

# Holloway Falls

## Neil Cross

### Chapter 1

Andrew had done his research.

Although he knew the odds of successfully faking suicide were not good, one night he caught a train to the south-west coast of England and fabricated his death by drowning.

He thought of pupae and butterflies. Time-lapse. Reversed.

Before that day came, there had been much to do.

His father had left him £25,000, which Andrew had transferred straight to a building society. He imagined a fungal mound of greasy cash in a damp basement corner; but he no longer cared about that and from the account he arranged to withdraw £9,000.

He and Rachel were affluent in a way that privately rather embarrassed him. She worked for the natural history department at BBC Bristol. When the weather was fine, she walked to work. Andrew was deputy head-teacher at a South Bristol comprehensive. He earned less than his wife and didn't mind. In addition, Rachel received an annuity from her grandparents that paid for holidays and Christmas. There was a joint-savings account, which alone contained more than his inherited 25,000. And there were a number of insurance policies, into which they had been drip-feeding their salary for more years than he could cheerfully think about.

His family would never need the remaining £16,000. They'd probably never want to touch it, in the hope or fear that he might some day *come back*, shambling, seaweed-shrouded. But he left them the money anyway.

He re-drafted his will one Thursday lunchtime, employing a South Bristol solicitor who expressly was not a family friend.

He was of sound mind.

With the £9,000, he opened three bank accounts under his own name, depositing £3,000 in each.

During the weeks of preparation, he diligently and often transferred portions of this money from account to account. This deceptive flow of capital gave each bank the impression that his financial affairs were fluid and sound. Predicated on this, he was able to arrange three substantial overdrafts.

He withdrew the money in instalments. This procedure was time-consuming and repetitive, and it helped that he'd been on sick leave since the previous school year. Each day for several weeks he withdrew from automatic teller machines on White Ladies Road slightly

less than each account allowed him. Computer automation ensured that human attention was not brought to this potentially dubious conduct.

He left early in April. The morning had about it a crisp Englishness that filled him with vague happiness, a pre-emptive nostalgia. He remembered the life he was living as if it were already a faded photograph. He found himself moving about his house, picking up and minutely examining innocuous objects – a television remote control, a golf ball, a bread knife.

He dressed in his best suit, as if going to work, and took with him a small leather suitcase in which he had packed £47,000: his original investment plus £38,000 from the overdrafts. He felt the thrill of a new life about to begin. Walking for the last time from bank to bank, folding cash into wallet and wallet into breast pocket (he could feel the blank, whirring eyes of disinterested security cameras). He was possessed of a peculiar consciousness, as if viewing himself from a precipitous new perspective.

He left before the kids got home.

II

Andrew and his family lived in a Georgian house in central Bristol. Many properties on their winding, tree-lined street had been converted into flats for young professional couples who wished to live near Clifton without paying Clifton premiums. There were also family houses – University lecturers, bankers moved from London with Lloyds, Bristol media-types.

What was to become chronic insomnia first made itself known in his late-thirties. Sanguine, he imagined it would be a passing problem and, that first summer, he functioned well enough on three or four hours' sleep a night.

The early mornings were quiet, leaf-dappled with shadow and stone cool. Fully awake in time for *Farming Today*, he would stretch with great contentment (gently, so as not to wake Rachel), then take the portable radio from the bedside cabinet and wander downstairs, barefoot in pyjamas, to the ground-floor extension he'd built for his mother-in-law. She called it the Granny Flat, and the name had stuck.

Although it overlooked the rear garden, the Granny Flat had the familiar but exotic air of a holiday home. It didn't quite feel like his property, from which he extracted a delicate pleasure. There was a single bed, kept made in anticipation of a visit (he never minded): floral print duvets and feather pillows: Rachel's water colours – Devon seascapes. There was a bookshelf he'd fitted into an alcove, not without complication or a concurrent sense of satisfaction. The lower shelves were lined with art- and cookery books and paperback thrillers. On the top shelf was a creased, stained, dog-eared paperback copy of *Captain Correlli's Mandolin* that had been passed hand-to-hand on one family holiday.

