got you,' he said. Then, kneeling on the rocks, starting to shiver, he threw up into the pool.

2

Next morning, Rebus was surrounded by memories.

Not his own, but those of his Chief Super: framed photographs cluttering the tight space of the office. The thing with memories was, they meant nothing to the outsider. Rebus could have been looking at a museum display. Children, lots of children. The Chief Super's kids, their faces ageing over time, and then grandchildren. Rebus got the feeling his boss hadn't taken the photos. They were gifts, passed on to him, and he'd felt it necessary to bring them here.

The clues were all in their situation: the photos on the desk faced out from it, so anyone in the office could see them with the exception of the man who used the desk every day. Others were on the window-ledge behind the desk – same effect – and still more on top of a filing cabinet in the corner. Rebus sat in Chief Superintendent Watson's chair to confirm his theory. The snapshots weren't for Watson; they were for visitors. And what they told visitors was that Watson was a family man, a man of rectitude, a man who had achieved something in his life. Instead of humanising the drab office, they sat in it with all the ease of exhibits.

A new photo had been added to the collection. It was old, slightly out of focus as though smeared by a flicker of camera movement. Crimped edges, white border, and the photographer's illegible signature in one corner. A family group: father standing, one hand proprietorially on the shoulder of his seated wife, who held in her lap a toddler. The father's other hand gripped the blazered shoulder of a

young boy, cropped hair and glaring eyes. Some pre-sitting tension was evident: the boy was trying to pull his shoulder from beneath his father's claw. Rebus took the photo over to the window, marvelled at the starched solemnity. He felt starched himself, in his dark woollen suit, white shirt and black tie. Black socks and shoes, the latter given a decent polish first thing this morning. Outside it was overcast, threatening rain. Fine weather for a funeral.

Chief Superintendent Watson came into the room, lazy progress belying his temperament. Behind his back they called him 'the Farmer', because he came from the north and had something of the Aberdeen Angus about him. He was dressed in his best uniform, cap in one hand, white A4 envelope in the other. He placed both on his desk, as Rebus replaced the photograph, angling it so it faced the Farmer's chair.

'That you, sir?' he asked, tapping the scowling child.

'That's me.'

'Brave of you to let us see you in shorts.'

But the Farmer was not to be deflected. Rebus could think of three explanations for the red veins highlighted on Watson's face: exertion, spirits, or anger. No sign of breathlessness, so rule out the first. And when the Farmer drank whisky, it didn't just affect his cheeks: his whole face took on a roseate glow and seemed to contract until it became puckish.

Which left anger.

'Let's get down to it,' Watson said, glancing at his watch. Neither man had much time. The Farmer opened the envelope and shook a packet of photographs on to his desk, then opened the packet and tossed the photos towards Rebus.

'Look for yourself.'

Rebus looked. They were the photos from Darren Rough's camera. The Farmer reached into his drawer to pull out a file. Rebus kept looking. Zoo animals, caged and

behind walls. And in some of the shots – not all of them, but a fair proportion – children. The camera had focused on these children, involved in conversations among themselves, or chewing sweets, or making faces at the animals. Rebus felt immediate relief, and looked to the Farmer for a confirmation that wasn't there.

'According to Mr Rough,' the Farmer was saying, studying a sheet from the file, 'the photos comprise part of a portfolio.'

'I'll bet they do.'

'Of a day in the life of Edinburgh Zoo.'

'Sure.'

The Farmer cleared his throat. 'He's enrolled in a photography night-class. I've checked and it's true. It's also true that his project is the zoo.'

'And there are kids in almost every shot.'

'In fewer than half the shots, actually.'

Rebus slid the photos across the desk. 'Come on, sir.'

'John, Darren Rough has been out of prison the best part of a year and has yet to show any sign of reoffending.'

'I heard he'd gone south.'

'And moved back again.'

'He ran for it when he saw me.'

The Farmer just stared the comment down. 'There's nothing here, John,' he said.

