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Standing in Another Man's Grave

Written by Ian Rankin

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**IAN
RANKIN
STANDING
IN ANOTHER
MAN'S GRAVE**



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He'd made sure he wasn't standing too near the open grave.

Closed ranks of the other mourners between him and it. The pallbearers had been called forward by number rather than name – six of them, starting with the deceased's son. Rain wasn't quite falling yet, but it had scheduled an appointment. The cemetery was fairly new, sited on the south-eastern outskirts of the city. He had skipped the church service, just as he would skip the drinks and sandwiches after. He was studying the backs of heads: hunched shoulders, twitches, sneezes and throat-clearings. There were people here he knew, but probably not many. A gap appeared between two of the mourners and he caught a glimpse of the graveside. The edges of the grave itself had been covered with sheets of green cloth, as if to mask the hard facts of the matter. Words were being uttered but he couldn't catch all of them. There was no mention of the cancer. Jimmy Wallace had been 'cruelly taken', leaving a widow and three children, plus five grandkids. Those kids would be down the front somewhere, mostly old enough to know what was going on. Their grandmother had given voice to a single piercing wail and was being comforted.

Christ, he needed a cigarette.

How well had he known Jimmy Wallace? Hadn't seen him in four or five years, but they'd worked in the same cop shop a decade or more back. Wallace was uniform rather than CID, but the sort of guy you'd talk to anyway. Jokes and gossip and the occasional snippet of useful information. He'd retired six years ago, which was around the same time the diagnosis appeared, along with the chemo and hair-loss.

Borne with his trademark humour . . .

Maybe so, but better to be miserable and alive. He could feel the pack of cigarettes in his pocket, knew he could back away a few

yards, maybe hide himself behind a tree and spark up. The thought reminded him of schooldays, when there had been bike sheds blocking the view from the headmaster's window. Teachers occasionally arrived and asked for a light, or a cigarette, or the whole damned pack.

A well-known figure in the local community . . .

Well known to criminals he'd helped put away, too. Maybe a few of the old-timers had come to pay their respects. The coffin was being lowered into the grave, the widow giving cry again, or perhaps it was one of the daughters. A couple of minutes later it was all over. He knew there would be a mechanical digger hidden nearby. It had dug the hole and would be used to fill it in again. The mound of earth had been covered with more of the green baize cloth. All very tasteful. The majority of the mourners didn't linger. One man, face heavily lined, mouth permanently drooping, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his black woollen coat and approached with the smallest nod of recognition.

'John,' he said.

'Tommy,' Rebus replied, with another nod.

'Got to be us one of these days, eh?'

'Not yet, though.'

The two men started walking towards the cemetery gates.

'Need a lift?'

Rebus shook his head. 'Car's outside.'

'Traffic's a nightmare – as per.'

Rebus offered a cigarette, but Tommy Beamish told him he'd stopped a couple of years back. 'Doctor advised me they stunt your growth.'

Rebus lit up and inhaled. 'How long have you been out of the game now?' he asked.

'Twelve years and counting. One of the lucky ones. Too many like Jimmy – get the gold watch, and soon after they're on a slab.'

'A cheery prospect.'

'Is that why you keep working? I heard you were in Cold Case.'

Rebus nodded slowly. They were almost at the gates now. The first of the cars was passing them, family members in the back, eyes fixed on the road ahead. He couldn't think what else to say to Beamish. Different ranks, different cop shops. He tried to conjure up the names of colleagues they might both have known.

'Ach, well . . .' Perhaps Beamish shared his difficulty. He was holding out his hand. Rebus shook it. 'Till the next time, eh?'

'So long as it's not one of us in the wooden suit.'

With a snort, Beamish was gone, turning his collar up against the falling rain. Rebus stubbed the cigarette out beneath his heel, waited a couple of moments, then headed for his car.

