Out of Mind

Catherine Sampson

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Prologue

She had resisted coming here, to this place where violence raped serenity. But the lawns covered in virgin snow, the valley seamed with silver, had lulled her into a sense of rare and exquisite security. As beauty always did. When would she learn that scenes of bucolic tranquillity were always the scenes of the greatest betrayal, that the rolling hills were the swell of fear, that the good earth hid butchered flesh, and that the steadfast face of a farmer was a mask of grief?

Now, with the brittle snap of a twig behind her, she knew she should never have come. Her body primed for flight, adrenalin flooding blood, oxygen fuelling muscles, senses screaming for information. Claustrophobia engulfed her, trees encircling, skeletal branches bearing down. She broke into a run, long legs covering the ground at speed, then, shoes suddenly skating on ice, feet sliding, she fell.

As she pulled herself upright, she heard the voice of reason in her head, speaking quietly beneath the high-pitched hum of panic: was there really someone there or did the snap of the twig invent him?

Then feet crunched across the ice, and he reached her and grabbed her. He pushed her to her knees, and the ground froze to the fabric of her jeans. He pulled a sack over her head and she was blinded, her arms flailing for balance. Her lungs cried out for air, but the sacking was tight around her nose and

mouth, and the knowledge of death seeped into her gut. She delved inside herself for comfort, pushing her way back past the horrors she had witnessed, back past the suffering of others, and back to the beginning, to what was good and true.

One

When I awoke the twins were playing quietly in the patch of sunlight at the foot of my bed. I pretended to be asleep and through half-closed eyes watched them squatting, bottoms stuck out, in their pyjamas. Hannah and William are three years old. Hannah has the willpower of a Sherman tank and William the devastating cunning of a stealth bomber. They were sorting through my jewellery box, draping strings of beads around their necks. William had a bangle dangling from one ear and Hannah had devised for herself a crown. Once in a while Hannah would thwack William, and he would obediently hand over whatever treasure she coveted, then steal it back when she wasn't looking. They were so busy that they had forgotten even to demand food and drink.

Their father, Adam, was murdered nearly two years ago, and anyway had never really been a father to them. Perhaps, I thought wistfully as I watched them play, this was what parenting would be like as they grew older. They would require only the occasional meal or dose of moral guidance and I could recline on the sofa and admire them as they quietly bathed and dressed themselves and bent their heads dutifully over their homework.

Half an hour later, when Finney arrived, Hannah was sitting stark naked on the stairs and screaming, and William was clinging to my leg, trying to pull me towards his train set. Finney took in the scene with one sweep of the eyes, settling on

Hannah to give her a look he would usually reserve for the drunk and disorderly.

'We're going to be late,' he growled.

Long weekend drives in the country with my children on the back seat are not Finney's idea of fun, but I had asked him to come along because I needed the eyes of a detective chief inspector. And he agreed because he has fallen in love with me, even if he has not fallen in love with my children. We were heading south on the A23 towards Reigate, to a manor house on the edge of London, a place known among my fellow journalists as the War School. Here, in rural England, journalists learn from former elite forces soldiers how to duck and dive in deadly games of hide and seek. Or how to staunch the bleeding of a fallen colleague whose stomach has been blown open or his eye dislodged. His screams are amateur dramatics and the torn flesh is bread soaked in animal blood, none of which makes it any the less a matter of life and death.

Because of the number of journalists who have died in the past decade in war zones, news organizations now realize they must try to protect their employees, at least with knowledge, and sometimes with arms too.

'You know this is a wild goose chase,' Finney shouted over the children's yelling. I was driving and he was in the passenger seat, stoically ignoring Hannah, who was lying almost flat and stretching out her legs to kick the back of his seat. 'If there was anything to find, Coburn would have found it six months ago when she disappeared.'

Finney can be pretty scathing about the incompetence of his colleagues, even about DCI Coburn, who headed the investigation into Melanie's disappearance. But the police force is his family, not mine, and I didn't want to get into a fight.