'A guy like Rough, he doesn't go to the zoo for the birds and the bees, believe me.'

'It wasn't even his choice of project. His tutor assigned it.'

'Yes, Rough would have preferred a play-park.' Rebus sighed. 'What does his lawyer say? Rough was always good at roping in a lawyer.'

'Mr Rough just wants to be left in peace.'

'The way he left those kids in peace?'

The Farmer sat back. 'Does the word "atonement" mean anything to you, John?'

Rebus shook his head. 'Not applicable.'

'How do you know?'

'Ever seen a leopard change its spots?'

The Farmer checked his watch. 'I know the two of you have a history.'

'I wasn't the one he made the complaint against.'

'No,' the Farmer said, 'Jim Margolies was.'

They left that in the air for a moment, lost in their own thoughts.

'So we do nothing?' Rebus queried at last. The word "atonement" was flitting about inside his skull. His friend the priest had been known to use it: reconciliation of God and man through Christ's life and death. A far cry from Darren Rough. Rebus wondered what Jim Margolies had been atoning for when he'd pitched himself off Salisbury Crags . . .

'His sheet's clean.' The Farmer reached into his desk's deep bottom drawer, pulled out a bottle and two glasses. Malt whisky. 'I don't know about you,' he said, 'but I need one of these before a funeral.'

Rebus nodded, watching the man pour. Cascading sound of mountain streams. *Usquebaugh* in the Gaelic. *Uisge*: water; *beatha*: life. Water of life. *Beatha* sounding like 'birth'. Each drink was a birth to Rebus's mind. But as his doctor kept telling him, each drop was a little death, too. He lifted the glass to his nose, nodded appreciation.

'Another good man gone,' the Farmer said.

And suddenly there were ghosts swirling around the room, just on the periphery of Rebus's vision, and chief amongst them Jack Morton. Jack, his old colleague, now three months dead. The Byrds: 'He Was a Friend of Mine'. A friend who refused to stay buried. The Farmer followed Rebus's eyes, but saw nothing. Drained his glass and put the bottle away again.

'Little and often,' he said. And then, as though the whisky had opened some bargain between them: 'There are ways and means, John.'

'Of what, sir?' Jack had melted into the windowpanes.

'Of coping.' Already the whisky was working on the Farmer's face, turning it triangular. 'Since what happened to Jim Margolies . . . well, it's made some of us think more about the stresses of the job.' He paused. 'Too many mistakes, John.'

'I'm having a bad patch, that's all.'

'A bad patch has its reasons.'

'Such as?'

The Farmer left the question unanswered, knowing perhaps that Rebus was busy answering it for himself: Jack Morton's death; Sammy in a wheelchair.

And whisky a therapist he could afford, at least in monetary terms.

'I'll manage,' he said at last, not even managing to convince himself.

'All by yourself?'

'That's the way, isn't it?'

The Farmer shrugged. 'And meantime we all live with your mistakes?'

Mistakes: like pulling men towards Darren Rough, who wasn't the man they wanted. Allowing the poisoner open access to the meerkats – an apple tossed into their enclosure. Luckily a keeper had walked past, picked it up before the animals could. He'd known about the scare, handed it in for testing.

Positive for rat poison.

Rebus's fault.

'Come on,' the Farmer said, after a final glance at his watch, 'let's get moving.'

So that once again Rebus's speech had gone unspoken, the one about how he'd lost any sense of vocation, any feeling of optimism about the role – the very existence – of policing. About how these thoughts scared him, left him either sleepless or scarred by bad dreams. About the ghosts which had come to haunt him, even in daytime.

About how he didn't want to be a cop any more.

*

Jim Margolies had had it all.

Ten years younger than Rebus, he was being tipped for accelerated advancement. They were waiting for him to learn the final few lessons, after which the rank of detective inspector would have been shed like a final skin. Bright, personable, a canny strategist with an eye to internal politics. Handsome, too, keeping fit playing rugby for his old school, Boroughmuir. He came from a good background and had connections to the Edinburgh establishment, his wife charming and elegant, his young daughter an acknowledged beauty. Liked by his fellow officers, and with an enviable ratio of arrests to convictions. The family lived quietly in The Grange, attended a local church, seemed the perfect little unit in every way.