The traffic in Edinburgh was indeed a nightmare. Temporary lights, road closures, diversions. Long tailbacks everywhere. Most of it to accommodate the construction of a single tramline between airport and city centre. While stationary, he checked his phone for messages, unsurprised to find there were none. No urgent cases required his attention: he worked with the long dead, murder victims forgotten by the world at large. There were eleven investigations on the books of the Serious Crime Review Unit. They went as far back as 1966, the most recent dating from 2002. Where there were graves to visit, Rebus had visited them. Families and friends still left flowers at a few, and the names on any cards had been jotted into his notebook and added to the file – to what end he wasn't entirely sure. When he turned on the car's CD player, Jackie Leven's voice – deep and visceral – emerged from the speakers. He was singing about standing in another man's grave. Rebus's eyes narrowed. For a moment he was back in the cemetery, content to be staring at heads and shoulders. He reached over to the passenger seat and managed to wrest the lyric booklet from its case. The track was called 'Another Man's Rain'. That was what Jackie was singing about: standing in another man's rain.

'Time to get your ears checked,' Rebus muttered to himself. Jackie Leven was dead, too. A year or so younger than Rebus. They shared a Fife background. Rebus wondered if his school had ever played the singer's at football – almost the only time kids from different schools might meet. It wouldn't have mattered: Rebus had never been picked for the first team, consigned instead to offering encouragement from the frozen sidelines as tackles and goals went in and insults were traded.

'And standing in every bastard's rain,' he said aloud. The horn was sounding from the car behind. Its driver was in a hurry. He had meetings waiting for him, important people he was letting down. The world would crash and burn if this traffic didn't start moving. Rebus wondered how many hours of his own life he had wasted like this. Or sitting on a surveillance. Or filling in forms, requisitions and time sheets. When his phone pinged with a message, he saw it was from his boss.

Thought you said 3!

Rebus glanced at his watch. It was five minutes past the hour. Twenty more minutes would see him at the office, more or less. In

days gone by, he might have had a siren and flashing light. He might have pulled out into the oncoming lane and trusted to the fates that he wouldn't end up in A&E. But these days he didn't even have a proper warrant card, because he wasn't a cop. He was a retired cop who happened to work for Lothian and Borders Police in a civilian capacity. His boss was the only member of the unit who was still a serving officer. A serving officer and not at all happy about his latest posting nursing the geriatrics. Not happy either about the three p.m. meeting and Rebus's tardiness.

What's the rush? Rebus texted back, just to be annoying. Then he turned up the music, repeating the same track as before. Jackie Leven still seemed to be standing in another man's grave.

As if rain wasn't bad enough . . .

He shook himself free of his overcoat and let it drip across the floor of the office to the hook on the far wall.

‘Thanks for taking the trouble,’ Cowan said.

‘Apologies, Danny.’

‘Daniel,’ Cowan corrected him.

‘Sorry, Dan.’

Cowan was seated on one of the desks, his feet not quite reaching the floor, exposing a pair of red paisley-pattern socks above gleaming black leather shoes. He kept polish and brushes in the bottom drawer of his desk. Rebus knew this because he’d opened the drawer one day when Cowan was out of the room, having already checked the two drawers above it.

‘What are you looking for?’ Elaine Robison had asked.

‘Clues,’ Rebus had replied.

Robison was standing in front of him now, handing him a mug of coffee. ‘How did it go?’ she asked.

‘It was a funeral,’ Rebus answered, placing the mug to his lips.

‘If we can get started,’ Cowan snapped. The grey suit didn’t look right on him. Its shoulders seemed over-padded and the lapels too wide. He pushed a hand defiantly through his hair.

Rebus and Robison took their seats alongside Peter Bliss, whose breathing sounded laboured even when at rest. But he’d had the same wheeze twenty years ago, and maybe the twenty before that, too. He was just a shade older than Rebus and had been in the unit longer than any of them. He sat with his hands clasped across his prodigious stomach, as if daring the universe to spring on him something he hadn’t seen before. He’d certainly seen plenty like Detective Sergeant Daniel Cowan, and had told Rebus as much on

Rebus's first day with the unit: 'Thinks we're beneath his station. Reckons he's too good, and the bosses know it and have shunted him here to take him down a peg or three.'

Prior to retirement, Bliss had reached the rank of detective inspector – same as Rebus. Elaine Robison had been a detective constable, and blamed the lack of higher achievement on the fact that she'd always put family before career.

