

Nobody Walks (Soho Crime)

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Set in the same fictional London as his CWA Gold Dagger Award-winning Slough House spy series, Mick Herron now introduces Tom Bettany, a man with a violent past and only one thing to live for: Avenging his son's death.

Tom Bettany is working at a meat processing plant in France when he gets a voicemail from an Englishwoman he doesn't know telling him that his estranged 26-year-old son is dead-Liam Bettany fell from his London balcony, where he was smoking pot.

Now for the first time since he cut all ties years ago, Bettany returns home to London to find out the truth about his son's death. Maybe it's the guilt he feels about losing touch with Liam that's gnawing at him, or maybe he's actually put his finger on a labyrinthine plot, but either way he'll get to the bottom of the tragedy, no matter whose feathers he has to ruffle. But more than a few people are interested to hear Bettany is back in town, from incarcerated mob bosses to those in the highest echelons of MI5. He might have thought he'd left it all behind when he first skipped town, but nobody ever really walks away.

Mick Herron is a British novelist and short story writer who was born in Newcastle and studied English at Oxford. He is the author of six books in the Slough House series (Slow Horses, Dead Lions, Real Tigers, Spook Street, London Rules, and the novella The List) and four Oxford mysteries (Down Cemetery Road, The Last Voice You Hear, Why We Die, and Smoke and Whispers), as well as the standalone novels Reconstruction, Nobody Walks and This Is What Happened. His work has won the CWA Gold Dagger for Best Crime Novel, the Steel Dagger for Best Thriller, and the Ellery Queen Readers Award, and been nominated for the Macavity, Barry, Shamus, and Theakstons Novel of the Year Awards. He currently lives in Oxford and writes full-time.^{1.1}

The news had come hundreds of miles to sit waiting for days in a mislaid phone. And there it lingered like a moth in a box, weightless, and aching for the light.

The street cleaners' lorry woke Bettany. It was 4:25 am. He washed at the sink, dressed, turned the bed's thin mattress, and rolled his sleeping bag into a tight package he leaned upright in a corner. 4:32.

Locking the door was an act of faith or satire-the lock would barely withstand a rattle-but the room wouldn't be empty long, because someone else used it during the day. Bettany hadn't met him, but they'd reached an accommodation. The daytime occupant respected Bettany's possessions-his toothbrush, his sleeping bag, the dog-eared copy of Dubliners he'd found on a bus-and in return Bettany left untouched the clothing that hung from a hook on the door, three shirts and a pair of khakis.

His own spare clothing he kept in a duffel bag in a locker at the sheds. Passport and wallet he carried in a security belt with his mobile, until that got lost or stolen.

Outside was February cold, quiet enough that he could hear water rinsing the sewers. A bus grumbled past, windows fogged. Bettany nodded to the whore on the corner, whose territory was bounded by two streetlights. She was Senegalese, pre-op, currently a redhead, and he'd bought her a drink one night. God knew why. They had exile

in common, but little else. Bettany's French remained undistinguished, and the hooker's English didn't lend itself to small talk.

A taste of the sea hung in the air. This would burn off later, and be replaced by urban flavours.

He caught the next bus, a twenty-minute ride to the top of a lane which fell from the main road like an afterthought, and as he trudged downhill a truck passed, horn blaring, its headlights yellowing the sheds ahead, which were barn-sized constructions behind wire-topped fences. A wooden sign hung lopsided from the gates, one of its tethering chains longer than the other. The words were faded by weather. Bettany had never been able to make them out.

Audible now, the sound of cattle in distress.

He was waved through and fetched his apron from the locker room. A group of men were smoking by the door, and one grunted his name.

"Tonton."

What they called him, for reasons lost in the mist of months.

He knotted his apron, which was stained so thick with blood and grease it felt plastic, and fumbled his gloves on.

Out in the yard the truck was impatient, its exhaust fumes spoiling out in thick black ropes. The noise from the nearest shed was mechanical, mostly, and its smells metallic and full of fear. Behind Bettany men stamped their cigarettes out and hawked noisily. Refrigerated air whispered from the truck's dropped tailgate.

