

ONE

PROLOGUE

SITE 1, WAT YAN YAO TEMPLE, THAILAND: 5PM, 14 JANUARY 2005

I had lived with the stench of death for years but had never experienced anything like this.

Fifteen hours after leaving the UK in the grip of midwinter I was standing on the banks of a muddy blood-red river looking through heat waves at a devastated landscape. There was no birdsong, only the buzzing of flies and the occasional barking of dogs. And there was the smell: death and raw sewerage, thick as fog.

Along the riverbanks were dozens of metal freight containers about the size and height of a large bedroom.

We had driven for two-and-half hours from the airport and watched as paradise transformed into hell. Beachside villas, bars and clubs, white sands and palm trees that had once drawn so many visitors, were all gone. Anything that hadn't been swept away was in ruins and covered in drying mud and debris.

9.3 on the Richter scale. The third largest earthquake in recorded history had lasted for ten minutes and unleashed enough power (the equivalent of 230,000 Hiroshimas) to shift the planet almost half an inch on its axis. Around 250,000 people

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were dead. One third of them were children, easily overcome by the surging water.

Our destination was Wat Yan Yao, a Buddhist temple on Thailand's southwest peninsula. With hundreds and then thousands of bodies being recovered, temples were being used as temporary mortuaries. With no electricity or running water, they were hardly ideal but there was simply nowhere better to take them.

The moment we emerged from the sanctuary of the air-conditioned Land Cruiser the smell hit us like a mallet. If you can imagine an overheated warehouse that's been storing putrefied meat, rotting vegetables and raw sewerage for several weeks then you're halfway there. There was no escape, it didn't matter if you were indoors or out, there was no choice but to breathe it in and get used to it.

Once we'd donned our protective gear (white coveralls, gumboots, gloves and masks), I led the way in through the ornate gateway that took us into the grounds. The main temple building was ahead of us. It was sixty feet tall and its red, gold and blue polished stone façade glowed in the evening sun.

Monks were praying for the dead while men laid blocks of dry ice around dozens of newly-recovered bodies that were yet to be placed in body bags.

The bodies, shrouded in the dry ice's spectral white mist, were all golden brown, discoloured by sun and mud and swollen by bacteria; it was obvious they would be unrecognizable even to their closest relatives. I couldn't even tell if they were Asian or European.

The 'mortuary' consisted of a few tents and a couple of porta cabins, also with no power or running water, which served as makeshift body storage units. After completing my inspection I walked down to the river, to the main storage units.

“Are you sure you want to see this?” my Thai guide asked. “The army only went near here wearing breathing apparatus.”

I had to. If I was going to have any chance of sorting this out, then I needed to know what we were dealing with. Just recovering bodies was proving to be a mammoth task for a police force already stretched to the limit rescuing injured survivors. A total of 3,600 corpses from the popular tourist resort of Khao Lak Beach alone found their way to the temple at Wat Yan Yao in the first three days after the disaster. The fact that these victims, who had died in salt water and had been placed in metal boxes in 35C heat some days earlier already gave me a good idea of what we were up against. But I had to get it out of my system. See it, breathe it in, get used to it and crack on. We were in a race against time with fast-spreading, old-school diseases: cholera, typhoid, diphtheria and dysentery.

I braced myself as my guide, wearing a mask, unbolted the metal door and it clanged back.

“So,” the guide said. “We think there are about 5,000 so far. Where do you want to begin?”

TWO

BAPTISM OF FIRE

I was climbing through the upstairs bedroom window of an ordinary-looking, smart little detached house in Mexborough when I caught the unmistakable scent of death. It was August 1988 and I was a 31-year-old CID detective sergeant assigned to a murder squad trying to jail a mass murderer. I paused and took another breath. Yes, not overpowering but definitely there.

Mick, a solid and trustworthy detective, followed me through the window a moment later. We exchanged a look, knowing in some sense what was to come. The bedroom had been ransacked; clothes were strewn about, furniture had been jostled or overturned.

A dog barked. It hadn't made a sound when we'd knocked at the door. It stayed downstairs, possibly guarding the dead body of its owner, while we checked the upstairs, moving more slowly than normal, not wanting to shock ourselves. All clear, until I reached the bathroom. The toilet was stuffed full of neckties. I caught my reflection in the bathroom mirror. My skin was pale grey and I looked terrified.

