

The Grave Tattoo

Val McDermid

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Extract

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The Prelude

September 2005

All landscapes hold their own secrets. Layer on layer, the past is buried beneath the surface. Seldom irretrievable, it lurks, waiting for human agency or meteorological accident to force the skeleton up through flesh and skin back into the present. Like the poor, the past is always with us.

That summer, it rained as if England had been transported to the tropics. Water fell in torrents, wrecking glorious gardens, turning meadows into quagmires where livestock struggled hock-deep in mud. Rivers burst their banks, their suddenly released waters finding their own level by demolishing whatever was vulnerable in their path. In the flooded streets of one previously picturesque village, cars were swept up like toys and deposited in the harbour, choking it in a chaos of mangled metal. Landslips swamped cars with mud and farmers mourned lost crops.

No part of the country was immune from the sheets of stinging rain. City and countryside alike struggled under the weight of water. In the Lake District, it sheeted down over fell and dale, subtly altering the contours of a centuries-old landscape. The water levels in the lakes reached record summer highs; the only discernible benefit was that when the sun did

occasionally shine, it revealed a lusher green than usual.

Above the village of Fellhead on the shores of Langmere, ancient peat hags were carved into new shapes under the onslaught of water. And as autumn crept in, gradually the earth gave up one of its close-held secrets.

From a distance, it looked like a scrunched-up tarpaulin stained brown by the brackish water of the bog. At first glance, it seemed insignificant; another piece of discarded rubbish that had worked its way to the surface. But closer inspection revealed something far more chilling. Something that would reach across the centuries and bring even more profound changes in its wake than the weather.

My beloved son,

I trust you and the children are in good health. I have found this day troubling matter in your father's hand. It may surprise you that, in spite of the close confidence between us, I was in ignorance of this while he lived, and wish heartily I had remained in that state. You will easily see the need for secrecy while your father lived, and he left me no instructions concerning its disposition. Since it closely touches you, and may be the occasion of more pain, I wish to leave to you the decision as to what should be done. I will convey the matter to you by a faithful hand. You must do as you see fit.

Your loving Mother

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*The way it rained that summer
It would have broken your heart to see.
It smashed its sheets to smithereens
And flowed down the corrugated roofs
Of dismal railway stations.
And I would sit waiting for trains,
Feet in puddles,
My head starry with rain,
Thinking of you miles from me
In Grecian sunlight
Where rain never falls.*

Jane Gresham stared at what she had written then with an impatient stroke of her pen crossed it through so firmly the paper tore and split in the wake of the nib. *Bloody Jake*, she thought angrily. She was a grown-up, not some lovestruck adolescent. Sub-poetic maundering was something she should have left behind years ago. She'd had insight enough to know she was never going to be a poet by the time she'd finished her first degree. Studying other people's poetry was what she was good at; interpreting their work, exploring thematic links in their verse and opening up their complexity to those who

were, she hoped, an assorted number of steps behind her in the process. ‘Bloody, bloody Jake,’ she said out loud, crumpling the paper savagely and tossing it in the bin. He wasn’t worth the expense of her intellectual energy. Nor the familiar claw of pain that grabbed at her chest at the thought of him.

Eager to shunt aside thoughts of Jake, Jane turned to the stack of CDs beside the desk in the poky room that the council classified as a bedroom but which she called, with knowing pretentiousness, her study. She scanned the titles, deliberately starting at the bottom, looking for something that held no resonance of her . . . what was he? Her ex? Her erstwhile lover? Her lover-in-abeyance? Who knew? She certainly didn’t. And she doubted very much whether he gave her a second thought from one week to the next. Muttering at herself under her breath, she pulled out Nick Cave’s *Murder Ballads* and slotted it into the CD drive of her computer. The dark growl of his voice matched her mood so perfectly, it became a paradoxical antidote. In spite of herself, Jane found she was almost smiling.

She picked up the book she had been attempting to study before Jake Hartnell had intruded on her thoughts. But it took her only a few minutes to realise how far her focus had drifted. Irritated with herself again, she slammed it shut. Wordsworth’s letters of 1807 would have to wait.

