

Consequences

An Inspector McLean Short Story

by

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Nature had already begun to reclaim him.

The boy lay on his back, sprawled out amongst black plastic sacks like so much discarded garbage. Rats had chewed away his outstretched fingers, gnawing the flesh down to pale white bone. Something larger had gone to work on his stomach, most likely an urban fox. Entrails looped over the glistening hot cobbles, pulled this way and that by hungry crows. Even now, disturbed by the arrival of a SOC team and several police officers, they stared down at the scene with button-black eyes, cawing quietly to each other from the safety of the fire escape ladders overhead. Detective Inspector Anthony McLean approached with trepidation. His nose told him that the body was in a state of decay; he had no great desire to look down on yet another ruined life.

‘What’ve got for me this time, Angus?’ he asked of the white overall clad pathologist leaning over the body. Dr Cadwallader turned at his voice.

‘Ah, Tony. I was wondering who they’d give this to. Come, have a look.’

‘Must I?’

‘It’s not as bad as all that. He’s only been here a day or so.’

The dead boy - not really a man yet - was perhaps sixteen years old, his pale, bloodless face framed by a mop of floppy dark hair. Although they had ravaged his body, for some reason the animals had left his head alone. And as he lay there, perfectly still, McLean could just about persuade himself that the boy was sleeping. He looked so peaceful, almost angelic.

‘Cause of death?’ he asked the pathologist.

‘Couldn’t say. Not until I get him back to the mortuary. There’s too much damage. He’s a drug user though.’ Cadwallader pointed to the boy’s outstretched arm; the grey-brown bruising around the crook of his elbow and the tiny red pinpricks of

the needle's kiss. McLean looked away, taking in the scene. Normally rubbish would be confined to the wheeled bins lined up and down the alley, but a month into the council-workers strike and they spilled out all over the place. The city was sinking under the stench of its own refuse and here was one more piece of trash to be thrown out with everything else.

‘Do we know who he is?’

‘No ID on him sir, just a pocketful of cash.’ Detective Constable Stuart MacBride lifted up a clear evidence bag with a roll of dirty twenty pound notes in it. In this part of town that could mean only one thing. Rent boy money; the wages of sin. McLean flagged down the SOC photographer who was taking arty compositions of rubbish bags.

‘OK, get me a good head shot. Looks like we’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way.’

Calton Hill on a humid September evening. The heat of the day still radiated from the stones, and even up here above the city roofs, the stench of rotting garbage covered everything. Or maybe it was just the flesh trade of this park that left a foul smell in his nose. McLean walked the shadowed pathways, hands in pockets, head down, trying to look inconspicuous. Trying to look like he wasn't a policeman.

It wasn't hard to spot the people there for business. They were young, male and looked at the world with a desperate anger. Some smoked, but most just leant against the railings and stared. None could be more than twenty years old; the city preferred its meat fresh.

‘You lookin’ fer something?’ A red-headed youth, freckles and pale green, piercing eyes sidled up to McLean, hands shoved into the tight pockets of his jeans. He was thin as a schoolboy’s excuse, shaking slightly like he was nervous.

‘Not my type.’ McLean pulled the photograph he’d got from the SOC team that afternoon, held it up. ‘More interested in this kid.’

‘Fuck!’ The young man jerked back, turning away and shouting to his colleagues. ‘It’s the bizzies. Leg it.’ McLean had expected no less, and was ready for the badly aimed fist that swung his way. He ducked, grabbed the passing arm and twisted it around.

‘Ow! Fuck off me, pig!’ The young man fought against his restraint. Most of his colleagues had run off, but a few were watching, circling like wolves. McLean knew he’d have to act fast; it wouldn’t take much for the situation to turn nasty, and he’d come alone precisely to avoid the usual reaction. One whiff of cop and these boys would melt away.

‘Just listen to me, OK.’ He didn’t let go of the struggling rent boy, but he eased the pressure on his twisted arm a little. ‘I couldn’t give a shit what you do to yourself. You want to take it up the arse from some fat businessman for twenty quid a time, that’s fine. Go ahead and knock yourself out. I just want to know who this kid is.’

‘Why, so you can take him back to the cells and fuck him in private? Fuck off.’