Mick's pallor and expression matched mine.

Dry mouthed, hearts pounding, we started to make our way downstairs. I was closest to the bannister with Mick on the walled side of staircase.

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I tried to get some moisture in my throat. I could barely get the words out.

“You know what we’re going to find down there, don’t you Mick?”

Mick swallowed.

“Yes sarge.”

We paused halfway down, and I kid you not, we held hands like a pair of kids from Scooby Doo. I had, in my twelve years of policing, seen dozens of dead bodies in states unimaginable to most people (even other cops), and our prime suspect was already in custody.

So why was I so bloody scared?

Twelve years earlier, in May 1976, as part of my initial training as an 18-and-a-half-year-old police constable for South Yorkshire Police, I was taken with five other fresh-faced, newly crew-cutted recruits on a visit to a mortuary to view an autopsy. You didn’t have to stay for the whole thing but you did have to at least see a body.

Our sergeant waved us off with a big grin. We were in for a “treat”, apparently. My first surprise was to see that the senior forensic pathologist that day was Professor Alan Usher. Just a few weeks earlier he’d held my balls in his hand as part of the police medical. Now I was going to see those same hands elbow-deep in a corpse.

I hadn’t been able to sleep the previous night. The thought of going to the mortuary had really unnerved me but I was reassured by the sedate introduction given by an attendant who described the correct way to store a body and then the autopsy process, including continuity and paperwork. Then he handed us our aprons and plastic overshoes.

‘Oh well,’ I thought, as I fumbled to get the apron over my uniform, ‘No turning back now.’

Professor Usher then told us the history of the person we were going to see.

“This is a 35-year-old male, a resident at Middlewood Mental Hospital. He’d been missing for about three weeks when he was found trapped in one of the heating ducts. He’d tried to escape but became stuck and died there.”

The Professor paused for a moment.

“Some of you might not like what you’re going to see.”

We entered the autopsy room. We all flinched as the cloying smell of putrefaction hit our noses like a right hook. The body was covered in a white sheet, which only worsened our apprehension. When it was lifted back, however, I found the sight so surprising that I forgot for a moment what we were looking at.

He was green and swollen. The skin, stretched smooth, looked like solidified jelly and I thought the colour was remarkably similar to that of the Incredible Hulk or the Jolly Green Giant. He only resembled a human in the vaguest terms. He was covered in white maggots, the sort I’d used for fishing when a young lad. They swarmed in his eye sockets and mouth. For me, the smell was worse than the sight and I watched with interest as Professor Usher began the autopsy and started to lecture us on everything we might want to know about dead bodies.

“There are five main stages in the process of human decomposition, summarised using the acronym FBAAD: Fresh, Bloat, Active, Advanced, and Dry. Stage one, or fresh decomposition, occurs in the hours immediately after death, as blood coalesces in veins and muscles, the result of a stilled heart. We’d expect to see dark blue or black hands and feet in a hanging victim, for example, wherever the blood has collected. Autolysis follows; decay leads to the release of cellular enzymes into body cells and muscular tissue, and this gets the process of decomposition

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properly. As oxygen disappears, anaerobic organisms start to turn proteins and lipids – molecules containing fats, vitamins, and waxes – of the body's fresh and organs – into hydrogen sulphide and methane, along with other acids and gases which brings us into stage two as these gases lead to bloating of the body. Then, as we reach stage three, maggots appear and fluids flow out as tissues liquefy. Then we reach the Advanced stage of decay, most material has broken down, being absorbed by the surrounding earth – if lying on the ground or buried – leading to the creation of a corpse decomposition island, a stained area of ground that contains more carbon and nitrogen than the surrounding area. If left on the ground, plants will spring up, absorbing the excess calcium, phosphorus, and magnesium and the area will be richer in plant life than areas nearby. Stage five is skeletonisation. Generally, bones will survive nearly all conditions if buried but factors like temperature, oxygen levels in the soil, not forgetting moisture and pH balance are just four variables that can lead to the disintegration or redistribution, absorption into wet soil and moved by river or tidal lagoon, for example. Here we have reached the stage of decomposition were saponification is taking place.”

I asked what that was.

“The remaining tissue is turned into adipocere, known as grave wax. The fatter the person, the sooner this happens. It also happens where decomposition agents are absent, as in this case. This wax, usually brownish white, falls off the body fairly quickly.”

