

Not Dark Yet

Also by Peter Robinson

Caedmon's Song
No Cure for Love
Before the Poison

INSPECTOR BANKS NOVELS

Gallows View
A Dedicated Man
A Necessary End
The Hanging Valley
Past Reason Hated
Wednesday's Child
Dry Bones that Dream
Innocent Graves
Dead Right
In a Dry Season
Cold is the Grave
Aftermath
The Summer that Never Was
Playing with Fire
Strange Affair
Piece of my Heart
Friend of the Devil
All the Colours of Darkness
Bad Boy
Watching the Dark
Children of the Revolution
Abattoir Blues
When the Music's Over
Sleeping in the Ground
Careless Love
Many Rivers to Cross

SHORT STORIES

Not Safe After Dark
The Price of Love

**PETER
ROBINSON**

Not Dark Yet

H
HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

1

Copyright © Peter Robinson 2021

The right of Peter Robinson to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 529 34307 6
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 529 34312 0
eBook ISBN 978 1 529 34309 0

Typeset in Plantin Light by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

To Sheila

I

Zelda hadn't visited Chişinău since she had been abducted outside the orphanage at the age of seventeen. And now she was back. She wasn't sure how she was going to find the man she wanted – she had no contacts in the city – but she did have one or two vague ideas about where to begin.

As she walked down Stefan cel Mare Boulevard, she noticed that while many of the shops and their colourful facades were new, the wide pavements and road surface were still cracked and pitted with potholes, and the old ladies in peasant skirts and headscarves still sat under the trees gossiping and selling their belongings to make ends meet. Spread out at their feet lay everything from articles of clothing to children's toys and pink plastic hairbrushes.

The heat was oppressive, dry and dusty. Zelda felt it burn in her chest as she walked. And the smell of the sewer was never far away. She looked behind, not because she seriously believed someone might be following her, but because such caution had become a habit. All in all, she knew that she was much safer here in Chişinău than she was back in Yorkshire, or London. She had been worried that Petar Tadić would work out that she had been responsible for the death of his brother Goran, and that he would come to find her. But how could he, she asked herself in more rational moments? Even if he discovered that a woman had killed Goran, there was no reason why he should assume that was Zelda. Goran had abused a lot of

women. Why would his brother think for even a moment of that young, frightened Moldovan girl they had raped and abused on a long drive across Romania over thirteen years ago?

The underpass Zelda took to get across the broad road was dark and scrawled with graffiti, mostly swastikas and erect penises. The concrete steps going down were cracked and missing huge chunks, making them awkward to negotiate. The passage was dark and smelled of urine. Zelda picked up her pace, and when she emerged, it was into an altogether different part of Chişinău, an urban wasteland of neglected grey Soviet tower blocks and swathes of sparse grass and spindly trees. A couple of children were kicking a football around, and a scrawny dog lifted its leg against a dead tree.

There were signs of construction – huge piles of dirt, concrete blocks, wooden rafters, metal bars – but the sites were deserted and the mechanical diggers idle. In the midst of all this stood a brand new shopping centre opposite the crumbling blank-eyed stare of the National Hotel. A luxury Intourist hotel in the Soviet era, and once the hottest party spot in town, the National had been built in the late seventies and had stood empty for as long as Zelda could remember. Its decayed grandeur was a cynical reminder of the faded glory of the old days. In front of the hotel stretched a sunken area of dried up and litter-strewn fountains, now overgrown with weeds and home to empty beer cans, broken bottles, used condoms, McDonald's wrappers, needles and whatever other rubbish people tossed into it.

Past the Beer House and a row of travel agents and car rental outlets, Zelda wandered into the backstreets off Constantin Negruzzi Boulevard, and before she knew it, she was standing on the very corner from which she had been snatched.

It was a narrow street by Chişinău standards, tree-lined, with a mix of older, more elegant Russian-style buildings and modern uniform Soviet blocks, what Zelda called Stalinist architecture. Everything was grey and pockmarked, chipped and pitted. Very few cars passed by as she stood fixed to the spot. The old bar on the corner was gone, turned into a brand new *farmacie*, complete with green neon cross, but the rest of the street was much the same.

