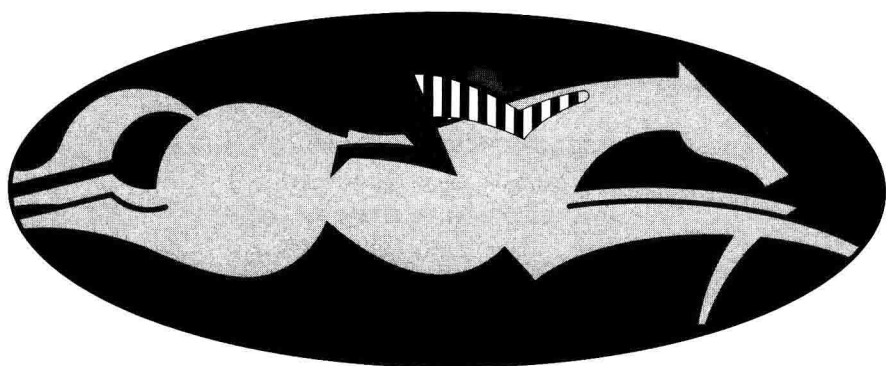


TO THE HILT



DICK FRANCIS

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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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BEDE'S DEATH SONG

Fore thaem neidfaerae naenig uuirthit
 thoncsnotturra, than him tharf sie
to ymbhycggannae aer his hiniongae
hwaet his gastae godaes aeththae yflaes
aefter deothdaege doemid uueorthae

*Before that sudden journey no one is wiser in
thought than he needs to be, in considering,
before his departure, what will be adjudged to
his soul, of good or evil, after his death-day*

ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER

TO THE HILT

I

I don't think my stepfather much minded dying. That he almost took me with him wasn't really his fault.

My mother sent me a postcard—"Perhaps I'd better tell you your stepfather has had a heart attack"—which I read in disbelief outside the remote Scottish post office where I went every two weeks to collect my letters. The postcard had lain there unread for approximately ten days.

Somewhat distractedly, though my stepfather and I were hardly intimate, I went back into the cluttered little shop and begged use of the telephone.

"You'll be reimbursing us as usual, Mr. Kinloch?"

"Of course."

Dour old Donald Cameron, nodding, lifted a flap of counter and allowed me through to his own jealously protected and wall-mounted instrument. As the official public telephone, thoughtfully provided outside for the few surrounding inhabitants, survived vandalism for roughly thirty minutes each time it was mended, old Donald was accustomed to extending to customers

the courtesy of his own phone. Since he charged an extra fee for its use, I privately reckoned it was Donald himself who regularly disabled the less profitable technology on his doorstep.

"Mother?" I said, eventually connected to her in London. "This is Al."

"Alexander," she corrected automatically, not liking my abbreviation, "are you in Scotland?"

"I am, yes. What about the old man?"

"Your stepfather," she said reprovingly, "is resting."

"Er . . . *where* is he resting?" In hospital? In *peace*?

"In bed," she said.

"So he is alive."

"Of course he's alive."

"But your postcard . . ."

"There's nothing to panic about," she said calmly. "He had some chest pains and spent a week in the Clinic for stabilization and tests, and now he is home with me, resting."

"Do you want me to come?" I asked blankly. "Do you need any help?"

"He has a nurse," she said.

My mother's unvarying composure, I sometimes thought, stemmed from a genuine deficiency of emotion. I had never seen her cry, had never heard tears in her voice, not even after her first husband, my father, had been killed in a shooting accident out on the moors. To me, at seventeen, his sudden loss had been devastating. My mother, dry-eyed, had told me to pull myself together.

A year later, still cool at the ceremony, she had married Ivan George Westering, baronet, brewer, pillar of the British Jockey Club, my stepfather. He was not domineering; had been generous, even; but he disapproved of the way I lived. We were polite to each other.

"How ill is he?" I asked.

"You can come if you like," my mother said. "It's entirely up to you."

Despite the casual voice, the carefully maintained distance, it sounded closer to a plea than I was used to.

"I'll arrive tomorrow," I said, making up my mind.

"If you're sure?" She betrayed no relief however; no welcome.

"I'm sure."

"Very well."

I paid the phone call's ransom into Donald's stringy outstretched palm and returned to my laden, ancient and battered four-wheel drive outside. It had good gears, good brakes, good tires and little remaining color on its thin metal flanks. It contained, at that moment, food for two weeks, a big cylinder of butane gas, supplies of batteries, bottled water and insect killer and three brown cardboard boxes, parcel delivery, replenishing the tools of my trade.

