

'A tremendous novel' William Boyd

PETER HANINGTON

A

Between the frontline and the news...

DYING

...lies the truth.

BREED

'Amazingly gripping' Melvyn Bragg



Advance praise for *A Dying Breed*

‘A tremendous novel – shot-through with great authenticity and insider knowledge – wholly compelling and shrewdly wise’

William Boyd

‘A tremendously good debut with characters who leap to life. I was particularly struck by the vivid detail and intensity of it: I have not read anything that has taken me anywhere near as close to Afghanistan as a place. I look forward to more of Hanington’s work with great expectations’

Melvyn Bragg

‘*A Dying Breed* is a deeply insightful, humane, funny and furious novel. This is both a timely reflection on how Britain does business and a belting good read’

*A.L. Kennedy, author of *Dear Thief**

‘Peter is that rare commodity in the journalistic fraternity ... a natural storyteller. You really want to turn the pages. And that’s what matters’

John Humphrys, Today presenter

‘A deeply intelligent, beautifully constructed story’

Will Gompertz, BBC Arts Editor

‘A compelling read, and a great insider’s view of life in broadcast journalism. I’m disappointed I am not to feature in the book: it is a brilliant read’

Evan Davis, Newsnight presenter

‘Urgent, compelling, new bright light on the dark dilemmas of broadcast news’

Gillian Reynolds, Daily Telegraph journalist and broadcaster

‘Buy this book. Find a quiet place. Switch off your phone and devour it. Hanington’s ability to wrap a story around the ghosts of truth is superb. He spins his tale with a true writer’s gift. I loved every minute in this book’s company’

Fi Glover, BBC Radio 4 presenter

‘Peter Hanington has crafted a gripping and wonderfully well-paced thriller replete with rollercoaster dips and turns and a cavalcade of villains and deliciously fallible anti-heroes. *A Dying Breed* is delightfully assured and unputdownable’

*Andrew Hosken author of *Empire of Fear: Inside the Islamic State* and Today programme reporter*

‘All journalists seem to think they can write great novels about journalism and 99% of those who try make a hash of it. Hanington is in the 1%. Having created believable characters caught up in the hell that is Afghanistan, he weaves a story that manages to excite, appal and instruct in equal measure’

Roy Greenslade, Guardian and Evening Standard columnist and commentator

‘A gripping, fast-moving tale of shifting loyalties and creeping betrayal ... written with an effortless liquidly-drinkable prose style. A page turner from the first line’

Allan Little, former BBC foreign correspondent and chair of the Edinburgh International Book Festival

Festival

‘A gripping story... Peter Hanington’s clear, assured voice shines out from every page’
Mishal Husain, BBC broadcaster and Today presenter

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BREED



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For my mother, my father and for Vic. Obviously.

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Prologue

DATELINE: All Souls Church, Langham Place, London, W1, June 14th

Crossing the threshold of All Souls Church, Carver raised a hand to cross himself, then stopped. He muttered something that was not a prayer and jammed the offending hand back into his blazer pocket. He looked around. Tall Corinthian columns and sun-washed Bath stone were at his back, but inside was a rather uninspiring 1970s sort of arrangement, designed to accommodate the maximum number of worshippers with the minimum fuss. Up in the balcony, the church rector stopped what he was doing and watched the visitor. He saw a bespectacled man somewhere around sixty, thinning on top and heavy in the middle; in his right hand he held a well-worn yellow plastic carrier bag. Not a church regular, nor a tourist by the looks of him. The rector went back to work, checking the hymnals for blasphemous graffiti and general wear and tear.

William Carver wandered down the central aisle. He took a look at the old Hunter church organ, its fine mahogany case, and at a stained-glass tableau featuring an earnest-looking shepherd and several cross-eyed sheep. Carver checked his watch and turned to leave; he was really only killing time. On the way back out, his eye caught sight of a single flickering light in an otherwise inky corner of All Souls. William sighed and walked in that direction. The pound coin he dropped into the empty black tin collection box hit the bottom with a loud rattle. He took a votive candle from the cardboard box, unpicked the wick, and, using the flame of the only other slim white candle in the sand-filled tray, lit his offering. He held it for a moment, staring into the flame and enjoying the sweet smell of burning wax, before planting it front and centre in the sand. He remembered how his mother would always congratulate him on picking the best spot for his candle and how, after the seemingly endless Sunday service, as they filed out, she would observe that his flame appeared to be burning a little brighter than all the others. Ridiculous, of course – all the candles burnt more or less the same.

He thought about his mother and then, inevitably, about his father. But there would be no one pouring candle for him.

Outside the church, Carver's eyes took time to adjust to the bright morning light; once they did, he checked his watch again. He had a meeting with the head of BBC personnel at ten. It was not quite a quarter to, he was still early, but then he was always early, even for appointments that he had no interest in keeping, like this one. His editor had described it as a formality, a ten-minute sit-down with one of the big BBC bosses, something that all the veteran journalists were having to endure. He ambled across the part-pedestrianised road and in through the high, handsome doors of Broadcasting House. How many times had he walked into this building? Thousands or maybe even tens of thousands of times, he guessed. Nevertheless William found it impossible not to feel a swell of pride, glancing up at the sculptures of Prospero and Ariel in all their art deco glory. Inside, he sat down on a worn leather bench in the corner of reception and watched as a tour party assembled. The guide was an enthusiastic young woman with a south London accent and an infectious laugh. She had a group of sweatshirt-wearing schoolchildren rapt.

'*Nation shall speak peace unto nation.* Give me a better motto than that and I'll give you a fiver. Come on!' The children laughed. William had always meant to take the tour and he was tempted to attach himself to the back of the group now, but the receptionist was waving him over.

‘Mr Drice is ready for you now, sir. He’s up on the sixth floor. Do you know it?’