'Quite right too,' Rebus had told her, adding (after he'd known her a few more weeks) that his own marriage had lost its fight with the job early on.

Robison had only just turned fifty. Her son and daughter had left home, graduated from college and moved south for work. There were framed portraits of them on her desk, alongside other photos showing Robison herself posing at the top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and seated at the controls of a light aeroplane. She had recently started to dye her hair, not that Rebus saw anything wrong in that. Streaked grey, she would still have looked ten years younger than her age and might even pass for thirty-five – same as Cowan.

Cowan, he reckoned, had arranged the chairs. They sat in a straight line in front of his desk, so that they all had to look up at him.

'Wearing those socks for a bet, Danny?' Rebus asked from behind the mug.

Cowan deflected the comment with a thin smile. 'Do I hear right, John? You've applied to rejoin?' He waited for Rebus to acknowledge the truth of this. The retirement age had been raised, meaning those of Rebus's vintage could reapply. 'Thing is,' Cowan continued, leaning forward a little, 'they'll come to *me* for a reference. Way you're going, it won't be a fan letter.'

'You can have my autograph anyway,' Rebus assured him.

It was hard to tell if Peter Bliss's wheezing had just taken on a different timbre or whether he was stifling a laugh. Robison looked down into her lap and smiled. Cowan shook his head slowly.

'Can I remind you all,' he said quietly, 'that this unit is jeopardised? And if it closes down, only one of us will be welcomed back into the body of the kirk.' He pointed a finger at his own chest. 'A result would be nice. Progress of any kind would be nice.'

They all knew what he was talking about. The Crown Office was setting up a specialist Cold Case Unit for the whole of Scotland. If it scooped up their workload, their jobs would be history. The CCU would have at its heart a database of ninety-three cases dating back to the 1940s, including all the ones from the Lothian and Borders

police authority. With the CCU up and running, questions were bound to be asked about the usefulness of the smaller Edinburgh team. Money was tight. There were already mutterings that dusting off old unsolved did little but drain cash from current (and more urgent) inquiries in and around the city.

‘A result would be nice,’ Cowan repeated. He leapt from the desk, strode around it and plucked a newspaper cutting from the wall, brandishing it for effect. ‘Cold Case Unit in England,’ he intoned. ‘Suspect charged for the murder of a teenager committed almost fifty years ago.’ He paraded the clipping in front of their faces. ‘DNA . . . crime-scene analysis . . . witnesses whose consciences have been gnawing away at them. We know how this works, so how about *making* it work?’

He seemed to require an answer, but none was forthcoming. The silence lengthened until Robison broke it.

‘We don’t always have the resources,’ she countered, ‘never mind the evidence. Hard to apply DNA tests to anything when the victim’s clothing got lost somewhere down the line.’

‘There are plenty of cases where we *do* have clothing, though, aren’t there?’

‘And can we demand that every male in a town gives us a DNA sample so we can try for a match?’ Bliss added. ‘How about the ones who’ve died or moved away in the interim?’

‘That positive outlook of yours is why I warm to you, Peter.’ Cowan placed the cutting on the desk and folded his arms. ‘For your own sakes,’ he said. ‘Not mine – I’ll be fine and dandy – but for *your* sakes.’ He paused for effect. ‘For your sakes, we need to make this work.’

There was silence in the room again, broken only by Bliss’s breathing and a sigh from Robison. Cowan’s eyes were on Rebus, but Rebus was busy draining the last of the coffee from his mug.

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Bert Jansch was dead, too. Rebus had seen him play a few solo gigs in Edinburgh down the years. Jansch had been born in the city but made his name in London. After work that evening, alone in his flat, Rebus played a couple of Pentangle albums. He was no expert, but he could tell Jansch's playing from the other guitarist in the band, John Renbourn. As far as he knew, Renbourn was still around – maybe living in the Borders. Or was that Robin Williamson? He had taken his colleague Siobhan Clarke to a Renbourn/Williamson concert once, driving her all the way to Biggar Folk Club without telling her why. When the two musicians stepped on to the stage – looking as though they'd just roused themselves from armchairs by a roaring fire – he'd leaned in towards her.