I painted pictures. I lived in a broken-down long-deserted shepherd's hut, known as a bothy, out on a windy Scottish mountainside, without electricity. My hair grew to my shoulders. I played the bagpipes. My many and fairly noble relations thought me weird.

Some are born weird, some achieve it, others have weirdness thrust upon them. I preferred solitude and paint to outthinking salmon and shooting for food; I had only half inherited the country skills and courtesies of my ancestors. I was the twenty-nine-year-old son of the (dead) fourth son of an earl and I had no unearned wealth. I had three uncles, four aunts and twenty-one cousins. Someone in such a large (and conventional) family had to be weird, and it seemed I'd been elected.

I didn't mind. Mad Alexander. Messes about with paints. And not even *oils*, my dear, but those frightfully common *acrylics*.

If Michelangelo could have laid his hands on acrylics, I said, he would have joyfully used them. Acrylics were endlessly versatile and never faded. They outlived oils by furlongs.

Don't be *ridiculous*, Alexander.

I paid my uncle (the present earl, known as "Himself") a painting a year as rent for the ruin I inhabited on his estate. The painting was done to his choice. He mostly asked for portraits of his horses or dogs. I quite liked to please him.

Outside the post office, on that dry cloudy cold morning in September, I sat in my old jeep-type jalopy and did my paperwork, opening my letters, answering them and sending off the replies. There were two checks that day for work delivered, which I dispatched to the bank, and an order from America for six more paintings to be done at once—like yesterday. Ridiculous, mad Alexander, in his weird way, actually, quietly prospered; and I kept that fact to myself.

The paperwork done, I drove my wheels northwards, at first along a recognizable road, then a roughly graveled stretch, then up a long rutted and indistinct track which led nowhere but to my unnamed home in the Monadhliath Mountains. "Between Loch Ness and Aviemore," I usually explained, and no, I hadn't seen the monster.

Whoever in the mists of time had first built my bothy had chosen its position well: it backed straight into an elbowed granite outcrop that sheltered it from the north and east, so that winter blizzards mostly leapfrogged over the top. In front lay a sort of small stony plateau that on the far side dropped away steeply, giving me long views of valleys and rocky hills and of a main road far below.

The only problem with the road that served to remind me that an outside world existed was that my dwelling was visible *from* it, so that far too often I found strangers on my doorstep, hikers

equipped with shorts, maps, half-ton walking boots and endless energy. There was nowhere left in the world unpenetrated by inquisitive legs.

On the day of my mother's postcard I returned to find four of the nosy species poking around without inhibitions. Male. Blue, scarlet, orange backpacks. Glasses. English regional voices.

The days when I'd offered tea, comforts and conversation were long gone. Irritated by the invasion, I drove onto the plateau, stopped the engine, removed my keys from the ignition and walked towards my front (and only) door.

The four men stopped peering into things and ranged themselves into a ragged line ahead of me, across my path.

"There's no one in," one of them called. "It's all locked up."

I replied without heat, "What do you want?"

"Him as lives here," one said loudly.

"Maybe that's you," said another.

I felt the first tremble of something wrong. Their manner subtly wasn't the awkwardness of trespassers caught in the act. There was no shuffling from foot to foot. They met my eyes not with placating apology, but with fierce concentration.

I stopped walking and said again, "What do you want?"

The first speaker said, "Where is it?"

I felt a strong primitive impulse to turn tail and run, and wished afterwards that I'd listened to the wisdom of prehistory, but somehow one doesn't easily equate knobbly-kneed hikers with positive danger.

I said, "I don't know what you mean," and I made the mistake of turning my back on them and retracing my steps towards the jeep.

I heard their heavy feet scrunching on the stony ground behind me but still didn't truly believe in disaster until they clutched and spun me round and purposefully and knowledgeably

punched. I had a sort of splintered composite view of intent malevolent faces, of gray daylight reflecting on their incongruous glasses, of their hard bombarding fists and of a wildly slanting horizon of unhelpful mountains as I doubled forwards over a debilitating pain in the abdomen. Neck chop. Jabs to the ribs. Classic pattern. Over and over. Thud, merciless thud.

I was wearing jeans, shirt and sweater: they might as well have been gossamer for all the protection they offered. As for meaningful retaliation, read nonexistent. I couldn't find breath. I swung at them in anger but fought an octopus. Bad news.

One of the men kept saying insistently, "Where is it? Where is it?" but his colleagues made it impossible for me to answer.

I wondered vaguely if by "it" they meant money, of which I carried little. They were welcome to it, I thought groggily, if they would stop their attentions. I unintentionally dropped my small bunch of keys and lost it to a hand that grabbed it up with triumph.

Somehow or other I ended with my back against the jeep: no further retreat. One of them snatched handfuls of my hair and banged my head against metal. I clawed blood down his cheek and got a head butt in return that went straight from my skull to my knees, buckling them like butter.

