

PROLOGUE

COUNTY HOSPITAL, DURNOVER WING

LATE JULY

Just like the day before and the day before that, the air in here today holds the faintly vegetal taste of decay.

The door to the private room has been wedged open on account of the dead heat of the afternoon and through the gap a strip light on the ceiling of the corridor can be seen flickering on and off, on and off, hesitating like a child plucking up the courage to jump a stream, on and off, and finally on. Gabe replays an old image of his son, a year or two ago, leaping across the little gulley he'd dug when they were laying down the pond in the back garden. It isn't just the flickering that bothers Gabe: there's a scratchy hum that comes and goes with it. What remains is a gently irritating monotone.

There is no need for artificial lighting in the private room, for its wide windows allow a flood of natural sunlight to fill it, to glint off the silvery edges of the monitors, off the metal frames of the furniture and the drip-stand, to radiate from the spotless walls, bleaching the crisp bed-sheets with an intensity that hurt his eyes. If he were the kind of person who wore sunglasses indoors he would be wearing a pair right now. But out in the corridor there is far less natural light, or so it would appear. Gabe sees a porter slowly pushing a trolley of laundry past the open doorway, followed by his long wavering shadow. And suddenly the strip light cuts out with a soft buzz, this time for good.

For a little while now there have been four people in the private room. It is not a small room but it feels cramped. The three who are able move from one position to another, from the window to a chair, from the bedside to the trolley, as if in a mechanical dance, brush past each other in near silence, exchanging spaces like pieces on a chessboard. For want of something better to do Gabe is pouring himself a glass of water and is spilling a little on to the plastic tray. His wife Grace is suddenly at the wide windows, peering out, watching the flimsiest of breezes touch the leaves of a young sycamore; she hasn't spoken to him for at least five minutes. Now the nurse is at the door, casting a glance down the corridor, as if she is expecting

someone. The fourth person, the only one who doesn't move, who cannot move, of course, is Don: horizontal, fixed in time and space like an Egyptian mummy, legs held rigid, head looped in bandages, eyes shut, mouth clamped, nose pinned by tubing, covered to his chin by layers of sheets, his chest rises and falls but by barely half an inch, the only evidence of a loose hold on life.

Then, trapped in this space with its door wedged open but its wide windows closed, traces of the smell again: neither sweat, nor urine, nor disinfectant, not even a cocktail of all three. Gabe decides it is the stain of stale food, hanging in the reconditioned air like zombie breath.

"That *is* a lovely photograph."

Gabe looks up. The nurse has moved to the bedside table and, in her rich West African accent, is speaking to him, to Grace, to them both.

"This one," she says, her dark plump face creasing into a smile. She straightens the photo, standing it up against a box of tissues. "You look like the perfect family, yes, you really do."

It is a simple enough family group, posed and caught in the sunshine by an amateur or even a self-timer: five happy faces, three generations in colourful holiday clothes standing together for a few seconds in what looks like a private garden or a small park. Juliet recognises the younger man on the right as her patient's son, nervous, edgy, hovering around the bed like a shy man on the fringes of a party. There to the left of the picture is his wife, looking trim and pretty, lovely blonde curls, smiling for the camera, very self-aware; and here she is now, still staring out of the window, bored, much shorter hair with new highlights, and has she put on a little weight in the meantime? But at the centre of the photograph are an older couple. It's clearly their day. The man is around fifty, she guesses, healthy, good complexion, he looks confident, alert. His hair is short and thick, a greyer version of his son's. But Juliet has never seen his full face for real, concealed as it now is in heavy dressings, by the oxygen mask, the intrusive tubing. The other woman in the picture is standing very close to him, one arm behind his back perhaps, hugging him to her. She too looks contented, maybe a little tired, her sharp, intelligent features captured in a moment of celebration. Don has been lying in this hospital bed for three days, but, as far as the nurse knows, this woman has never set foot in the place. In front of them both is the child: a very young boy with an eager, spirited energy about him and a smile that radiates his pride in being part of this special group.

"Yes, perfect," says Gabe with a tight laugh, and Juliet cannot fail to catch its undisguised irony.

"I think it's pretty good of all of us," he goes on quietly. "Quite a rarity, really. Mum was never happy with how she looked in photos. There are plenty of pictures

of Dad and me: on holiday, posing in the garden with a cricket bat, you know. But Mum..."

"I haven't met your mother. You know, visiting Don here on the ward."

"No, you won't have. I thought you knew. My mother died about a year ago. An accident."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I'd no idea, Mr Percey. I thought perhaps..."