Before she could decide what to attack next, the alarm on her mobile phone beeped. Jane frowned, checking the time on her phone against the watch on her wrist. ‘Hell and damnation,’ she said. How could it be half past eleven already? Where had the morning gone?

‘Bloody Jake,’ she said again, jumping to her feet and switching off her computer. All that time wasted mooning over him when there were better things to be passionate about. She grabbed her bag and went through to the other room. Officially this was the living room, but Jane used it as a

bedsit, preferring to have a completely separate space to work in. It made the rest of her life even more cramped by comparison, but that felt like a small price to pay for the luxury of having somewhere she could lay out her books and papers without having to shift them every time she wanted to eat or sleep.

The small room could barely accommodate even her Spartan existence. Her sofa bed, although folded away now, dominated the space. A table sat against the opposite wall, three wooden chairs tucked under it. A small TV set was mounted on a bracket high on the wall, and a bean bag slouched in the furthest corner. But the room was fresh, its soft green paintwork clean and light. On the wall opposite the sofa hung a series of digital colour photographs of the Lake District, blown up to A3 size and laminated. At the heart of the landscape, Gresham's Farm, where her family had eked out a meagre living as far back as anyone could trace. No matter what was outside her windows, Jane could wake up in the morning to the world she'd grown up in, the world she still missed every city day.

She stripped off her sweatpants and fleece top, swapping them for tight-fitting black jeans and a black v-neck stretch top that accentuated generous breasts. It wasn't her first choice of outfit, but experience had taught her that making the most of her assets meant better tips from customers. Luckily her olive skin meant she didn't look terminal in black, and her co-worker Harry had assured her she didn't look as lumpy as she felt in the tight top. A glance outside the window at the weather and she grabbed her rainproof jacket from its hook, shrugging into it as she hurried towards the front door. She didn't care that it lacked any pretence of chic; in this downpour, she cared more about arriving at work dry and warm.

Jane took her invariable last look at the Lakeland vista before walking into a completely different universe. She

doubted whether anyone in Fellhead could conjure up her present environment even in their worst imaginings. When she'd told her mother she'd been granted a council flat on the Marshpool Farm Estate, Judy Gresham's face had lit up. 'That's nice, love,' she'd said. 'I didn't know you got farms in London.'

Jane shook her head in amused exasperation. 'There hasn't been a farm there in donkey's years, Mum. It's a sixties council estate. Concrete as far as the eye can see.'

Her mother's face fell. 'Oh. Well, at least you've got a roof over your head.'

They'd left it at that. Jane knew her mother well enough to know that she wouldn't want the truth – that Jane had so few qualifying points that the only accommodation the council was going to offer her was exactly the sort of place she'd ended up with. A hard-to-let box on a run-down East End estate where almost nobody had any form of legitimate employment, where kids ran wild day and night, and where there were more used condoms and hypodermic needles than blades of grass. No, Judy Gresham definitely wouldn't like to think of her daughter living somewhere like that. Apart from anything else, it would seriously impair her ability to boast about how well their Jane was doing.

She'd told her brother Matthew, however. Anything to blunt the edge of the resentment he carried because she was the one who had got away while he'd been left, in his words, to rot in the back of beyond because somebody had to stay for the sake of their parents. It didn't matter that, as the elder, he'd been the first to fly the nest for university and that he'd chosen to come back to the job he'd always wanted. Matthew, Jane thought, had been born aggrieved.

The irony, of course, was that Jane would have swapped London for Fellhead in the blink of an eye if it had held the faintest possibility of doing the work she loved. But there were no jobs for academics in the Lakes, not even for a

Wordsworth specialist like her. Not unless she wanted to swap intellectual rigour and research for lecturing to schoolkids about the Lakeland poets. Nothing would kill her passion for the words faster than that, she knew. So instead, she was stuck in the worst kind of urban hell. Jane tucked her head into her chest as she walked along the galleried balcony to the stairs. By what she could only believe to be the evil whim of the architect, her block had been constructed so that the prevailing wind was funnelled down the walkways, rendering even a gentle summer breeze blustery and uncomfortable. On a showery autumn day, it drove the rain into every nook and cranny of the building as well as the clothes of any inhabitants who bothered to emerge from their flats.

