

This is the opening chapter of my crime novel, *Over the Edge*.

Chapter One

It was the summer of love when my brother died. He was 45. An early morning jogger found his body on the undercliff path between Brighton and Saltdean. A fractured skull, two broken ankles and a dried pool of blood were evidence that sometime in the night, he had fallen a hundred feet or so from the clifftop walk. It was the 28th of July 1967, and I was more than four thousand miles away in the Gulf of Aden. It took me three days to arrange compassionate leave, bum a lift on a Hercules and find my way via Whitehall and the regimental headquarters in Kent, to finally arrive in Brighton. There was no real reason for speed. I had not seen or spoken to my brother for fifteen years, and I had no idea what he might have been doing that night, walking on a moonless night, along the dark cliff park. Now it was too late to ask him.

As I stood on the threshold of his office, I thought back over those fifteen years, wondering how wisely we had spent them. For myself, I certainly had my doubts. For him, well, perhaps now I would find out. He had not left much. No wife, no children, not even a dog, just a basement office and a one-bed flat above, tucked away in a less than desirable part of Brighton. There was a battered pedestal desk at one end, an old Remington typewriter holding down a solid, but scarred pine table off to one side next to an equally bruised filing cabinet and a few threadbare chairs. The walls, once magnolia, were now tinged with nicotine as they tried to blend in with the dirty brown of the carpet. The window was set high up and frosted, presumably with the intention of preventing inquisitive passers-by from looking down on proceedings. I found it hard to imagine that the dull brass plate outside, inscribed Henry Granta LLB (Cantab) Solicitor and Commissioner of Oaths, would have generated any such curiosity.

I tried to picture him getting up from behind the desk, greeting each client, courteously inquiring about their problems, calming their concerns and carefully leading them through their options. Was that how he treated his clients? I had no real idea. I only knew him from the past. Had he changed over the years? Back then he had been capable and perceptive with a deep and shrewd appreciation of both the good and bad in human nature. He had been a man at the top of his game, with a double first from Cambridge, on a fast-track pupillage in prestigious chambers, a member of Lincoln's Inn, in love with the Law and the senior partner's daughter. Less than five years later, it had all gone. A spectacular failure in court, a messy divorce from a disappointed and bitter wife, and an affair with the bottle left him with nothing. But even then, the law would not leave him alone. Or maybe it was the other way round. In any case, this dingy office was the place he had chosen to spend his last years wrapped up in dealing with the minutiae of other people's lives; contested wills, neighbours arguing over a party wall or granny's forgetful shoplifting offence. He must have had his reasons. Maybe he had been happy, maybe he had been hiding from his past, maybe he found some sort of contentment in fixing other peoples' problems. Now I doubted I would ever know.

Even though I would never speak to him again, he still had some words for me. I had read them an hour ago, in Willmott and Weatherby, another solicitor's office in a much more salubrious part of Brighton. Willmott, the senior partner, told me that my brother had named me as joint executor, along with Willmott and Weatherby. It seemed oddly appropriate that a solicitor should need another solicitor to see them off this earth. Willmott's office, with its heavy mahogany desk and walls lined with law books and journals, had seemed rather oppressive. The thick carpet and heavy curtains gave it a dead acoustic, rather like a funeral parlour. One way or another, the final details of many lives would be concluded in an office like this, even if their physical life ended elsewhere.

“Who will bury the last solicitor?”

“I beg your pardon, Major Granta?”

I realised I had been daydreaming and had spoken aloud. There was something in the tone of Willmott’s reply that I did not like. Some faint hint of disdain. Willmott was a big man, very big in fact, probably north of twenty stone and a good three or four inches taller than me. He could have been an impressive rugby player in his youth, but a couple of decades of long lunches briefing counsel or courting clients had turned him to flab. I doubted he could now run the length of a rugby field. But he still looked like he could be dangerous in the scrum.