Bettany's role wasn't complicated. Lorries arrived bearing cattle and the cattle were fed into the sheds. What came out was meat, which was then ferried away in different lorries. Bettany's job, and that of his companions, was to carry the meat to the lorries. This not only required no thought, it demanded thought's absence.

At day's end he'd hose down the yard, a task he performed with grim diligence, meticulously blasting every scrap of matter down the drains.

He switched off, and the working day took over. This was measured in a familiar series of aches and smells and sounds, the same actions repeated with minor variations, while blurred memories nagged him uninvited, moments which had seemed unexceptional at the time, but had persisted. A woman in a café, regarding him with what might have been interest, might have been contempt. An evening at the track with Majeed, who was the nearest he'd made to a friend, though he hadn't made enemies. He didn't think he'd made enemies.

Thoughts became rituals in themselves. You plodded the same course over and over, like any dumb beast or wind-up toy.

At about the time citizens would be leaving their homes in clean shirts Bettany stopped for coffee, pitch black in a polystyrene cup. He ate a hunk of bread wrapped round cheese, leaning against the fence and watching grey weather arrive, heading inland.

From three metres' distance Majeed detached himself from a group similarly occupied.

"Hey, Tonton. You lose your mobile?"

It spun through the air. He caught it one-handed.

"Ou?"

"La Girondelle."

The bar at the track. He was surprised to see it again, though the reason why wasn't long in coming.

"C'est de la merde. Not worth stealing."

Bettany gave no argument.

The piece of shit, not worth stealing, was barely worth ringing either, though still had a flicker of charge. Four missed calls in nine days. Two were local numbers and hadn't left messages. The others were from England, unfamiliar streams of digits. Odds were they were cold calls, checking out his inclinations vis-à-vis internet banking or double-glazing. He finished his coffee undecided whether to listen or delete, then found his thumb resolving the issue of its own accord, scrolling to his voicemail number, pressing play.

"Yes, this is Detective Sergeant Welles, speaking from Hoxton police station. Er, London. I'm trying to reach a Mr. Thomas Bettany? If you could give me a ring at your earliest convenience. It's a matter of some importance." He recited a number slowly enough that Bettany caught it first time.

His mouth was dry. The bread, the cheese, grew lumpy in his stomach.

The second voice was less measured.

"Mr. Bettany? Liam's father?" It was a girl, or young woman. "My name's Flea, Felicity Pointer? I'm calling about Liam . . . Mr. Bettany, I'm so sorry to have to tell you this."

She sounded sorry.

"There's been an accident. Liam-I'm sorry, Mr. Bettany. Liam died."

Either she paused a long while or the recorded silence dragged itself out in slow motion, eating up his pre-paid minutes.

"I'm sorry."

"Message ends. To hear the message envelope, press One. To save the-"

He killed the robot voice.

Nearby, Majeed was halfway through a story, dropping into English when French wasn't obscene enough. Bettany could hear the creaking of a trolley's metal wheels, a chain scraping over a beam. Another lorry trundled down the lane, its grille broad, an American model. Already details were stacking up. More blurred snapshots he'd flick through in future days, always associated with the news just heard.

He reached for the back of his neck, and untied his apron.

"Tonton?"

He dropped it to the ground.

"Ou vas-tu?"

Bettany fetched his duffel from the locker.

1.2

The crematorium was single-storey, stucco-clad, with a high chimney. On one side creeping plants swarmed a cane trellis that bordered an array of small gardens divided by hedges. Japanese stones neighbored ornamental ponds and bonsaid trees peered from terracotta pots. Other patches echoed formal English styles, orchards, terraced rosebeds, in any of which you might strew the ashes of the departed, supposing the deceased had expressed a preference.

Bettany imagined Liam saying When I'm dead, scatter me on a Japanese garden.

Not in actual Japan. Just anywhere handy.

A mild English winter was turning chill, but all that remained of the morning's frost was a damp smudge on the pavements. The imprints of vanished leaves were stamped there too, like the work of a graffiti artist who'd run out of things to say.

