



A TIME TO DIE

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11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
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First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2020.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2461-1

Typeset in 12/17 pt Sabon LT Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

PROLOGUE

Where was the little shit-bag? Brenda lit one cigarette off the butt of her last smoke and breathed out shakily. John was ten and so he should be able to get himself from Silvertown, through the foot tunnel to Woolwich with no bother. But this was John . . .

Why was her baby brother such a div? Was it because he'd been born so long after she had, that their parents had babied him? Hardly. Brenda couldn't remember a time when her dad wasn't mostly down the pub and her mum just sort of wafted around the flat in a tranquillised fug. Since the old man had left, to no doubt drink himself to death, John had largely been abandoned to his own devices. And maybe that was the problem. Always a dreamer, John wandered around aimlessly when he wasn't at school. With no friends to take him out of himself, the kid was like a tit in a trance.

Brenda had only offered to have the boy for the day because her mum had a hospital appointment. Devon, Brenda's husband, had no great love for the kid and so she hadn't wanted to take him, not really. She'd seen him wave at her from the northern shore of the Thames before he went into the Edwardian rotunda that marked the entrance to the tunnel under the river, so she knew he was on his way. Brenda looked at her watch. The silly sod was probably daydreaming down there, counting the tiles on the walls or something else equally as daft.

Nobody really liked walking through the old foot tunnel. It was smelly and kids mucked about down there. But it was the only way to get from North Woolwich to South Woolwich without taking the ferry. That had been out of action for a week and so it was the tunnel or nothing.

People got mugged down in the damp hideous old passage under the river, which was why Brenda had made sure John waved to her before he crossed, so that she could time him. It took about ten minutes to walk briskly through the tunnel, which was what Brenda, if she had to use it at all, made sure she always did. The place gave her the heebie-jeebies with its jaundiced lighting, musty smell and occasional alarming drip from the tiled ceiling. Her brother, with his morbid interest in anything dark, creepy and generally putrid, was probably having a bloody brilliant time down there imagining ghosts, running away from weird noises and frightening the shit out of himself. He was a strange little tyke – which would have been fine – had he not been so unlikeable.

What it was about John nobody seemed able to take to was something Brenda could never fully understand – he wasn't really a bad kid. Maybe it was the fact that he never appeared to listen to anything anyone ever said? The feeling he gave off

of being away with the fairies all the time? Or was it perhaps the suspicion Brenda had that this airy-fairy thing was all an act and that underneath all of it was a calculating mind that knew exactly what it was doing.

As far as Brenda was aware, John had never bullied anyone or been cruel to animals. He didn't interact with anyone – animal or human. But he did have a lot of cuts and scars on his arms and legs and she wondered whether he was hurting himself. Maybe for attention? Not that it had succeeded. When Brenda had told her mother about John's wounds all she had said had been, 'What you talking about? I don't know of no wounds.'

Brenda looked at her watch. The silly sod had been down there for nearly twenty bloody minutes! What the fuck was he up to down there?



ONE

‘Took me over forty years to find the answer to that question,’ Brenda Joseph said. ‘If I have . . .’

‘Which is why you’re here?’

‘Yeah.’

Brenda Joseph was a small, dark woman in her early sixties. Twice married and mother to seven children, she was also the possessor of a strange experience, deep in her past, involving her younger brother, John. During the long, hot summer of 1976, ten-year-old John Saunders had gone down into the Edwardian foot tunnel at North Woolwich and disappeared. In spite of the best efforts of his sister, who, after half an hour waiting on the southern shore, had entered the tunnel herself to look for him, plus an extensive police investigation, nothing had been heard from or of John until he had, apparently, arrived at Brenda’s house in Canning Town just before Christmas 2018.

‘I’ve never found out how he got my address,’ Brenda told private detective Mumtaz Hakim. ‘I moved there back in 2008 when I married Des.’

The Arnold Private Detective Agency had been operating out of its tiny office on Green Street Upton Park since 2010. Opened initially as a one-man band by ex-policeman Lee Arnold, Mumtaz had joined the firm in 2012. A psychology graduate and mother of one, Mumtaz was the only full-time employee apart from Arnold himself who was currently out on a job in Romford.

‘It’s difficult for me to say whether or not this John looks like our John,’ Brenda continued. ‘He was ten when I last saw him.’

‘What about other members of your family?’

‘Mum died back in 1990 and me dad left us before John disappeared,’ Brenda said. ‘He’s dead now. All the aunts and uncles have gone too, and none of me cousins really kept in touch. Anyway, John weren’t exactly someone you’d remember. Away with the fairies most of the time. He was a strange kid.’

‘Friends?’

‘He didn’t have any. Spent most of his time drifting about on his own. Done a lot of reading in his bedroom.’ She leant forwards. ‘We’ve had DNA tests, me and this bloke. According to them he is my brother, but . . . There’s something wrong here.’