Unaware of my appraisal Willmott continued,

“Now, to get to the matter at hand. Until the coroner issues the death certificate, I cannot conduct a formal reading of the will. But, since you are an executor as well as this firm, then I can tell you that you are the sole beneficiary. This means both his business and personal assets pass over to you. His practice was not, I’m afraid, very active, but it is solvent, so there is a little money there - and of course, there are the business assets in terms of the office and contents. And he had a small number of personal investments and the house and personal possessions. The house and office do have a small mortgage, however. All of this comes to you.”

“I see. I’m afraid I know very little about the law. It was my brother who was the legal expert in the family so I’m not quite sure what I would be able to do with a solicitor’s practice.” Actually, I had had quite a lot of experience with the law in my military career. Mostly, I had been doing my best to step around the niceties of the international laws of various countries with the intention of staying out of their courts and jails. For me the law was just a tool, to be carefully used like a rifle or even more carefully avoided like a land mine. Henry however had been truly fascinated by it and had developed a profound regard

for it. He had loved the precision of the legal language and the intellectual puzzle of finding an elegant way of arguing that the law was always in favour of his client. I usually found that the Army's rather more robust methods provided a quicker and more efficient solution.

"I think almost certainly I will end up selling the practice and the house. Is that going to be problematic do you think?"

"No, not all, Major. It would be exactly what we expected. The terms of the will mean you will inherit the Director's shares in the business. You can then either employ a solicitor to run the business or simply sell your share in the business to an existing practice. But we are perhaps getting a little ahead of the procedures. For the moment, we need to get a death certificate - or at least an interim certificate so that the funeral can go ahead. That means a trip to the coroner. And I imagine you will want to look over the properties and perhaps spend a little while before making any plans. There is one more thing. Henry left a personal letter for you."

Willmott passed me a thin envelope, impressively sealed with a large blob of sealing wax. My name was handwritten on the front. I broke the seal and extracted the single sheet of paper. It was brief and I read it aloud:

Cremation, not burial. I'd rather get it over with now and forestall any further burning in the afterlife. Henry.

My brother was just trying to be humorous, but neither I nor Willmott smiled. I did not think that was how it worked anyway - it was your soul that burnt in perpetuity not your body.

"I'm afraid the coroner will also need you to formally identify the body, before any of the paperwork can proceed."

I nodded as Willmott gave me a folder of documentation, including the address of the morgue, a list of funeral parlours and my brother's office and flat keys and then I went on my way.

I had seen too many dead bodies in the past to have any immediate desire to see another in the present, so I put the morgue at the bottom of my mental to-do list. I knew I would need to make arrangements for the funeral, but I had no doubt my brother wouldn't mind waiting a little longer. Before that I needed to speak to the coroner and Police, but that could wait for a few hours too. For the moment, I just wanted some time to think, to see where he had lived and worked, and to see if I could get some sense of who he had become.

I had often reminded the cadet officers in my classes at Sandhurst of Wellington: "Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted". If they managed to emulate his track record, they would be doing reasonably well. So, I had leisurely walked the mile and a half along the Brighton front, past the four-star hotels and the Regency squares, resisting the Kiss Me Quick hats and the helter-skelter on the Place piers, and the penny arcades and the fish and chips on the Western Pier until I eventually reached Portslade. My brother's accommodation was in a street leading up the hill away from the front. He had the bottom two floors of a Victorian townhouse in the middle of what must have once been a moderately fashionable terrace.

Now I stood looking around into his office, the only witness to the last years of his life, trying to sense who my brother had become, trying to recall his face and wondering about his final note. He had always been Harry in our games, in our disagreements and even in our last fractured meeting. That perhaps was when I started wondering if someone had killed him and why.