'I promised Melanie's parents. I can't not go.'

*

Corporation camerawoman Melanie Jacobs had disappeared on 10 January, a Friday six months earlier, from the War School, which is officially called HazPrep. The Corporation employs thousands of people. It is like a very little country or a big school. You have a few colleagues who are blood brothers, lots of people you know to say hi to, and legions whom you know by reputation only. I worked just once with Melanie, but I was impressed by her seriousness and attention to detail. Since then I had heard colleagues speak with approval, and sometimes with disbelief, about her bravery in war zones. Shortly after she covered a particularly bloody civil war, I saw her in the canteen and went over to say hello. Melanie was tall and agile and strong. She let her dark hair grow long and straight, and when she was working she generally tied it back behind her head. That was when you could see that her left ear bore not one but a row of six gold studs. She nodded in greeting but did not smile. I looked into her eyes and saw that something had changed.

'It must have been hard,' I said. I don't know why I said it. It's not the sort of thing journalists normally say to each other.

'It's a job,' she muttered, shrugging.

I don't know if she intended it in the way that it hit me, but I walked away bathed in guilt. I had the same job as her. I'd started out as a television producer, but I'd learned how to operate a camera and sometimes I filmed my own material. We were both journalists. But I'd said no to war zones with scarcely a second thought because I am the single mother of two small children. Melanie had no children to hold her back and had taken the decision to risk her own life day after day to record human atrocity. It seemed to me that this was the purest form of journalism, to put the factual record above one's own survival. I did not know Melanie well enough to ask about her motivation. I could not believe that she sought glory – camera operators do not, in general, achieve glory, however good their work. But could such a dangerous decision be entirely selfless?

On another occasion I bumped into Melanie with her parents at King's Cross. So when she went missing a few weeks later I telephoned them to see if there was anything I could do to help. Melanie's mother, Beatrice, worried sick but polite nevertheless, thanked me for my concern and asked simply that I keep in touch, which I did. Beatrice and Elliot, Melanie's father, lived in Durham, and Elliot's health had deteriorated rapidly after his daughter's disappearance. Beatrice did not like to leave him for more than a few hours, but the lengthy train journey to London was more than he could stand. She was the sort of person who by instinct would have dug around to find out what had happened to her daughter, but her circumstances made her feel impotent and cut off. She was frustrated at the lack of news and upset that the police investigation seemed to be running out of steam.

'DCI Coburn tells me there's no evidence that she's dead. He says it's possible she's had a nervous breakdown and that she just upped and went, but I find that hard to believe of Melanie.'

Desperately apologetic, she'd asked me whether I would mind keeping my ears open within the Corporation for any word at all on what might have happened to Melanie.

'Who have you spoken to inside the Corporation?' I asked her. 'There must be someone who's the contact point for the police.'

'There is a man called Ivor Collins,' Beatrice said, 'who has been very kind. He came up on the train to see us and he brought us Melanie's things. He talked with us for a long time, but he seemed to be completely mystified too. He said he would let us know anything he found out, but . . .' Her voice trailed off unhappily.

'He hasn't contacted you?' I was incredulous.

'Oh yes, he has. He's rung us every week. He's been very kind, but he hasn't had any news for us. Maybe he feels, until there's something definite, he can't tell us. But that's not what I want . . . Melanie had friends, she had colleagues, they must be

talking about her disappearance, people must have theories, there must be rumours. I want . . .' Her voice cracked and she fell silent. I could hear her trying to control herself, breathing hard and slowly into the telephone.

She wanted what I would want. She wanted every tiny speck of information, she wanted to know she had left no stone unturned. She wanted to know that she had done everything she could for her daughter.

I know the name Ivor Collins. Usually you glimpse him in the distance, like a star in the night sky. Occasionally, if there is a morale issue, Collins visits the rank and file to dispense encouraging words, pat backs and nose around to see where – or with whom – the trouble lies. When I had spoken to Beatrice, I looked Ivor Collins up in the directory, and found that Ivor was HCP (R, H), which stood for Head of Corporate Policy, brackets Resources comma Human close brackets.