‘In what sense?’

‘I dunno. That’s what’s so horrible about all this. I should be grateful that he’s come back after all these years, but I’m not. And the story he tells about what happened is just, well, it’s fantastic – and not in a good way.’

‘So tell me,’ Mumtaz said.

* * *

‘He says our dad was waiting for him in the tunnel,’ Brenda said. ‘I never saw him. I saw John wave from the other end just before he went in, but I never saw the old man and I certainly never saw John come out my end. Anyway, the way this bloke tells it, they come up the stairs and not in the lift, and then they waited until I was looking away until they come out. What do I know? But anyway, the first thing that occurred to me when this “John” was telling his tale was why?’

‘Why?’

‘Why did our old man, Reg, take him? He was a drinker, he didn’t ever seem to me as if he liked kids and he never wanted to work. And yet John claims that Reg took him to America.’

‘People can change.’

‘Normally I’d say, right enough, of course they can, if I hadn’t been to my old man’s funeral with me mum back in 1982.’

Mumtaz leant back in her chair. She hadn’t been expecting that.

‘We had to go out to Wales,’ Brenda continued. ‘Mum identified the body and everything.’

‘Do you know what he was doing in Wales?’

Brenda shrugged. ‘He died of cirrhosis of the liver and so he hadn’t changed his ways. Me and Mum met this nun who looked after him when he was dying. I s’pose I should’ve paid more attention to what she said, but I never. I was so mad at the old git, I just wanted to get the funeral over with and get back home to the kids. Now Mum’s dead I don’t stand a chance of knowing what the woman was on about. Although, that said, what I do know is that Dad was a tramp by that time. That was why Mum had to go and identify him. Although the nuns took him in, there was no proof on him of who he was.’

‘So your father must have told the nuns his name.’

‘I s’pose so.’

‘And what did this John say when you told him about your father’s death?’

‘He thanked me. Said he hadn’t known.’

‘So, your father takes him to America and then . . .’

Brenda breathed in deeply. ‘Well, this is where it all gets a bit mental,’ she said.

Standing up beside a tea stall in the middle of Romford Market seemed to be a strange place to have a conversation about a dead marriage, but then the man Lee Arnold had come to see, Jason Pritchard, was far from being what people thought of as your typical ‘Essex’ man.

The wrong side of fifty and with a nose that was splattered rather than placed at the middle of his face, Jason looked and talked the part but, as his oldest mate, Dave, had told Lee right from the start, ‘He’s got some funny ideas.’

The top of Jason’s ‘funny ideas’ list concerned Britain’s referendum back in 2016 about whether or not to stay in or come out of the European Union. The country had voted by a narrow margin to come out, with Romford being one of the most determinedly ‘Brexit’ areas of the country.

‘But not him,’ Dave had said pointing to Jason when Lee had first met the blokes. ‘Talks about it being a financial disaster. I don’t know where he gets it from.’

Lee did. He too had voted to remain in the EU and could fully understand Jason’s point of view.

‘You hear ’em round here all the time,’ Jason told Lee as Dave walked away. “‘Just get us out!’” they say. Tossers. Anyway, sick to buggery of Brexit, what’s happening with that old slapper?’

The ‘old slapper’ in question was Jason’s ex-wife, Lorraine. The

two of them had parted a year before and Jason had started divorce proceedings. But Lorraine was apparently playing rough and was claiming that her ex had left her destitute when he'd taken off with a bingo caller from Southend. She wanted more money. Jason, for his part, contended that he'd given Lorraine their house, debt-free, that he still gave her an allowance and that the only reason she was destitute was because she was addicted to Tinder, the online dating site. Officially no loans had been taken out against the considerable equity in the house, but that didn't mean they didn't exist.

'She had a handbag spree at Lakeside at the weekend,' Lee said.

The only thing that had made Lee's trip to Lakeside Shopping Centre at all pleasant had been the fact that it had been under cover. The previous Saturday had been very wet.

'How much?' Jason asked.

'Best part of two and a half grand.'

'Fuck me!'

'She's no fool,' Lee said. 'On one level.'

Lorraine Pritchard had started funding her addiction to, mainly, younger men, by taking out small loans in pawnshops against her jewellery. By Jason's own admission, Lorraine's 'jewels' were mainly Ratners specials, so she hadn't made much. This had then progressed to taking out unsecured loans with various high street loan companies, which had now, her husband suspected, progressed further to coming under the influence of actual loan sharks. As yet, Jason didn't know who they were. But if she carried on her life of luxury, it wouldn't be long before Lorraine got hurt. And, although he wanted nothing more to do with his ex, Jason didn't want her to either lose their house or get hurt.