There, all those years ago, with the dazzling promise of a great future, Zelda's life as she knew it had come to an end. She remembered seeing the small scuffed suitcase break open on the cracked road surface, spilling what few possessions and memories of her dead parents she had – her mother's music box, her father's scuffed leather wallet, the book Zelda was reading – *Bleak House* – her clothes and the scrapbook and diaries she had diligently kept over her years in the orphanage, and her father's chipped shaving mug, which broke into fragments when it hit the concrete.

And the photographs. It had hurt most of all to lose the photographs. While there were plenty taken with friends during her years at the orphanage, there were only three that showed her parents. It was too long ago to remember the details, but she did remember the day the suitcase arrived at the orphanage, only a few months after her parents' deaths in 1992. The contents of the case were the only remnants left of her life from those days.

One photograph showed her father, young and handsome with a shy smile, and another her mother wearing a bikini on holiday in Odessa, with the Black Sea in the background, pretending to strike a sexy pose and putting her hand over her mouth to stifle the laughter. The third showed a stiff and formal family group in a studio portrait taken when Zelda was about three. She sat on her mother's knee, wearing what must

have been her very best dress, hair tumbling in ringlets over her shoulders, and her father stood, straight and serious, in his suit, one hand on her mother's shoulder and the other on Zelda's. None of them smiled. All stared directly at the camera.

Zelda had expected that she would feel angry or sad when she returned to the spot where she had lost everything, but all she felt was numbness. Whenever she had looked back on the life that had been stolen, she had simmered with hatred, but now, at the very spot where it had all begun, she felt nothing at all. She thought of all the cars that had driven by since then, all the people who had walked there oblivious, none of them knowing what momentous event had occurred there. Somehow, her own experience was lost in the ceaseless flow of quotidian life, as if she were Icarus falling into the sea, while all around him everyone went on ploughing their fields and tending their sheep.

Now it was just a place, a street corner like any other. Sometimes she wondered who had picked up the music box, her book, the diaries, the wallet, and what they had made of it all. Had anyone actually *seen* her get taken?

It wasn't until she approached the orphanage building itself that the full horror of the past hit her right between the eyes, and she began to tremble at the power of the memory. The building was still there, an early twentieth-century Russian construction in the classical style, of dark stone with rococo touches. With its broad steps, small arched portico and chipped columns, it formed a contrast to the monstrous towers surrounding it. The windows on the lower floor had been boarded up, but the upper ones remained uncovered, jagged frames of broken glass.

Zelda couldn't stop trembling, and the breath seemed to solidify in her chest. This had been her home between the ages of four and seventeen. This was the place that had made

her what she was, or what she *could* have been. Now, though, it was a ruin, and so was she, and the irony didn't escape her. What the hell was she doing here, running away from the good life she had found, despite all the odds, and from a good man, who was more than she deserved, seeking God only knew what? Revenge? Atonement? Reconciliation?

There were very few people about, and those who were went about their business, heads down, not paying any attention to Zelda or to anyone else. Trying to push the knot of troubling thoughts aside and to control her shakes and breathing, she walked up the steps and, with a quick glance around her, shoved at the door. It didn't budge. She turned the heavy metal handle and pushed harder with her shoulder, and this time it made a screeching sound, like fingernails on a blackboard, as it dragged across the tiled floor. Again, Zelda glanced around to make sure no one had seen her, then she gave another shove and found herself standing in the hall.

She pushed the door shut behind her.

When the day of Tracy's wedding dawned, Detective Superintendent Alan Banks awoke early to the sounds of bird-song and the glare of bright sunshine through a chink in his curtains. Another perfect midsummer day in an unbroken run of nearly two weeks. He ate a leisurely breakfast of toast and marmalade in the conservatory, listening to the Brahms clarinet quintet on Radio 3 as he glanced over the *Guardian* review section, then took his second cup of coffee out to the garden to contemplate the day ahead.

He had offered to pick up his parents from their sheltered housing on the Northumberland coast but, fiercely independent as ever, his father had insisted that they would make their own way down. Banks knew better than to argue.