"Stupid really. The most stupid accident."

Suddenly Grace, who is now crouching by the open bed-side cupboard, interrupts:

"Didn't you bring your dad some shirts? I can't see any in here. Gabe, are you listening?"

"Sorry, er, I thought I did. Isn't there a tee-shirt in there somewhere?"

"I can't see one."

"Right at the back?"

"I am looking right at the back. There is no tee-shirt, no shirt in here at all, at the front or right at the back."

"I must have left it at home. Anyway, he won't need any of his own clothes yet. I'll bring them in next time."

"You're getting so forgetful these days..."

"I have got quite a lot on my mind, Grace."

The nurse cuts in:

"Anyway, it *is* a lovely photograph."

She is checking the monitors and writing numbers on to charts on a pink clipboard.

Gabe moves back over to the plastic-backed chair by his father's bed and sits down to take the weight off his feet. He picks up the photo and looks at it for a moment or two.

"I thought, you know, when he wakes up..."

Grace pushes hard at the little cupboard door until it shuts with a click.

"*If* he wakes up," she suggests.

"*When* he wakes up, it would be the first thing he sees. If we're not here. He'd see the picture and maybe he'd recognise a face. Help him regain a sense of who he is. Where he is. I don't know, it's just a thought. Something familiar, something to stimulate a reaction..."

"It's a lovely idea," offers Juliet.

Gabe says nothing more.

"What's your little boy's name?"

"Sorry?"

"The little one in the photograph, what's his name?"

"Oliver. That's Oliver. He's seven. He was four or five in this photo. He wouldn't stand still."

In three days the nurse hasn't seen Gabe properly smile until now.

"It was a party for my Mum and Dad's thirtieth wedding anniversary. A ruby wedding bash in the back garden; just family and a few old friends."

Grace, listening:

"Pearl, not ruby. Ruby's the fortieth."

Gabe looks across the room at his wife. She is standing by the window once again, staring out at the cloudless sky, her back to him. He looks back at the photograph.

"Ollie couldn't understand how his grandparents could be married for so long. He could just about count that far."

Another smile, a little shallower.

"Thirty years. And now it's all fallen apart, hasn't it?"

"Oh, be optimistic. Please, Mr Percey. You must. Really you must. Your father has made very good progress. His internal organs are all sound. The bleeding has stopped. He really is on the mend. The doctors are confident he will come out of this very soon and will make a good recovery. A proper recovery. Please..."

Grace, bored with the view, has turned her back to the window. She sighs gently, casting a look towards the bandaged patient, the tubes and the drips, the oxygen, the splints, the soft, regular patterns on the monitors. His sleeping eyes. He looks so helpless, chest lifting and sinking in a slow, shallow rhythm like a tiring metronome set to *adagio*. So vulnerable. She sees her husband's ruddy face. Poor Gabe. Her husband is doing his level best to be supportive, of course he is, and it's not such an effort: selflessness comes quite naturally to him. But that's Gabriel: loyal and steadfast. Gabe the rock. Rock solid. Which is all very well, but sometimes she wishes he were a rock that rolled just a little more.

His moist eyes meet hers.

"You look lovely in this, Grace," he says, still transfixed by the photo. "Blue suits you, I've always said that, haven't I?"

"We should go." She is not in the mood for flattery. "It's after four."

The nurse places the pink clipboard into a transparent pouch attached to the foot of the bed.

"I'm leaving you now," she says. "Other patients to see to. I'm just down the corridor if you need me. It was nice to see you again, Mr Percey, Mrs Percey. Stay as long as you like. I'll see you next time if I'm on, perhaps."

"We're leaving too," says Grace, picking up a newspaper lying at the foot of the bed, folding it briskly and tucking it between the straps of her bag. "Gabe, we should go. We need to pick up Oliver and then..."

"Yes, I did hear you the first time."

Gabe returns the photograph to its place on the bedside table. Standing up, he runs his fingers through his hair and then takes hold of his father's limp right hand. He looks hard at the closed eyes, the tubes clamped around the fleshy nose, the bandages framing the jaw, set to silent.

"I'll be back again tomorrow, Dad. Tomorrow. Stay strong, old man."

ONE

The lake-dwellers had wanted to construct a geometrically perfect steel-framed cube but it seemed that they had been given only a motley collection of damaged materials.

And so, at the very bottom of the lake, set flat against the sand and barely visible in the faint shafts of sunlight that refract through the watery depths, here beyond the shelf-line, is the cage: a space the size of a small room enclosed by an irregular box-like structure of hastily connected scaffolding poles.