Events became unclear. I slid to the ground, facedown. I had a close view of gray granite stones and short dry struggling blades of grass, more brown than green.

"Where is it?"

I didn't answer. Didn't move. Shut my eyes. Drifted.

"He's out," a voice said. "Fat lot of help you are."

I felt hands roughly searching my pockets. Resistance, as an option, promised only more bruises. I lay still, not wholly conscious, inertia pervading, angry but willy-nilly passive, nothing coordinating, no strength, no will.

After a time of floating I felt their hands on me again.

"Is he alive?"

"No thanks to you, but yes, he is. He's breathing."

"Just leave him."

"Chuck him over there."

"Over there" turned out to be the edge of the plateau, but I didn't realize it until I'd been dragged across the stones and lifted and flung over. I went rolling fast and inexorably down the steep mountain slope, almost bouncing from rock to rock, still incapable of helping myself, unable to stop, dimly aware of my body flooding with whirling comprehensive pain.

I slammed down onto a larger rock and did stop there, half on my side, half on my stomach. I felt no gratitude. I felt pulverized. Winded. Dazed. Thought vanished.

Some sort of consciousness soon came crazily back, but orderly memory took much longer.

Those bastard hikers, I thought eventually. I remembered their faces. I could draw them. They were demons in a dream.

The accurate knowledge of who I was and where I was arrived quietly.

I tried to move. A mistake.

Time would take care of it, perhaps. Give it time.

Those bastards had been *real*, I realized, demons or not. Their fists had been real. "Where is it?" had been real. In spite of everything, I ruefully smiled. I thought it possible that they hadn't known what they were actually looking for. "It" could have been whatever their victim valued most. There was no guarantee in any case that delivering up "it" would save one from being thrown down a mountain.

It occurred to me to wonder what time it was. I looked at my left wrist, but my watch had gone.

It had been about eleven o'clock when I'd got back from the post office . . .

Hell's teeth, I thought abruptly. *Mother. Ivan. Heart attack.* I was supposed to be going to London. Or the moon.

The worst thing I might feel, I considered, was nothing.

Not the case.

With fierce concentration, I could move all my fingers and all my toes. Anything more hurt too much for enthusiasm. Outraged muscles went into breath-stopping spasms to protect themselves.

Wait. Lie still. I felt cold.

Bloody stupid, being mugged on one's own doorstep. Embarrassing. A helpless little old lady I was not, but a pushover—literally—just the same.

I found the casual callousness of the walkers extraordinary. They had appeared not to care whether I lived or died, and had in fact left it to chance. I supposed they could truthfully say, "He was alive when we saw him last." They could dodge the word "murder."

The ebb tide in my body finally turned. Movement could at last be achieved without spasm. All I had to do from then on was scrape myself off the mountain and go catch a train. Even the thought was exhausting.

I was sure, after a while, that by immense good fortune I had broken no bones in my helter-skeltering fall. I'd been a rag doll. Babies got lucky through not trying to help themselves. Same principle, I supposed.

With an unstoical groan, I raised from prone to kneeling on my rock and took a look up at where I'd come down. The edge of the plateau was hidden behind outcrops but was alarmingly far above. Looking down was almost worse, though from five or more years of living there, I understood at once where I was in relation to the bothy above. If I could traverse to the right without losing my footing and plunging down another slope, I would come eventually to the uneven but definable path that meandered

from the road below up to my home: the challenging half-hidden ascent that brought walkers to my door.

The four hiker-demons had probably come up that way. I certainly didn't want to meet them if they were on their way down. Hours had probably passed, though. I knew I had lain helpless for a long time. They must surely by then have left.

Realistically, I was going nowhere except uncontrollably downwards again unless I could reach that path. Hikers or not, it was the only possible route. Trying to go in the opposite direction, to reach the road-track up from the post office, was pointless, as it involved an overhang and a perpendicular rock climb, neither of which could be managed without gear.

I was well used to moving alone in the mountains, and I was always careful. I would never normally have attempted what now confronted me without an axe and crampons, let alone with every move a wince, but fear of a less lucky fall, of a broken leg or worse, kept me stuck like glue, with fingernails and tiny cautious shifts of weight, to every protruding scrap of solid rock. Loose stones rattled and bounced away. Scrubby earth gave too little purchase. Rock was all.

I made the journey sitting down, looking out over the perilous drops to the valley, digging in with my heels; careful, careful . . . *careful*.

The path, when at last I reached it, was by comparison a broad highway. I sat on one of its rocky steps and felt as weak as thankful: sat with my forearms on my knees, head hanging, trying to be cool about a degree of strain and discomfort far beyond the easily bearable.