When the time came to get ready, he dusted off his dark grey suit – thank God it wasn't a morning-suit affair – and dressed. It was to be an old-fashioned C of E wedding at St Mary's church, at the far end of Market Street, not far from where the Banks family had lived when they first arrived in Eastvale. Old-fashioned apart from the 'obey' bit, Tracy had assured him, though he was to 'give away' the bride. He was nervous, as any father would be, but proud, too. His son Brian would be there, as would his ex-wife Sandra – Tracy's mother – with her husband Sean.

Finally, he was ready, and he went out to the car.

He drove the familiar road with a light heart listening to Mendelssohn's *Octet*, which lifted his spirits even higher. He arrived in good time for a quick glass of red at the Blue Monk before the bridal party was scheduled to meet at the church, just around the corner.

Outside the church, Banks met up with his parents and his son Brian. His mother fixed him a buttonhole, then Tracy's car arrived, and they decided they shouldn't keep poor Mark waiting too much longer. Everyone went inside except for Banks, Tracy and the two bridesmaids.

Needless to say, Tracy looked gorgeous, and Banks felt a lump in his throat as he walked down the aisle beside her and she smiled at him. Tracy had been the sort of child you always wanted to be happy, to keep her innocence. Of course, that was impossible, and though she had been a carefree child, she had lost her way for a while after university and veered towards the dark side, but she had made it back. Now, when Banks looked at her, he saw a grown-up woman, but he felt the same way as he had when she was a child. He could no more protect her from the world now than he had done before – he knew he had been far from a perfect father – but that was what he wished for her in his heart.

As he walked down the aisle beside Tracy, Banks felt as if he were floating through the moment, with faces drifting in and out of vision as guests turned in their pews to catch a glimpse of the bride. Everything seemed somehow unreal, in slow motion; even the swishing of Tracy's wedding dress sounded like soft waves against the shore. He saw Sandra from the corner of his eye, sitting with Sean on the front row. She flashed him a quick smile. Then he saw his parents, his mother already with her hanky out. Tracy gave his hand a squeeze when they got to the front and everyone took their places. Tracy turned to Mark and smiled. He looked scared as hell, Banks thought.

Everything went smoothly, everyone got their lines right and it seemed that in no time they were all walking back down the aisle.

After the photographs and confetti, the crowd dispersed. The reception was to be held over an hour later in the banquet room of the Burgundy Hotel, where most of the out-of-town guests were staying for the night.

Banks found himself walking close to Brian, Sandra and Sean down Market Street, past the end of the street where they used to live, and he was lost for words. To him, Sandra appeared hardly any different than when she had left him. She had kept her figure, and though her hair colour might have been bolstered with a few drops of one of Boots's concoctions, there was nothing false about its lustre. Her face seemed still relatively unlined, her dark eyebrows nicely plucked. She wore a powder blue skirt and jacket over a plain, silk white blouse. A St Christopher on a silver chain around her neck was the only jewellery she wore.

Sandra and Sean edged away to talk to Mark's mother and father, and Banks and Brian slipped away to the Queen's Arms for a quick drink before the reception.

The silence inside the ruined orphanage rang in Zelda's ears, interrupted only by the distant motor of a car, shout of a child, or bark of a dog. The place smelled musty with rotten wood, mould, dead leaves and stagnant water. For a while, Zelda just stood there as her eyes adjusted. Dust motes floated in the pale light that came in through the broken windows on the upper level.

Ahead of her, a broad staircase led to the first and second floors, mostly dormitories and classrooms. Down here, on the ground floor, had been the administrative offices, staffrooms, cafeteria and communal areas where the children could sit and chat, watch TV, play chess or table tennis. There was also an assembly hall, where they gathered every morning for hymns and prayers.

When Zelda could see clearly, she noticed that the plaster was crumbling from the walls, and in places was completely gone. The thick pile carpets that had once graced the stairs had rotted away to stained tatters, and their patterns had faded. There had been paintings on the walls – nothing special, just landscapes and portraits easy on the eyes – but they were all either gone now or lying torn and broken on the floor. Even in here there was graffiti, the usual sort of crudities, and the floors were strewn with rubbish. Somewhere in the distance she could hear water dripping. Then she heard something skittering down one of the corridors. It wasn't loud enough to be another person. Probably just a rat.