Every year, they rented a house in a harbour town on the coast of Devon. In the garden was a brick barbecue at which stood Rachel's father and brother. They were oiling trout with a pastry brush, wrapping the fish in *Bacofoil* and placing the parcels on the grill, where already sausages were blackening on one spatula-flattened side. Because it was an unspoken rule

that such jobs as barbecuing meat should be the responsibility of his father- and brother-in-law, Andrew and Rachel prepared the salad.

Rachel found this hilarious. Despite Andrew's protestations to the contrary, she told him (as he shelled hard-boiled eggs and wrestled the tops from bottles of salad dressing) that his voice temporarily dropped an octave. Then she stood on tiptoes and kissed him just behind the ear.

Rachel's grandmother sat happily enough in a deck chair, reading *Hello* and *OK!*. The children busied themselves variously with Gameboys, the lower limbs of blameless trees, tepid cans of diet Pepsi, and *J17*.

Andrew's mother-in-law did not arrive at the *al fresco* wooden table until her husband was almost wretched with worry that her trout would be overcooked. She emerged with red eyes. She had just finished *Captain Correlli's Mandolin*.

That evening, while Rachel's grandmother baby-sat, they went to the local pub. There was a car park at front, wooden benches set on the grass, each sheltered by an umbrella advertising Holsten *Pils*. At one side of the pub stood a pebble-dashed extension that housed the family games room. This in turn housed its own bar, which was staffed by an elderly woman who apparently had yet to tire of the borderline atavism of children on holiday, up past their bed-time after too long in the July sun.

Andrew drank pints of lager and lime, his holiday drink. His sunglasses were upended on the table before him. He was a big man with a rugby player's shoulders and neck: his black Adidas polo shirt – *All Blacks*, a present from New Zealand – was taut at belly and shoulders. His hair was packed into tight Semitic curls, thinning at the crown and his experimental goatee beard was flecked with silver. He wore cargo shorts and old tennis shoes, ripped at the seams. He'd begun to acquire a belly in the third year of marriage, when a recurrent cartilage injury barred him even from Sunday soccer.

He drove a ten-year old Volvo. He believed cricket to be a deep communion with the English subconscious and his voice had the appropriate, gentle behest of a commentator, accentuated by his rising West Country inflection. He remained passionate about rugby, which he no longer played. His computer password was *jonalomu*. He would not subscribe to Sky Sports.

Lower middle class Bristol boy, temperamentally left wing. He did not smoke, except sometimes at Christmas and parties. He had never been unfaithful to his wife and had in his married life never been impotent, excepting a single, half-drunken escape with a recalcitrant condom that closely followed Rachel's decision to come off the Pill. He read the *Observer* on Sunday. Sometimes he bought the *Sunday Mirror* to read on the toilet.

Andrew moved with the gentle assurance acquired at cost by any person who since childhood had been one size too big for the world.

Before ten, it clouded over and began to drizzle and they went inside. The main bar was dark with wood and brass. Within ten minutes, heavy rain came in off the channel and began to beat a tattoo against the leaded windows. The six of them fell into conversation with another group of holidaymakers, three married couples from Yorkshire, two generations. Rachel began to massage the inside of his calf with her insole, slipped from a yellow, rope-

soled *espadrille* bought the first day from a seafront shop perfumed with heat, inflatable rubber rings and sun-tan lotion.

The rain did not let up. At eleven-thirty, he and his family walked the short, steep route to the rented house, which overlooked the harbour. His wife (his Rachel) borrowed his denim jacket because the rain made her sun dress clinging and transparent. The jacket made her child-sized and her hair hung in wet tousles across her brow and shoulders. She smelled of rain.

When they entered the holiday-musty cottage, only their eldest, Annie, was awake, watching *Curse of the Werewolf*, starring a young Oliver Reed.

### III

While much of his world was asleep, he enjoyed the holiday feeling of agreeably alienated familiarity. He showered, shaved, and wrapped himself in a dark blue towelling robe.

Sometimes he whiled away an hour reading yesterday's newspaper. Then he prepared breakfast for those members his family currently willing to eat it.

Periodically, Rachel was on a diet: in the bedroom she adopted an expression of glum concentration and squeezed and prodded and examined in full length mirrors her breasts and thighs and buttocks. At the age of twelve, Annie announced that she was a vegetarian. Andrew and Rachel decided to encourage her in this. They were proud their daughter and hoped she'd grow out of it soon.

