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The Book of Souls

Written by James Oswald

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The Book of Souls

JAMES OSWALD



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For Barbara

I

The streets are empty. An unnatural quiet spreads over the north end of the city as if all the sound has been sucked out of it by the festivities on Princes Street. Only the occasional taxi breaks the calm as he follows his feet who knows where. Away from the crowds, away from the excitement, away from the joy.

He has been wandering for hours now, searching, though in his heart he knows he is too late. Has he been here before? There is a terrible familiarity about it all: the clock-tower arms reaching towards midnight and the opening of a new millennium; the cobbled streets glistening with slippery rain; the orange glow against warm sandstone painting everything with a demonic light. His feet take him downwards, through the nine circles, despair growing with each muffled footfall.

What is it that stops him on the bridge? An impossible sound, perhaps. The echo of a scream uttered years ago. Or maybe it's the sudden hush of the city holding its breath, counting down those last seconds to a new dawn. He can't share their enthusiasm, can't find it in himself to care. If he could stop time, turn it backwards, he would do things so differently. But this is just a moment, and it will be followed by another. Another after that. Onwards to infinity.

He leans on the cold stone parapet, looks down on the

dark rushing water below. Something has brought him here, away from the world of celebrations and festive cheer.

A loud explosion marks the end of the old and the start of the new. Fireworks come in quick succession, rising over the tall buildings and lighting the sky. A million new stars fill the heavens, chasing away the shadows, reflecting in the black water, revealing its dread secret.

Flash, and the water sparkles with strange shapes, fading away like afterglow on the back of the eye.

Flash, and startled fish dart from the floating fingers they have been nibbling away.

Flash, and long black hair tugs glossily in the flow, like seaweed on the tide.

Flash, and the pent-up force of a week's rain pushes past the latest obstacle, moving it slowly down towards the sea, rolling it over and over as it goes.

Flash, and a ghostly white face stares up at him with pleading, dead eyes.

Flash . . .

‘Argh! Jesus! Is that a rat?’

‘Keep it down, constable.’

‘But sarge, it crawled over my foot. Must’ve been the size of a bloody badger.’

‘I don’t care if it was as big as my shiny arse. Keep it quiet until we get the signal.’

A grumbling silence fell over the dark street as the small group of police officers crouched among uncollected rubbish sacks outside a lifeless tenement. The constant quiet roar of the city around them underlined the stillness, the insufficient glow of the one functional street light casting everything in twilight shadow. Early morning and you could rely on the natives of this part of town to be asleep, or stoned out of sensibility.

Two clicks on an airwave set, then a tinny voice through an earpiece. ‘All clear round the back. You’re good to go.’

The bodies shuffled around, hemmed in by the rubbish on either side. ‘OK people. On my mark. Three . . . Two . . . One . . .’

A crash of splintering wood split the air, followed closely by a scream.

‘Argh! Bastard wasn’t even locked.’ Then, ‘Jesus Christ! There’s shit all over the floor.’

Detective Inspector Anthony McLean sighed and switched on his torch. In front of him he could just make

out the black-clad figure of PC Jones struggling to extricate himself from a pile of rubbish sacks inside the tenement hallway.

‘Did they not teach you in Tulliallan to check that first?’

He pushed past the struggling constable and into the dank building, sniffing the air and trying not to gag. Rotting garbage mixed with stale piss and mould, the favoured aroma of the Edinburgh slum. It wasn’t usually this ripe though, and that didn’t bode well for why he was here.

‘Bob, you take the ground floor. Jones, help him.’ McLean turned to the final member of their party, a baby-faced young detective constable who’d been unlucky enough to be in the canteen at the station an hour earlier looking like he had nothing better to do. That’s what you got for being keen. ‘Come on then, MacBride. Let’s see if there’s anything here worth breaking down an unlocked door for.’

There were three storeys to the tenement, two tiny flats on each floor. None of the doors were locked, and the graffiti liberally scrawled over every available surface was at least two generations of squatter out of date. McLean stepped carefully from room to room, the beam of his torchlight playing over broken furniture, ripped-out electrical fittings and the occasional dead rat. DC MacBride never left his side, hovering like an obedient labrador, almost too close for comfort. Or maybe it was just that he didn’t want to brush up against anything. Couldn’t blame him, really. The smell of the place would take weeks to wash out.

‘Looks like yet another complete bloody waste of time,’ McLean said as they left the last flat and stood on the

landing at the top of the stairs. All the glass had long since gone from the window looking out over the gardens behind. At least that meant a cold wind could blow away the worst of the smell.

‘Um. Why did we come here, sir?’ The question choked in MacBride’s throat, as if he had tried to stop himself asking it at the last minute.

‘That’s a very good question, constable.’ McLean shone his torch down into the empty stairwell, then up at the ceiling with its high-angled roofline and reinforced glass light well. That was out of reach of the vandals, and tough enough to withstand thrown missiles, but even so a couple of panes were crazed and sagging. ‘An informant. A snitch. What is it they like to call them these days? A Covert Human Intelligence Source?’ He made little bunny-ear inverted commas with his fingers, bouncing the light from his torch up and down as he did. ‘Bugger that. Mine’s a stoner called Izzy and he’s a useless tosser. Spun me a load of old crap just to get me out of his hair, I’ve no doubt. Told me this place was used as a distribution hub. My own fault for believing him, I guess.’