I asked a few more questions and I became conscious at some point that I was the only one of my group talking. I turned. No one was there; the door to the autopsy room was just swinging shut, the result of a stampede to the toilet.

Professor Usher, meanwhile, was professional and enthusiastic and I became really absorbed by the whole process.

“Don’t worry,” the pathologist told the group at the end of the visit, some of whom were still looking quite poorly. “That was a real baptism of fire. You’ll never see anything like that again in your entire career.”

Although I was nearly nineteen, I looked closer to fifteen. People looked at my uniform disbelievingly and asked me if I’d started shaving yet. I was definitely naive, like all teenagers, and the job kept me on my toes. I learned an important lesson during the first month of my beat, when I received a phone call from the neighbour of an old woman who lived alone.

“I haven’t seen her for three days,” she said. “Her curtains have been closed and she’s not taken in the milk.”

I duly prepared the neighbours and family for the worst and said I would try and gain access as no one held a spare key. When I arrived at the house the keys were in the lock on the inside, so I used my truncheon to break the smallest window and I slowly reached in and turned the mortise.

I shouted the old girl’s name and I checked each room before going upstairs. She was in bed, blankets neatly placed over her chest. She looked peaceful. ‘Gone quietly, at least,’ I thought and, as we’d been taught, I leaned over to confirm she was dead and placed my finger on her jugular to feel for a pulse.

The subsequent ear-splitting scream that followed confirmed that my diagnosis was entirely incorrect.

“What the hell are you doing in my house?” she demanded as I tried to stop my heart bouncing around in my chest like a rubber ball.

“You neighbour called, she hasn’t seen you for days, the milk’s out,” I explained breathlessly, clutching my heart with my right hand.

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“I was feeling a bit poorly so stayed in bed,” she said before remarking I was the first man in her bedroom since her late husband.

We had a cuppa after I’d given the family and neighbours the good news.

This lesson (don’t believe your eyes and/or looks can be deceiving) was soon followed by my first real death, and this also contained a number of important and unforgettable lessons. The first was that the human body is bloody heavy and deceased bodies are incredibly difficult to manoeuvre. The man in question was the landlord of a local pub. He’d been found dead in bed. Fine so far. But when I saw him, well, he was the size and girth of Giant Haystacks. He must have weighed between seventeen and twenty stone. Four undertakers turned up but it wasn’t enough. It took six of us to steer him down the winding stairs, which was made even more difficult by the fact that we weren’t able to get him on a stretcher, a somewhat undignified removal to say the least, and we were all sweating and nursing pulled muscles by the time the body was finally straining the suspension of the mortuary vehicle.

My next lesson came when I had to tag the body with a label tied to his right toe. This was the first time I’d touched the skin of a dead body. We didn’t bother with gloves in those days and I struggled to maintain my professionalism (I didn’t want my colleagues to think I was a wimp) as I fumbled to get the label and string tied on. The most unnerving part for me was the lack of warmth. Touching another human being is usually a warming experience. It felt so totally alien and I wasn’t prepared for the coldness.

Job done, I looked down at the body. I knew then that I didn’t like dealing with deaths but, as I learned, dealing with a dead body was unpleasant, but that was nothing when compared to the other aspect of death – the loved ones they leave behind.

One afternoon I mentioned to my sarge that I hadn't dealt with a road traffic accident (new recruits are expected to deal with a wide range of incidents to gain experience, especially if they want promotion).

A few minutes later, at 5:20pm a report came in of an RTA and the sarge said: "Whatever it is, it's yours Venables."

Small Renault meets school bus head-on in a narrow country road. Several of the public-school pupils were injured, but not seriously (chief witness was thirteen-year-old William Hague, the future Conservative Foreign Secretary, who'd been a front seat passenger on the bus). The 51-year-old driver of the Renault was unconscious and seriously injured. She was a teacher from the local teacher training college and had skidded on one of the large patches of mud left on the wet road by various agricultural vehicles. She died on her way to hospital.

I went to the mortuary as part of the continuity, which meant I had to identify the body as the woman I had seen in the car upon my arrival at the scene. She was absolutely intact, not a mark on her, and her eyes were open. Mum had often said to me that "the eyes are the windows to your soul," and those words came back to me at that moment and I felt crushed. This was my first experience of seeing death like this; so powerful yet serene. My inspector asked me if I wanted to stay for the autopsy but I just couldn't. I later found out that she died from a lacerated liver.