Bettany's once-blond shaggy hair was now streaked grey, like his ragged beard, and while his eyes were strikingly blue, their expression was vague. His hands, large and raw, were jammed in the pockets of a cheap raincoat, and he rocked slightly on feet cased in work-boots that had seen better days. Under the coat he wore jeans, a long-sleeved crew-neck tee and a zippered top. These were the spare clothes from his duffel bag, but three days' wear had taken their toll. The duffel itself he'd abandoned in a bin, he couldn't remember which side of the Channel. For all the hours he'd spent on buses, he'd managed little sleep. His only conversation had been a brief exchange on the ferry, when a French trucker lent him the use of a phone charger.

His first stop on reaching London had been Hoxton Police Station.

Detective Sergeant Welles, once located, had been sympathetic.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Bettany nodded.

"Nobody seemed to know where you were. But there was an idea you were out of the country. I'm glad you got back in time."

Which was how he discovered the cremation was taking place that morning.

He'd sat in the back row. The chapel of remembrance was quarter-full, most of the congregation Liam's age, none of them known to him, but an introduction contained a familiar name, Felicity Pointer. Flea, she'd called herself on the phone. She approached the lectern looking twenty-five, twenty-six, brunette and lightly olive-skinned, wearing black of course. Hardly looking at the assembled company, she read a short poem about chimney sweeps, then returned to her seat.

Watching this, Bettany had barely paid attention to the main object of interest, but looking at it now he realised that what he'd been feeling these past three days was not grief but numbness. A pair of curtains provided the backdrop, and behind them the coffin would soon pass, and there the remains of his only son would be reduced to ash and fragments of bone, to the mess of clinker you'd find in a grate on a winter's morning. Nothing of substance. And all Bettany could make of it was an all-consuming absence of feeling, as if he was indeed the stranger his son had made of him.

He rose and slipped out of the door.

Waiting by the trellis, it struck him that it was seven years since he'd been in London. He supposed he ought to be noticing differences, things being better or worse, but he couldn't see much had changed. The skyline had altered, with new towers jutting heavenwards from the City, and more poised to sprout everywhere you looked. But that had always been the case. London had never been finished, and never would be. Or not by dint of new construction.

Seven years since London, three of them in Lyme. Then Hannah had died, and he'd left England. Now Liam had died, and he was back.

Welles had given him a lift here. There might have been a hidden agenda, pump the father for information, but Bettany had none to offer and the flow had gone the other way. How it had happened, for instance. Up through France, across the choppy Channel, Bettany hadn't known the how. Of the various possibilities some kind of traffic accident

had seemed most likely, Liam driving too fast on a fog-bound stretch of motorway, or a bus mounting the pavement, Liam in the wrong place. He could have called and spared himself conjecture, but that would have been to make imagination fact. Now he learned that there had been no cars involved, no buses. Liam had fallen from the window of his flat.

"Were you in close contact with your son, Mr. Bettany?"

"No."

"So you wouldn't know much about his lifestyle?"

"I don't even know where he lived."

"Not far from here."

Which would make it N1. Not somewhere B...

Other Books

Girl Gone Missing, Nineteen-year-old Cash Blackbear helps law enforcement solve the mysterious disappearance of a local girl from Minnesota's Red River Valley. 1970s, Fargo-Moorhead: it's the tail end of the age of peace and love, but Cash Blackbear isn't feeling it. Bored by her freshman classes at Moorhead State College, Cash just wants to play pool, learn judo, chain-smoke, and be left alone. But when one of Cash's classmates vanishes without a trace, Cash, whose dreams have revealed dangerous realities in the past, can't stop envisioning terrified girls begging for help. Things become even more intense when an unexpected houseguest starts crashing in her living room: a brother she didn't even know was alive, from whom she was separated when they were taken from the Ojibwe White Earth Reservation as children and forced into foster care. When Sheriff Wheaton, her guardian and friend, asks for Cash's help with the case of the missing girl, she must override her apprehension about leaving her hometown—and her rule to never get in somebody else's car—in order to discover the truth about the girl's whereabouts. Can she get to her before it's too late?

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ... The Marylebone Drop (A Novella) Joe Country The Catch (A Novella) Slough House Down Cemetery Road The Last Voice You Hear Way We Die Smoke and Whispers Reconstruction Nobody Walks This Is What Happened Dolphin Junction : Stories ..."