The police considered it was accidental death. No doubt, they had looked at any evidence at the scene, the circumstances of the discovery of the body, and they would have looked for evidence of any third-party participation. They had found nothing but a careless accident. The coroner would presumably look closely at the post-mortem result and the police report and agree. There probably would not even need to be a formal inquest - the

coroner could simply release the body, write up the paperwork, and the public Henry would be tidied away with minimum effort. It did not sit comfortably in my stomach. The private Harry I had known would never have been so careless as to simply step off a cliff in the middle of the night. He was too prudent, too rational, too sensible to allow a simple slip to end his life. Of course, he could have changed from the person I knew. Maybe the missteps of his youth had finally caught up with him and led him to that cliff top and over the edge, accidentally or even on purpose. But I could not believe that, at least for the time being. The family motto *numquam dedere pugnam - never surrender the fight* had been drummed into us from birth. And rarely can we escape our upbringing. Whatever his battle had been, it was over for him now. Maybe though, I still had to conclude his campaign.

I spent a couple of hours going through the office and flat. I had been right. The papers in his desk and filing cabinet did indeed tell a story of largely wealthless wills, unhappy divorces, trivial but intransigent disputes between neighbours, dubious evasions of driving offences, briefs for petty thieving and the surprisingly sad embezzlement of a local charity's funds. It was a kaleidoscopic, if somewhat depressing view of humanity. The accounting ledgers showed his business to be consistently but only slightly profitable. I found no reason anyone would want to kill him. Nor indeed any reason he might want to kill himself.

By that time, it was just past one o'clock. I wondered what Harry would have done for lunch. There was little food in the flat and what there was had started to go mouldy. I locked up and stepped out into the street in search of sausage and chips.

[2138 words]

Critical commentary

“A book, in any genre, is good to the extent that it absorbs its audience ... [this should be done by] making the readers work damn hard AND rewarding that labour as generously as you can. ... [this is the] secret of writing” (Bingham, 2022).

While Bingham’s advice to authors seems deceptively simple, he convincingly grounds his assertion in the author’s use of plot twists, complexity, location, characterisation, world-building, language and dialogue. Bingham’s thesis is that the reward for the reader is the pleasure of decoding and understanding the authors words, and that is what makes the reader compelled to turn the page. This viewpoint resonates with what I have learnt in the Crime Writing module workshops. In this reflection, I will discuss my approach to making my novel’s opening as absorbing as possible.

I wanted to write a story that drew upon the traditions of the hardboiled crime fiction of such authors as James M Cain, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. But I planned to bring something fresh to the genre by translating the mean city streets of 1930s/40s America to an apparently more genteel 1960s English seaside town. I intended to reveal that under that gentility, there was as much violence and corruption in Brighton as Philip Marlowe ever found in Los Angeles. Marlow is an engaging character and typical of the ‘flawed’ hero. He is tough, funny, successful with women but also lonely, sometimes mistaken and often drinks too much. Chandler nevertheless sees his hero as “a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man...a man of honour ... a man of his age” (Chandler, 1988). My plan was to place a similarly “complete man” in the seedier parts of English seaside life.

I first considered how the “man of his age” would translate to the late 1960s when

England was experiencing great social and economic changes as a new generation grew up after World War II. As a teenager in the 1960s I had personal experience of the tension between my post war generation and my parents' generation. We had radically different view of many things, e.g., The Rolling Stones, the Vietnam war, the hippie movement and the clashes between mods and rockers at various seaside resorts. This cultural turmoil is the world that my novel inhabits and in which I wanted to depict a capable, tough, shrewd but flawed protagonist. I also wanted him to be somewhat ambiguous – brought up as a member of the establishment but now an outsider in his own country. I picked George Granta, an Army intelligence officer with military experiences abroad, but now suffering from bouts of PTSD. I placed him in the coffee shops and nightclubs of 1967 Brighton, in the emerging drug culture of poppers, downers, marijuana and LSD and gave him the task of finding who killed his brother and why. I made his brother a solicitor, originally a pillar of society but now drawn into corruption by others. The inspiration for this descent into corruption was the similar journey by Huff in *Double Indemnity* (Cain, 2005), however in my case the interest for my reader is in seeing how George comes to understand his brother's downfall, while in *Double Indemnity*, it is Huff's, gradual self-realisation of his own moral failings that absorbs the reader.