When Zelda moved, she realised she had been holding her breath so long she was beginning to feel dizzy. She grabbed a banister and took a few deep breaths. The wood felt as smooth under her palm as it had years ago, when she and her friends had slid down, strictly against the rules. Olga. Vika. Axenia. Where were they all now? She knew that the beautiful Iuliana had been sold, the same way she had, for they had met a

couple of years later in a brothel in Užice, in Serbia. Iuliana, her body and spirit broken, had told Zelda about seeing Lupescu, the orphanage director, watching as she was taken in the street, and drawing back inside as soon as he realised she had spotted him. Nothing was ever said or done about it, and that was one reason Zelda thought he was to blame. Iuliana had killed herself soon after their talk. She was why Zelda was here today.

Zelda carried on up the stairs, wondering what she would find there. But it was just another scene of vandalism. More sunlight poured in through the broken windows and illuminated the clouds of dust Zelda kicked up as she walked. By instinct, she went first to her old dormitory, beds for twelve girls arranged into opposite rows of six, each with a cupboard and bedside table. She thought of the conversations they had had there after lights out, secrets shared, hopes and dreams, grief at the loss of their parents, plans for the future, crushes and loathings, mostly for the boys, who teased them mercilessly. But Zelda had experienced her first feelings for a boy there, she remembered. Radu Prodan. She had buried the memory for years, but now she remembered he had been beautiful, shy, quiet, intelligent, with an untamed shock of blond hair and a habit of trying to smooth it down. Perhaps she had loved him, as well as any girl could love a boy at the age of nine. She had no idea what had become of Radu. Had boys been sold, too?

The old beds had all been stripped down to their metal frames, the tables upturned and the cupboards smashed. There was more graffiti. Zelda wondered whether the vandals who had done all this had any idea what the place had been, what lives had been nurtured here – nurtured and then stolen, in some cases. It didn't matter.

She wandered the rooms and corridors in a daze until she came to an old storage room, which was still full of boxes and

packing crates. It was in one of these that she discovered a damp, misshapen cardboard box full of old books, mostly water-damaged, mouldy and warped, with curled pages and stained covers. But they were the books she remembered, the English books: *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, *Five Go to Mystery Moor*, *4.50 From Paddington*, *The Sign of Four*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. As she handled them, she felt tears burn in her eyes, and soon the sobbing wracked her body. She let herself slump on the filthy floor to cry. These were the kind of books that had filled her teenage hours with joy, romance and adventure.

When the whirlwind of emotion passed, leaving Zelda feeling numb and tired again, she put back the soggy book she had been holding – *The Wind in the Willows* – and made to close the box. As she did so, she caught sight of a label affixed to the corner of one of the flaps. It was faded and almost completely peeled off, but when she got closer, she was able to make out a name and address: Vasile Lupescu, the name of the orphanage director, and the address of the place she was in. But there was a second name, unknown to her. It was an English name, William Buckley, and the address was in Suruceni, a village on the shores of Lake Danceni, about twenty kilometres west of Chişinău.

Was this, then, the address of her mysterious benefactor? She had always wondered who it was, where the books had come from. Was he still alive? Still in Suruceni? She hadn't made any kind of plan beyond visiting the orphanage, hoping she might find some clue to Vasile Lupescu's whereabouts. Everything had depended on what she discovered here. And now she had something concrete to go on. The first person she would go to for information was William Buckley.

All the outside tables were occupied, but Banks didn't mind being relegated to the inside of the pub. They found a quiet

corner and Banks fetched a pint of Theakston's bitter for each of them. Brian was moderately famous, as a member of the Blue Lamps, and one or two of the drinkers stared as if they thought they recognised him but weren't quite sure.

Cyril had recently installed some air-conditioning on the cheap, and it managed to send a blast of chill air across the room every two or three minutes. And then there was the background music, one of Cyril's never-ending sixties playlists, always full of surprises. There was something about that era of early sixties pop, before it became 'rock' and started taking itself seriously, that smacked of innocence and the sheer joy of being young and alive. It was epitomised especially by the song playing at the moment: The Crystals singing 'Then He Kissed Me'. It sounded just like that first kiss tasted.

'You all right, Dad?' Brian asked.

'Why? Don't I look it?'

'You seem a bit . . . I don't know. Distracted.'