Sensing movement inside it, Don is peering into the space, squinting between the cold, rusty bars. Quite at ease, he swims around the side to get a better view. He is breathing as effortlessly underwater, down here in the depths of this lake, as he would be standing on the shore.

The thin light is playful, casting moving shadows and then just as suddenly revealing a line, a new shape in the liquid gloom. As a shimmering ray illuminates his target, he now sees the prisoner clearly before him. It is a woman, sitting, unconcerned by her captivity, at an empty writing desk. A small shoal of minnows skitter by its narrow carved legs. The woman is reading from a single sheet of paper which is wafted gently by the currents in a slow rhythm with her long fine hair and the soft folds of her nightdress.

Anxiously, Don is pressing his face between the poles.

"Carole...," he calls, and hears his voice carry through the water. "Carole, look, it's me!"

Agitated, Don is pulling at the bars of the makeshift cage, but the woman does not hear him. She does not turn her head towards him. She is absorbed in her task, whatever it may be.

The bars are loose; they rattle but they will not yield.

"Carole!"

He is shouting louder now, and as he twists away to swim to the far side of the cage, he suddenly realises that his wrist is trapped at an angle where upright and transom cross.

Now Don is tugging his hand away. He is still caught, like a fish on a line.

The woman is still reading.

Lazily the light changes and only the shadowy outlines remain. In the next shaft of iridescence he can see that his wrist, his right wrist, is now clamped to a vertical tube of scaffolding by a pair of handcuffs: silver, glinting in the faltering beams. He tugs again, panicking now, as hard as he can, but the cuffs are locked tight and he is snared.

Don is pulling back and forth, and the frame of the cage is rocking at its base, casting up eddies of sand from the lake bed.

"Carole!" he screams, but the woman cannot feel the cage shaking. Her eyes are set fast on the printed page in her delicate hands.

Then, as the faint sunrays alter again, the waters on the far side of the cage appear briefly aglow and Don recognises another shape swimming towards it. Out of the shadows emerges the figure of Neptune, god of springs and lakes and rivers, Roman god of the sea, naked, bearded, and now aiming the glinting prongs of a trident towards the cage.

Don's eyes meet the creature's through the shimmering patterns of light. He sees sparks of fire in them.

The cage is still between them. Once more Don tugs vainly against the handcuffs. Neptune strikes his trident hard against the bars of the cage: a metallic ratatat-tat distorted by the water. The minnows scatter like a firework exploding. The woman looks up, suddenly disturbed, and smiles serenely.

But Don is now beside himself.

"Carole!" he pleads, as Neptune turns and starts to swim smoothly around the cage towards him.

Don jerks his hand away from the bar, hopelessly. But this time, somehow, he is free; the cuffs have opened and frantically he turns away and flees, kicking his legs hard against the water. With all the power he can muster he stretches his arms out ahead of him, pulls them back through the mass, again and again, to lurch away and upwards, quickly upwards, towards the sunlight flickering above on the surface of the lake.

COUNTY HOSPITAL

AUGUST

My name is Donald Percey and at least I can remember that much. When you wake up from a long, troubled sleep in a cold, dark place you need a few straws to grab hold of. Well, I never forgot who I am. And I knew I was in a hospital bed, in a brightly lit room. On my own, I thought. And I knew that, for all the pain, I was alive. I don't know how close I was to dying but the first doctor I saw here had the expression on his face of a man who was about to defuse a live bomb.

The very first thing I remember was listening to a woman's voice telling me her name. A name I didn't recognise: Juliet. Of course I can remember it now. She said she'd been talking to me for days. She had a pretty voice, chirrupy and clear, and she told me she had come from Africa to nurse me back to life. The delicate features of her round open face came gently into focus before my blinking eyes. The light hurt and she moved to a window and pulled down a blind. She told me where I was and asked me if I knew who I was. It seemed like a daft question; of course I knew who I was: Don Percey, aged fifty-four. I think I wanted to tell her I was a detective, but as speech was impossible no words came out, which was disconcerting. In any case that would have been wrong, of course. I haven't been in the force for eighteen months. But I'm pretty sure I would have got my name right.

She told me she was going to fetch a doctor, but before she left the room she reached over for a square of card lying close to my bed. Juliet smiled and handed it to me. This was mine, she said - a picture of the people who loved me. *Don't go away, now*, she ordered; it was her little joke, I suppose.