Those *bastards*, I thought. The helpless rage of all victims shook in my gut. My physical state was shaming and infuriating. Somehow or other I should surely have put up a better fight.

From where I sat I could see most of the long path down to

the road. No scarlet, orange or blue backpacks moved on it anywhere. Curse them, I thought; and damn them; and *shit*.

There was silence behind and above me and I had no sense of anyone being there. The inescapability of having to go up for a look was only a shade worse than actually making the effort; but I couldn't stay where I was forever.

With reluctant muscles and a fearful mind I got laboriously to my feet and began the climb.

No evil faces grinned over the plateau above. My instinct that I was alone proved a true one, and I crawled the last bit on hands and knees and raised my head for a cautious look without anyone pouncing on me with a yell and kicking me back into space.

The reason for the silence and the absence of attackers was immediately obvious: my jeep had gone.

I stood erect on the plateau, figuratively groaning. Not only had I lost my transport, but the door of my home stood wide open with heaps of my belongings spilling out of it—a chair, clothes, books, bedclothes. I walked wearily across the plateau and looked in at a sickening mess.

Like all who live purposefully alone without provision for guests, my actual household goods were few. I tended to eat straight out of the frying pan, and to drink all liquids from a mug. Living without electricity, I owned none of the routinely stolen things like television, stereo or computer, nor did I have a mobile phone because of not being able to recharge the batteries. I did own a portable radio for checking that interstellar war hadn't broken out, and for playing taped music if I felt like it, but it was no grand affair with resale value. I had no antique silver. No Chippendale chairs.

What I did have was paint.

When I'd moved into the tumbledown building five and a half years earlier I'd made only the center and largest of its three di-

visions habitable. About three yards by five, my room had been given a businesslike new roof, a large double-glazed window, and a host of antidamp preservation measures in its rebuilt walls and flooring. Light, heat and cooking were achieved with gas. Running water came from a small clear burn trickling through nearby rocks, and for bathroom I had a weathered privy a short walk away. I'd meant at first to stay on the mountain only during the long northern summer days, but in the end had left my departure later and later that first year until suddenly the everlasting December nights were shortening again, and I'd stayed snug through a freezing January and February and had never since considered leaving.

Apart from a bed, a small table, a chest of drawers and one comfortable chair, the whole room was taken up by three easels, stacked canvases, a work stool, a wall of shelves and the equivalent of a kitchen table covered with pots and tubes of paints, and other essentials of my work like jugs of brushes and painting knives and jam jars full of clear or dirty water.

Lack of space and my own instincts dictated order and overall tidiness, but chiefly the disciplined organization was the result of the very nature of the acrylics themselves: they dried so fast when exposed to air that lids *had* to be replaced, tubes had to be capped, only small quantities could be squeezed onto a palette at a time, brushes had to be constantly rinsed clean, knives wiped, hands washed. I kept large amounts of clean and dirty water in separate buckets under the table and used tissues by the jeepload for keeping mess at bay.

Despite all care I had few clothes free of paint stains and had to sand down the wood-block floor now and then to get rid of multicolored sludge.

The mess the four demons had made of all this was spectacularly awful.

I had left work in progress on all three easels, as I often painted three pictures simultaneously. All three were now facedown on the floor, thoroughly saturated by the kicked-over buckets. My worktable lay on its side, pots, brushes and paints spilling wide. Burst paint tubes had been squashed underfoot. My bed had been tipped over, chest of drawers ransacked, box files pulled down from the shelves, ditto books, every container emptied, sugar and coffee granules scattered in a filthy jumbled chaos.

Bastards.

I stood without energy in the doorway looking at the depressing damage and working out what to do. The clothes I was wearing were torn and dirty and I'd been bleeding from many small scrapes and scratches. The bothy had been robbed, as far as I could see, of everything I could have raised money on. Also my wallet had gone and my watch had gone. My checkbook had been in the jeep.

I had said I would go to London.

Well . . . so I bloody well *would*.

Mad Alexander. Might as well live up to the name.

Apart from moving back into the room the chair and other things that were half out of the doorway, I left the scene mostly as it was. I sorted out only the cleanest jeans, jersey and shirt from the things emptied out of the chest of drawers, and I changed into them out by the burn, rinsing off the dried trickles of blood in the cold clean water.

I ached deeply all over.

Bloody bastards.

I walked along to the privy, but there had been nothing to steal there, and they had left it alone. Of the two original but ruined flanks to my habitable room, one was now a carport with a gray camouflage-painted roof of corrugated iron; the other, still open to the skies, was where I kept the gas cylinders (in a sort of