

NIGEL FARNDALE



The
Blasphemer

Sometimes believing is seeing

THE BLASPHEMER

NIGEL FARNDALE



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For my grandfather, Private Alfred Farndale,
who died in the mud of Passchendaele,
and again seventy years later in his bed

By the same author

A Sympathetic Hanging

Last Action Hero of the British Empire:
Commander John Kerans 1915–1985

Flirtation, Seduction, Betrayal

Haw-Haw. The Tragedy of William and Margaret Joyce

'Monkeys make men. Men make angels.'
Charles Darwin

PROLOGUE

Ypres Salient. Last Monday of July, 1917

WITH A FIVE-DAY BEARD AND A CRUST OF YELLOW MUD WOVEN INTO the fabric of his breeches, Peter Morris does not look like an officer. Instead of a peaked cap he wears a loose-knit trench hat. On his back is a sleeveless leather jerkin. His skin is grey with fatigue and his hooded eyes, as he raises his head and stares at the entrance of the dugout, are shot with blood.

He has heard a scrape of metal. Now he sees the corrugated iron door open wide and a hairless hand push back the blanket on a string that serves as a gas curtain. A waxy-faced young private in a relatively clean tunic appears in the doorway, stamps in a tray filled with chloride of lime, and adjusts his eyes to the gloom. With his downy moustache and his narrow shoulders that slope down like a Russian doll's, he looks his age, twenty. 'Private Kennedy,' he says in a flat-vowelled voice. 'Shropshire Fusiliers. I've been told to find a Major Morris. You seen him? He's with the Rifle Brigade.'

The major lowers his gaze without answering. There are words vibrating in his head but they are random and meaningless. Someone has asked a question. A movement distracts him; it is his own hands coming together on the desk in front of him, the fingers steepling. Next to them, he notices, is a field telephone and a studded cosh with fibres of hair and cartilage attached to it, and alongside this an empty bottle of HP sauce with the label half picked off. They are acting as paperweights for a trench map. He places them carefully on a shelf, takes a sheet of folded paper from his wallet and smoothes it out over the map. It is a musical score, annotated in German. He nods to himself as he studies it. There is meaning in these patterns. There is order and beauty.

'What's that?'

Kennedy's question does not reach Morris.

'Is it a sheet of music?'

All morning the sky has been buckling with noise. Now the barrage that has been creeping closer finds them. A Pissing Jenny – identifiable by its whistle – lands within forty yards of the trench. As the air compresses and a shower of soil falls from the gaps between the beams in the ceiling, the private cowers, but the major does not react. The score and the map are littered with dirt, making the cartographic trench system appear three-dimensional. A lantern hooked to a nail above the desk sways, pitching the map in and out of shadow. Morris brushes the soil away with the side of his hand, his movements mechanical and slow, as though underwater. A smell of cordite and damp, freshly turned earth crowds the space between the two men.

'I'm with the Shropshire Fusiliers,' Kennedy repeats, 'Eleventh Battalion.'

Morris remains silent.

'We've just got here.'

The older man levels his eyes at the younger. They are cold and bestial; the eyes of a man who has killed before and could, without hesitation or conscience, kill again. Kennedy steps backwards involuntarily. Makes as if to speak. Leaves.

As Morris stares down once more at the sheet of music in front of him, his right hand rises lightly and, with gradual undulations of the wrist, begins to conduct.

CHAPTER ONE

London. Present day

DANIEL KENNEDY STOOD NAKED IN FRONT OF HIS BATHROOM mirror and rehearsed in his head the lie he had told, the one he was about to tell again. His reflection was indistinct, more a shadow in the violet-edged dawn. As he stared at it, he felt behind his back for the light cord. Tug. *Click*. Release. *Clack*. When the darkness continued, he reached forward and gave the fluorescent tube above the mirror a double tap with his fingertip. It crackled for an instant before casting a sallow light over one half of the bathroom. Mounted to the left of the sink was a round, extendable mirror. He examined his magnified skin in it, captivated by the layers of epithelial tissue, by the orange peel, by the inherited, unchanging size of the pores. After half a minute he blinked, washed with a tea-tree-oil facial scrub and dabbed with a towel before applying moisturizer. This rubbed in, he rinsed his hands and teased his tufty hair with matt clay, spiking it in a way that looked dry and natural. He plugged in his shaver next, on a setting that left a suggestion of stubble. Its electric buzz was soon joined by the aggressive purr of Nancy Palmer's toothbrush. Nancy was his dentist, the mother of his child, the woman he loved.

As an associate professor of nematology – a branch of zoology involving Petri dishes, microscopes and steady hands – Daniel felt he had an excuse for occasionally studying Nancy as though through a powerful convex lens, observing her movements, analysing her behaviour. He watched her now as she lowered the lavatory seat, sat down and stared at the floor. She was running the oscillating head of the toothbrush over her tongue. The tendons on her neck were rigid. Her eyes were avoiding contact with his. After two minutes – her brush had a timer – she wiped, stood up and pushed the flush-lever. He admired the way she could multitask like that.