‘He’s dead, you twat. Someone dumped him out with the garbage yesterday morning. You want me to catch them before they do the same to you?’ McLean released his hold on the young man, pushing him away across the path. In the fracas he’d dropped the photograph, and now it lay face up between them. The young man

rubbed at his arm but didn't run away, instead glaring at the inspector with a mixture of hatred and fear.

'Well? Do you know him?' McLean nodded down at the picture. Warily, like a man approaching a wild animal, the young rent boy bent down and picked it up. He gave it a casual glance.

'I dunno. Maybe. What's it worth?'

'They don't know his name. No-one knew anything much about him really. He's only been on the scene a couple of months. Came and went. Reckon he was hooked up with a pimp going by the name of Karl.'

McLean sat in the dark and dusty vice squad offices, trying not to look too hard at the pictures tacked to the walls. He'd seen plenty of things to turn his stomach in fifteen years on the force, but he was glad he didn't have to wade through filth like that every day. Detective Chief Inspector Jo Dexter had joined up at the same time as him, but had hit the promotion ladder early. McLean was happy for her, though he preferred his own niche; a career of chasing prostitutes and pornographers had hardened Jo Dexter's once pretty features so that she looked far older than her thirty-nine years. She studied the photo McLean had given her, expression blank as if she'd seen a thousand just like it before.

'I don't know him either, Tony. Sorry. But Karl? Could be Karl Janec. Pond scum. You know the type. He preys on those even more unfortunate than himself. Runs a half dozen rent boys in the east end of town. Strictly small time.'

'You got any kind of surveillance on him?'

‘Not at the moment, no. He’s not worth the effort. We’ll sweep him up when we make the next big bust. Why?’

‘Just don’t want to tread on any toes, Jo. I think I might go and pay this Karl a visit.’

‘You got anything for me, Stuart?’

McLean pushed open the door of the video viewing room, his eyes drawn to the flickering screens. Two men sat at the console, and the smell of coffee and donuts filled the warm air. ‘Ah, Bob, you’re here too.’

Detective Sergeant ‘Grumpy’ Bob Laird looked around, not a trace of guilt on his face though he should doubtless have been somewhere else.

‘We’ve gone through about twelve hours’ worth sir. No sign of our boy yet.’

McLean pulled up a seat, squeezing into the gap between the two detectives. The greasy brown paper bag on the video control console yielded just one small donut, sugar crystals spiralling down into the expensive electronics as he lifted it to his mouth. He swept the mess away half-heartedly, his concentration on the flickering images in front of him.

It was a static view of the street. Late night; the timestamp on the image said 00:45. A few drunken pedestrians lurched along the pavement, and a steady stream of cars glided swiftly past. Figures loitered in shop doorways, heads down and hooded against the omnipresent electronic eye. Occasionally a car would slow, but whatever the kerb-crawlers were looking for, it plainly wasn’t on offer here.

‘What did we get for a time of death, Stuart?’ McLean turned towards DC MacBride, who was operating the video control dial, alternately speeding up and slowing down the image.

‘Doc estimated sometime between midnight and four in the morning.’

‘Can’t he do better than that?’

‘He’s snowed under right now, sir. That pile-up on the bridge. Must be ten, twelve bodies they’ve got to put back together for identification.’

‘So we’ve got no name, no time of death, no cause of death. Bloody marvellous. Do we know anything about this boy?’ McLean slumped back in his chair and stared at the screen again, watching the comical fast-forward motion loop through the minutes past one o’clock and on towards two.

‘Hang on a mo.’ Grumpy Bob sat up in his seat. ‘Go back a bit, lad. There.’ He jabbed his finger at the corner of the screen. ‘Now bring it forward, slowly.’

And there he was, walking casually along the pavement, head down and hands shoved into the pockets of a short black jacket. He was unmistakably the dead young man they had found in the alley. As he neared the centre of the camera’s field of view, he stopped, turned to face a dark coloured car that had pulled up. Then after the briefest of conversations, he opened the door and got in. One thirty-eight am and seventeen seconds.

Karl Janec was the sort of man you could instantly forget. Short hair, plain face, same jeans and T-shirt as worn by half the male population of Edinburgh. You wouldn’t give him a second glance in a crowd. He glanced around a couple of times before jogging down the stone steps in front of his tenement block, checking to see he wasn’t

being followed, then hunched his shoulders and headed off towards the old docks. Across the road, hiding under a useful shop awning, McLean waited until he was a hundred yards or so away, then set off after him, keeping to the other side of the road.

