‘God give me strength to lead a double life.’

Hugo Williams, ‘Prayer’

ONE

Hampstead's wealth lay unconscious along the edge of the Heath, Mercedes and SUVs frosted beneath plane trees, Victorian terraces unlit. A Starbucks glowed, but otherwise the streets were dark. The first solitary commuter cars whispered down Willow Road to South End Green. Detective Constable Nick Belsey listened, counting. He heard three in a minute, which meant it was before six am. Ice outlined the leaves and branches around him and the earth was cold beneath his body. His mouth had soil in it, and there was a smell of blood and rotten bark.

Belsey lay on a small mound on the southern side of Hampstead Heath. The mound was crowded with pine trees, surrounded by gorse and partitioned from the rest of the world by a low, iron fence. So it wasn't such an absurd place to seek shelter, Belsey thought, if that had been his intention. His coat lay on the ground. A throbbing pain travelled his body, too general to locate one source. His face was involved; his upper body. The detective stood up slowly. He shook his coat, put it on and climbed over the fence into long grass.

From the hilltop he could see London, stretched towards the hills of Kent and Surrey. The city itself looked numb as a rough sleeper; Camden and then the West End, the City, tower blocks puncturing a thin mist. He admired the fragile light. His watch was missing. He searched his pockets, found a blood-stained serviette and a promotional leaflet for a spiritual retreat, but no keys or phone or police badge.

He walked to the athletics track and along the path to the ponds. His shoes were flooded and water seeped between his toes. He crossed the bridge that divided the mixed-bathing pond in two and looked for early swimmers. None yet. He knelt on the concrete of the bridge, bent to the water and splashed his face. Blood dripped from his shaking hands. He leaned over to see his reflection but could make out only an oily confusion of light and

darkness. Two swans watched him from beside the diving platform. ‘Good morning,’ Belsey said. He waited for them to turn and glide a distance away then plunged his head beneath the surface.

TWO

A squad car remained in the Heath car park with the windshield smashed, driver's door open. Blood led across the gravel towards the Heath itself: smear rather than spatter, maybe three hours old. Faint footsteps ran in parallel to the blood. Belsey measured his foot against them. The metal barrier of the car park lay twisted on the ground. The only impact had been with the barrier, it seemed. There was no evidence of collision with another car, no paint flecks or side prangs. The windshield had spilled out across the bonnet. He stepped along the edge of the broken glass to a wheel-lock lying on the ground and picked it up. It had come straight through the windshield. He found the serviette and wiped the steering wheel and gear stick and door handles.

Belsey left the car park, onto the hushed curve of road leading from Keats Grove to South End Green. He walked slowly, keeping the Heath to his left and the multi-million pound houses to his right. Everything was perfectly still. There is a golden hour to every day, Belsey thought, just as there is in a murder investigation: a window of opportunity before the city got its story straight. He tried the handles of a few vehicles until the door of a Vauxhall Astra creaked towards him. Belsey checked the street, climbed in, flicked the glove compartment and found three pounds in small change. He took the money and stepped out of the car, shutting the door gently.

He bought a toothbrush, a bottle of water and some cotton wool from an all-night store beside the hospital. It was run by two Somali brothers.

'Morning, Inspector. What happened?'

'I've just been swimming. It feels wonderful.'

'Okay, Inspector.' They gave shy grins and rang up his purchases.

'Still haven't made Inspector, though.'

‘That’s right, boss.’ The owners didn’t look him in the eye. If the damage to his face worried them, they didn’t say anything. Belsey took his change, took a deep breath and walked up Pond Street to the police station.

Most London police operated out of modernist concrete blocks. Not Hampstead. The red, Victorian bricks of the station glowed with civic pride on Rosslyn Hill. Above the station lay the heritage plumpness of the village and, down the hill, the dirty sprawl of Camden Town began. Belsey sat at a bus stop across the road watching the late turn trickling out of the station, nocturnal and subdued. At seven am the earlies filed in for morning parade. He gave them five minutes then crossed the road.

The corridors were empty. Belsey went to the lockers. He found the first aid box and took paracetamol, a roll of bandage and antiseptic. He removed a broken umbrella from the bin and prised his locker open: one spare tie, a copy of *The Golden Bough*, a slim, green hotel Bible stolen from his last accommodation, but no spare shoes or shirt. Belsey returned to the corridor and froze. His boss, Detective Inspector Tim Gower, stepped into the canteen a few metres ahead of him. Belsey counted to five then padded past, up the stairs to the empty CID office and sat down.

He kept the lights off, blinds low, grabbed the night’s crime sheet and checked he wasn’t on it. A fight in a kebab shop, two break-ins, a missing person. No Belsey. He searched the desk drawers for his badge and warrant card and they were there, innocent: E II R, Metropolitan Police, a crown in a silver explosion. So this was what was left of him.

He ran a check on the totalled squad car and it came up as belonging to Kentish Town Police Station. Belsey called.

‘This is Nick Belsey, Hampstead CID. One of your cars is in the Heath Extension car park... No, it’s still there... I don’t know... Thanks.’