'I suppose it was all the excitement of the wedding,' he said. 'The emotion. My little girl getting married. And seeing your mother again. It's been quite a while. I suppose I'm feeling just a little bit sad. And old.'

'Yeah, it was weird walking past where we used to live. Are you sure you're OK, though?'

Banks swigged some beer. 'Me? Course I am. Tough as old nails. It just feels like a momentous occasion. That's all.'

'It is for Tracy. What do you think of Mark?'

'He's all right, I suppose. Could be a bit more . . . you know . . . exciting. Adventurous.'

'He's an accountant, for crying out loud. What do you expect?'

Banks laughed. 'I know. I know. And he does like Richard Thompson. That's definitely a point in his favour. She could have done a lot worse.'

‘She almost did, as I remember.’

‘Yes.’ Banks remembered the time when Tracy had taken up with the archetypal ‘bad boy’ and almost got herself killed as a result.

‘So maybe a little dull isn’t too bad?’ Brian went on. ‘What about you, though? Still living the exciting copper’s life?’

‘It’s rarely exciting. But what else would I do?’

‘Same as everyone else your age, Dad. Putter about in the garden. Get an allotment. Ogle young women. Drink too much. Watch TV.’

Banks laughed. ‘I already do all those things. Except the allotment. Maybe I should write my memoirs?’

‘You always said you hated writing reports.’

‘Well . . . yes . . . but that’s different. Enough about me. What about you? The farewell tour? How’s it going?’

‘Great so far. Mum and Sean came to the London show. Are you coming to see us?’

‘Of course. Wouldn’t miss it for the world. The Sage. I’ve already got the tickets. Ray and Zelda are coming, too.’

‘No date for you?’

‘Not these days, it seems. I think my allure must have deserted me.’ The music had changed again. Neil Sedaka was singing ‘Breaking Up is Hard to Do’. He managed to make even such a sad song sound almost joyful. At that moment, Banks’s mobile played its blues riff. The number was withheld, but that happened often enough not to be a problem. He excused himself for a moment and went outside.

‘Yes?’

‘Banksy?’

It could only be Dirty Dick Burgess; no one else ever called him that. ‘Yes?’

‘Where are you? You sound funny.’

'I'm standing in the market square outside the Queen's Arms on my way to my daughter's wedding reception. So make it fast.'

'Sorry,' said Burgess. 'Give her my . . . you know . . .'

'Right.'

'Keeping busy?'

'Oh, you know. The usual.'

'Getting anywhere with the Blaydon murders yet?'

'It's still early days,' said Banks. 'As I said, I'm on my way to a rather important wedding reception. I'm guessing you've called for some other reason than to yank my chain?'

'Oh, you're no fun. But as a matter of fact, I have. You're not the only one working on a dead-end murder investigation.'

'Where do I come in?'

'I don't want to say too much over the phone, but I think we should meet and compare notes. Are you seriously busy?'

'No. Well, yes, but . . . we're trying to make a case against Leka Gashi and the Albanians for Blaydon's murder. Trouble is, we don't even know where they are.'

'Leka Gashi and the Albanians,' repeated Burgess. 'Sounds like a rock band. Anyway, the Albanians can wait. They'll be back. Don't worry. You'll nail them. Do you think your boss will let you come out to play?'

'You want me to come down to London?'

'I honestly can't get away at the moment. Not for longer than an hour or two, and that won't even cover the train ride. Meetings up to the eyeballs. Otherwise, as you know, nothing would please me more than a trip up north.'

Banks couldn't always figure out when, or if, Burgess was being ironic.

'I promise you it'll be worthwhile,' Burgess went on. 'And if you can get here by lunch tomorrow, I'll even buy. How's that?'

‘An offer I can’t refuse.’

‘Excellent. Whenever you can make it. Pret on—’

‘Hang on a minute. I’m not going all that way to be fobbed off with Pret A Manger.’

‘Zizzi’s, then?’

‘You must be joking. Next thing you’ll be telling me it’s the NCA canteen.’

‘Do we have one? Well, it’s not going to be Gordon bloody Ramsay’s or Michel Roux’s, either, I can assure you.’

‘I’m sure you’ll find somewhere suitable. Text me in the morning.’