The Farmer kept the commentary going, voice barely audible. He'd started on the drive to the church, kept it up during the service, and was closing with a graveside peroration.

'He had it all, John. And then he goes and does something like that. What makes a man . . . I mean, what goes through his head? This was someone even older officers looked up to – I mean the cynical old buggers within spitting distance of their pension. They've seen everything in their time, but they'd never seen anyone quite like Jim Margolies.'

Rebus and the Farmer – their station's representatives – were towards the back of the crowd. And it was a good crowd, too. Lots of brass, alongside rugby players, churchgoers, and neighbours. Plus extended family. And standing by the open grave, the widow dressed in black, managing to look composed. She'd lifted her daughter off the ground. The daughter in a white lace dress, her hair thick and long and ringlet-blonde, face shining as she waved bye-bye to the wooden casket. With the blonde hair and white dress, she looked like an angel. Perhaps that had been the intention. Certainly, she stood out from the crowd.

Margolies' parents were there, too. The father looking ex-forces, stiff-backed as a grandfather clock but with both trembling hands gripping the silver knob of a walking-stick. The mother teary-eyed, fragile, a veil falling to her wet mouth. She'd lost both her children. According to the Farmer, Jim's sister had killed herself too, years back. History of mental instability, and she'd slashed her wrists. Rebus looked again at the parents, who had now outlived both their offspring. His mind flashed to his own daughter, wondering how scarred *she* was, scarred in places you couldn't see.

Other family members nestled close to the parents, seeking comfort or ready to offer support – Rebus couldn't tell which.

'Nice family,' the Farmer was whispering. Rebus almost perceived a whiff of envy. 'Hannah's won competitions.'

Hannah being the daughter. She was eight, Rebus learned. Blue-eyed like her father and perfect-skinned. The widow's name was Katherine.

'Dear Lord, the sheer waste.'

Rebus thought of the Farmer's photographs, of the way individuals met and interlaced, forming a pattern which drew in others, colours merging or taking on discernible contrasts. You made friends, married into a new family, you had children who played with the children of other parents. You went to work, met colleagues who became friends. Bit by bit your identity became subsumed, no longer an individual and yet stronger somehow as a result.

Except it didn't always work that way. Conflicts could arise: work perhaps, or the slow realisation that you'd made a wrong decision some time back. Rebus had seen it in his own life, had chosen profession over marriage, pushing his wife away. She'd taken their daughter with her. He felt now that he'd made the right choice for the wrong reasons, that he should have owned up to his

failings from the start. His work had merely given him a reasonable excuse for bailing out.

He wondered about Jim Margolies, who had thrown himself to his death in the dark. He wondered what had driven him to that final stark decision. No one seemed to have a clue. Rebus had come across plenty of suicides over the years, from bungled to assisted and all points in between. But there had always been some kind of explanation, some breaking point reached, some deep-seated sense of loss or failure or foreboding. Leaf Hound: 'Drowned My Life in Fear'.

But when it came to Jim Margolies . . . nothing clicked. There was no sense to it. His widow, parents, workmates . . . no one had been able to offer the first hint of an explanation. He'd been declared A1 fit. Things had been fine on the work front and at home. He loved his wife, his daughter. Money was not a problem.

But something had been a problem.

Dear Lord, the sheer waste.

And the cruelty of it: to leave everyone not only grieving but questioning, wondering if they were somehow to blame.

To erase your own life when life was so precious.

Looking towards the trees, Rebus saw Jack Morton standing there, seeming as young as when the two had first met.

Earth was being tossed down on to the coffin lid, a final futile wake-up call. The Farmer started walking away, hands clasped behind his back.

'As long as I live,' he said, 'I'll never understand it.'

'You never know your luck,' said Rebus.