The following morning was far, far worse. I went to see her husband and we sat in his kitchen. He couldn't speak, choked on tears every time he tried. Then the kids came out of the lounge. Four of them. Two of whom were eight-year-old twin boys who both started to bawl the moment they saw my uniform. The eldest daughter was in her late teens and she quickly guided the boys back to the lounge.

I was swept along with the husband's emotion. The grief was overwhelming and I just wasn't ready; I hadn't known what to

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expect but this was just too much. The husband was extremely dignified and I think pulled himself together for my sake; I wasn't much older than his eldest daughter.

When I got home, I couldn't get the kids out of my mind and, cried my eyes out and kept crying for a good while after. There was no counselling, no debrief. I, like every other cop dealing with similar situations back then, was just left to find my own way to cope.

I learned then that I would never make a good traffic cop. Dealing with road crashes like this was not for me. As my career progressed and I dealt with more accidents, more sudden deaths, my fear of the dead started to dissipate. Dead bodies were much easier to deal with than grieving families; a body is not going to spit or swear at me, ask awkward questions, or look at me in that heart-wrenching, "please bring them back" way. Whenever I had the option, I would say to a colleague: "I'll do the requirements around the body if you see the family."

Jennifer and I married in August 1978, aged 19 and 20 respectively. In July 1979, Jen was due to give birth and I was at work at 8.30am on the ninth when I got a message to say that she was being induced. This was immediately followed by an emergency call: a high-speed passenger train had hit someone in Swinton. That was my patch, there was no one to cover and it was an emergency, so I simply had to attend.

A team of engineers had been working on a fast stretch of line. A man had been posted to Swinton Bridge as look-out but even though he warned his colleagues, the train had been going too fast and the workers had to jump for their lives, and one of them wasn't quick enough. He was killed instantly.

While Sarah was being born (she arrived at 12.45pm) I was still picking body parts up of the tracks. There were no trained specialists in those days and it was left to whichever cops were

there. And again, no welfare or counselling afterwards and once I finally made it to the hospital I was full of emotion, good and bad (this was my first experience of a disrupted body). I couldn't shake the thought that Jen had been creating life, through my beautiful daughter, Sarah, as this poor man lost his.

This experience reminded me of the story of my own birthday, a tale often repeated in my family. Wednesday 28 August 1957, at home: 39 Angel Street, Bolton-on-Deerne, a mining community near Rotherham in South Yorkshire. My screams failed to drown out Chopin's Piano Sonata No.2 coming from the chapel next door, where the rest of my family was saying goodbye to Grandmother Louisa, Dad's mum, who'd died a few days earlier.

Death was part of my life right from the start. Great Aunt Harriet worked on behalf of the local undertaker in Bolton-On-Deerne, being the first person to respond to a home death (she was paid per body). Auntie Harriet would go to the house, strip the body, wash it, re-clothe it and then place it on a body board, which she then – with some help – placed on two easels, ready for viewing by the family. She kept a 6-foot wooden body board, in the shape of a coffin lid, behind the pantry door of her terraced home.

Grandad David (Great Aunt Harriet's brother and Louisa's husband) introduced me to killing when I was about five years old. He worked his whole life at Barnburgh Colliery, retiring in 1965. He kept a large and immaculate prize-winning allotment (he grew champion roses) behind his terraced house. Far more fascinating to me than the roses and countless vegetables were the pigs, which Grandad raised from piglets until they were ready for market. I ran to see the pigs every time we visited and watched them grow up.

One day Grandad gave me a certain look, a tilt of the head, waiting 'til he had me fixed in his gaze.

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“You should come down and watch.”

“Watch what, Grandad?”

The mini slaughterhouse, a solid brick building about three metres long and two metres wide, stood in the rear yard of his house. White-washed walls, large concrete shelf built into one wall, stainless steel sink at the far end with a single copper tap. Empty apart from a series of hooks bolted to a wooden ceiling beam.

My older brothers, Robert and Michael, weren't interested in Grandad's pigs but I felt privileged that Grandad (with Dad's blessing) had asked me into this secret, adult place that fine, warm summer morning.

Grandad left me with Dad for a moment while he nipped into his shed. He came out with a satchel and peering inside, I saw the silver flash of steel. He set about sharpening and the three of us sat in the sun for a while, chatting about this and that, school and family, as Grandad carefully, steadily, expertly – *precisely* – sharpened each implement.