'Don't wake the baby,' he said as he clicked off his razor and drew attention to the rushing water.

'Wasn't going to,' she countered too evenly, her voice tight.

'We should let her sleep for as long as possible.'

'I know. I wasn't going to wake the baby.'

(Although their daughter Martha was nine, they still sometimes referred to her as 'the baby'.)

Nancy was wearing the T-shirt she had slept in. It was too big for her – one of Daniel's – and her frame looked adolescent in it. When she tugged it off in order to stand as lightly as possible on the bathroom scales, her hair tumbled gently and the faded barbed-wire tattoo around her bicep became visible. This, along with her stretch marks and neatly trimmed pubic triangle was, to Daniel, incongruously adult-looking. As he sprayed under his arms with deodorant, he allowed himself a furtive smile, more

a twitch of the lips. He couldn't afford to let Nancy gauge his mood yet. She hadn't: she was looking the other way, reaching for the main light switch.

'Don't turn that on,' Daniel said in a muted voice, crossing the bathroom and lifting the seat. 'You'll wake the baby.' His plan was to goad Nancy in such a concealed way she wouldn't understand why she was feeling annoyed. It would, he reasoned, make her appreciate the moment of unknottng all the more.

'But I can't see the scales.'

As Daniel relieved himself, he balanced on one foot and, behind Nancy's back, pressed his toes down on the scales.

'Unbe-fucking-lievable,' Nancy said flatly. 'I've put on four pounds.' She looked over her shoulder and noticed Daniel's toes. 'Hey!' She was laughing now. 'Bastard!' The tension that had been building between them was dissipated temporarily. Still smiling, Nancy flipped the seat back down, flushed again and reached the bathroom door at the same time as Daniel. When she opened it, Martha was standing on the other side, rubbing her eyes.

Three quarters of an hour later, Daniel was sitting in the driver's seat of what the advertisements had called a 'green but mean' hybrid utility vehicle. The engine was running, the heater was on, and he was worrying whether Martha was now too old to see him naked in the bathroom. It had, after all, been more than a year since he had stopped her getting into the bath with him. Making a mental note to consult Nancy – she always had a good steer on these matters – he unfolded his *Guardian* and turned to the sports section. England on tour in India. Batting collapse. What a surprise. When a council lorry hissed by in the slush, spraying salt on tarmac and parked cars alike, he noticed that his windscreen was icing up again where he had emptied the kettle over it. He turned the heater on as high as it would go and watched the glass steam up. The hot air was making him feel claustrophobic. He loosened his scarf, opened the window and looked out. Beyond the amber halo of the streetlights, blackness was shading into grey. It had been snowing steadily throughout the night and, in the absence of a breeze, flakes had settled on the tree next to the car. The phone lines that crisscrossed the square had also turned white, the extra weight causing them to belly. Daniel turned off his engine so he could appreciate the nakedness of the silence.

'Can I get out and make a snow angel?' Martha asked from her booster seat in the back.

'No. Mummy will be here any second.'

'Think she knows?'

'Hasn't got a clue.'

The sodium lights dimmed and went off, leaving the square eerily luminous. Daniel checked his watch again. 'Did Mummy give you your injection?'

'Not yet,' Martha replied with a yawn. 'Said she'd do it in the car.' The child gathered her hair into a ponytail. Pulled up her hood. Shivered. Although it had been nine months since her tiredness, blurred vision and nightly thirsts had resulted in a diagnosis of type one diabetes, her father still couldn't bring himself to administer the required dose of insulin. He could inject rabbits and mice in a laboratory, but not his

own daughter. Nancy had no such compunction. Being a dentist, she was used to the sight of other people's discomfort.

That was how they met, Daniel and Nancy. She had entered wearing a facemask that exaggerated her eyebrows: two fiercely plucked arcs. As he lay on her hydraulic chair thinking of the impacted wisdom tooth she was trying to wrest from his numbed gums, her eyes entranced him. They were bearish brown, flecked with gold. He fell in love with them right there as he lay on his back, with his mouth open, flinching intermittently. He also fell in love with the weight of Nancy's left breast, which, under several layers of material, was pressing against his arm. Pleasure and pain. Pain and pleasure. Their relationship had started as it was destined to continue.

What was she doing in there? They were going to miss their flight at this rate.

Daniel probed with the tip of his tongue the soft cavity that had been left by the wisdom tooth – something he often did without realizing, the equivalent of touching a comfort blanket. He tapped his watch again and shivered with excitement as the porch light came on and Nancy emerged from the house shrugging a grey duffle coat on over a fawn polo neck. The falling snow had softened a little, arriving in flurries, and downy flakes were settling on Nancy's hair as she turned the front door key in the lock, stood framed on the lip of the porch and closed her eyes – something she always did when making sure she had remembered everything. Watching her, Daniel felt a surge of tenderness. How beautiful you look, he thought. I don't think I've ever seen you looking more beautiful. 'We'll be late!' he barked through the lowered window. 'The traffic is bound to be bad with this weather.'