The next day I made an appointment to see him and found his comfortably appointed office in the far reaches of the management empire. He greeted me with a warm handshake and invited me to sit in the armchair opposite his. He had startling blue eyes and snowy white hair cut very short. His body was narrow, and his long face seemed even longer because of its unusual thinness. He looked like an exclamation mark.

'You wanted to talk to me about Melanie Jacobs,' he said, cocking his long head on one side.

'Her parents are frustrated by the lack of news,' I told him, 'and they asked me to keep my ears open.'

He nodded thoughtfully. 'And what have you learned?'

'You're the first person I've asked.'

'Well . . .' He heaved a sigh and spoke in a voice that was so low it was almost not there. Whether this indicated a desire for ultimate deniability or simply a throat infection, I could not tell.

'I find it hard to speak to Beatrice and Elliot every Monday, as I do, when I can't tell them any more than they've read in the papers. All of us here have been helping the police in whatever

way we can, but there has been little to tell them. Melanie was supremely brave, extremely talented, and we valued her highly. We have no idea why she disappeared.'

I left Collins's office ten minutes later, empty-handed. As I trod the lengths of corridor back to my office, I felt increasingly dissatisfied. Collins had not dismissed me, he had not tried to stop me asking questions, but he had met each of my enquiries with a sad shake of the head and an apology that there was nothing new that he could tell me, his blue eyes filled with a concern that looked genuine.

Surely, I thought, it was impossible that Collins had no more information now than the day Melanie vanished. I simply could not believe it. And as I thought it over, alarm bells began to ring in my head. When, nearly two years earlier, Adam Wills had been killed, I had become chief suspect, and the Corporation had failed to stand behind me. Was the Corporation now abandoning Melanie to her fate as it had abandoned me? I had been a suspect in a murder investigation, so perhaps it was understandable that my employers should want to pretend I had nothing to do with them. But there was no such stain on Melanie's reputation.

The next day Beatrice rang me and asked whether I would mind terribly going to HazPrep, and checking one last time whether there was something, anything, that the police might have missed. I agreed immediately. If Collins was not going to stand up for Melanie then I would have to. I found myself fired by an angry zeal that, had I been honest with myself, I would have realized had more to do with what had happened to me nearly two years earlier than with what had or had not happened to Melanie.

Now, as hedgerow gave way to a high brick wall topped with razor-sharp wire, I recognized the War School from the TV

coverage of Melanie's disappearance. HazPrep had not allowed journalists inside to film in the grounds at the time, nor had it allowed its staff to give interviews, with the exception of the director, Andrew Bentley. So there had been a lot of pictures of this exterior wall and the blue metal gate. I called Bentley from my mobile, as he'd instructed, and the gate slid open.

We parked by the manor house, a sprawling stone building surrounded with topiary at the top of a small hill. Bentley was waiting. I had expected combat fatigues, but he wore a dark blue business suit and what looked to my amateur eyes like a regimental tie. All I knew of his history was that he had been an officer in the Special Boat Service. His short dark hair had receded to show a large circle of glossy bald head, his shoulders pushed the suit to its limits, and his unbuttoned jacket revealed a chest that sat above his waist like a V. I could see my face in his shoes.

'Hello?' Bentley greeted Finney with an interrogative, and shook his hand.

'This is Tom Finney,' I said and left it at that.

'Good God, you've got a carful.' Bentley peered into the back.

'It's the weekend—' I started, but he waved away my excuses.

'Plenty of space for them to run around. I've got kids myself.'

I was pleased to find someone who didn't blanch when they saw children, but by the time I'd managed to dislodge William and Hannah from the car, Bentley and Finney had turned and were already heading towards the house. It was an English summer's day, the early sun now overcast with clouds that threatened rain, and Finney was wearing a leather jacket and jeans. Unlike Bentley, who made a suit look like a uniform, Finney was incapable of making even a suit look like a suit. I hadn't introduced Finney as a police officer, but it seemed to me, as they strode off together that the two men had recognized

in each other the formal manner of men who work in hierarchical institutions and the bearing of those who expect a certain measure of respect. They were deep in conversation.