My head was held rigidly in some sort of brace. I had sensation and freedom in my right arm and with a little effort I held the card up to my eye line and focused my fragile sight on a familiar photograph. One that I recognised from a frame at home: a family portrait of the not-so-extensive Perceys. It was a happy moment, frozen in a lens: all eyes forwards, some toothy smiles, some closed, contented grins. Arms around shoulders and waists, my left hand gently resting on little Oliver's curly brown hair. In my right, what looked like a glass of wine. Carole had one too, slightly raised and her wide mouth half open in a "cheers", her lively hazel eyes looking so slightly above the camera. To either side of us, our son Gabriel, looking

every inch the fitter, younger, taller version of his dad, and his wife Grace, tanned and relaxed in a powder-blue man's shirt.

It's been two weeks since I woke up. That's what the nurse says. And Gabe too, who's been in to see me every day. I think. Gabe is my son. His wife's name is Grace. I have already mentioned that. She doesn't always come with him. That's okay, though. She's a busy woman. She runs a shop, I think. Or she used to.

It seems I was attacked by some madman.

I don't remember any attack, but I've been told that I was found unconscious in a bus depot by a dog-walker and I hadn't just tripped over an oil drum. He spotted a cab light still on in the dark, the driver's door still ajar. I've been left with a pair of broken legs, three cracked ribs, massive bruising, a fractured skull and a broken jaw. Quite a tally.

So I have to try to remember. There's a copper I recognise who asks me questions all the time, when the nurses let him. I can only nod as my jaw is set. I do get tired easily, even now. And headaches. Awful headaches. As I'm staying awake a little longer each day, they've given me this laptop. I'm to write down my thoughts and recollections in my lucid moments. *Take it from the beginning*, somebody said. *Take it from wherever you like*, someone else chipped in. *Extrapolate. Be creative. If it's a bit disjointed, don't worry, we'll work it out. Give us detail. Let us worry about making sense of it.*

They want a statement.

Fragments of your memory, Don, somebody said. *As much or as little as you can. Scraps of facts. Little descriptions that come to mind. Any of it could be valuable.*

Even dreams? asked a doctor who looked no older than a teenager.

Especially dreams, somebody said.

It's a kind of therapy, I suppose. The doctors agree that if I could help the police and help myself at the same time, reconnecting the circuits, reordering the files, as it were, then everyone's a winner.

It's a nice new laptop.

But I do get tired.

Writing's never been a problem, and I want to help. I was a police officer myself. I had to write report after report, of course. I tidied up witness statements. I used to proofread my boss's annual development plan and then translate it from *Coppingese* into something more convincing as readable English. Some complained about the paperwork. Not me. I was quite at home with a piece of prose to compose.

I made Detective Sergeant. Not a high-flyer. Steady though.

I've written enough for today.

I'm feeling okay in my head this afternoon. No pain yet.

What the hell am I doing here in hospital? I need to answer that question. They say I was attacked. Brutally attacked - so I must have deserved it. Not a random attack. Somebody lying in wait for me, following me, knowing my routine. What have I done to deserve an attempt on my life like that? Was it someone from my past as a copper? I left the force over two years ago. I think I already said that. Nobody leaves with pats on the back from all the jacks you've worked with - you

always tread on a few toes - but as things go I thought I'd got away clean and clear. A few minor gripes and grudges, but no festering wounds. And as for the villains, they're either insignificant, infirm or inside. And anyway, I was a minor player. Maybe I'm wrong but I don't think I left that much of an impression. I was never the action hero with a jackhammer drive to clean up the county. Not like Coppinger. I had no vindictive streak. I never made it personal.

But somebody else did.

Somebody made it extremely personal.

I need to think beyond the police force. Take my thinking to the very recent past. I've a statement to write, but where do I start? The cast of characters is vague and the sequence of events is mistier still.

I can see faces but some names have gone. At least for now.

My wife was Carole. Carole's dead. She must be. One way or another she has left me. So, has she left me, or left me behind? She hasn't been to see me and I think she would have done if she'd wanted to or been able to. Gabriel's been a lot. He came again last night.

I see a small round-faced boy. I have a grandson, I'm sure but he's not the boy I see. Gabe's son is Oliver. Oliver is much younger than the boy I see. And this boy's a scamp.

And Geena. Geena Dale. I need to remember her. She's at the heart of it. She must be. I do remember her spiky red hair and her crazy, scatty smile. Full of mischief. How did our paths cross?

Cherchez la femme, as they used to say.

Is Geena Dale the reason I'm lying here with broken bones and fits of nausea? *Cherchez la femme*. A detective's default setting. That or *Follow the money*.

I can't think about this any more today.

This typing is taking longer than I thought. It's a slow old job and I've got a headache coming on again.