Jane turned into the stairwell and gained a brief respite. No point in even trying the lift. Ignoring the badly spelled graffiti, the unsavoury collections of rubbish blown into the corners and the stink of decay and piss, she trotted downwards. At the first turn of the stairs, her stomach flipped over. It was a sight she'd seen so often she knew she should have been inured to it, but every time she saw the tiny frame perched precariously in the lotus position on the narrow concrete banister three floors up, Jane's knees trembled.

'Hey, Jane,' the slight figure called softly.

'Hey, Tenille,' Jane replied, forcing a smile through her fear.

With what felt like death-defying casualness, Tenille unfolded her legs and dropped down to the dank concrete next to Jane. 'Whatchu know?' the thirteen-year-old demanded as she fell into step beside her.

'I know I'm going to be late for work if I don't get a move on,' Jane said, letting gravity give her momentum as she took the stairs at a faster pace. Tenille kept stride with her, her long dreds bouncing on her narrow shoulders.

'I'll walk wi'chu,' Tenille said, her attempt at a swagger a pathetic parody of the wannabe gangstas that hung around

the dismal maze of the estate learning their trade from older brothers, cousins and anyone else who managed to stay out of custody for long enough to teach them.

‘I hate to sound like a middle-aged, middle-class pain in the arse, Tenille, but shouldn’t you be in school?’ It was an old line and Jane mentally predicted the response.

‘Teachers got nothin’ to say to me,’ Tenille said mechanically, lengthening her stride to catch up with Jane as they hit street level. ‘What they know about my livin’?’

Jane sighed. ‘I get so tired of hearing the same old, same old from you, Tenille. You’re way too smart to settle for the crap that’s coming your way unless you get enough of an education to sidestep it.’

Tenille stuffed her hands into the pockets of her skinny fake leather jacket and raised her narrow shoulders defensively. ‘Fuck dat,’ she said. ‘I ain’t gonna be no mo’fo’s incubator. None of that baby mamma drama for Tenille.’

They cut through a walkway under the block of flats and emerged beside a stretch of dual carriageway where cars surged past, their drivers rejoicing at finally getting out of second gear, their tyres hissing on the wet tarmac. ‘Hard to see how you’re going to avoid it unless you harness your brain,’ Jane said drily, keeping well away from the kerb and the spray of the passing vehicles.

‘I wanna be like you, Jane.’ It was a plaintive cry that Jane had heard from Tenille more times than she could count.

‘So go to school,’ she said, trying not to let her exasperation show.

‘I hate the useless stuff they make us do,’ Tenille said, a lip-curling sneer transforming her unselfconscious attractiveness into a mask of scorn. ‘It’s not like what you give me to read.’ Her speech had shifted from street to standard English, as if leaving the confines of the estate allowed her to slip from persona to person.

‘I’m sure it isn’t. But I’m not where I want to be yet, you

know. Working part-time in bars and seminar rooms while I get my book finished so I can land a proper job is not what I had in mind when I started out. But I still had to go through the same crap to get even this far. And yes, mostly I did think it was crap,' she continued, drowning whatever Tenille had been about to add. She wished there was something she could offer apart from platitudes, but she didn't know what else to say to a thirteen-year-old mixed race orphan who not only adored but also seemed to grasp the significance of the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and De Quincey with an ease that had taken Jane herself a decade of close study to achieve.

Tenille sidestepped to avoid a buggy containing a moon-faced toddler, chocolate smeared across its cheeks, a dummy jammed in its mouth like a stopper designed to keep the chubby child inflated. The pram pusher didn't look that much older than Tenille herself. 'I'm not going to make it that way, Jane,' Tenille said despondently. 'Maybe I could use the poetry another way. Be a rapper like Ms Dynamite,' she added without conviction.

They both knew it was never going to happen. Not unless someone invented a self-esteem drug that Jane could pump into Tenille's veins ahead of the heroin that kept what seemed like half the estate sedated. Jane halted at the bus stop, turning to face Tenille. 'Nobody can ever take the words out of your head,' she said.