More lights flickering in the darkness downstairs were Detective Sergeant Bob Laird and Police Constable Taffy Jones stumbling through the rubbish sacks in the entrance hall. If they’d found anything they’d have shouted, so it looked like the whole episode was a complete waste of time. Just like every other bloody raid. Wonderful. Dagwood was going to be so pleased.

‘Come on then. It’s probably best if we don’t make Grumpy Bob climb all the way up here. Let’s get back to the nice warm canteen.’ McLean set off down the stairs,

only realising he wasn't being followed when he was half-way to the next floor. He looked back and saw MacBride's torch pointed at a space above the fanlight over one of the flat doors. A small hatch gave entry to the building's loft space. It looked almost completely unremarkable, except for the shiny new padlock hasp screwed into it.

'D'you think there might be something up there, sir?' MacBride asked as McLean rejoined him on the landing.

'Only one way to find out. Give us a leg-up.'

McLean shoved his torch in his mouth, then trod gently in the cup made by the constable's interlocked fingers. There was nothing to hold onto except a small lip below the hatch, and he had to stretch his other leg out to the wobbly banister before he could reach up with one hand and unclip the hasp. It gleamed where until recently a padlock had swung.

'Hold steady.' McLean pushed against the hatch. It resisted slightly, then swung in on well-used hinges. Beyond was a different darkness, and a sweet musk quite at odds with the rank odour wafting up from below. He swung his head around until his torch pointed in through the hatchway, seeing aluminium foil over the rafters, low wooden benches, fluorescent lighting.

'I can't hold on much longer, sir.' MacBride's voice shook with the effort of holding twelve stone of detective inspector. Well, maybe thirteen. McLean transferred as much of his weight as he dared to the banister, then swung around and dropped back down to the stone landing. The constable looked at him with a worried expression, as if expecting to be shouted at for his weakness. McLean just smiled.

‘Get on your airwave set,’ he said. ‘I think we’re going to need a SOC team here as soon as possible.’

Removing the rubbish bags had helped clear the air, but the flagstone floor they had covered was sticky and slippery with fluids best not thought about too deeply. McLean watched the stream of white-suited SOC officers as they trooped from their van, along the corridor and up the stairs, lugging battered aluminium cases of expensive equipment.

‘Pity the poor bastard who’s going to have to go through all that.’ Grumpy Bob nodded at the pile of rubbish bags each now sporting a ‘Police Evidence’ tag and waiting in the middle of the road for a truck to come and take them away.

‘That would be me, as it happens. Who’s the officer in charge here?’ A white-suited figure stopped mid-corridor, pulling off a hood to reveal an unruly mop of spiky black hair. Emma Baird either was or wasn’t going out with McLean, depending on which station gossip you spoke to. He’d not seen her in a couple of weeks; something about a training course up north. As she scowled in the half-light, he wished their reunion could have been in better circumstances. He looked at Grumpy Bob, who shrugged back at him an eloquent refusal to take any responsibility.

‘Hi, Em.’ McLean stepped out of the shadows so he could be seen. ‘I thought you were still up in Aberdeen.’

‘I’m beginning to wish I’d stayed there.’ She looked at the growing pile of rubbish. ‘You know that attic’s not been disturbed in months, right?’

‘Shite.’ Another dead end. And it had all been looking so promising.

‘Exactly, shite. Twenty-three stinking black bin bags of it, to be precise. And I’m going to have to go through every last one of them knowing there’s going to be bugger all in there of any use to your investigation. Unless you decide it’s unnecessary. . .’ She trailed off, looked at the two of them, eyes flicking between them as if unsure who she should be addressing.

‘If I could, I would, Em.’ McLean tried a smile, knowing it would just look like a grimace. ‘But you know Dagwood.’

‘Oh crap. He’s no’ in charge, is he?’ Emma scrunched her hood in her gloved hands, shoved it in a pocket of her overalls, turned and shouted to the assembled SOC crowd. ‘Come on you lot. Quicker we get started, quicker we can hit the shower.’ And she stalked off without another word.

An icy rain whips around the cemetery, turning the winter snow into salt-grey slush. The sky is leaden, clouds settling down over the small party like a drowning wave. He stands at the edge of the grave, staring down into blackness as nearby a minister mutters meaningless platitudes.

Movement now, and strong men grasp the sash cords slipped under the coffin. She is inside it, lying still and cold in his mother's favourite dress. Her favourite dress. No good to anyone now. He wants to break open the lid and look on her face just one more time. He wants to cradle her in his arms and will the past to melt away. For the bad things to have never happened. What would he give to go back just a couple of months? His soul? Of course. Bring on the contract and the blood-tipped quill. He has no need of a soul now that she's gone.

But he doesn't move. Can't move. He should be helping the strong men lower her into the earth, but he can't. It's all he can do to stay standing.

A hand on his arm. He turns to see a woman dressed all in black. Tears run down her white-painted face, but her eyes are full of an angry hatred. They stare at him full of accusation. It's his fault that all this has happened. His fault that her baby girl, her only joy, is slowly being covered with shovels of earth. Food for the worms. Dead.

He can't deny those eyes. They're right. He is to blame.

Better she push him in the grave now. He won't stop her. He'd be happy to lie on that coffin while they threw the dirt on top of him. Anything would be better than trying to live without her.

But he knows that's what he will do.