It wasn't difficult to tail Janec through the busy streets, but as he turned away from the bustle and into the back lanes of Trinity, McLean had to work harder not to be spotted. He wished he'd brought backup, but Grumpy Bob was busy trying to identify the car they had seen on the CCTV footage. DC MacBride was chasing up the pathologist for a report on cause of death, and until it was confirmed as foul play, he couldn't waste a lot of time or manpower on the investigation.

Hanging back for a few moments after Janec had turned once corner, McLean thought for a moment he had lost the man as he looked down an empty street of anonymous terraced houses. Then a movement at the far end caught his eye. A narrow wooden gate swinging shut over a vennel running back to the gardens behind the houses. He crossed the road and walked purposefully towards the turning at the end, passing the gate as if he were just another pedestrian on his way to somewhere else. It had a shiny new Yale lock fitted into the old cracked paint, but it hadn't latched shut as it closed. Retracing his footsteps, McLean pushed it lightly, and it swung open on oiled hinges to reveal a narrow passage, piled up with anonymous brown cardboard boxes. Sunlight bleached the rubbish tip at the back, and the one-sided noise of a telephone conversation spilled out of an open doorway set into the wall a few yards in.

'Yeah, tomorrow afternoon. Should be all done by then. We'll get the whole operation moved after that.'

McLean stepped through the maze of boxes on silent feet until he could peer through the door. Beyond would once have been the living room of a small ground

floor flat, but now it was lined wall to wall with metal shelves and whirring DVD recorders. A lone monitor showed something graphic and sexual, partially obscured by Karl Janec's head. He had a mobile phone clamped to one ear and was struggling with the cellophane wrapping around a cake-box of blank DVDs.

Stooping down, McLean pulled a slipcase out of the nearest open box. For an illegal operation, the packaging was surprisingly well-designed, and from the photograph on the front of the case, there was no doubting that this was an illegal operation. Peering once more into the room, he caught a full view of the image flickering on the screen across the room, and had to resist the urge to barge in and kick the crap out of Karl Janec. Instead he crept quietly out of the vannel, making sure to latch the gate properly this time. As he crossed the street, heading for an open tenement hallway where he could maintain surveillance for a short while, he pulled out his mobile phone and dialled.

'DCI Dexter? Hi Jo, it's Tony here. I think I might have found something you'd be interested in.'

'He says your lad never told him his last name. I'm inclined to believe him; he's got a lot more on his plate to worry about than a dead rent boy.'

McLean peered through the one way glass at the slumped figure of Karl Janec as he was being interrogated. Beside him, DCI Jo Dexter was unusually cheerful, which might have had something to do with the child pornography ring they'd just uncovered. The numbers stored on Janec's phone were interesting enough, but the laptop computer being analysed by the tech boys in the basement would keep vice busy for months.

‘Ah well. At least something good’s come of it. Let me know if he does remember anything, eh?’ McLean opened the door to leave.

‘No problem, Tony. I owe you big time.’

Outside, the corridor boiled with detectives, all milling around waiting for the latest bombshell to come out of the interrogation. McLean ducked his way through them, trying to minimise the back-slapping and congratulations. He didn’t want any credit for what was just a stroke of luck. These guys waded through filth every day to stop men like Janec; they deserved the praise, not him.

Escaping the vice squad, he went off in search of DC MacBride, finding him down in the canteen tucking into a bacon buttie. Brown sauce stained the constable’s rather lurid tie.

‘Any more news from the mortuary?’ McLean asked, sitting himself down and nicking some chips.

Stuart winced, swallowing hard before answering. ‘Not much yet, sir. They’re still snowed under. But we got some blood work back. Our dead rent boy had a heroin problem, but not enough to kill him. And he was HIV positive, but hadn’t developed full-blown AIDS. There’s no sign of drug therapy either, so chances are he didn’t even know.’

‘Anything on the car?’

The constable looked at the rest of his buttie, then put it back on his plate and pushed the whole tray to one side, obviously no longer hungry. ‘Not yet. DS Laird’s chasing it up, but we only got a partial from the CCTV.’

More likely Grumpy Bob was chasing up forty winks in one of the unused incident rooms, McLean thought.

‘Never mind, Stuart. Let’s go see a man about some drugs.’