Belsey locked himself in the toilet and stripped to the waist. He studied his face. A line of dried blood ran from his left nostril across his lips to his chin. He ran a finger along the blood and judged it superficial. Dark, complex bruises were blooming across his chest and right shoulder but no bones were broken. He cleaned the wound and spat the remaining fragments of broken tooth out of his mouth. He looked wired. His flat detective eyes were regaining emotion, waxing with a light he had long ago suppressed. Belsey removed his trousers and dampened the bottoms and rinsed his suit jacket so the worst of the Heath was off. He hung his coat up to dry, put his trousers back on, then returned to his desk.

The call room had sent up a list of messages for him - calls received over the past few hours. They had come from several individuals he had not spoken to for years, and some distant relatives and an old colleague. *You tried to get hold of me last night*... He didn't remember calling anyone. A vague dread pressed at the edges of his consciousness. Outside, the night had evaporated, the air turned hard, with thin clouds like scum on water. It was an extraordinary day, Belsey sensed. A midwinter sun hung pale in the sky and there was something of childhood in it all. A man in shirt-sleeves opened up a chemist's; a street cleaner shuffled, sweeping, towards Belsize Park tube station. City traders hurried past. Out of habit he wondered if he should cancel his cards, but the cards had cancelled themselves a few days ago. His old life was beyond rescue. It felt as if without the cards he had no debt, and without the debt he was free to run.

The important thing was to stay calm.

Belsey smoothed the sheet of jobs on his desk: one fight, two break-ins, a missing person. His plan formed. The control room had put an alert note by the missing person half an hour ago. It meant they thought someone should take a look, although adult disappearances weren't police business, and it was probably just the address that caught their eye: The Bishops Avenue. The Bishops was the most expensive street in the division, and therefore

one of the most expensive in the world. No one pretended the rich going missing was the same as the poor.

He stuck a message on the sergeant's desk – 'On MisPer' - and signed out keys for an unmarked CID car. Then he went downstairs, checked there was enough petrol in the tank and reversed onto Downshire Hill.

THREE

He drove steadily. The occasional Land Rover passed, commuters dangling cigarettes out of tinted windows. But the school run was half an hour off, the traffic still fluid. Belsey climbed to Whitestone pond, past early joggers, past the Spaniard's Inn and turned left, down into the secluded privilege of The Bishops Avenue.

Stand-alone mansions lined the road, each asserting its own brand of high-security tastelessness. The Bishops Avenue provided a home to sheiks, princes and tycoons, running broad and gated for a kilometre down from the Heath to a dismal stretch of the A1. It was a world in itself, inscrutable and aloof from the rest of the city. A woman stood on the drive of number thirty-seven with a black jacket over a cleaner's pink uniform. She was pale, blonde, smoking with rapid, shallow puffs. The house behind her loomed with gormless pomp. It boasted two storeys of new red bricks, white window sills, white columns either side of a black door with a high-gloss sheen. Tiny trees in black pots guarded the front. A flagless white pole stood in the centre of the semi-circular driveway; pink gravel led around to the chain link of a tennis court.

The woman gave a glance at his scars and then at his police badge and went with the latter.

'I haven't touched anything.' She spoke with a Polish accent and a line of smoke out of the side of her mouth.

'What's your name?' Belsey said.

'Kristina.'

'And you clean for the missing individual?'

'Yes.'

He walked past her to the steps. 'Anyone in?'

‘No.’

Belsey looked up at the shuttered windows. He climbed the four smooth, stone steps to the door but the maid held back.

‘They lived alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are the alarms all off?’

‘Yes.’

‘When did you last see him?’ Belsey said.

‘I’ve never seen him.’

‘You’ve never seen him?’

‘No.’

‘How do you know he’s missing?’

‘There’s a note.’

Belsey pushed the door. It opened. It revealed a hallway the size of a small church, with marble floors and a chandelier. At the back, two curling flights of red carpeted stairs parted on either side of a tall, waterless fountain. Belsey stepped in. His damaged form appeared in long mirrors on either side. He climbed the stairs to the first floor and checked three bedrooms with white carpets, and a bathroom with a Jacuzzi and soap dishes like gold scallop shells. He found face wash made out of Japanese seaweed, and folded towels tied with silver ribbon. He didn’t find any suicide. Most home suicides were found in bathrooms, less often in bedrooms. The occupier wasn’t in. Belsey opened cupboards until he found a pair of snakeskin loafers. He took his wet shoes off and slipped the loafers on. They were a little loose but perfectly comfortable. There was a wallet on the bedside table filled with cards in the name of A. Devereux. No cash. He checked the bedside drawer but found only

cufflinks and a Harrods carrier bag. He put his old shoes in the bag and carried them downstairs.

The fridge in the main kitchen had an inbuilt TV and radio. It had a display that told you when the contents were about to go off. Right now it said ‘chicken portions’ although Belsey couldn’t see any chicken inside. He found one bottle of champagne unopened, some granary bread, cheese, semi-skimmed milk and half a microwave goulash. The milk smelt fresh. He couldn’t find any coffee. He put two slices of bread in the toaster and filled the kettle. There was a bag of prawns and a bottle of vodka in the freezer. It was all very bare. He wandered the length of the ground floor corridor while the kettle boiled, admiring a lot of books on shelves and modern art on the walls. The frames were florid and golden, the art bare and abstract. Belsey reached a study with oak panelling and a billiards table set up on a Persian rug. The suicide note was on the table’s baize, black ink on headed stationery:

I’m sorry. For a long time I thought I could continue the way things were, but this is no longer the case. For the past year I have felt as if the sun has gone out. Please believe that I know what I am doing and it is for the best. I have tried to ensure that all paperwork is in order so that you have no cause for further aggravation. Alex Devereux.