He knew it. The sixth was where the bosses lived and the story was that BBC management had recently had the old oak panelling, which had been stripped out twenty years ago, reinstated at considerable cost. William was interested to see it. He rode the juddery antique lift to the sixth floor and when the doors opened, there was Drice, standing, waiting for him with a thin smile and an outstretched hand. The management man wore a tailored blue suit and steel-rimmed glasses. He gave William a hot and overly firm handshake before leading him into the refurbished office. The oak did look good, William thought, gave the place an air of authority. The desk was top quality too, an old antique affair, leather-topped, broad and deep; a little too big, in fact, for the number of items Drice had to place upon it. He had a phone, a small pile of papers and an expensive fountain pen, but that was it. William wondered where his computer was. Stowed away in one of the drawers, he guessed, so as not to spoil the look, although that was already slightly spoilt by the strange black moulded chair the man was now bobbing backwards and forwards in.

‘Thanks so much for coming to see me, William.’

‘I wasn’t given much choice.’

Carver sat in the high-backed wooden seat opposite Drice and glanced around. The office was at the very front of Broadcasting House, with windows on all sides, and as a result, sitting there felt rather like sitting in the prow of a ship.

‘You’ve a good view up here.’

Drice nodded. ‘Yes, it’s terrific on a clear day. Not so good on a dreary day, a bit—’

William waited while the man tried to locate an adjective.

‘—well, dreary.’

Carver placed his plastic bag down at the side of his chair and pointed at the wall. ‘How much did the oak panelling cost?’

Drice hoisted both eyebrows in a look of mock horror. ‘Ha. That’s what I love about you old hacker, no messing about. Straight to the nub, right to the tricky question.’

Carver said nothing. He just waited.

‘Well, let’s see. I think I can safely say that it didn’t cost half as much as you think it did.’

‘A hundred quid?’

‘Ha. Good one. No, no, a bit more than that.’ Drice paused. ‘I would tell you, William, but you wouldn’t believe how quickly a thing like that can end up in the newspapers. I tell you in confidence, you tell someone else in confidence, the next thing you know, I’m reading about it in the *Daily Wotsit*.’

He waved a hand above his head and smiled. ‘This place leaks like a sieve.’

William nodded but did not smile back. ‘It might have something to do with that big antenna on the roof.’

‘Ha. It might do, might well do. So, can I get you anything? A tea, coffee, mineral water. Something like that, before we get down to business?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Good. Good, you’re busy, I’m busy ...’ Drice put his hands down flat either side of the pile of papers. ‘So William, tell me, what are your plans?’

‘My plans?’

‘Yes. Medium term, I mean?’

Carver shrugged, uncertain what ‘medium term’ might mean. ‘Well, I’ve got a couple of stories I’m working on here, investigative stuff, domestic, but I’m heading back to Afghanistan the day after

tomorrow.'

Drice nodded. He glanced briefly out of one of the many windows and then back at Carver. 'Afghanistan, yes, of course. Excellent.'

William shifted in his seat. It seemed this conversation was going to be an even bigger waste of time than he had feared. He broke eye contact with Drice and looked past him, out towards the Langham Hotel across the road. The wind was getting up and a bright Union flag on the hotel roof had unfurled itself from its pole and was fluttering keenly in the breeze. William watched it and his mind was beginning to wander when a tight little cough summoned him back to the room.

'I wonder, have you thought about VR?'

William was confused. He frowned. 'Via? I'm flying via Delhi. British Airways: Heathrow, Delhi, Kabul. That's the cheapest decent flight I could get.'

Drice smiled. 'Sorry. My fault, talking in jargon. Not *via*; VR, voluntary redundancy. I wondered whether you'd given that some thought recently?'

Now Carver laughed. 'Redundancy? You want rid of me? Is that what this meeting's about?' He sat back and waited for the denial, the embarrassed apology. Neither came.

Instead Drice leant back in his ergonomic chair. 'Well, as you know, things are pretty tough for the Beeb right now. Licence fee settlements not what they used to be, Foreign Office funding for the World Service gone, free licences for the oldies and all that. We're having to tighten our belts ...'

William glanced again at the oak panelling.

'Explore all the possibilities. And what this meeting is about, part of my job, is to look at the way the bill and talk to the senior fellows – veterans like you – see whether they've considered all the options ...'

'Option one being that I sack myself and save you the trouble?'

'Not at all. There are lots of options, I'm sure.' Drice did not look sure. 'But, as you know, times are changing. The chaps running news, your bosses, they want their people multi-platform these days. You know, versatile, radio-friendly but telegenic too. Journalists who can write the online piece, file the radio bulletin, do the TV two-way and be Tweeting and Facebooking as they go. Makes a lot of sense, given that's how the commentariat are getting their news these days.'

William looked at the man; he had understood about half of what Drice had just said.

'An example for you ... Last week, John Brandon. You know? The *Ten O'Clock News* man?'

William conceded that he knew him.

'John wrote this piece ... Pretty personal it was, rather controversial. All about the price you pay for being a war corr. That piece set the Twittersphere alight.'

Drice beamed with happiness at the very memory of it.

William hadn't seen it. He glanced down at the plastic bag by his feet; inside were his tape recorder and notepads. 'I'm good at what I do.'

But as he said this, his face shaped itself into a scowl; he hated how weak it sounded, how apologetic.

Drice moved in, leaning across the large desk. 'Of course you are, William, of course. But you've been doing it a long time and—'

'And that's why I'm good at it.'

This was said with more confidence, but having said it, William stopped, suddenly filled with doubt. Was the statement still true? Was he still good at what he did? What if Drice was right? Things had changed and he had not. The management man pressed his advantage.

'All we're asking is that you have a think about it. I had my team do a few sums and they've come back with this ...' Drice pulled a letter with Carver's name and staff number on it from the foot of his

pile of papers and pushed it slowly, ceremonially across the desk. 'That's what you could expect to get if you took redundancy any time in the next few months.'