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The stairs were unlit, save for a weak green glow filtering in through the moss and grime encrusted skylight way overhead. As they trudged up the stone steps, McLean could see the rivers of condensation running down the gloss-painted walls, pooling like urine at the bottom. The whole place stank of tomcat and tramps' breath, overlaid with a sickly sweet smell of hash.

These tenements had once been the proud homes of Edinburgh's craftsmen, built by rich merchants to keep their workforce happy. Now they were the new sink estates, squalid and uninviting. The council was doing its best to knock down all the mistakes of the sixties and seventies, and the new parliament building just a few hundred yards away was slowly dragging the neighbourhood upwards, but still some places resisted gentrification with all the grace of an upraised middle finger.

According to the word from HQ, Guido Tanner lived on the fourth floor, one from the top. He was a proud specimen of Edinburgh citizenry, happy to sell his grandmother to save his own skin. Currently on methadone and parole, the information he had given to the police in the past had kept him out of Saughton so far. If anyone knew who might have supplied a dead rent boy with his last fix, Guido was as good a place as any to start.

McLean stopped on the landing, giving DC MacBride time to catch up and gulp down a few breaths. The door to the apartment was closed; loud music pumped out from behind it.

'Guido?' McLean rapped at the door. 'Guido Tanner?'

No answer, but the door on the other side of the landing inched open. An Asian woman's face peered out from the darkness beyond, scowled, and then disappeared. The door slammed and bolts slotted home.

'Guido?' McLean tried the handle this time, and it turned. As he opened the door, the music swelled even louder. A thick cloud of smoke billowed out onto the landing; tobacco cut with something stronger. He pushed on into the hall, trying not to breathe too deeply as he made his way into the living room.

It was surprisingly tidy, if rather cluttered. The stereo pumping out rap music sat on one end of a long, low table. Arranged in the rest of the space was a set of scales, a boxful of empty Ziploc bags, some stainless steel spatulas and what looked like a kilo of heroin. A shoebox on the floor was filled with little gram packets, weighed, filled and ready to go. Quite the production line.

'Sir, is that...' DC MacBride began to speak, but McLean raised a finger to his lips and motioned the constable to follow him back out into the hallway. There were three other doors. The kitchen and bedroom stood ajar, but the third was closed. As they stood on either side of it, McLean heard the telltale flushing of the toilet, then the clack of the bolt being pulled back. At the same moment as Guido Tanner opened the door, the CD in the stereo came to an end. The hissing of water refilling the cistern framed the sudden silence.

'Good afternoon Guido. I hope you washed your hands.'

In many ways it was a bit of a nuisance. McLean wanted to ask about the dead rent boy, still nameless, but there was the small matter of possession with intent to deal that everyone else thought more important.

Interview room three felt rather claustrophobic. DC MacBride stood with his back to the wall, close by the door. McLean himself was seated at the interrogation table, along with DCI Carney from the drug squad. Opposite them, Guido Tanner stared at his hands and picked his nails. Alongside him, his lawyer looked unhappy.

‘My client would like to ask if he might plea bargain.’

DCI Carney grinned and leant forwards, placing his elbows on the table and staring hard at Guido.

‘That depends entirely on what he’s prepared to tell us.’

‘They say he’s going to testify against McLennan. With what he knows we could take down the whole east coast operation.’

McLean tried not to laugh at DC MacBride’s enthusiasm. ‘Don’t count your chickens, Stuart. Someone like Guido won’t last long in court against the kind of lawyers McLennan can afford. My guess is Carney won’t use him to go straight for the big man. Just get another step closer.’

‘But it’s a good bust, sir.’

‘Oh yes. If nothing else we’ve kept a kilo of heroin off the streets. But we’re no closer to finding out who our mysterious dead rent boy is.’ He flapped the photo back and forth absent-mindedly. Guido had been eager to demonstrate just how helpful he could be, but though he admitted to supplying the young man, he didn’t know his name.

‘Ah, there you are sir. Been looking all over.’

McLean turned to see Grumpy Bob marching up the corridor. He, too held a photograph, though his was larger.

‘Tell me you’ve got something on the car, Bob,’ McLean said. Grumpy Bob grinned and handed over the stiff sheet.

‘Oh, I have sir. And you’re going to like it.’