How polite, Belsey thought. There was no addressee. Maybe it was for the staff. Who signed a suicide note with their full name? The paper was heavy, watermarked. It carried the Bishops address and a motto: ‘Hope Springs Eternal’. Belsey checked Devereux’s handwriting against paperwork in the desk and it matched. He felt the temperature of the taps in the en suite bathroom and checked the window locks. A door on the fourth floor opened when Belsey pulled the bolt. It led onto the roof. Belsey stepped outside and exhaled in wonder. An infinity pool rippled in the morning breeze, encircled by deckchairs. No corpse floating. Below him, beyond trellis panels, Belsey could see the lawn and tennis court, the edges of the property, playing fields and then the Heath itself, branches scratching the sky.

He wandered back down into the living room and played with the control for a flat screen TV. He buttered his toast and read the note again while he ate. Then he went out and threw his ruined shoes into the back of the unmarked car. Kristina was sitting on the wall.

‘Any signs Mr Devereux was in trouble?’ Belsey asked.

‘No.’

‘How long have you been working for him?’

‘Two months.’

‘Anything unusual about the house today?’

‘No.’

‘Vehicles missing?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What line of work was he in?’

‘Business.’

‘No kidding.’

Belsey walked around the sides of the property to the garden: a hose, a shed, bags of compost, the usual cameras and razor wire. A delicate layer of frost still coated the grass. No one pretended the rich killing themselves was the same as the poor, but no one pretended it was for different reasons either.

The maid handed over her key to the place with an air of solemn ceremony. Maybe this was what they did where she came from, Belsey thought. Maybe they saw it all the time.

‘Would you like a drink?’ Belsey asked.

‘No,’ she said.

FOUR

Belsey drove by the Heath car park. They'd collected the squad car. All had been cleared away, even the broken glass.

He tried to think what CCTV would have picked him up last night, which cameras would record a driver's face. He parked beside the depot on Highgate Road and sat in the car for a moment. Then he got out and walked towards the shabby business of Kentish Town High Street.

What had he done?

The previous night had marked a division in his life. This is what Belsey sensed. A fire break. He could not have continued as he had been. He walked into the Citizens' Advice Bureau and took a leaflet entitled 'Managing Bankruptcy'. Then he walked to the Starbucks by the canal. He had just enough change left for a coffee. Belsey took a seat at the back. He swallowed four paracetamol. He read the leaflet: *Make a list of your everyday outgoings. Be honest*, then turned it face down.

He tried to remember where he'd been. The car had been borrowed from Kentish Town. He must have been walking north, looking for a night cap. He remembered going into a store to buy cigarettes and his wallet was gone. That was a block from Kentish Town police station. He drank his coffee watching the tourists flow down Camden High Street towards Euston, then walked out.

A probationer manned the front desk of Kentish Town police station: rookie-fresh, nineteen, with bleached blonde hair. Belsey showed his badge.

'Nick Belsey. Hampstead station. I heard you had a squad car go AWOL.'

'That's right.'

'What time?'

‘Reported 3.17 am.’

‘Inspector Gower’s asked for the tapes.’

The new boy looked uncertain. ‘Our car park tapes?’

‘That’s right. Do you know where they’re kept? The hard disk?’

‘Yes.’ Then DC Robin Oakley appeared in the background and Belsey’s heart sunk. Belsey had been on training courses with Oakley; he drove a Nissan GT-R and collected martial arts weapons. He had a big mouth.

‘Nick,’ Oakley said, eyeing Belsey’s cuts. ‘What happened to your face?’

‘Did anyone hand in a phone or wallet last night?’

‘Why?’

‘I lost mine,’ Belsey said.

Oakley thought this was very funny. ‘Anyone hand in Nick Belsey’s wallet?’ he shouted. ‘Could be anywhere, Nick. Know what I mean?’

‘No.’

Oakley grinned. The rookie looked confused. ‘Should I go see about the car park?’

‘That’s fine,’ Belsey said. ‘Leave it.’

‘What’s happening in the car park?’ Oakley said.

‘Nothing. Have you got a cigarette?’

They stepped outside. Oakley fished a ten-pack of Superkings out of his breast pocket and passed one to Belsey.

‘What are you like, you crazy bastard?’ Oakley said.

‘Did you see me last night?’

‘Half of London saw you.’

‘Where was I?’

‘Have you spoken to your boss?’

‘Gower? Not recently.’

Oakley’s face twitched with the desire to laugh. ‘Where did you end up?’

‘Why?’

‘Nick, you’ve got to speak to Gower.’

‘Okay. What did I do?’

‘At one point you were in Lorenzo’s.’

‘Christ.’ Belsey closed his eyes. Lorenzo de Medici’s was a cocaine-fuelled dive behind Tottenham Court Road. By day it was a mediocre spaghetti house, but it had a five am license and an alcoholic owner who couldn’t control his own stock. The walls were painted with bad copies of Renaissance masterpieces and the toilet sinks were usually speckled with blood.