William ignored the piece of paper and looked out over Drice's shoulder. The flag was struggling to find its rhythm, snapping backwards and forwards in the wind.

'Take a look, it's a tidy sum.'

The management man licked his lips. Eventually Carver retrieved the letter, folded it in half and placed it in his jacket pocket, unread. This unsettled Drice, and he shuffled awkwardly in his seat and stared at the man opposite him. He'd conducted dozens of these sorts of conversations and this hadn't happened before. Usually the person he was talking to looked carefully at the numbers on the piece of paper, was pleasantly surprised, said thank you and so on. But not this man. He stumbled on:

'Good. Well then, yes, take it with you, read it later, give it some thought.'

Drice picked up his neat pile of papers, tapped it together once more, then put it back down.

'So, you're off to Afghanistan, you said? Part of the big election jamboree, I suppose?'

William was still lost in thought. 'What? No, no, I was going back anyway.'

'Oh. Well, good timing I suppose ... an exciting time? What do you think's going to happen?'

'What?'

'In Afghanistan. With the election. What do you think will happen?'

William picked up his plastic bag. 'Dying. Dying is going to happen.'

PART ONE

1 The Wedding Party

DATELINE: Central Kabul, Afghanistan, June 21st

If Baba had been asked to count his blessings, then number one, ahead of his wife, four children and robust health, would be the stone fountain in his front garden. He fussed over it the way other men in Kabul attended to their cars or their mistresses and he fussed most on the day of a wedding, which was why he was up early this morning, preparing to coax the most he could from the fountain's fickle pump. The night before, while climbing into bed, he had slowly and deliberately knocked his head five times against the wooden headboard, thereby informing his famous body clock that he needed to rise at five sharp. At ten past five his wife, Soraya, had gently pinched his nose to stifle the snores and when that failed, pulled her husband's share of the sheets and blankets over to her side of the bed. Before long, Baba woke, checked his watch and rose to a sitting position with a satisfied growl. He pushed himself up from the bed, stretched and began to dress as quietly as he knew how. Soraya watched in silence as he struggled out of his vest and long johns and into his work clothes: a greasy stained white T-shirt, jeans and flip-flops. Baba tiptoed from the room but quickly came back again and went over to his bedside table. Groping around, he found the American-made workman's torch that his son had given him for his last birthday. He pulled the elastic strap over his bald head and positioned the torch front and centre before departing again, his flip-flops slapping on the ceramic tiles. Still Soraya lay motionless, her dark eyes open, and a minute later she was rewarded as her husband returned, standing in the doorway, the torch switched on – a huge human lighthouse. The yellow beam swept the room, carefully avoiding Soraya's side of the bed, before settling on a tool belt that was hanging over the back of her dressing chair. Baba took the belt, strapped it beneath his large stomach and left again, closing the door gently behind him. Only now did Soraya move, shuffling over to her husband's side of the bed. She slid easily into the indentation he had left in the old mattress, sighed deeply and closed her eyes.

Baba made himself a strong black coffee, slipped the steel bolt on the front door and stepped outside into the still sleeping city. There was a little moisture in the Kabul air and the sky was iron grey; a touch of yellow on the horizon, the only hint of the heat to come. He strode down the garden and circled the fountain before setting to work, unlocking the small door at the base of the beloved water feature and shining his head-torch inside. The fountain was a three-tiered Italianate affair comprising three ornate stone basins separated and supported by a thick central column. A rubber pipe inside the column pushed the water up and out of the fountainhead, from where it worked its way back down, ending up back at the lowest bowl before being pumped up again. The water went nowhere but it made a pretty noise and a pleasing cascade, and when it was working well it could look quite dramatic. Baba knew that his fountain and the well-tended front garden were the reason why so many wedding parties chose his modest guesthouse over the many more prestigious venues in Kabul. This little patch of green in a dirty, dusty city was a good place for a party but – more importantly – it was the perfect place for a picture. If you arranged your wedding group correctly and framed the photograph carefully, you might imagine your reception had taken place in the grounds of an English country house or even a small French chateau. Baba's cousin, Ali, was expert in creating that impression, and he was the photographer who most couples opted for, after a little cajoling from the

host. In return for this recommendation, Ali was required to give Baba ten per cent of the fee and on seven-by-five group shot of each wedding party. These photos were kept in a scrapbook that Baba would flick through with Soraya. She would comment on the cut of a certain dress or the haughty manner of a particular mother. But Baba had no interest in how beautiful the bride was, or how distinguished the family. His eye went straight to the fountain and the plume of water being pushed skywards. As far as he was concerned, the success of a wedding was determined solely by the height the spout achieved. Baba's eye often came to rest on a picture of a particular wedding party that had ended early and acrimoniously after an argument over the size of the dowry. Looking at the picture anyone could have guessed at the trouble to come; the stormy countenances of the parents were unmissable. Baba didn't see these warnings signs, however; he saw a fountain spouting water a full metre into the air.

'Ah yes, an excellent wedding! A great success.' A metre was an unattainable dream these days. After two hours of hard labour, Baba had cleaned the filtration system with a toothbrush, he'd run boiling water through the pipes a dozen times and now he was hitting the nearby generator with a spanner. If he saw the dark blue Toyota crawling along his side of Passport Street and back down the other side, it wasn't fixed enough in his memory for him to mention it later.

The rubber tubing was clogged with years of dirt and detritus that no amount of boiled water could clear, and his attempts at solving the problem by making the pump push harder had simply made the fountain noisy. Without new parts it was a losing battle, and there were no new parts to be had in this country at war. Baba sweated and tinkered with the guts of the fountain for another hour before giving up. Slamming the small door shut, he hauled himself to his feet and scowled. He unbuckled his tool belt, let it fall to the ground with a clatter and stormed back inside, returning with an old wooden school ruler. He measured the plume of water.