'You know where it's coming from yet?' Jason asked.

Lee shook his head. 'Not exactly.'

‘What’s that mean?’

‘Means that I’ve got some ideas but nothing concrete,’ Lee said.

Lorraine was making occasional trips out to Langdon Hills in Thurrock, which didn’t make a lot of sense given that all her family and friends lived in Romford. Also, she had no car and so every trip that she made out to this ‘posh’ part of Thurrock based around a golf club, was difficult and costly. Lee didn’t know any obvious ‘villains’ who lived in that area, but that didn’t mean they didn’t exist. The house she visited was registered to a Mr and Mrs Barzan Rajput. The name rang no bells, but why was she going there? And how had she got to know these people? He’d asked Jason about any possible Langdon Hills connections before, but he’d come up empty. Lee didn’t want to labour the point now.

‘She been out this week?’ Jason asked.

Unlike the ‘old days’, following people engaged in sexual relationships wasn’t so easy in the twenty-first century. Back when he’d been a copper, hooky types tended to meet their ‘dates’ in pubs, clubs and discos. But in the modern world of ‘hook-ups’ this all happened online, and although Lee had ‘friended’ Lorraine on social media, he had noticed that she was rather reticent when it came to details about her movements. But for the skilled PI, for whom patience wasn’t so much a virtue as a necessity, this was not a great problem.

‘Sunday she had lunch at a pub in Havering-atte-Bower and then went back with the bloke she’d met there for two hours.’

‘Some suit?’

‘He wore a suit but it didn’t define him,’ Lee said. ‘His home turned out to be of the mobile variety.’

‘Slummin’ it.’

‘Not really, no,’ Lee said. ‘He was probably twenty-five, tops.’

What he lacked in readies he more than made up for in youth.'

Jason shook his head. 'Dirty mare.'

'Dad used to work on the docks when I was a kid,' Brenda said. 'Then when everything moved down to Tilbury, he got a job on the cruise ships. But he got caught nicking stuff and so they sacked him. But, probably because he was always good for a pint or twelve, he knew everyone wherever he worked. Mainly he knew the villains. Someone must've got him and John on that ship across the Atlantic. This John man didn't talk about that much.'

Mumtaz noticed how Brenda never referred to John as her brother, in spite of the apparent DNA proof.

'All I know is they landed at New York where they were met by this couple.' She shook her head. 'It sounds mad, especially if you'd known me dad. How he found these people . . . Well anyway, they were called the Gustavssons. This John when he mentioned them started going on about them being billionaires and all that, and I thought he was full of shit, you know. My dad was a toerag, how'd he get to be with people like them? But I looked them up. Or rather I got our Kenton to look them up on Google and there they were. Etta and Michael Gustavsson of Orange County, California, one son – John. They're bloody loaded.'

Mumtaz was just thinking that she'd never heard of them when Brenda said, 'Funny people, though. All that money but you'll never see their names in the papers or nothing. This John geezer's their only heir too! And he's got no family, so he says, so it'll all come to my lot. So he says. But it don't add up.'

Mumtaz frowned.

'I mean, don't think I'm being grasping or nothing, but if you

was rich and then you come back to your family after donkey's years, don't you think you'd want them to see you'd done well? Like wearing nice clothes? Driving up in a posh car?'

'He didn't?'

'Rocked up in a taxi from Plaistow, after getting the Tube, so he said. Looked like he'd slept in his clothes.'

'If he's come from America then maybe he had,' Mumtaz said. 'On the plane.'

'Yeah, but why? If you had a lot of money you'd go first class, wouldn't you? I know I would. Anyway, that's just a detail really. What I'm really interested to know is why he's here.'

'Why does he say he's here?'

'To see us.' She shook her head. 'So he says.'

'But you don't believe him?'

'I don't.'

'Why not?'

Brenda sighed. 'Look, I can understand why he don't want to stay with us. He could, I've offered, but he says he don't want to be no bother. I'm not saying the house is a tip, but . . . I got kids still at home, Des, and then there's his youngest boy, in and out as he pleases. Grandchildren . . . It's like Charing Cross Station, but if he has really come to see us why is he staying up West? And why in a Travelodge?'

Mumtaz said, 'Not all rich people want to splash their money around.'

'Oh, I get that his people are not flash. They wouldn't hide themselves away if they was. But he don't spend time with us. He says he's over here to see us but then he's always off somewhere. When he is with us, he sits in a corner and reads. And yes, I know he might be embarrassed and maybe he wants to see things after so long away but . . . This is going to sound

daft, but I think he's here for some other reason. I feel we're an excuse. I don't trust him.' She moved in closer to Mumtaz and said, 'I mean, I don't know him, do I?'

'Tel.'

'Jase.'

There was no actual hostility between the two men, but Lee could see there was no love lost either.