‘What time was I in Lorenzo’s?’

‘Does it make a difference?’

‘Did I have my phone?’

‘You were phoning *everyone*. You were telling them to come to Lorenzo’s. You said it was your birthday, mate.’

Belsey opened his eyes. Oakley grinned, shaking his head. He tossed his cigarette into the road, patted Belsey on the arm and headed inside.

Belsey finished his cigarette then walked towards Hampstead. Memories were cracking through: he knew he had been at Lorenzo’s now - he remembered trying to sell his jacket to the ownerAnd he was trying to explain to someone in the bar – ‘I overleveraged myself.’ And they found this hilarious. ‘Overleveraged,’ they kept saying.

‘Now I’m going on a retreat.’ Shouting over the music. He had a leaflet from a health food shop: *Anxious? Uncertain? We are an interfaith community offering healing retreats in Worcestershire, UK*. There was a drawing of a cross-legged man glowing with

enlightenment, light emanating from inside his floating body. *Become like a child whose soul is empty. Peace of mind is already yours*.

‘You’re going to rehab?’

‘It’s not rehab. It’s a healing retreat,’ Belsey said.

‘A retreat from what? ’

And then he was in a car with a man who said he worked for the Foreign Office and this man had track marks on the backs of his hands … And now, yes, hesaw the start of it all, standing in the front hall of a B&B in Kings Cross with his worldly possessions in two bin liners at his feet. None of his cards would work. He tried them in shops and then cash machines and they started being withheld one by one. Someone had run out of faith in his future.

He’d gone through the motions of speaking to call centres, chatting to polite young men in Mumbai and Bangalore. He had known it was coming, this moment, but it was astonishing when it arrived. For five minutes, in a stale-smelling pub on the Caledonian Road, Belsey tried to calculate what he had done. He saw himself there now, staring into the whole he’d made. He had been too brave, he saw. That was the simple truth. Stupid with a confidence beyond all reason. Something had snapped over the last twelve months and he had gone on tilt. That was what his poker mates would call it: a losing player, flailing, hypnotised by the approaching crash. The milestones of bad spreads, new credit cards, nights born out of them, the usual ill-advised debt consolidation, they all congealed to a single event. He could see it as a whole now.

In the stale-smelling pub he calculated that even with the next thirty-seven paychecks poured into the hole, it would grow deeper. He felt a bleak fascination at the self-consuming monster he had created. That was a kick to the stomach, opening a statement and seeing his

salary betrothed to bottomless debt; taking out one final loan to pay off the woman who was leaving him and ensure no bailiffs came knocking at what had briefly been their home.

The final week of credit had been the worst. He had been trying to reach an end, he saw that now, tunnelling down, trying to find a way out of his life through the bottom of his overdraft. He remembered setting up debits to charities for political prisoners and eye surgery and clean drinking water, a last few wild punts on distant rainfall and elections in countries he'd never heard of. It was hypothermia. The danger of hypothermia began when the pain had passed and you were washed with a yawning apathy. He thought he had broken through to an insight, but it was a kind of hypothermia.

The hotel owner was apologetic as he gave the card back. Belsey's room had already been occupied by a thin, nervous-looking family to whom he left the bags of his belongings. He didn't have the heart to carry them anywhere. He was thrown out along with a young, bright-eyed Afghan who was about to get married: cast upon the street.

'I've been refused asylum and you've been refused credit,' the man grinned. He seemed okay about it. He said he'd sorted his own paperwork anyway. They stood smoking in front of the Continental Hotel's flaking facade, Belsey in his detective's suit and the Afghan in a flight jacket with the stars and stripes on the back. White sunlight fell across the scaffolding of St Pancras station onto dusty pavement and dirty shop windows. They had got to know each other quite well in the month of Belsey's residence. The man had come to the UK via Moscow. He said he'd been a tour guide in Moscow and a political prisoner in Afghanistan. He liked to grease his hair and help female tourists.

'Are you working today?' the Afghan asked.

'I've got the day off.'

'I need a witness,' he said. 'A suit and a witness. I will give you fifty pounds.'

'What kind of witness?'

‘For my wedding.’

The bride was a Slovak from Edgware, a red-haired girl with a dirty laugh, ten years older than himself. They exchanged vows in Marylebone town hall, married by an Australian woman with a clipboard. Belsey tried to refuse the money afterwards and, when the Afghan insisted on paying, Belsey bought champagne with it. They were in a tourist pub by Madame Tussauds. He hadn’t intended to drink. After four bottles between the three of them they moved to a bar beneath a Christian Science reading room. That was the wedding reception. Belsey tried to get cash on his last functioning card – enough for a deposit for room rental at least - but it was all too late. *Contact your card issuer.*

By nine or ten Belsey had found his way to a memorial do for a dead policeman, a dog handler who had known his father and who’d died recently in a road accident in France. Men from Dogs Section, some Drugs Squad, crowded the Ten Bells in Waterloo, near where they trained the dogs; old coppers, men with high blood pressure and market-trader voices. It was dark outside. He had broken through to a state of inebriation in which every moment flowed effortlessly to the next and he could not go wrong. Everything would be resolved. He made loud greetings to men he barely recognised, men from his childhood, when his father was in the Yard. They had aged. For a brief, terrifying moment he saw his future. Someone bought brandies.

