

Where was that light coming from? Bright, hot light. Knives in the night. Last night, was it? No, the night before. Just another Friday in Edinburgh. A drug haul at a dance hall. A few of the dealers trying to run for it. Rebus cornering one. The man, sweating, teeth bared, turning before Rebus's eyes into an animal, something wild, predatory, scared. And cornered. The glint of a knife ...

. But that was Friday, the night before last. So this was Sunday. Yes! Sunday morning. (Afternoon, maybe.) Rebus opened his eyes and squinted into the sunshine, streaming through his uncurtained window. No, not sunshine. His bedside lamp. Must have been on all night. He had

come to bed drunk last night, drunk and tired. Had forgotten to close the curtains. And now warming light, birds resting on the window-ledge. He stared into a small black eye, then checked his watch. Ten past eight. Morning then, not afternoon. Early morning.

His head was the consistency of syrup, his limbs stiff. He'd been fit as a young man; not fitness daft, but fit all the same. But one day he had just stopped caring. He dressed quickly, then checked and found that he was running out of clean shirts, clean pants, clean socks. Today's chore then: doing the laundry. Ever since his wife had left him, he had taken his dirty washing to a public laundrette at the top of Marchmont Road, where a service wash cost very little and the manageress always used to fold his clean clothes away very neatly, a smile on her scrupulous lips. But in a fit of madness one Saturday afternoon, he had walked calmly into an electrical shop and purchased a washer/dryer for the flat.

He pressed the dirty bundle into the machine and found he was down to one last half-scoop of washing powder. What the hell it would have to do. There were various buttons and controls on the machine's fascia, but he only ever used one programme: Number 5 (40 Degrees), full load, with ten minutes' tumble dry at the end. The results were satisfactory, if never perfect. He switched the machine on, donned his shoes and left the flat, double locking the door behind him.

Ian Rankin

Concrete Evidence

'It's amazing what you find in these old buildings,' said the contractor, a middle-aged man in safety helmet and overalls. Beneath the overalls lurked a shirt and tie, the marks of his station. He was the chief, the gaffer. Nothing surprised him any more, not even unearthing a skeleton.

'Do you know,' he went on, 'in my time, I've found everything from ancient coins to a pocket-watch. How old do you reckon he is then?'

'We're not even sure it is a he, not yet. Give us a chance, Mr Beesford.'

'Well, when can we start work again?'

'Later on today.'

'Must be gey old though, eh?'

'How do you make that out?'

'Well, it's got no clothes on, has it? They've perished. Takes time for that to happen, plenty of time ...'

Rebus had to concede, the man had a point. Yet the concrete floor beneath which the bones had been found ... it didn't look so old, did it? Rebus cast an eye over the cellar again. It was situated a storey or so beneath road-level, in the basement of an old building off the Cowgate. Rebus was often in the Cowgate; the mortuary was just up the road. He knew that the older buildings here were a veritable warren, long narrow tunnels ran here, there and, it seemed, everywhere, semi-cylindrical in shape and just about high enough to stand up in. This present building was being given the full works - gutted, new drainage system, rewiring. They were taking out the floor in the cellar to lay new drains and also because there seemed to be damp - certainly there was a fousty smell to the place - and its cause needed to be found.

They were expecting to find old drains, open drains perhaps. Maybe even a trickle of a stream, something which would lead to damp. Instead, their pneumatic drills found what remained of a corpse, perhaps hundreds of years old. Except, of course, for that concrete floor. It couldn't be more than fifty or sixty years old, could it? Would clothing deteriorate to a visible nothing in so short a time? Perhaps the damp could do that. Rebus found the cellar oppressive. The smell, the shadowy lighting provided by portable lamps, the dust.

But the photographers were finished, and so was the pathologist, Dr Curt. He didn't have too much to report at this stage, except to comment that he preferred it when skeletons were kept in cupboards, not confined to the cellar. They'd take the bones away, along with samples of the earth and rubble around the find, and they'd see what they would see.

'Archaeology's not really my line,' the doctor

added. 'It may take me some time to bone up on it.' And he smiled his usual smile.

It took several days for the telephone call to come. Rebus picked up the receiver.

'Hello?'

'Inspector Rebus? Dr Curt here. About our emaciated friend.'

'Yes?'

'Male, five feet ten inches tall, probably been down there between thirty and thirty-five years. His left leg was broken at some time, long before he died. It healed nicely. But the little finger on his left hand had been dislocated and it did not heal so well. I'd say it was crooked all his adult life. Perfect for afternoon tea in Morningside.'

'Yes?' Rebus knew damned well Curt was leading up to something. He knew, too, that Curt was not a man to be hurried.

'Tests on the soil and gravel around the skeleton show traces of human tissue, but no fibres or anything which might have been clothing. No shoes, socks, underpants, nothing. Altogether, I'd say he was buried there in the altogether.'

'But did he die there?'

'Can't say.'

'All right, what did he die of?'

There was an almost palpable smile in Curt's voice. 'Inspector, I thought you'd never ask. Blow to the skull, a blow of considerable force to the back of the head. Murder, I'd say. Yes, definitely murder.'