Adam and Steven, the twins, would eat anything, so long as it was not or did not contain fruit. Sometimes on Sunday, Andrew would cook a full fried breakfast for himself and his sons. Cracking eggs into hot pan sizzling with bacon fat, he never felt closer to them. He didn't fully understand this. He suspected that something primeval lurked at its source, but it pleased him nonetheless.

On the night of Saturday, August 31<sup>st</sup> or the early hours of Sunday September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1997, he lurched into wakefulness like a braking truck. He had vividly dreamed the death of a female celebrity and lay awake for many minutes.

In the early hours, he sneaked from the bedroom and padded downstairs to the Granny Flat. In the washed-out pastels of a Bristolian Autumn morning (the smell of fresh, laundered cotton), even showering and shaving, the dream-sadness lingered.

He wondered if he should discuss the dream with Rachel. He towelled himself dry and looked for his bathrobe. He padded round the Granny Flat in befuddled circles, like a sleepy cat. The robe hung where it always did, on a hook behind the bathroom door.

He decided not to say anything. He had been disconcerted by the death of his father. Rachel's strained patience had been tested further by his sudden insistence, despite her appeals to the contrary, on keeping a photograph of him in the sitting room. It stood next to their wedding photograph on the fireplace.

“Fine,” she said. “Whatever you want,” and they hadn’t spoken for two days.

Their relationship had not yet fully normalised. She was still being tautly polite and he quietly amiable.

Downstairs, Andrew turned on the television. Something important seemed to have happened: there was live news on every channel. His first thought, the legacy of a cold-war childhood, was of nuclear war.

He watched BBC1 for a few incredulous minutes. Then he went and woke Rachel, taking the portable radio with him.

Much as families had during the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, they gathered round the television. On every channel haggard newsreaders, broadcasting live, explained again and again what had happened in Paris during the early hours of the morning. Even the coiffured anchormen seemed unable to believe it.

Andrew and his family were strangely enraptured, brought into silent fraternity by the woman’s death. It seemed to intimate something of great significance, something at the insubstantial edges of which the mind could only grasp. Andrew felt close to them, all at once. They did not dress or properly eat until late in the afternoon. Rachel wept and comforted Annie. The twins were silent. The unspoken dream-sadness settled heavily on Andrew’s shoulders and entangled him like a musty robe.

He didn’t know what time he’d woken up. Nor could he eliminate the possibility that he’d heard wayward news broadcasts during his sleep and retained their content – what televisions and minicab radios had been mainlined into his receptive mind in the late-night stillness? What Saturday night revellers returning along empty streets drunkenly pondered aloud the breaking news, echoing faint but distinct in the marital bedroom? It was therefore not possible to say with certainty that the dream had been precognitive.

But he knew it had been.

A woman he’d never met – to whose image he had been exposed for nearly twenty years but to whom he nevertheless had paid little conscious attention – met her fierce consequence in downtown Paris; her limited intellect extinguished, her body rendered askew and crooked by impact.

An oceanic swell of sorrow washed over England. There was a spasm of grief. The morbid incense of flowers piled high, corrupting in the late summer heat. The beloved countenance glimpsed in gently shifting cloud formation.

During those strange days the country could hardly believe it might recover, but it did. It was gently chagrined, as at the memory of a small indiscretion. The shared sense of something numinous and ineffable receded. Britain realigned. It clicked firmly home into the mounting from which it had been agitated.

Andrew Taylor, however, did not. Try as he might, he could not get realigned. He did not click home.

The woman's destruction had shattered something in him like the windscreen of her Mercedes: she had ruptured a psychic membrane and the dream of her death was only the first. Into Andrew's head there surged a geyser of terrible images. Nightmares clamoured and shrieked behind his eyes. The nocturnal world became a feast: the constant eruption of orgasm. He pitched and warped on the mattress, turned in a knot of sweat and bedclothes.

His head swelled with madness, threatened to split like fruit. Kossovar refugees, gaunt and black-eyed on the Macedonian border. A burning man at the wheel of a bombarded truck, lips bubbling and peeling from teeth. He was sealed shut and bound in the dark. He crossed borders on bare and bleeding feet. He wept in helplessness and fear. Taste and smell of black, vegetal soil. He looked down on a pale body, not his own. Defiled and passing away. Blue flesh and ligotage.