'Six centimetres only!' He shook his head in defeat.

Baba glanced at his watch and considered taking another tilt at it, but at that moment Soraya called his name. He looked again at the time. There were too many other chores to do: he needed to collect the mirror, buy the henna and find an amplifier for the band. Baba took a fistful of lavender, crushed it in his hand and sprinkled it into the water – an old chef garnishing his soup. As soon as he left the house, Soraya would remove the lavender with a tea strainer and pour a splash of her own lily-of-the-valley perfume into the highest bowl. The perfume would splash from one bowl to the next for several hours, and would remain forever in the minds of hundreds of Afghan women who would always associate the scent with their wedding day.

Soraya waged a one-woman campaign against the increasingly popular western-style wedding and the secret of her success was planning. No detail was too small not to merit her fullest attention, and an evening wedding meant a day's work. Baba's three jobs would force him out of the house and on his way until five in the afternoon, an hour or so before the guests would begin to arrive. In the meantime Soraya and her two daughters prepared all the food and decorated two high-backed chairs where the bride and groom would receive their guests with fresh flowers from the garden. They set and decorated the six round tables which Soraya had squeezed into the main dining room, and assembled a raised stage for the band in the hall. Finally, Soraya would attach her feather duster to a broomstick and carefully polish the old French chandelier that hung from the centre of the dining room ceiling.

Baba's tasks took even longer than his wife had estimated, and by the time he got home there was already a short line of taxis and private cars idling in the road outside the guesthouse. Soraya was organising the close relatives of the bride and groom into a receiving line at the gate and cousin Ali had attached his tiny DV camera to a tripod that looked far too large for it. He crouched behind, ready

to film the early arrivals.

The ceremony started well. The married couple made an attractive pair and seemed enchanted both with each other and with the day. The groom endeared himself to Baba by commenting favourably on the quality of the garden and the fountain, and Baba reciprocated by being more generous than usual with the complimentary drinks. When the band played the opening bars of the *Ahesta Boro*, the slow wedding march marking the bride and groom's arrival, the guests stood and Soraya pulled herself up against the door frame and stood on tiptoes to take in the scene. It seemed to her that everyone invited had gone to the greatest trouble. Neither family was wealthy, but whatever good jewels the women had, they were wearing, and it was obvious many women had come straight from the beauty salon for the wedding reception. Soraya admired their finely embroidered kameezes and colourful shawl headscarves. In her experience, you could usually count on the women to make an effort, only to be let down by their men. But not so today. The young men in the room wore what she recognised from fashion magazines to be the latest in western-style suits with gaudy patterned ties. The older men were more soberly dressed but every suit was pressed, many wore buttonholes and there were even a couple of old Tajiks with dyed beards and embroidered pillbox hats. She went to find her husband, to remind him to tell Ali that he mustn't only film the pretty young women, but also to try and persuade him to come and watch some of the wedding. Baba was in the garden smoking a Turkish cigarette.

'I keep getting ambushed by aunties. They talk at me for an hour but it seems they still have more talk left.'

Baba reluctantly allowed himself to be dragged back inside. Soraya gave him a large glass of punch and stood between him and the exit. Slowly the mood in the room, the joy, percolated through Baba too. The Nikah ceremony, which he usually tried hard to miss, finding it old-fashioned and fake, on this occasion almost moved him to tears. He watched, beaming, as close relatives covered the bride and groom in a richly decorated shawl and then, reaching beneath the cloth, passed them the large silver-framed mirror he had collected earlier from the antique dealer. The pair giggled as they looked at each other in the mirror, and then he and all the other guests craned their necks closer to hear the groom's shy but certain voice as he recited an extract from the Koran:

'And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them and He put between you love and compassion; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect.'

Baba reached instinctively for Soraya's plump hand and held it firm. The music started again and the guests nearest to the door parted to allow a small girl, no more than seven years old, wearing a white dress and in bare feet, to come twirling through the crowd. She was carrying a silver tray with candles, flowers and small clay dishes containing henna. She danced her way round the room and up to the bride and groom, passing them the tray with a modest curtsy.

The wedding party was dancing its second and final Attan when the bomb exploded. Baba felt the blast before he heard it: all the guests were inside the house but the front door had been left open against the heat and the bomb sucked the air suddenly from the room. Then the large window in the front room seemed to bow and bend before cracking neatly down the centre. Baba would remember this cracking sound more clearly than the deafening bang that followed. The explosion smashed the window and a hail of shattered glass filled the room. Next there was silence before the sound of a small child sobbing was drowned out by Baba's loud voice, shouting for everyone to stay low and remain where they were, in case of a second blast. Soraya's chandelier swung from side to side shedding glass like tears.

Baba waited for as long as his instincts would allow – half a minute, which felt to him like half a

hour. Then he caught Ali's eye, stood and headed for the door, his cousin following him, camera in hand. The blast had come from the direction of Savi's tailor's shop, just down the street from the guesthouse, and Baba strode through the garden and into the road expecting to see the shop destroyed. In fact the building was still standing although it was burning furiously, flames pushing outward from a huge hole where the front door used to be. The signage, windows and decorative coping were all gone. Baba moved closer but then paused. He doubted whether anyone could have survived such a blast. He saw a bloodied limb lying on the step in front of the shop, like a leg of lamb on a butcher's slab. Then the screaming started.

What little passing traffic there was at that time of night had stopped and people were getting out of their cars to help or take a look. But one car kept moving, weaving through the stationary vehicles and away from the explosion. The dark blue Toyota travelled slowly up Passport Street, signalled right and turned on to the main road.