I gathered the children up and hurried after them. Inside the house we followed Bentley along a ground-floor corridor, and he stopped outside a door, the top half of which was glass.

'This is one of our seminar rooms,' he said quietly. 'It's being used, but you're welcome to take a look. A lot of what we teach is risk assessment, and self-awareness. We need to tell camera operators like Melanie that their camera looks like a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. They may think their equipment looks innocent enough, but it doesn't. And a camera operator needs a minimum of four seconds of film, which is a long time to stick your neck out with bullets flying.'

I stepped up and looked through the glass. There were a dozen men in there, sitting in a circle on metal chairs chosen for function rather than comfort, each with a notebook at their elbow. Two of them were passing notes to each other. A third looked close to sleep. I recognized only one of them, a man called Max Amsel. Max is one of the Corporation's war correspondents. Short and stout, he is Austrian by birth and was once told by a Corporation executive that he would never make a broadcaster because his accent was too strong. Now he speaks a smooth standard English. Only if you listen very closely can you hear the slightest of clipped edges.

An instructor stood at the front of the class, holding up a flak jacket and describing its many fine properties. Props were stacked on shelves around the edges of the room – first aid kits, helmets, a pair of boots, as well as what I assumed were models of grenades, landmines and mortar shells. Two old-fashioned blackboards stood at the front of the room, and there was a large flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. On one blackboard were diagrams of explosions, of the trajectory of shrapnel, with stick figures crouching, ducking, running. On the second, there was writing in white chalk. 'Be the Grey Man.'

'Shut the Fuck Up or Die,' was scrawled in pink chalk beneath it. Someone had wiped over the words in a half-hearted attempt to erase them, but they were still clearly legible.

Bentley followed my eyes.

'In a group-hostage situation it's generally good policy to keep your head down,' Bentley murmured in my ear. 'I think the commentary was added by one of our clients. Some of them think they're real jokers.'

I moved aside to let Finney take a look through the glass and then we moved on. We climbed the staircase to the room Melanie had occupied. The single bed was covered in a grass green counterpane. There was a small chest of drawers beside it, olive green curtains hung at the window, and the carpet was moss green, the walls beige. It was a room in camouflage. This must be what happened when you left interior decoration up to former soldiers. A narrow wardrobe was empty of anything but hangers. Through another door a shower room was hung with pristine towels. The room had long ago been wiped clean of any vestige of Melanie.

'The police sealed it off.' Bentley was standing in the doorway, as though crossing the threshold might make him disappear as Melanie had. 'They turned it upside down, but as far as I know they didn't find anything unusual and there was no sign of forced entry. In the end someone from the Corporation came and packed up her things.'

'Who was that?'

Bentley shrugged.

'I don't remember the name. We shook hands. She was in her late thirties, perhaps early forties, light brown hair. I can check with my secretary if it's important.'

'If you could. Did you spend any time with Melanie?'

Bentley shook his head.

'I had meetings in London the first two days she was here. The course runs like clockwork. My instructors don't need me breathing down their necks.'

We followed Bentley downstairs and outside again, and along a dirt path from the dining room towards the woods. A light rain was falling and the children galloped around us, shrieking with delight as they got wet and the soggy earth began to cling to their sandals.

'Am I right in remembering it had snowed?' Finney asked. 'Did Melanie leave tracks?'