He dreamed of rape and cancer. He dreamed of vandalism and mutilation, of soft bodies and impact. He dreamed of penetration. He dreamed of fierce contortion and violent impairment.

He dreamed of murder.

The dreams diminished him. He became hunched, red-eyed, timorous. The malice behind the twist of every smile bared itself to him. He saw knots of vein straining at neck and jaw. Bone superstructure on which living meat was hung. He heard screams of pain in laughter. He saw age slinking behind youth: death behind age. He saw compost and animal flesh. Worms rolled in loops and knots.

The pattern of job and friendships shifted around him, modulated into the choreography of an unknown dance. Schoolchildren sensed that something was amiss with their deputy head-teacher who – if not loved – had at least gone essentially underided. But now Mr Taylor wandered the corridors befuddled, like an untimely spectre. They sensed that his purpose was lost. When they addressed him – even his favourites, the sixth-formers, the athletic and the academically talented – he didn't seem at first to recognise them. A spasm of panic would twitch across his features.

Even those admired sixth formers were still children and there was little pity among them for a man so evidently teetering on the headland. Jokes were told about him and names were invented. Some of the jokes and nicknames found their way to the staffroom. There was more pity there, not much, and guilty laughter.

Time passed. The laughter did not subside, but it took on a disconcerted undertone, an acknowledgement that something alien walked among them.

Three times a week for fourteen months, he saw a therapist.

For displaced anxiety and depression triggered by the death of his father, he was prescribed Prozac.

One night he freed himself from tangled bedsheets and hurried downstairs. On the back on an unopened gas bill he wrote:

*have what? three seven zero of what?  
we are going to invert.*

Later, fully awake, he saw this message and did not understand it. Along with his family, friends, colleagues, and pupils, he began to fear for his sanity.

In the morning, Rachel found him quite still in an armchair. He was pretending to read a thriller. She knew he had lifted the book from the carpet beside him the moment he heard her stir, in order that she would not find him staring blankly at nothing.

One night he said, "I don't need a doctor, I need an exorcist," and Rachel looked up from her novel. She laughed and hoped this was the first sign of the Prozac making things better.

But Andrew was not joking.

He saw many doctors, in private clinics paid for by insurance policies he had opposed taking out on political grounds. It was Dr Scobie, Presbyterian and arrogant, who first spoke to him of temporal lobe epilepsy.

It was a mysterious madness. Its locus, the source of his misery, was perhaps a tiny lesion on his brain. He imagined a pullulating knot over his ear, into which surged occult patterns and energies.

Andrew said: "But what if it's real?"

"What if *what's* real?"

"The dreams."

"Real in what sense?"

"You know in what sense."

Scobie clasped his smooth hands before him on the desk. He twinkled with medical irony.

"Don't you think it would be best to eliminate alternative possibilities before we discuss – alternative possibilities?"

"I'm not imagining it."

"I'm not suggesting you are. The phenomenon is quite real. It's the *cause* of the phenomenon we're here to ascertain."

"But what if the lesion is an effect? What if the dreams caused it?"

Minutely, Scobie shrugged his bony shoulders. Glint of sunlight on watchstrap.

"I'm afraid that's not a question I'm trained to answer."

In the early hours of the morning of December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1999, he dreamed about Kelly Brookmyre.

Kelly was fifteen. She lived in a small village in South Wales. She had disappeared. Nobody knew where Kelly might be.

Andrew woke unable to move. Rachel woke alongside him, bewildered by his mewling. On her knees, her nightdress hiked and one unprotected breast lined with the pattern of rucked bed linen, she attempted to calm him while he mooed like a cow.

The house came awake. Lights. The children crying. Rachel ushered them back to bed. Sound of doors slamming. She dragged hands through sleep-knotted hair.

The days leading to Christmas were full of distance and awkwardness. Christmas day: a silent lunch, lips taut and white, cutlery clattering too loud. *Top of the Pops*.

Andrew on the edge of the bed in his new shirt and trousers, sobbing into his palms.

*It's A Wonderful Life.*

The television news showed that ranks of police and local volunteers spent Christmas day beating down grass in frosted fields, searching for Kelly Brookmyre's mortal remains.