I felt a bit nervous when Grandad finished and brought up the first pig.

My eyes saucered when Grandad took a captive bolt gun out of his jacket pocket. I thought it was a real revolver and couldn't wait to tell my schoolmates that my Grandad had a gun, just like a detective.

Grandad maneuvered the pig so that he was square on.

“I'm just going to stun the pig now,” he said quietly. “That way it will feel no pain.”

Grandad took hold of the pig's ears and gently steadied its head. He placed the barrel between the pig's eyes.

The pig seemed agitated. Did it know what was coming, just as a human would?

A solid bang, not as loud as a gunshot, but loud enough in that little space. The pig jerked and its legs gave way.

“To get the best meat,” Grandad said, speaking more loudly now, “The pig needs bleeding.”

He quickly slit its throat, ear-to-ear. I was not frightened. I felt no emotion for the pig. This was how men turned an animal into food. It was a process.

There was so much blood. Dark and thick. Once it had stopped flowing, Grandad swished some of it away with a bucket of water. Dad helped Grandad lift the pig onto the concrete slab, both of them groaning and cursing with the effort. Using hot water and sharp knives they shaved the pig of hair. Grandad then took a large knife and stabbed and sawed at the under-belly, and then eviscerated the animal, telling me which organ was what before carefully putting each onto the concrete slab next to the pig. He was enjoying himself and it was infectious. When I saw the huge, never-ending intestines, I thought they were ready-made sausages.

Eventually, Dad and Grandad lifted the gutted pig and hooked it under the beam. Job done. From that day on, I decided, I would join Grandad for the slaughter and these experiences stood me in great stead on the day of my first autopsy viewing (if such an event had taken place these days, I suspect Grandad would have been arrested for child cruelty).

So, after all the death I’d experienced in my young life, why was I so bloody scared on that staircase? Because this person had been murdered. I had never discovered a murdered body before. And we knew that the killer, 22-year-old Anthony Arkwright, who was at that moment being grilled by experienced CID detectives, was an exceptionally savage killer. He had murdered his 45-year-old neighbour, ex-teacher Raymond Ford, stabbing him 250 times before disembowelling the corpse and draping his

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entrails around the room, scattering some of his internal organs in the hallway. Marcus Law, an acquaintance of Arkwright, in a wheelchair after a motorbike accident, was stabbed seventy times, and left with cigarettes stuffed in his mouth and ears, his eyes gouged out, cigarettes left in the sockets. Arkwright said it was revenge for all the cigarettes Law had scrounged.

I was nearest the hallway and so turned to lean over the banister and look back down the hallway. I could see her through the open kitchen doorway. Arkwright's grandmother was lying on the floor. An axe was buried in her head.

"Mick," I said hoarsely, "She's dead and it's not a pretty sight."

Mick's eyes were as wide as an owl's. We were eight stairs from the hallway and we stayed put as the shock settled in and then, as is so often the case, our training kicked in. Preserve the scene. I descended the stairs, approached the body. No need to check if she was dead, so no need to contaminate the scene any more. We turned and left by the front door. As I opened it I was confronted by the sight of Arkwright's brother on the front path, next to the ladder we'd used to climb in. Now I had to tell him his grandmother had been murdered. I had no time to think about phrasing and blurted it out, quickly closing the door behind me, so there was no chance he would see.

Next job was to call the incident room. I spoke to the senior investigating officer Derek Smith who was in a celebratory mood as Arkwright had been charged with the two murders. I told him that there was a third victim; that no one had seen Arkwright's Grandad for a couple of days and, from talking to a neighbour who'd said he'd heard the family's other dog barking from inside the allotment shed, I thought we needed to check it out.

"Fuck off Dick, you're having a laugh, go and enjoy your weekend, you've been working some long hours."

Once I'd persuaded him I was telling the truth, we travelled to the allotment shed where we could hear the dog barking. We

broke in and found Grandad, killed by blows to the head with a lump hammer.

As I'd discovered both bodies, I had to attend both autopsies for continuity, to confirm my identification and then to relate any new information to the enquiry team immediately after.

When I spoke to one of the case officers he said: "Arkwright asked for a deck of cards. So we brought him one. He cut the pack, revealing the four of hearts. He said 'That's how I decided how many I would kill.' Thank god he didn't draw a ten."