The blast moved the pane of glass in Vivian's window enough to dislodge some of the dried putty from one side of the frame. She threw down her book, rolled off the single bed and peered out. It was hard to see much. The windows were filthy and had thick gaffer-tape crosses stuck on them corner to corner. She carefully lifted a window and leant out. Her eyes swept the horizon, pausing when she saw a pall of dark smoke and dust billowing from somewhere to the east. It was close. Maybe four or five kilometres. The cloud rose and spread as she watched, blossoming grey and white against a red sky. Vivian Fox pulled on her boots and grabbed her shoulder bag from a plastic coat hook on the back of the door. She carried this shoulder bag everywhere; inside were two digital Marantz sound recorders, half a dozen sound cards, two mics, leads and spare leads, an instruction manual and enough batteries to record several days' worth of audio if that were required. She checked the equipment every morning and evening, in case sand or dust had somehow fouled the mechanism. But on this assignment that was unlikely. So far the man she was meant to be working with hadn't allowed her to open the bag, preferring instead to use his old MiniDisc recorder, which he kept in his jacket pocket wrapped in a plastic carrier bag. Vivian opened the door to her clothes cupboard and looked herself up and down in the three-quarter-length mirror: beige cargo pants with a white linen shirt tucked in and buttoned almost to the neck; on her feet, a pair of new Bata boots; no jewellery, no make-up; black hair pulled into a neat ponytail. She checked her trouser pocket for the plain navy-blue headscarf she wore everywhere outside of the BBC house or the several hotels where the rest of the western media had set up shop.

'Okay,' she muttered to herself, 'let's try again.'

She walked down the corridor and knocked gingerly on William Carver's door. She hadn't spoken to her colleague since the early hours of the morning and was uncertain how much of the awkward evening the reporter would remember. William had made a drunken pass at her in a hotel bar in front of fellow journalists and then again in the taxi on the way back to the BBC house. The polite goodnight peck on the cheek had not felt like the full stop she was hoping for, and sure enough, ten minutes later, Carver had rapped on her door waving a bottle of cheap vodka and a couple of plastic glasses.

'How do you fancy a nightcap?' The lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles were smudged and sweat had plastered strands of thinning black hair to his freckled scalp.

Vivian had tugged her oversized white T-shirt down to cover a little more thigh. 'William. It's a really sweet idea but it's been such a long day. I want to be up in time to listen to your programme online. We're three and a half hours ahead here so ...'

Carver had scowled and shoved the plastic glasses into the pocket of his blazer jacket, but had kept hold of the bottle. ‘I know what the bloody time difference is between London and Kabul.’

‘I’m sorry. But, hey listen—’

Vivian had been about to offer an olive branch: breakfast or a drink tomorrow. Carver didn’t let her. He had leant in closer, his breath sour, flecks of white spittle at the corners of his mouth. ‘No, you listen. I find my own stories, I do my own interviews and I mix my own bloody packages. So if you aren’t here for fun, Viv, what are you here for?’ He had turned away, and as she closed her bedroom door, Vivian heard angry mumbling and the metallic snap of the vodka bottle top being twisted open.

The question Carver posed was the same one she’d been asking herself for the last five days, as she traipsed around after the reporter while he did his best to ignore her. She’d been warned that William Carver could be hard work, that he was set in his ways, but she’d never known a journalist so suspicious. And suspicious not of a source or a story, but of his own producer.

Vivian checked her watch. Nearly thirteen hours had passed since she’d snubbed his invitation and she hadn’t seen nor hair of Carver since. She knocked again, this time a little harder. Nothing. She tried the handle, the door was unlocked and swung open easily, knocking against the empty vodka bottle and sending it rolling slowly across the carpeted floor. Vivian’s eye followed its lazy arc past the wall, bathroom door, window and ... William. He was lying naked, stomach up and waxy white in the middle of his double bed. The arm nearest to Vivian hung over the side, hand nearly touching the floor but still holding a plastic glass. She swallowed a gasp and reversed quickly out the room, closing the door gently behind her. She took a few breaths and then banged her fist hard on the door frame while shouting his name.

‘William, William. It’s Viv.’ She heard some muttering and, finally, footsteps. William wrenched open the door and squinted at her. He was wrapped in a thin blue bathrobe several sizes too small. He struggled a moment with his spectacles, the arms twisted like ballerina’s legs. Unwrapping them carefully, he planted them across his nose and focused.

‘What d’you want? You changed your mind?’ He looked down at the empty bottle on the floor. ‘The vodka’s all gone.’

‘It’s Thursday night, William. You’ve slept all day.’ Vivian pointed over William’s shoulder at the window behind him, grimy and gaffer-taped like her own. ‘There’s been an explosion, a bomb blast, I think. It’s nearby. I thought you might want to check it out?’

William nodded. ‘Yeah? Yeah, okay. I thought I heard something. I’ll get my stuff together. Come in and wait. Won’t take me a minute.’

He turned back towards the bathroom leaving the door ajar. Vivian walked in slowly and stood by the bed. From the other side of the bathroom door, she heard the buzz of an electric shaver and the what sounded like the noise of a dog being choked – this became a slightly softer hacking and hawking while Carver cleared his sinuses. She heard the flush of a toilet but no shower or running water, and moments later William was back, dressed in the same clothes he’d been wearing the night before.

You can hang a lot of weight on a six-foot frame but you can’t hang sixteen stone without showing here and there. Carver was wearing faded, ill-fitting jeans, which were held up around his waist should have been by a thick brown belt. His white shirt was half tucked in, half hanging out with at least one button missing in action, and his blue blazer jacket was in need of a wash and press. He wore black trainers over white socks, and in his hand he carried a yellow plastic carrier bag.

‘No time for a shower, I guess,’ he coughed. ‘A tart’s bath will have to do.’ He caught a disapproving look cross his colleague’s face. ‘My mum used to call it that. Can you chuck us the aftershave?’