‘Your old man, he was a great murder detective, but he never went home, you know what I mean?’ *No, no I don’t.* Someone was trying to talk to him about his father. *What does that mean?* They’d brought a sniffer dog and someone had put a black armband on one of its legs.

‘It’s crying.’

Everyone laughed. No one was crying. Then Chief Superintendent Northwood arrived, the Borough Commander, in his parade uniform with a framed photograph of the

dead man. Northwood had his wife in tow. Sandra Northwood wore heels and high, platinum-blonde hair. She was a handsome woman in her late forties, who achieved another layer of brittle glamour with each of her husband's promotions. Northwood himself towered over her, rigid in every limb, permanently flushed with self-importance. He made a speech.

'Dogs are the heart of the police.'

Someone said: 'A man who loved dogs more than he loved life.' Belsey raised a toast. He stood on a chair. Music played.

'This is what Jim would have wanted,' everyone agreed, getting legless.

Then Belsey was dancing with Sandra Northwood, her soft body warm in his arms. 'Oh,' she breathed into his ear and giggled.

She said: 'I remember your father. I remember you when you were so young.' And she touched his face as if searching for some way back to that past. Her hands smelt of hairspray. 'Nicholas,' she giggled. Her eyes were unfocussed. He wondered if she'd been sleeping with his father; wondered who hadn't.

'Were you sleeping with my old man?' he asked. 'Sandra? Can you hear me?'

He paid for the cab out of Sandra Northwood's purse. She was beside him. So this is where the Borough Commander lives, Belsey thought, looking at a low, detached new-build with shrub borders. Where was the Commander? The lights were off. Belsey helped Sandra in. The house was empty. Belsey went inside to see what it was like, the Chief's home. The furniture looked very new. Some of it had been kept under plastic. Sandra poured them wine from an open bottle on the sideboard.

'My husband says you're one of the best.'

'Thank you.'

'Handsome, like your father.'

She fell asleep on the sofa. Belsey went upstairs, looked in the bathroom cabinets, found Northwood's Masonic regalia in a chest in the bedroom and put it on: apron, gauntlets, collar. He was gloriously wasted. He took the regalia off. He stole twenty pounds from one of Northwood's jackets, urinated in the bath and backed out.

FIVE

Belsey and Detective Inspector Gower sat in the side office, door shut. It seemed to Belsey they had been sat a long time looking at each other.

'How was the memorial last night?' Gower began.

'Fitting.'

'You know I worked with him once. He was a fine dog handler. A fine policeman.'

'Yes.'

Gower had a silver moustache and wore pale, linen suits; a solid detective, a manager rather than a maestro. He read Belsey's injured face. *I've been going through a bit of a hard time,* Belsey should have said. That would have been appropriate. But it was not entirely true, and he had decided honesty was to be his strategy. He wanted to say: *I have been going through a good time,* which was closer to the truth and always a more dangerous situation.

'Do you know anything about a squad car that went missing from Kentish Town?'

'It was on the Heath.'

'Why?'

'I don't know,' Belsey said. 'But I believe I'm responsible. I'd like to request a transfer out of London.'

Gower stared at the desk now, as if he was the one in trouble, which he may have been, and Belsey felt sorry that such a dedicated officer should be drawn into his own misfortune.

'You are our best detective,' the Inspector said, quietly.

'What I'd like,' Belsey said, 'is to transfer out of London. As far away as possible.'

Gower looked at him. Belsey felt calm, strong even. Books on criminal law lined the Inspector's shelves alongside bound magazines on bird watching. Belsey read the spines. He

studied the family photos, some of which were turned to face the guest as if to say: look, look what we are fighting for. Twenty years ago Tim Gower had been Lance Corporal Gower, patrolling the streets of Belfast. This was common knowledge. Belsey had tried to get him to talk about it at a Christmas drinks, but Gower refused: 'long time ago now.' Belsey respected Gower but felt he might not have the resources to deal with this particular situation.

Gower transferred his gaze from Belsey's face to the window and then back again.

'What's happening to you?'

'I think I may be having a religious experience.'

The Inspector nodded slowly. 'What troubles me is that I don't think you care,' he said.

'That I'm having a religious experience?'

'About keeping your job.'

'I would like to.'

'Maybe you don't care enough about yourself.'

'I'm proud to be a police officer,' Belsey said. But it sounded over-zealous. He did not want to be sent to counselling again. He wondered what they would talk about this time. 'What I'd like,' he said, 'what I think I need, is a change of scenery.'

Gower shook his head, not like a refusal but as if Belsey had picked up the wrong script.

'Northwood's not very happy about something. I need to know, in advance of the meeting, quite what you've done.'

'With all due respect, sir, fuck Northwood.'

Gower opened a desk drawer, slid one sheet in and took another out.

'No, Belsey. We don't fuck Northwood, or anyone else for that matter. You're not in Borough now.'

‘I haven’t been in Borough for five years.’

‘You know what I mean.’