I'd been on duty 23hours by the time I got home for a terrible round of nightmare-filled sleep. This was another valuable lesson. I had previously dismissed the trauma people said they suffer from the discovery of dead bodies, especially murder victims. The victims came alive again in my dreams, only to be murdered once more, leaving me awake and wide-eyed, sweating and entangled in the bedsheets.

THREE

WEDNESDAY'S CHILD

Not long into my service, I was working the 6am to 2pm shift on Christmas Day. At 1.45pm, I was called to a domestic.
‘There goes my Christmas dinner,’ I thought.

I went to the address and was amazed to find that I recognised the accused as one of the kids who used to beat me up on my way home from school.

My application form had said I wanted to join the police to help people and to make a difference. In truth, I wanted to be a policeman because it would give me an identity. I would be a respected ‘somebody’ in the community (these were the days when cops commanded that kind of respect). I wanted the uniform; I wanted to be instantly recognisable. My enthusiasm gained even more momentum when, as a police cadet, my older brother Mike brought his girlfriend home. She was gorgeous and he made it clear that there were plenty of girls who loved cops. I’d not had much success with ladies. Sixteen and 5ft2”, I was short for my age and had auburn hair. Being small and ginger meant I was the school bullies’ ideal fodder.

After school was done with I wanted more than anything to join the police but I was six inches too short, eighteen months too young and although I managed seven O-levels, I only managed

to scrape a CSE Grade 2 in maths – not good enough for the police. I went back to school with my self-esteem at an all-time low. My plan was to retake maths and do some A-Levels.

And then the miracle happened. I started to grow. My hair gradually turned brown. I wasn't bullied. I became a Prefect and earned respect. I made friends and was even invited to parties.

But I still had no luck with the ladies.

Then, for my seventeenth birthday I got a Lambretta GP 200 scooter. It had fourteen mirrors and two aerials and sounded like a washing machine on full spin filled with angry wasps.

“You know what mate,” I told Noz, my best mate at the time, “This may just get me a girl!”

And it did – in October 1974 whilst visiting my local Chinese take away I met my first wife Jen, who was fifteen and obviously impressed by my ‘circus wagon’ (as Dad named it). We were engaged in 1976 and married two years later. We were very young, but in those days that was the only way to be together.

I was at last tall enough and educated enough but I still had nine months to go until I was old enough (you had to be 18-and-a-half) so found work as a chock-fitter with the National Coal Board working at Elsecar Central Workshops in Barnsley; hard, wet, dirty and dangerous. A 70kg roof support leg fell on my workmate Phil. I was the youngest, but found myself taking charge and I got Phil out to safety (minus a finger), without being at all fazed, a scenario I related during my successful interview with South Yorkshire Police.

Training school followed, which got off to a poor start when the drill sergeant asked me my name.

“Richard, sergeant.”

The veins on the sergeant's forehead swelled and his face turned blood red as he screamed: “YOUR NAME IS YOUR RANK AND SURNAME!! FIRST NAMES ARE FOR SISSY'S.

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ARE YOU A SISSY? RICHARD IS IT? RICHARD? WELL, YOU LOOK LIKE A DICK TO ME!”

As a result, I have been known professionally as Dick for the past 39 years but my family have always only known me as Rich or Richard.

Apart from that blip, I made it through without too many more problems and now here I was, an all-powerful police officer. I'd never forgotten the day this lad, who'd been quite a bit older and bigger than me, along with three of his mates, had attacked me, broken my nose, blackened both my eyes and cracked some ribs.

I removed him from the house and arrested him for public order offences. He pleaded guilty at court and he never knew that his arresting officer was the little auburn-haired boy he'd beaten up ten years previously.

My Christmas dinner may have been cold that day but it tasted damn good to me.

While working as a detective constable in Rotherham, I investigated a woman who'd stolen money from a gas meter. She quickly confessed, citing hard times and depression as excuses. She was a rough diamond and I used to see her in various pubs around Rotherham. I'd say 'Hi,' now and again. We met again professionally after she found herself on the receiving end of criminality, having been burgled. Once I'd taken her statement, she pointed to some tarot cards on the table and asked if I wanted a reading.

“Go on then, for a laugh,” I said, as I didn't – and still don't – believe in anything like this.

She started with a few generic things about me that anyone could guess before mentioning I'd been hospitalised recently, which was true. She then told me that my marriage would dissolve in my forties and that I would remarry.