He nodded in the direction of a dark green bottle with a picture of a camel on it. Vivian fetched it from the bedside table, handed it to him and watched as he splashed it around his neck, chest and armpits. A strong smell of sandalwood filled the room. 'I need to make a phone call. How about you go get me some food and I'll see you downstairs.'

'I beg your pardon?' Vivian had accepted that Carver was unlikely to treat her as an equal but she was still not ready to be treated like a servant. She stared at the reporter and he glared back. He obviously saw nothing unusual in the request.

'What? You're my producer, aren't you? Kind of. Well then, go produce me some dinner. Just a cheese sandwich. And a sweet tea – milk and three.'

The BBC house in Kabul was an anonymous whitewashed apartment building not far from the several big hotels where the other media lived. It was remarkable only in that it was one storey taller than most of the surrounding properties and its main selling point was it overlooked a particularly ruined part of Kabul. The television people who made the decisions about where to be based knew a good location for a piece-to-camera when they saw one. Vivian walked down the five stone-floored flights to the ground-floor lobby where there was a glass coffee table strewn with recent copies of the *Herald Tribune*, a brown three-seater sofa and a white Formica reception desk, empty save for a cream-coloured finger-dial phone *circa* 1980, wired to the wall and working but which no one had ever heard ring or had reason to use. Behind this makeshift reception was a basic kitchen.

A handsome man somewhere in his indefinable fifties stalked the lobby. He was suntanned, wore a white tailored suit, had a long nose and a plume of greying hair, and resembled a rare and rather valuable tropical bird. Vivian nodded at him and he nodded back, eyeing her up and down. They had been introduced the night before and the night before that, but it was clear to Vivian that he still couldn't place her.

'Morning Mr Brandon,' she offered, cheerily. He mumbled a response. John Brandon was not just another reporter. He was a presenter, the face of the *Ten O'Clock News*; live every evening from the cavernous Studio One in New Broadcasting House. He was in Kabul because the BBC had decided the forthcoming Afghan election was a major world news event requiring blanket coverage including a jewel in the crown: an outside broadcast, anchored by Brandon, live into the *Ten*. Vivian skirted past him and went into the kitchen. She filled the electric kettle from the tap marked 'drinkable' and planted it on its base; when she flicked the switch to turn it on, the kitchen and lobby lights dimmed a little – electricity was an unreliable commodity and the expensive petrol generator the BBC had bought was only to be used when it was broadcast-critical. Vivian buttered two slices of white bread and placed several slices of orange American cheese in between before pressing the whole thing together with the palm of her hand. From where she was she could see Brandon pacing up and down, increasingly agitated, waiting for someone else to find a solution to his problem. When William eventually puffed his way to the foot of the stairs, Brandon brightened. Ignoring the reporter's obvious attempt to avoid him, he boldly walked up and clapped him heavily on the back.

'Carver, how are you doing?' His voice was unnecessarily loud and didn't wait on a reply. 'Look, can you give me a lift to this bombing? I've done a quick piece to camera on the roof but I need to get there while it's still smoking and some tosser's parked in front of the garage. Help a buddy out?'

The slap on the back had become a friendly arm around the shoulder which William was trying to shuffle free from. But to Vivian's surprise, Carver nodded. 'Sure, John. I can help. Why don't you meet us outside in ten minutes? I'm going to fetch my fixer from the hotel. We can pick you up on the way back round.'

'Good man. I'll go and find my shoot-edit.'

Vivian let Brandon leave before handing William a paper bag with the cheese sandwich inside and a polystyrene cup of tea.

‘Cheers.’

He took a gulp of tea, and Vivian noticed a slight tremor in his hand as he lifted the drink to his mouth and looked away.

‘You said we’re going to get your fixer. So am I finally going to meet the mysterious Karim?’

‘I guess so.’ Carver dropped the sandwich into his plastic carrier bag and headed for the door.

It was only a ten-minute walk from the BBC house to the hotel, but by the time they got there Carver was already sweating heavily. The back of his neck was glazed and there was a tidemark on his shirt, up around his navel. Whenever possible, he tried to avoid meeting Karim in places like this. He didn’t encourage contact with other journalists, fearing they might take Karim from him, offering him a contract, a pay rise and a general improvement on his current terms and conditions with Carver. But sometimes there was no choice. The two garages at the BBC house were reserved for TV transport and so the hotel car park was the easiest and safest place to keep the red Honda that William had bought and Karim drove.

Karim Mumtaz was William’s best-kept secret and most valuable asset. Orphaned by the Taliban and educated in a missionary school, Karim met Carver in the first few days of the American operation in Afghanistan. He was a driver then, ferrying hacks from hotel to hotel, press conference to press conference. But William had quickly realised he was capable of far more. Karim had a journalist’s nose and a gift for languages. He spoke Pashto, Dari, French and some Russian as well as a smattering of English. William had made him a deal. Whenever he was in Kabul, Karim would work exclusively for him. In return, Carver made a number of promises, most of which he’d already kept. He had promised and delivered a textbook and audiotape Teach Yourself English course, which Karim had completed in a fortnight. He’d promised to help Karim learn shorthand and other basic journalistic skills. Finally, he’d promised to speak to a charity in London, which he hoped might be able to help Karim with his most obvious problem.

Two dusty potted palms stood sentry either side of the dark glass sliding doors of the Intercontinental. There is a particular atmosphere in a press hotel; beneath the fragile bonhomie lies a thick layer of rumour and paranoia. In the lobby and the bar, journalists sat around trying to look confident and casual but feeling the very opposite. Every new arrival and departure was carefully observed. Big-name TV correspondents peacocked around, arriving and departing with great purpose and at speed, their producers, soundmen, cameras and translators running alongside. William spotted Karim standing off to one side, watching it all from a safe distance. He walked over, put a sweaty hand on his fixer’s wrist and pulled him towards the exit.

‘Come on, let’s go. The story’ll be cold before we get there. Where’ve you parked?’

‘A good place, right by the barrier.’