Borough was his first posting as a constable. He fought to keep the memories at bay: all of them, but especially the good ones.

‘I’m going to suggest you take a break for a while,’ the Inspector said, ‘regardless of what happens.’

‘I don’t want to take a break.’

Gower uncapped his pen and started filling in the form. The police had forms for every eventuality. Belsey needed to fill a form in for Mr Devereux. That had been quite a home to go missing from. What had Devereux felt life was lacking? Maybe he’d just made enough money and was checking out, job done. Belsey let his eyes rest on the photographs of wetland birds on the Inspector’s wall. He imagined Gower in military uniform on a roadblock, Londonderry, watching the birds. Eventually Gower capped his pen.

‘I’ve spent ten years dragging this police station out of the depths. I’m not having one man and his crisis drag it back down.’

‘What do you mean by crisis?’

‘This isn’t a game.’

‘I’m just curious what you mean by the word “crisis”.’

‘No one’s doubting you’re good, Nick. But you’re not as good as you think you are. You’re not worth a whole police station and more.’

‘I never thought that,’ Belsey said. Gower studied the form. He asked Belsey to sign it. Belsey signed it without looking.

‘What’s that?’ Gower nodded to the book in Belsey’s hand.

‘The Golden Bough.’

‘What’s it about?’

‘The pagan origins of Christianity, folk culture, myths.’

‘I thought it might be about birds.’

‘There are birds in it. Bird cults.’

‘Bird cults,’ the Inspector sighed. ‘The review will be tomorrow. They’ll assign a representative. I’m going to ask you to write down what happened in advance of that.’

‘Starting when?’

‘When the trouble started.’

Belsey laughed. Yes, he thought. *Where my honesty ceases, there am I blind.* Gower was right, he should record the journey that had brought him here. An extravagant holiday to Cyprus, a seven hundred pound bar tab, an awful punt on last year’s League One play-offs. Or the first bailiff letter, with its Biblical language of goods and chattels, as someone somewhere began to cut their losses, seeking the material substance of his life. Perhaps he could start with his first night as a constable, looking up at the windows of the Aylesbury Estate, lit against a vast and starless sky. How much of this did Gower want to hear?

The Inspector moved his seat. ‘That’s all for now.’

‘Can I ask you a question?’ Belsey said.

‘Go on.’

‘You’re a bird watcher.’

‘Yes,’ Gower said, warily.

‘What do you do once you’ve seen them?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing?’

‘Belsey...’

‘Do you write it down?’

‘You’re out of control, Belsey.’

‘I think I’m in control,’ Belsey said.

SIX

‘He was having a dig in his balls. I kicked the kitchen door and he’s got one foot up on the sink. He said, I saw you coming. I said, why’d you start fixing if you saw us coming? He said he didn’t know when he’d next get the chance.’

Belsey stepped into the office. His colleagues went silent: Derek Rosen leaning heavily against the edge of Belsey’s desk, Rob Trapping watching with a grin on his youthful, clean-shaven face.

‘Then what?’ Belsey said.

‘He took the pin out and there was blood everywhere,’ Rosen said. He flapped a tabloid and began to read.

‘How did it go?’ Trapping turned to Belsey. He was only twenty-three years old, six foot four and still in love with the idea of being a detective.

‘Really well.’

‘We could have done with you yesterday,’ he said. ‘Knifing outside the job centre.’

‘I heard.’

‘Turns out it was Niall Cassidy’s boy, Johnny. We haven’t found him yet. Apparently you know him from the good old days.’

‘I thought he was in a Spanish prison.’

‘Comes back from a two year stretch in the Balearics and stabs the guy who grassed him. Straight from the airport. Stabs him in the thigh.’

‘What was that? Jet lag?’

Trapping laughed. His mobile rang.

‘Jetlag,’ he said. He left the room, laughing, answering his mobile: ‘Detective Trapping here’. Belsey sat at his desk. Niall Cassidy: another name from his South London

days. It felt as if something had broken, whatever mechanism kept the present and past from leaking into each other. Things were slipping.

'The prodigal son,' Rosen said. 'I've had someone here looking for you. From a company called Millennium Credit Recovery. Mr Walls. Like the ice cream.'

'Like the ice cream.'

'That was his line.'

'It's a good one. I've never met any Mr Walls.'

'No. Apparently he's never met you.'

Rosen turned back to his paper. Belsey admired the blue sheen of his jowls, the fine network of red veins starting to cover the skin. Mr Walls, he thought; which of his creditors had sold on his expired dreams to Millennium Credit Recovery? What could he say when they eventually tracked him down? *Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another; for love of one's fellow man is the whole of the law.* St Paul. Patron saint of London.

'Have you heard of an Alex Devereux?' Belsey said.

'Who?'

'He lives on The Bishops Avenue. Devereux.'

Rosen's face went thoughtful. He looked up from his paper.

'No,' he said. 'Why?'

'He's disappeared.'

'Not a crime last time I looked.' Rosen grinned. His teeth were yellow. He turned to the sports pages and his face went slack again.