And then she pulled out the death card. Several times.

She looked concerned.

“Am I going to die?” I asked.

“No,” she said, “But, oh dear, this just doesn’t make any sense. This is the beginning of your midlife; you’re surrounded by death, but it’s not you. Death just keeps on repeating and repeating. You’re steeped in it. I can’t explain it.”

She then said that death disappeared out of my life in my mid-50s, and was replaced by many children.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” she said, shaking her head, looking deeply troubled, as I left. “The death just disappears, as quickly as it comes.”

I quickly forgot about this, as my thoughts were all full of family and career. I was interviewed for the CID department in a pub – a classic CID move in those days – was accepted in at 23-years-old and, a month after CID training was complete, I was able to take my inspector’s exam. The only catch was that Jen was heavily pregnant with our second child and my exam was scheduled for the expected birthdate – April 20. We hoped that Jen would give birth before or after this date but by sheer luck the exam venue happened to be next door to the hospital, so if the worst came to the worst then, I imagined, I could flit between the two.

Of course Jen went into labour in the small hours of April 20, so I took her to hospital then left for my exam dizzy with excitement. I rushed through everything, finishing as fast as I could and then sprinted back to the hospital and made it in time for the birth (Jen said she hung on for me). It was the most marvellous, magical and incredible experience of my life. And I passed my inspector’s exam.

In 1988 I was 31-years-old and becoming a seasoned cop, although I was still learning and jobs could still catch me out. I was called to an abattoir on the outskirts of Sheffield where there

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had been a series of thefts. The owner asked if I wanted to have a look around. I said that I would, and explained about Grandad and his pigs, that I was a seasoned observer of animal slaughter. We stepped into the killing floor and I watched as sheep, pigs, cows and bullocks were herded into a room, alive, noisy and scared until they were all at once silenced by electrocution. Their throats were then slit en-masse before being hung on a mechanical carousel of hooks that whisked them off, still spraying blood, through 10ft-high plastic curtains. The speed and volume was devastating. I left the abattoir utterly distressed. This was no way to slaughter animals.

In 1990 I was invited to join the serious crime squad as a Detective Sergeant. We were a major incident support team and when not called upon we concentrated on target criminals within South Yorkshire. In 1992 we were transformed into a surveillance unit, which meant specialist training – including the advanced driver’s course. Sitting about for hours in cars and hiding in hedge bottoms did not really do it for me. It was rare to actually catch a criminal in the act during surveillance (although when it did happen, it was a massive adrenaline surge and very fulfilling). So, although surveillance had its moments, they were too few and far between for me – a cop who loved the ‘Life on Mars’ lifestyle. I was ready to try and advance to Inspector, so presented myself before a promotion board in May 1993. I succeeded but had to wait until the appropriate appointment came up. In August 1993, I was in the middle of a murder investigation, hiding in a hedge at the bottom of a quarry, when the Chief Constable called me in for a talk. I couldn’t think why, and said so.

“You stupid idiot,” my boss told me. “It’s about getting promoted, straight from DS to DI and staying in CID.”

Wow, this was amazing news. Aged only 34, I’d be the youngest DI in South Yorkshire Police. But the Chief soon wiped the grin from my face. The promotion was a sweetener for a job

no one else wanted. I had to join the understaffed Fraud Squad, 8am to 4pm, Monday to Friday, no overtime and not an ounce of interest for me. Grey men in grey suits with about 700 years' service. This was as about as far away from what I'd wanted to do as was possible.

"Do this a couple of years and then you can move on," the Chief told me, "I'm sure there will be a good posting waiting for you at Division."

So, on 3 August 1993, complete with pinstriped suit, I took up post as Detective Inspector, Fraud Squad. The team consisted of a Detective Chief Inspector, myself, twenty Detective Constables and some Police (Civilian) Staff.

Two days in and I got my welcome meeting with the Detective Chief Superintendent. I told him that he was speaking to a man who didn't even get his maths O-Level, hoping that he would see that I probably was not the best man for the job after all.

"Don't worry about that Dick," he said, dashing my hopes, "You'll do just fine. Oh, and by the way, when we get the next Hillsborough, Fraud Squad are responsible for deceased victims and temporary mortuaries."

This sentence, tagged on at the end of our meeting, hit me with the physical force of a hammer blow. I'd been at Hillsborough on the day of the disaster.