South of Edinburgh, a couple of miles beyond the bypass and perched on the edge of the canyon-like Esk valley, the village of Roslin could be split easily into two halves. There was the south-west side, where ramshackle old mineworkers’ terraced cottages ran cheek by jowl with a non-descript seventies housing estate, and there was the north-east side, near to the famous chapel, where substantial detached sandstone mansions sat in secluded gardens. Councillor Preston Gunn lived in the latter and made much of the fact that he had been born and raised in the former. McLean had met him once before, at a reception to honour the retiring Chief Constable. He hadn’t much taken to the man then, and time only worsened the feeling. Gunn, after all, was responsible for simultaneously slashing the police budget whilst promising to put more bobbies on the beat. His hard line with the garbage collectors was the reason the streets were full of rubbish. Like all politicians, he was quite happy to bask in the limelight whilst lining up others to take the flack when things went wrong.

‘Lothian and Borders police, sir.’ McLean made the introductions and showed his warrant card. ‘May we come in?’

‘I... Well. It’s not exactly convenient, inspector. I’ve got dinner guests.’

‘It shouldn’t take a moment, sir. I was just wondering if you could tell us where you were last Tuesday night, Wednesday morning. Between about one and three.’

A tiny flicker in the eye, so subtle McLean almost missed it. ‘Why, I was asleep here with my wife, inspector. What did you expect?’

‘Do you know this young man, sir?’ McLean held up the photograph of the dead rent boy. The flicker was more noticeable now. An involuntary twitch of the eyelid.

‘I... No. Never.’

‘Is that your car there sir?’ McLean pointed to one of several expensive cars parked in the gravel driveway. Gunn nodded, silent.

‘And you’re sure it was here on the night in question, last Tuesday?’

‘Of course. Look, what’s this all about?’

‘Were you aware that the boy was HIV positive?’

‘I... What?’

‘What’s going on here Preston, dear?’ A female voice came from the hall. Gunn looked round.

‘It’s alright Jean. It’s nothing serious. Go talk to our guests. I’ll be back in a minute.’ He turned back to McLean, a haunted light in his eyes. ‘Look, you’d better come in.’

‘Any idea what killed him yet, Angus?’

McLean stood in the cold white examination theatre at the mortuary, watching as Angus Cadwallader practised his art. The pale, ruined remains of the young man lay on the stainless steel slab, slowly revealing their innermost secrets.

‘Give me a little time, Tony. I’ve only just started.’

‘Sorry, it’s been an odd few days. I’ve been chasing around trying to find out who he is. Uncovered all manner of nasty little secrets, but nobody knows his name.’

‘Maybe never will, unless someone recognises him from a photo. His teeth are perfect; no sign of any dental work. I’ve sent a DNA sample off to be checked, but he’s young. Can’t be much more than sixteen, so I doubt we’d have him on record. As for prints, well his fingers are gone. Christ, most of his body’s been chewed apart.’

‘Except his face.’ McLean recalled the alleyway where the boy had been found. ‘Was he dead? You know, before...?’

‘Before the rats and foxes and crows started on him? Oh yes. Probably been lying there for a good few hours, but with this much garbage piled up on the streets, the scavengers are getting bold. Normally it’d be days before they got to him.’

McLean watched as the doctor opened up his patient and removed his organs one by one. He listened to the quiet commentary, but said nothing, seeing only that smooth, young face. Would they ever put a name to it? If he was local they might, but chances were he’d come from further afield. Half of Edinburgh seemed to be immigrants these days; which Eastern European countries should he send the photo to? And how many of them would bother responding to one more missing person case?

Finally, Cadwallader put down his scalpel and pulled off his latex gloves.

‘You can sew him back up now, Tracy,’ he said to his assistant.

‘What’s the verdict, doc? Do you think you can save him?’ McLean asked. It raised a thin smile from the pathologist.

‘I think he’s a bit beyond that, Tony.’

‘Well, what about cause of death?’

‘That’s a problem, too. He’s a drug addict, but I don’t think that killed him. He’s been chewed up quite badly, but that was after he died. There’s nothing wrong with his brain, no obvious sign of aneurysm or heart attack. Blood screening shows no sign of poisoning either.’

‘So what are you saying, Angus? He wasn’t murdered? Then why was he dumped in the alley with all the garbage?’

‘I don’t think he was dumped at all, Tony. From the look of him, I think he just lay down there and died.’

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