Perhaps I should have chosen a more Steve McQueen like protagonist (the epitome of 1960s 'cool') but I don't think a primary characteristic of 'coolness' works very well in a novel. Cool is great for a film like *Top Gun* - but it is too two-dimensional in the more expansive space of a novel. Marlowe is complex (and hence absorbing) in a way that McQueen's 'cool' eponymous performance in the Neo-noir film *Bullitt* is not. Viewers of *Bullitt* are not primarily intellectually engaged by the great depth of the characters but because they are dazzled by McQueen's understated performance ("Steve McQueen is cool as ice", (Rotten Tomatoes, no date) and the visual spectacle unfolding in front of them,

including “arguably greatest car chase ever” (ibid). I felt this type of ‘coolness’ was inappropriate for George Granta.

I aimed to make the reader of my story regularly ask themselves questions about my protagonist and then carefully drip-feed the answers in a way that compelled the reader to turn the next page. This is the ‘absorption’ technique I learnt in the course workshops and proposed by Bingham and other crime authors. Lee Child similarly recommends: “and that’s how you create suspense ... it all boils down to asking a question and making people wait for the answer ... humans are hard-wired to want an answer to a question” (Petit, 2022).

In the same article, Child takes the view that the rule that “Suspense is created by having sympathetic characters ... doesn’t add up”. He proposes the counterexample of John Grisham’s *The Runaway Jury* and which he says does not contain “a sympathetic character in the entire book - there are bad guys and worse guys ... instead of sympathetic characters, the book is driven by what the verdict is of the trial at the heart of the story” (Petit, 2022).

I disagree with Child. In *The Runaway Jury* (Grisham 1996), Marlee and Easton may appear to manipulate the jury for personal gain, but Marlee is in fact an anti-smoking activist whose parents both died from smoking. Her actions open the Tobacco companies to the retribution of their victims – a morally valid result. For me, Marlee and Easton act according to a morality that most readers would sympathise with and would applaud.

I expect my character, George Granta, to similarly evoke sympathy. Granta has elements of fragility, sensitivity and vulnerability arising from his past participation in state sanctioned military atrocities on civilians in Kenya. He has begun to lose his faith in the English establishment and questions the morality of the society his Army campaigns have protected. In this fractured state of mind, Granta must not only expose the criminals who killed his brother but also corruption in the local police and judiciary. Granta, like Chandler, nevertheless remains largely on the side of the angels. Todorov says a crime story: “is the

story of the crime and the story of the investigation”. (Todorov, 1977, p44). For me, there is a third story – the moral development of the protagonist themselves. My novel is not only the story of George’s brother’s murder and George’s investigation into how and why Henry died but also, and most importantly, George’s discovery of who he and his brother have become.

References

Bingham, H., (2022) “Maximum Absorption II: The Sequel”, *Jericho Writers*, [Online] Jun 2022 [Accessed on 8 Jul 2022] <https://community.jerichowriters.com/page/view-post?id=520>

Cain, J. M. (2005) *Double Indemnity*. Paperback edn. London: Orion Books.

Chandler, R., (1988) *The Simple Art of Murder*, Vintage Books.

Grisham, J., (1996) *The Runaway Juror*, New York, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Petit, Z., (2012) “Lee Child Debunks the Greatest Writing Myths”, *Writers Digest*, [Online] 13 Jul 2013 [Accessed on 25 Jun 2022] <https://www.writersdigest.com/whats-new/lee-child-debunks-the-biggest-writing-myths>.

Rotten Tomatoes, (2022) “Bullitt (1968)”, *Rotten Tomatoes*, Fandango Media, [Online] no date [Accessed on 25 Jun 2022] <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/bullitt>.

Todorov, T. (1977) *The poetics of prose*. Oxford, Blackwell.