April 15, 1989. Clear blue skies, the sense of summer approaching and the prospect of an FA Cup semi-final match between top Championship rivals Liverpool and Nottingham Forest, played on the neutral ground of Sheffield Wednesday's Hillsborough Stadium.

Thirteen years a cop, I was a plain-clothed CID sergeant but had squeezed back into an ill-fitting uniform after volunteering for twelve hours of overtime, policing the grounds from 8am to 8pm, during which I would have a chance to see some footballing legends in action up close.

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Instead, I witnessed a tragedy that left 96 dead and 766 injured, the result of crushing in the overcrowded stadium.

At the time of writing, the second inquest into the disaster is underway and so it would not be appropriate for me to relate my experiences at this time. Once the inquest and subsequent possible criminal investigation is complete, a chapter that covers my experiences at Hillsborough on that day will be made available as a free download from amazon.co.uk and from my agent's website, andrewlownie.co.uk.

For now, suffice it to say, I visited Anfield (which had been declared a shrine) shortly after the disaster. I went with a friend, DC Tony Cawkwell, one of the best thief takers I've ever worked with. Dressed in sweatshirts and jeans and we queued at the Bill Shankly Gates. I struggled desperately to hold it together as the countless tributes left at the Spion Kop end came into view. The victims became truly real to me then. They had mostly been young with full lives ahead of them. Their friends and families had been left with unimaginable grief.

I know that everything I felt – and still do – cannot compare with the torment of the families of the people that died that day; people that should have survived – would have survived if they'd been treated sooner.

Cops are responders. We come running after an incident has happened. It's extremely rare for cops to witness incidents, let alone witness loss of life and to see a major disaster take place right before your eyes, while you, in police uniform stand helplessly by unable to satisfy the basic principal of policing – to protect.

I'd seen people die right in front of me and I'd been unable to help them. I will feel the guilt for the rest of my life. It is real, permanent, devastating. Flashbacks strike whenever life's not going so well. I know I'm not the only one.

Lord Justice Taylor's report into Hillsborough was published just before I joined the Fraud Squad. It was scathing about South Yorkshire Police, confirming what many already felt: we'd not only failed to do our job, we weren't fit for purpose. The report led to the realisation within the Police Service that new attitudes towards dealing with major disasters were needed.

At the time, the Taylor report – added to my already strong personal feelings – made me want to disassociate myself with ever being at Hillsborough. But my DCS's comment about the mortuaries reawakened memories and emotions. I thought I had locked away but they were there, floating just below my consciousness, and I had simply become good at pushing them down when they threatened to resurface. Now they came to the fore and I was overcome with guilt – and realised that there was no getting rid of these memories or feelings.

I started to think that perhaps I could use my experience at Hillsborough, to some good purpose. I had many 'fight or flight' moments during those initial weeks as I tried to think of strategies. In the panicky flight moments, thoughts snuck in about leaving it, or sorting out minimal, periphery-type stuff which would satisfy the bosses that I was doing something about it, and then move on after two years as the Chief had advised. Besides, Fraud and temporary mortuaries hardly seemed to go hand-in-glove.

But I continued to examine and think about the subject; I just couldn't ignore it; something in me had been kindled. As a police force and as a country, we were lacking in terms of our response to major disasters. This had to be changed and, for whatever reason, I was going to be a part of that change. I began to ask myself seemingly impossible questions, such as: 'What can *we* do to help grieving families to come to terms with their loss?'

By this time in my police service, I was a confident police officer. I knew what I could and couldn't do. Like all police officers, I'd acquired certain mechanical skills necessary to survive

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the job. I would like to think that I learned how to be practical rather than harsh, although police officers in general have to take a somewhat hardened approach, else we wouldn't cope with all the horrible things we have to deal with.

I'd worked on thirty murders and countless sudden deaths and I knew I was not good at delivering bad news, neither was I emotionally intelligent when it came to dealing with the bereaved. Dead bodies, on the other hand, I could handle. I thought perhaps if I concentrated on this aspect of my brief and the positive impact that dealing with the dead could have upon relatives, if, for example, they could at least know that the body of their loved one was being treated with dignity and respect, then that may at least give them some comfort. After all, I thought, as professionals, we owe it to families to do our very best for them at the worst time in their lives.

The only problem was I didn't know where to start.