'One of them played Woodstock, you know,' he'd whispered.

He still had the ticket to the Biggar gig somewhere. Tended to keep them, though he knew it was just one more thing that would need to be binned when he was no longer around. Next to his record deck lay a plastic guitar pick. He had bought it years back, after wandering through a music shop, telling the young guy behind the till that he might be back later for an actual guitar. The assistant had mentioned that the pick was manufactured by a Scotsman called Jim Dunlop, who also made effects pedals. In the years since, Rebus had rubbed all the writing from the pick, but had never used it on a guitar of any kind.

'Never learned to fly a plane, either,' he said to himself.

He studied the cigarette he was holding. He'd undergone a medical a few months back and received the usual warnings. His dentist, too, was always checking for the first signs of anything nasty. So far so good.

'Every lucky streak comes to an end, John,' his dentist had told him. 'Trust me.'

'Can I get an each-way bet on that?' Rebus had replied.

He stubbed the cigarette into an ashtray and counted how many

were left in the packet. Eight, meaning he'd smoked twelve so far today. That wasn't bad, was it? Time was, he'd have finished one lot and broken open another. He wasn't drinking as much either: couple of beers of an evening, with maybe a tot or three of whisky before bed. He had a beer open now – his first of the day. Neither Bliss nor Robison had fancied a drink after work, and he hadn't been about to ask Cowan. Cowan tended to hang around the office late. They were housed within Police HQ on Fettes Avenue, which gave Cowan the chance to bump into senior officers, people potentially useful to him who would notice how he kept a good shine on his shoes and always addressed them properly.

'It's called stalking,' Rebus had once informed him, having caught him laughing too heartily at an old joke one of the assistant chief constables had been telling in the corridor. 'And I notice you don't pull *him* up when he calls you Dan . . .'

In a way, though, Rebus felt sorry for Cowan. There were almost certainly less proficient officers around who had more successfully scaled the heights. Cowan certainly felt that, and it gnawed away at him, so that he was almost hollowed out by it. The team had suffered as a result, which was a pity. Rebus liked many aspects of the job. He felt a small tremor of anticipation whenever he undid the binding from an old case file. There might be boxes and boxes, each one ready to take him on a trip back through time. Yellowed newspapers would contain not only reports of the crime, but also general stories of national and world affairs, plus sport and advertisements. He would get Elaine Robison to guess how much a car or a house had cost in 1974, and would read out the football league tables to Peter Bliss, who had a knack for remembering the names of players and managers. But then, eventually, Rebus would be pulled back to the crime itself, to the details, interviews, evidence and family testimony: *somebody thinks they got away with it . . . knows they got away with it*. He hoped all these killers were out there somewhere, growing more ill at ease with each passing year as they read about advances in detection and technology. Maybe when their grandkids wanted to watch *CSI* or *Waking the Dead*, they had to leave the room and sit in the kitchen. Maybe they couldn't bear the sight of newsprint, or weren't able to listen in peace to the radio or TV news, for fear of hearing about the reopening of the case.

Rebus had posited the idea to Cowan: get the media to report breakthroughs on a regular basis, real or not, just to put the wind up the culprits.

'Something might shake loose.'

But Cowan hadn't been keen: weren't the media in enough trouble already for fabricating stories?

'It wouldn't be them doing it,' Rebus had persisted, 'it would be *us*.' But Cowan had just kept shaking his head.

The record finished and Rebus lifted the needle from the vinyl. It wasn't yet nine o'clock, far too early to be considering bed. He'd already eaten; already decided there was nothing on TV worth watching. The bottle of beer was empty. He walked over to the window and stared out at the tenement opposite. A couple of children in pyjamas were staring back at him from a first-floor flat. He waved, which sent them scampering away. Now they were circling one another in the middle of their room, bouncing on their toes, not at all sleepy, and he had been dismissed from their universe.

He knew what they'd been telling him, though – there was a whole other world out there. And that could mean only one thing.

'Pub,' Rebus said out loud, reaching for his phone and his keys. Switching off the record deck and amp, he noticed the pick again and decided it was coming with him too.