Not a crime, no, Belsey thought. Every man and woman's right. Hundreds did it every day. He ran Devereux's name through the Police National Computer. It came back clean. He picked up the phone and called three morgues, twelve hospitals, River Police and central

records but got no hits. Belsey filed Devereux as a Missing Person: *MISPER*, rhyming with whisper. Then he sat at his desk watching the street grow dark. The morning's tide flowed back: commuters relieved of their day's duty; children with au pairs, holding new paintings. Belsey stared at a report about an arson attack in Chalk Farm, a thirty-five-year-old man who set fire to his old school. Then it was six o'clock and Trapping was in the doorway with a coat over his arm and a friendly smile.

'Drink, Nick?'

'Not tonight, Rob. Loads on.'

Belsey waited until the office was empty. He typed 'shame' into his PC and looked at a picture of a dead Nazi officer lying in a stream, a guard from a camp who'd shot himself. Once he was sure he was alone, Belsey printed the picture and locked it in his desk drawer. He rested his head on his arms and closed his eyes and wanted to go home, wanted a home.

The Wetherspoons on the Finchley Road occupied the top floor of a leisure centre, beyond the gym and interior design store and the six-screen cinema. The whole place was washed with a comatose serenity. Belsey let an escalator lift him past the water features and artificial plants to the pub. It was large, and bathed in a murky blue light as if to stop people finding their veins. Belsey walked to the furthest corner, sat down and listened to a CD get stuck and no one care. He liked the Wetherspoons. It felt like a departure lounge. He liked bars in hotels and airports and train stations; places with no smell and no attempt to mean anything. In these places an individual could gather their thoughts.

Belsey checked his companions: several pensioners, meditative at their individual tables, a couple with the hurried intimacy of adulterers, neat staff talking Polish and an office party kicking off. It was a redundancy, Belsey guessed, by the quantity of empties on the table. Floor-length windows looked out over six lanes of the Finchley Road, as if any view

was worth seeing. Belsey put his hands in his pockets and watched the cars, wondering if this was a crisis. They say no one changes until they hit the bottom. He'd always imagined it like a crash, but perhaps it was like reaching the bottom of the ocean, with everything a little weightless and unreal.

The office workers were drinking hard, encouraging on the weekend oblivion. It was Thursday. They had their ties low, blouses open, company card behind the bar. Belsey got up, circled the group and walked to the barmaid.

'Can I put three pints of Stella on the tab?' he asked.

'Of course.' The girl poured his drinks and rang it up and put the receipt behind a silver MasterCard on the back shelf. 'Anything else?'

Belsey picked up a menu. 'Do you recommend this City Platter?'

'It's very popular.'

'I'll get one of those. And a vodka tonic, double, maybe some pork scratchings.'

'Okay.'

'Sorry if we're being a bit rowdy,' he said, as she fixed the vodka.

'Someone leaving?'

'Someone leaving, someone joining. Everyone's celebrating. It feels like everyone's moving somewhere. How long have you been working here?'

'Three weeks.'

'How are you finding it?'

'Fine.'

'It's one of my favourite places.'

Belsey drank the vodka tonic at the bar and took the pints and pork scratchings to his table. He felt, momentarily, a longing for his phone; felt the impossibility of being contacted like a static charge. Incommunicado, he thought. He would have liked to contact his bank,

more than any of his friends and family. It was a morbid longing; he did not know what he would say. At least the bank already knew his shame. He could apply for bankruptcy. Born again. Apply for moral bankruptcy too.

Belsey drank the pints in quick succession and while he drank he tested his soul for a sense of failure, pressing gently inwards like a crash victim touching their ribs. But he couldn't feel it. He needed sleep. Images of bus shelters, railway stations, shopping centre doorways passed through his mind like a sequence learned in childhood: the body-sized surfaces of the city in which a man may lie and not be disturbed. The platter arrived: chicken wings, garlic bread, cocktail sausages, potato wedges, nachos, some sour cream and barbeque sauce. He ate steadily.

There was always Iraq, of course. An old acquaintance from training college had tried to persuade Belsey to go out there. Simon Nickels worked for a private security contractor in Baghdad. Belsey had got a call out of the blue:

'Drinks at the police club. On me. All the old boys.'

Who were the old boys, Belsey wondered? When he got there it was only Simon, standing at the bar. He had grown a moustache. Belsey possessed a vague memory of him passing out in a bath at a party.

'You should come over. Sunny there. Choice of three pools.'

'Three, you say.'

'And we give you weapons training. Beautiful gear they've got. Top of the range.'

'That's not very enticing.'

'There's a golf course, a cinema. Everything you could want.'

'There's a golf course and a cinema in Finchley.'

Nickels wiped the froth off his moustache. He had a tan line on his ring finger where a wedding band had been.

‘It’s City banker money. You say to yourself: play a bit of squash, stay in shape, don’t hit the bottle too much, in a couple of years you’ve got the mortgage paid off and the kids’ university fees sorted.’

‘I don’t have any children.’

‘You will.’

‘Who else are you seeing while you’re over here?’

‘Only you,’ he said. ‘Only you.’

That was three weeks ago.

The barmaid went to clear tables. Belsey stared at the fruit machine. Each pub’s small monument to chance. To supposed chance and the machinations behind it. He studied the game, the maker. He took a pound out of the tips saucer, considered calling the security contractor, then put it in the fruit machine instead and lost.