Her parents, colourless, flanked by senior officers in laundered uniforms, petitioned for her safe return. Bulbs flashed. The shifting of shoulder-mounted cameras.

Few doubted that Kelly was dead.

Except Andrew.

At 2.49 on the morning of December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1999, he awoke and screamed, *Oh Jesus Christ, I'm on fire.*

He was not on fire.

Kelly Brookmyre was an above-average pupil. She was attractive and vivacious and because of this some did not love her.

One female classmate especially had taken against Kelly. This classmate resolved to exact revenge for whatever wrong had been done to her. We can speculate upon exactly the nature of this impropriety (and chances are, we wouldn't be far from the truth), but the particulars need not be recorded.

Somehow (and again, it's perhaps better that we don't seek to understand quite how), this aggrieved girl procured the assistance of her family in pursuit of her teenage revenge. She was assisted by two males, one seventeen, the other nineteen: her brothers. A fifty-one year old woman provided further assistance. Her mother.

Either these four or an unknown combination of two or three of them successfully contrived to kidnap Kelly. She was taken against her will to their grey, terraced house where they

burned the tips of her fingers on the ring of an electric cooker. They cut her hair with scissors, then shaved it with a Bic razor. They stripped her nude and carved the word *slag* on her belly with the tip of a knitting needle. Foreign objects were inserted into her vagina. A television remote control. A golf ball. The handle of a bread knife.

Kelly was fastened to a single bed with parcel tape and injected with amphetamines. She was blindfolded and the headphones of a Sony Walkman were taped to her ears.

On the morning of Christmas day, the brothers joined in the search for Kelly. They enjoyed the sense of community spirit her disappearance had engendered in the small town. It felt Christmassy. Should one examine the relevant videotape, they can quite easily be identified over the shoulder of a grim police spokesman, beating aside grass frozen white like icing sugar.

At approximately 2.40 on the morning of December 28<sup>th</sup>, they transferred Kelly to the boot of the family car. They drove her to what the press concurred was “a nearby beauty spot”, where they tipped her into a little-used picnic area that borders one of the main roads leading to town. They poured petrol over her and one of them set her alight.

It did not emerge in court which of them had done so.

Kelly was alive when they found her. She lived for twenty-one hours.

#### IV

Three months later, in March 2000, Andrew closed the door on his house and double-locked it. He caught a taxi to Temple Meads and a train to the south coast. At the coast, he caught another train to a small coastal town, about which he wandered until he found a quiet pub that took his fancy. Inside, he propped himself at the bar. He drank three pints of Guinness. The pub was quiet and the landlord engaged him in pleasant, inconsequential chat for much of his stay.

He left the pub and took a walk along a coastal path, pausing first to post his suicide note.

*My Dearest Rachel. By the time you read this.*

It was very dark. There were no stars. The breeze was warm and smelled of nocturnal pollen, of sand and salt-wet pebbles and sea.

He removed his shoes and socks and walked down to the pebbled beach, across the threshold of black seaweed at the edge of the sea, bordered by a luminous tier of foam. It began to rain great, warm gobbets. He squatted, heel to haunch, and unclasped the suitcase. He removed a change of clothes and a flattened Adidas sportsbag, into which he transferred £47,000 in cash.

He undressed. Naked in the rain and pale in the starless darkness, he felt pagan and unfamiliar. The pebbles were cold and bruised his tender English soles.

He dressed in the clothes he'd bought for cash that morning. Heavy-weave cotton trousers, khaki, with deep pockets: a warm, hooded sweater. A pair of Adidas trainers.

He took a moment to imagine the police photograph that would be taken: a brown leather and brass suitcase alone on a grey pebble beach, set against a looming grey sky. The thought was dense with the future of those he loved.

By the time he reached the bus stop it was raining heavily. He got soaked through. He waited, hood pulled all-but uselessly over his bowed, dripping head, until an asthmatic single-decker shuddered to a halt alongside the country road.

He rode to the next town, where he registered in a bed-and-breakfast hotel under his new name, Jack Shepherd. He had practised the signature many hundreds of times.

That night he dreamed of his sons and he dreamed of his daughter and he dreamed of his wife. He dreamed of his house. He sat gently on the edge of their beds, while they slept and did not know he had returned. He blew the fringe from their brows and smiled tenderly with love for them.

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