Karim led the way and they were at the car before he realised that Vivian was with them, haltingly jogging to keep up. He unlocked the Honda with a click of the key fob and held the back door open for her. ‘Hello, I’m Karim. Mr Carver’s translator.’

Vivian nodded. The young Afghan was wearing a black leather-look jacket and freshly ironed shirt with a ballpoint pen poking out of the breast pocket. He had combed hair and deep-set, dark eyes. When Vivian smiled and extended a hand, he smiled back and only then did she see the extent of his cleft lip. The top half of Karim’s mouth broke open to reveal a curl of bright pink flesh just beneath his nose. She widened her smile in response and held his hand warmly. ‘Pleased to meet you, Karim. William’s always talking about you. I’m Vivian, Mr Carver’s producer.’

Karim climbed into the front seat and, adjusting the rear-view mirror, he caught her eye again. ‘~~pleasure to meet you, Vivian. Please forgive my ignorance, I did not know Mr Carver had a producer~~’ He spoke a careful, formal English.

William shifted in his seat. ‘I don’t. Not really. Now can we get going?’ He pulled at a lever beneath him and pushed his seat back as far as it would go, narrowly missing Vivian’s legs.

Karim slipped the car into gear and edged out of the car park. William was busy patting at his various trouser and blazer pockets. Eventually he found a small brown plastic bottle, fumbled with the child-proof seal, tipped three pills on to his palm and swallowed them while Vivian watched.

‘What are the pills for, William?’

‘For fun. You want one?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Didn’t think so.’

Almost as soon as they left the press hotel car park they found themselves in heavy traffic. They lapsed into an awkward silence until William slapped a hand on the dashboard. ‘Oh, yeah, I forgot. Karim, can we make a quick stop back at the BBC house? We gotta get something.’

‘Right away.’

Karim waited for a gap in the oncoming cars, made a neat U-turn and worked his way back to the BBC’s building. A battered van was still blocking the entrance to the garage.

‘Viv, can you do us a favour? Jump out and get Brandon, will you?’ It was the most civil request Carver had made yet. She smiled and slid across the back seat, jumping out on to the pavement and disappearing into the house.

When she got back to the street with Brandon and his cameraman in tow, the car was gone.

2 London Calling

DATELINE: New Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London, W1, June 21st

The *Today* programme office on the third floor of New Broadcasting House was a mess during daylight and even worse at night. Patrick could pick out the distinct smells of supermarket korma, photocopier toner, industrial carpet shampoo and milk on the turn. Grey desks were arranged in three rows, each lit by a harsh tungsten glare; one for the planning team, one for the duty editor and producers and one for the reporters.

Patrick Reid had first been asked to night-edit a month earlier. It seemed to him a huge responsibility and he was still on probation – or, as the editor Rob Mariscal had put it, ‘there till I fucked up or fell off air’. Tonight would be his sixth programme and only the third that was the full three hours long (the others had all been shorter Saturday editions). It would comprise three hours of six news bulletins, five major lead slots and at least twenty-six different stories in total. A fourteen-hour shift, seven million listeners, two highly paid, highly strung presenters and one person in charge of him.

His previous programmes had been patchy at best. He had been nervous and the nervousness had infected the rest of his team and eventually the presenters as well. After the last post-programme meeting, Mariscal had taken Patrick to one side. ‘This is one of the toughest jobs in journalism. You need to make quick, clear decisions and hold to them. Your story selection ain’t bad but it needs to be broader, not just the boring, worthy stuff. You need to get the presenters and your team to listen to you and respect you. How ’bout you start by trying not to look so fucking terrified all the time? You understand?’

Patrick understood and had tried to take this advice on board, particularly the part about appearing confident. After consultations with his girlfriend and a long look at his bank balance, they’d spent what felt like a small fortune in Paul Smith on a new shirt and a pair of trousers. Patrick initially balked at the price tag and enquired about a sale rail, but Rebecca was insistent: ‘It’s not an indulgence, Patrick, it’s an investment. Grown-up clothes for a grown-up job.’ As he performed a self-conscious twirl in the otherwise empty changing room, even Patrick could see that the new clothes did something different to his skinny six-foot two frame. Rebecca confirmed the suspicion: ‘They work. It’s the high waistline I reckon, and the cut. The trousers make you look tall instead of just gangly and the blue in the shirt brings out the blue in your eyes.’

The Turkish barber that had been cutting Rebecca’s father’s hair for thirty years performed a similar conjuring trick on Patrick’s mop of brown hair and the final touch came in the form of a second-hand brown leather belt which Rebecca found for him in Brick Lane market, well-worn but obviously well loved. Rebecca threaded it through the belt loops on the new trousers and tightened it at the highest hole. ‘There you go. So every time you fasten that belt, you straighten your back. No more stooping, got it?’

The evening rush hour had delayed Patrick but he still arrived in the office at half past seven, thirty minutes ahead of a handover meeting when the team which had been working on the programme all day would deliver an à la carte menu of news stories, correspondents’ names, political heavyweights, features and fillers from which Patrick must construct his programme. These were the ‘prospects’. He

arrived early in order to read himself in, check his emails and see what the other parts of the BBC and rival news organisations were planning for the next morning. The four people who made up the day team were hunched over computers, tying down the final details of the stories they had been working on before the prospects were printed. Overseeing them was a wiry woman dressed in a black trouser suit. The duty day editor: Amanda Lake. On the other island of desks a couple of reporters were shutting down their computers, packing up and getting ready to leave. The only unexpected presence was a member of the night team who had arrived even earlier than Patrick and now had his feet up on the desk, reading the late edition of the *Evening Standard*, a half-finished curry at his elbow. Martin Mainwaring wore a white button-down shirt with silver cufflinks and the bottom half of a pinstriped suit; a strange choice for an all-nighter but Martin's regular uniform nevertheless. His short back and sides was combed and, by the look of it, Brylcreemed too. He glanced at Patrick in feigned surprise. He had small green eyes and the beginnings of a boozier's nose.