When the older, much fatter, man had walked past he said to Jason, 'Who was that?'

Jason rolled his eyes. 'Her uncle.'

'What?'

'The missus,' he said. 'Terry Gilbert. He's the only member of her family who'll so much as pass the time of day. Not that I blame 'em. Some'd say I done wrong going off with Sandra, especially the wife's family. But living with Lorraine had been doing my head in for years. And it's not like the kids are babies . . .'

'So, could he be a possible source . . . ?'

'For Lorraine? Nah. Reason he's still civil to me is that his family can't stand the sight of him.'

'Why not?'

Jason offered Lee a fag, which he took and then they both lit up.

'They call him Tall Tel round here,' Jason said. 'And, yeah, I know he's knee-high to a short cat, but you know how it is.'

Lee nodded. Many people in Romford originated from the East End where there was a long tradition of inappropriate or strange nicknames. Lee's mother's sister, his Auntie Grace, for instance, was known to everyone as 'Polly' because she was always putting the kettle on.

‘Yeah.’

‘Mind you,’ Jason said. ‘There’s truth in the Tall Tel thing because he’s always telling tales.’

‘What? Lies?’

‘Depends how you view these things,’ Jason said. ‘He’s always been, so he says, convinced the earth is flat. I thought he just done it for attention when I first met him, but he don’t. Sods off every so often to look for the Loch Ness Monster, thinks there’s a coven of witches that operate out of St Paul’s Cathedral. You wanna hear him about the tunnels underneath the Thames! And, of course, now he’s full of shit about George Soros taking over the world. Donald Trump’s his kind of geezer, which tells you all you need to know about Terry Gilbert and part of the reason why I left his niece.’

‘Lorraine tell tall stories?’

‘Nah. Not really. She just never questioned nothing. Long as she got her manicures and her hair done, she never give a shit about nothing important. I got fucked off with it. I mean, I know I look like the type of bloke who drives a Range Rover and puts up UKIP posters in me front windows, but I’m not like that and neither’s Sandra.’

‘Which is why you fell for her.’

‘Yeah.’ He looked up at the cloud-filled sky and then he said, ‘That and her tits.’

Shortly after Brenda Joseph left the office, Mumtaz took a trip down to North Woolwich. It was many years since she’d walked through the old foot tunnel and now, in view of Brenda’s story, she felt as if she needed to reacquaint herself with it. She parked up just behind a derelict pub on Manor Way and began to walk down towards the northern embarkation point for the Woolwich

Ferry. The entrance to the foot tunnel was just in front of the slip road for vehicles queuing for the boat.

With grey and cloudy skies up above and a low, riverine landscape all around, her walk was far from cheerful. North Woolwich was one of the forgotten corners of London. Heavily bombed in World War Two, it had been redeveloped first in the 1960s when numerous poorly built tower blocks sprang up. The Tube had never come out as far as North Woolwich and so, in those days, it was only served by infrequent trains on the old overground North London Line. But then in the eighties and nineties a second wave of development hit, bringing with it, eventually, the Docklands Light Railway and very pricey flats for rich people with uninterrupted river views. But, for all that, the tower blocks still stood, as did the cheap takeaway joints, the bookies and the corner shops where, if you knew the right people, you could access cheap fags.

As ever, the queue for the free ferry across the Thames was long and those waiting to use the foot tunnel were few. Built back in 1912, Woolwich Foot Tunnel was entered via matching brick-built, copper-roofed rotundas on the northern and southern shores of the river. On the northern shore the building was plonked on its own in the middle of a tangle of roads servicing the ferry and local buses. But on the southern shore the rotunda was less easy to discern. Before she descended, Mumtaz looked across the Thames to see how quickly she could spot it. It wasn't easy. The southern rotunda was hemmed in by newer buildings. But it was possible, as Brenda Joseph had claimed, to see someone waving outside the opposite structure.

Mumtaz entered the northern rotunda. The smell that hit her, a mixture of piss and fag ash, was very familiar in this kind of environment. Although brick-built the inside of the rotunda was

lined with what had once been white, now grey, tiles. Similar in size and appearance to the tiles one routinely found in Victorian toilets, these were what Lee always called 'bog tiles' and they always smelt like this. Many years ago, Mumtaz remembered walking down the staircase behind the lift to the tunnel and so she pressed the button to call the elevator. As she recalled, those stairs had been spiral and dark and she'd felt as if she was descending into hell. The lift was at least quick, even if it too was dark and unsettling with its strange wooden panels scarred by unimaginative graffiti. When the automatic doors opened, she found herself looking down a deserted tile-lined tube illuminated by flickering yellow lights. On the ground, down the middle of the tunnel was a long drainage hollow. Everything about this place seemed to be designed to cause the user anxiety.