'The snow hadn't settled on the path around the house itself – there was too much foot traffic. After that, well, we don't know which direction she took, of course. The guard at the gate didn't see her. There was snow and ice on this path down to the wood, but no one even noticed Melanie was gone until midday on January the eleventh – when she didn't turn up at class the instructor assumed she was sick and had stayed in her room. So the alarm wasn't raised until the afternoon. By which time we'd had a dozen men and women tramping up and down here. I think the sun even shone. So all we had left was sludge. Look.' Bentley came to a halt and pointed up ahead. 'We call this the booby-trap trail; we want our clients to learn how to use their eyes, and their brains. Here, look, the path forks and one route has been blocked off with a log. You should ask yourself: who did that? Why did they do it? Is someone you can't see forcing you to choose this path through the woods? There's a hut over there, it would provide excellent shelter. Someone's piled firewood in the doorway – you'd have to clear it away before you could get in . . .'

'. . . and it would blow up in your face.' Finney finished the sentence for him.

Bentley nodded.

Bentley's analysis of what we saw around us was delivered with clinical calm. I felt a chill creep into my bones. The beech trees in these woods had been here for a century or more, their thick foliage keeping out what little daylight there was. Even the rain fell more thinly here.

'And here's our execution ground,' Bentley said, his voice

still bare of inflection. He stood in a clearing in the trees. A perfectly circular patch of ground had been concreted over and a high brick wall constructed along one section of the perimeter with rough windows built into it. It looked like a theatre set.

'Not that an execution ground has to look like anything in particular, but when we're doing this exercise we want our clients to be able to identify this as a defined area, a killing zone, in which their efforts to save themselves take place.' He paused, then added, 'Melanie took part in this exercise on January the tenth.'

William hurtled past me and out into the centre of the concreted area, then he stopped and shouted something unintelligible towards me. We all stared at him. I had to stop myself from bodily seizing him up and carrying him out of this godforsaken place.

'William wants a ball, Mummy,' Hannah said.

I told her that I didn't have a ball with me, and she ran to William to pass the message on. He started to scream and stamp his feet.

'What happened that day?' Finney asked Bentley. 'Did Melanie say the right thing? Did she talk herself out of it or would she have been executed?'

Bentley puffed out his cheeks, and I thought he seemed uncomfortable with Finney's question. When he spoke he had to raise his voice so that we could hear him over William's tantrum.

'We don't deal in right or wrong answers here. We preach first psychological preparation and avoidance and if that fails we teach problem-solving techniques. No one pretended to execute Melanie, if that's what you're asking. We're not here to terrorize people. There's no need. Our clients aren't stupid. They know what they are getting themselves into. As I understand it, Melanie had extricated herself from some tight situations.'

William had fallen silent and was gazing at the ground as the drizzle became heavier, the raindrops fatter. They fell and

burst against the concrete stage like ten thousand tiny explosions. Bentley glanced at his watch.

'My men will be using this area for a training exercise in a few minutes. Let's go and get some lunch.'

The dining room was almost empty, just a few tables occupied by people who looked like staff getting an early lunch. We took a table by the window and sat down. Bentley pointed out the adjoining bar, where Melanie had last been seen. She had been on the course for three days, and was due to leave on the fourth. The bar had a separate exit into the grounds. It was through this exit that Melanie had left the bar at ten p.m.

'Why go outside at all?' I asked. 'Wouldn't it have been quicker to go through the dining room?'

'It would have been quicker. Also it was dark outside and cold. But there is another entrance by the bedroom wing, and people do take the overland route. Usually to have a cigarette or make a phone call. The entire building is a no-smoking zone, including the bar. And mobile phone reception is bad inside the building and marginally better outside. I seem to remember someone said they thought she was speaking into her mobile just before she left.'

'Her mobile . . .' Finney was thinking aloud. 'I don't think it's been found – am I right?'

'Right,' I agreed. My knowledge of the newspaper reporting on Melanie's disappearance was second to none. 'The police checked her phone records and there was an electronic signal logging off from the local transmitter shortly after ten that night.'

'Which means either that the battery ran out or that someone switched the phone off,' Finney said, 'but either way the phone was somewhere in this area at that point.'

'The transmitter's footprint covers a much greater area than just HazPrep, of course,' Bentley said quickly. 'And we shouldn't forget that she might have switched it off herself as she left the area, so she couldn't be tracked.'