At six thirty he was in the North Star, a small, functional pub with flatscreens over its Victorian trimmings. He watched the news over the shoulder of one of the local after-work alcoholics who was talking about anal sex and derivatives. The news showed a young dark-skinned man moving in slow motion over a chain link fence. The businessman was buying drinks and when he stopped Belsey moved to Ye Olde Swiss Cottage.

‘Was I in here last night?’ he asked.

‘You were in, for sure.’

‘Did I leave a phone?’

‘No.’

The Cottage was built like a Swiss chalet, abandoned in the centre of six lanes of bad-tempered traffic. Few risked the crossing to enjoy its dour, alpine charm. But the pub had a side room with a good pool table. Belsey played two frames, won both, and when a fight started he moved on. The Adelaide, the Enterprise. At some point he crashed a birthday party

in the Camden Holiday Inn. He was happy there. And then he was outside again. Everything was fine. He moved down the ladder gracefully from the Neptune to the Cobden Arms to The Sports Bar which had karaoke so raw it felt like Greek tragedy.

'Singing, Nick?'

'Not tonight.'

'I want you to meet my friend. Anne, Nick's a detective.'

'A detective!'

'Not for much longer.'

'I've always wanted to meet a detective.'

'I'm not going to be one for much...'

But he was fine. Into the back streets of Hampstead, where everything seemed gemmed and out of an advert; the houses themselves fat jewels with rustic tables behind basement windows. And the Heath always beside him, a shadow; and then he was crossing the Heath in primeval mud again, through trees that seemed half familiar like the ghosts of a thousand old friends.

Belsey was halfway to The Bishops Avenue before he realised what he was doing.

The Bishops lay deserted, fantasy homes unlit behind their gates, as if part of the fantasy was that you didn't even have to be there, present in your own life. Guards slept in booths beside the larger houses. Water features sang softly to the night. Number thirty-seven hung back from the road, shrouded in darkness, mourning. Belsey rang the bell. He felt forms shift, the ghost of Alex Devereux approach the intercom and retreat. The house itself seemed larger in the gloom, heavy with emptiness. Belsey unlocked the front gate and walked into the grounds. He climbed the steps and knocked. After a moment he unlocked the front door and stood on the threshold, waiting. He moved inside and sat on a chair in the hallway while his

eyes adjusted to the darkness. Then he got up and familiarised himself with the alarm system, made sure it was all off, and shut the door.

Belsey left the lights off. He felt his way through grey shades of luxury to the fourth floor and opened the door to the roof. A hazy moonlight caught the undulation of the pool's surface. It looked like treacle. Belsey let his clothes fall to the floor and dived in.

The water was freezing. Belsey surfaced with a gasp. But it felt good, his body naked in the cold water. It woke him up. He floated on his back, gazing at the light pollution. It felt as if the water itself was a kind of wealth and he was floating in it.

He swam a few lengths and dried off, went to the kitchen, heated a tin of soup and took it with bread and cheese into the lounge. He ate, watching his silhouette in the television screen. Then he stood up, unlocked the French windows and walked out. A security light came on. The plants and garden furniture froze as if caught in nocturnal conspiracy. A fox stared back. *Hello, friend*. Belsey lowered himself to his heels and it ran into the undergrowth.

The garden extended to tall wooden fences with cameras at each corner. He wondered where the tapes were kept. He returned inside, locking the door and then – this surprised him – wiping his prints off the handle with a corner of curtain. What was he doing here? He explored the house, testing the silence for an enduring impression Devereux might have made upon it. He found a room with nothing but a card table and two decks of cards in neat piles, face down.

There was a cordless phone on the bedside table in Devereux's room, alongside a book entitled *Ten Secrets of Effective Time Management*. Well, he'd found one secret to time management, Belsey thought. He smelt Devereux's sheets. He smelt the clothes in the cupboard and detected cigar smoke and a heavy aftershave he didn't recognise. There were no photos anywhere. Perhaps he had taken them with him. There were security cameras in the

front hall and study but he couldn't find the control panel or hard-drive. A floor-length mirror filled the centre of the right-hand bedroom wall. Belsey spent some time admiring the polished glass, the bedroom reflected in it, trying on Devereux's clothes: double-cuff shirts, wide, unfashionable ties.

He went downstairs to the kitchen, emptied the bin onto the floor and sifted through the rubbish with his foot: junk mail and catalogues. No food packaging. No tissues. No DNA. He looked for a passport in the bedroom and study, found a bottle of Bells and a box of Cuban cigars, but no documents. There was a framed photograph of St Petersburg's Winter Palace on the study wall and a model of an ocean liner in a glass case beside the window.

For the past year I have felt as if the sun has gone out...

Belsey returned to the lounge, lay down on the carpet and let the darkness enclose him. He turned on the TV and poured himself a cognac from a decanter on top of a cabinet. So this is wealth, he thought. And, after another glass: this is the most exciting thing I have ever done. The phone rang. It felt like an electric shock. There were phones all around him, ringing, a digital trill from the study and the ground floor and, fainter, from rooms beyond, upstairs. Belsey walked to the study and stared at the phone on the desk and the suicide note on the billiards table. He listened closely, as if the significance of the call might be discerned from its ring. It rang for over a minute then stopped.