Tenille picked at a chewed fingernail and stared at the pavement. 'You think I don't know that?' she almost shouted. 'How the fuck else do you think I survive?' Suddenly she spun round on the balls of her feet and she was off, scudding down the uneven pavement like a gazelle, long limbs surprisingly elegant in motion. She disappeared into an alley and Jane felt the familiar mixture of affection and frustration. It stayed with her on the ten-minute bus ride and it still nagged her as she pushed open the door of the wine bar.

Five minutes before noon, the Viking Bar and Grill felt hollow with emptiness. The blond wood, chrome and glass still gleamed in the halogen spots, evidence that nobody had been in since the cleaner finished her shift. Harry had put Michael Nyman's music from *The End of the Affair* on the CD player, and the strings seemed almost to shimmer visibly in the calm air. In twenty minutes' time, the Viking would be transformed as the city slickers piled in, desperate to cram as much food and drink into their short lunch breaks as they could. The air would thicken with conversation, body heat and smoke, and Jane wouldn't have a second to think about anything other than the press of bodies at the bar.

For now, though, it was peaceful. Harry Lambton stood at one end of the long pale birch curve of the bar, leaning on his forearms as he skimmed the morning paper. The light gleamed on the spiky halo of his short fair hair, turning him into a post-modern saint. He glanced up at the sound of Jane's feet on the wooden floor and sketched a wave of greeting, a smile animating his sharp, narrow face. 'Still raining?' he asked.

'Still raining.' Jane leaned in and planted a kiss on Harry's cheek as she passed him on her way to the cubbyhole where the staff hung their coats. 'Everybody in?' she asked as she returned to the main bar, corralling her long dark corkscrew curls and pushing them into a scrunchy.

Harry nodded. That was a relief, Jane thought, slipping past Harry's tightly muscled back and checking everything was where she needed it to be for her shift to run as smoothly as possible. She'd landed this job because Harry's boyfriend Dan was a friend and colleague at the university, but she didn't want anybody accusing her of taking advantage of that relationship. Besides, Harry claimed that managing the bar was only a stopgap. One day he might decide what he wanted to do with his life and Jane didn't want to provide her co-workers with any excuse to grass her up to a new boss as

lazy or incompetent. Working at the Viking was demanding, exhausting and poorly paid, but she needed the job.

‘I finally came up with a title,’ she said, tying the long white bistro apron round her waist. ‘For the book.’ Harry cocked his head interrogatively. ‘*The Laureate of Spin: Politics, Poetics and Pretence in the Writings of William Wordsworth*. What do you think?’

Harry frowned, considering. ‘I like it,’ he said. ‘Makes the boring old bastard sound halfway interesting.’

‘Interesting is good, it sells books.’

Harry nodded, flicking over a page of his paper and giving it a cursory look. Then his dark blue eyes narrowed and frown lines appeared between his sandy brows. ‘Hey,’ he said. ‘Isn’t Fellhead where you come from?’

Jane turned, a bottle of olives in her hand. ‘That’s right. Don’t tell me somebody finally did something newsworthy?’

Harry raised his eyebrows. ‘You could say that. They found a body.’

I am minded tonight of the time we spent at Alfoxden, & the suspicion that fell upon Coleridge and myself, viz. that we were agents of the enemy, gathering information as spies for Bonaparte. I recall Coleridge's assertion that it was beyond the bounds of good sense to give credence to the notion that poets were suited for such an endeavour since we see all before us as matter for our verse & would have no inclination to hold any secrets to our breasts that might serve our calling. In that important respect, he was correct, for the events of this day already ferment within me, seeking an expression in verse. But in the more important respect of maintaining our own counsel, I pray he is mistaken, for my encounter within the secluded bounds of our garden has already laid a heavy burden of knowledge on my shoulders, a burden that could yet bear down heavy on me and on my family. At first, I believed myself to be dreaming, for I hold no belief in the ghostly manifestations of the dead. But this was no apparition. It was a man of flesh and blood, a man I had thought never to see more.