'All right, Paddy? It's not you in the big chair tonight, is it?'

The enquiry sounded friendly enough but something about Martin's tone betrayed him. He knew full well that Patrick was in charge tonight and, more importantly, that he was not. He was one of two back-up producers despite the fact that he'd been at the programme for three years, as opposed to Patrick's few months. The story went that about a year ago, after much pleading, Martin had been given his first shot at night editing but it had gone very badly. He had frozen. The programme had almost fallen off air and the presenters had rebelled. Under Rob Mariscal you seldom got a second chance. But no one had told Martin.

'Evening Martin. I'm afraid it is me, so prepare for a bumpy night.' Patrick smiled apologetically. He received the thinnest possible smile in return.

'You're not kidding, mate.' Martin lowered his voice to a stage whisper. 'I've had a look at the prospects. Biggest pile of shit I've ever seen.'

Patrick's stomach lurched slightly.

Martin returned to his newspaper, turning the pages noisily. Each desk had a computer screen and keyboard, an eight-inch television monitor and a digital receiver with headphones which allowed you to listen to radio stations, TV channels and feeds from all over the world. Patrick chose a desk as far from his colleague as possible. Many of the TV monitors had been left on and were switched to quad screen mode, allowing four different channels to be viewed simultaneously: BBC World alongside Al Jazeera above CNN and Sky. A few of the journalists had also left their computer monitors on with the newswire services ticking over. The newswires still had the power to hold Patrick, and instead of logging on, he found himself staring at a neighbouring screen as the stories tumbled in. They came from Reuters, AFP, AP, PA, TASS and others. Any dispatch that an agency considered important was flashed at the top of the page: *TASS, Caucasus Two Police Dead*.

If a wire was considered urgent, then a bolt of lightning symbol appeared alongside it. The headlines piled in upon each other, each new one pushing its predecessor down the screen until eventually it fell off the bottom. Patrick read a few of the recent arrivals:

BC US Ohio failed Execution, 5th lead Writethru. Judges halt second attempt at lethal injection after a 2-and-a-half-hour attempt fails to kill man.

BC Iraq Crime Wave. Kidnappers holding a teacher's 10-year-old son gave him two days to find \$90,000. When he could not pay they chopped off the boy's head and hands and left the body parts at a city dump.

US Casino Tattoo. An American mother has had the name of a casino permanently tattooed on her forehead after selling advertising space to pay her child's school fees.

There were more stories than you knew what to do with, more stories than you could ever tell. As I

watched, a new wire dropped. A flashed story from AP in Afghanistan, slugged *BOMB BLAST KABUL*. A suspected Taliban attack had killed several people in central Kabul. There was very little detail but Patrick read what there was: small death toll, no westerners, no Allied forces. He clicked the cursor and closed the story down.

Patrick pulled himself away from the wires and tried to focus on his own programme. He logged on and checked his messages and then the night schedule: a daily PA wire which ran through the domestic and international stories expected to make news overnight and in the following day's paper. Patrick printed a copy of this off and was making notes when his second producer turned up. Hilary Gore was just twenty-five but she wore clothes Patrick's mum would consider frumpy. He had taken a dislike against her early on, alienated by her strident Home Counties accent and overheard conversations with her 'mummy'. But, slowly, he had come to realise that she was one of the hardest-working and most diligent journalists the programme had. Rob had destroyed her confidence in one brutal morning meeting six months before, and ever since, Hilary had preferred to work the night shift. Patrick considered this his good fortune. She had identified him as a fellow struggler and adopted him. As he watched, Hilary pulled a bundle of old newspaper from her tote bag and placed it on his desk.

'What's this?'

'Open it, you wazzock.'

Patrick unwrapped the parcel tentatively. Inside was a slightly faded, second-hand coffee mug with a chip on the lip. He held the mug up and turned it round: 'Happy Birthday Patrick,' it read.

'I saw it at our village jumble sale and I thought: I know the very man. Twenty pence!'

'Thanks, Hilary, that's really kind.'

A slight blush coloured Hilary's neck. She shook her head. 'It's not a token of affection, Patrick, it's an environmental intervention. I've counted how many paper cups you go through in a night shift and it's an outrage. Now you've no excuse. You have to use your mug for tea, coffee and water, no more excuses. You and me together, Patrick, saving the planet one paper cup at a time.' She planted her feet on the bottom of a revolving chair and struggled with her Hunter wellies, their tread filled with rich, dark soil, until inching them off to reveal a pair of firm calves and thick red hiking socks. Amanda was standing watching, unsmiling, at the door to Rob's empty office. She waved a sheath of papers in his direction.

'I've got the prospects and a life to get on with. Can we do this?'

The handover meeting was brief and business-like. Amanda ran swiftly through the stories, first home news, then foreign, providing only the minimum information required. Patrick got the same feeling he always did from Amanda; that she disliked him but not strongly and for no particular reason. She raced through the prospects and a meeting that often took an hour lasted half that, which was fine by Patrick. He flicked through the four pages one more time, Rob's advice about appearing confident rattling around his head.

'What about that failed execution in Ohio? It sounded pretty nasty.'

Amanda pushed her glasses a little further up her thin nose. 'You can fix a two-way on that if you like. I didn't think it was a big deal.'

Patrick nodded. 'And did you see that wire that just dropped? A bomb blast in Kabul?'

Amanda shifted in her seat. 'I saw it. It doesn't look like there's much in it. It's the election next week and the whole BBC News machine's going huge on that, so unless we can't avoid it, we're meant to leave Afghanistan alone.'

'Okay. Who told you that? Rob?'

'No, it came from higher than Rob. I don't know who made the call, but it was well above my pay grade.'

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