Snow that had settled on the path creaked as it was compressed under Nancy's sheepskin boots. '*Don't push it,*' she muttered, opening the back door and getting in beside Martha. 'And why did you turn the heating off?'

Think. Think. 'Global warming.'

Nancy narrowed her eyes. 'Now we'll use twice as much energy reheating the house when we get back. You should have just turned it down.'

Daniel drew breath as if about to reply, but stopped himself. He was becoming mesmerized by the speed at which Nancy was unzipping a medical pouch, removing a needle from a sterilized pack and slipping it on to a syringe. She did everything quickly: talk, eat, walk, reach orgasm, pick up new languages. Even sleeping was something she appeared to do in a hurry. Something to do with her REMs. Daniel could study her sleeping face for hours.

Nancy was now holding a small bottle of insulin to the car light and giving it an impatient shake. In the same movement, she pierced its rubber stopper, preferring this old-fashioned method to the 'pen' because it was easier to keep track of doses. A familiar clinical smell, sharp and metallic, pricked the air. Martha assumed a kneeling position, pulled down one side of her tracksuit trousers and pinched a fold of skin. Nancy positioned the syringe at an efficient right angle, inserted the needle up to its full depth, pressed down on the plunger and allowed a few seconds for the dose to be delivered before withdrawing the needle. 'There,' she said, massaging the skin. 'All done. You had enough to eat?'

Martha nodded, holding up a mottled banana skin.

Nancy stayed in the back and clipped up her belt: as she normally travelled in the front, this was intended as a statement of her annoyance. Daniel shrugged, turned the radio on and, recognizing the thumb positioning of Charlie Mingus, nodded approvingly. He then tuned it away from his preferred jazz station and found a raw, metallic Lenny Kravitz song instead. Better. Less relaxing. He started the engine. They had gone a hundred yards up the road before Daniel said: ‘Dog!’ The brakelights came on and the hybrid began reversing.

While Nancy ran back into the house, Daniel blew on his hands and patted the pocket of his cord jacket, checking he had the passports. He could feel two, but nevertheless pulled them out to make sure he had picked up Nancy’s not Martha’s. He flicked to the back page and stared at Nancy’s photograph. It was recent and a good likeness: shoulder-length hair that had gone chestnut in the sun, swollen cheekbones, a puffy curve for a top lip. With a shake of his head he flipped open his own photograph page. It had been taken eight years earlier, when he was thirty, and he had not only looked younger – sandy hair thicker, not yet frosting at the temples – but also, somehow, more luminous: his long eyelashes paler, his blond eyebrows more feathery, the rims of his eyes pinker. He was, he felt, cursed with the fussy, delicate appearance of a Victorian clergyman. In recent years he had tried to compensate by growing sideburns and hair down to his collar, but this, he had come to suspect, made him look like a Pilgrim Father instead. He opened the glove compartment, pulled out a manila envelope and slipped the passports inside it next to the tickets, just as Nancy appeared with Kevin, a brindle-coloured mongrel of indeterminate age. She had rescued him from Battersea Dogs’ Home and given him his name because it amused her to think of her socially ambitious parents having to shout ‘Kevin!’ in the park whenever they were looking after him. When she opened the hatch and Kevin jumped into the caged-off boot space, Daniel grimaced as he waited for her to notice the picnic blanket covering the two pieces of hand luggage next to the cage. She didn’t and, having slammed the hatch-door shut, deigned to sit in the front passenger seat. As the car set off again, Martha caught her father’s eye in the rearview mirror, made a letter ‘L’ sign with her thumb and index finger – ‘Loser’ – and placed it on her forehead. They both grinned conspiratorially.

Nancy turned the volume on the radio down, flipped open the passenger-side shade-mirror and, in the partial glow of an interior light, began to apply mascara to her lashes. With her mouth open to stretch her skin, she dusted her cheeks with a brush and removed an eyelash. ‘Explain to me again why we have to dump Martha at your parents’, she said, snapping the shade back up.

‘Knew something was bothering you.’

‘Of course it’s bothering me. You didn’t even ask me whether I minded.’

‘We are not *dumping* her at my parents’. Martha *likes* staying with my parents ... You like staying with Grampy and Grumpy, don’t you?’ There was a pause before a fluty voice rose from the back: ‘Grampy and Grumpy. Mum’s parents. Whomsoever.’

(That was her new word, whomsoever.)

‘If your mother wasn’t so squeamish about doing the jobs ...’ Daniel said to Nancy, surreptitiously turning the radio volume back up.

‘Don’t start, Daniel,’ Nancy said, turning the volume down again. ‘*Do not start*. I mean it.’

‘I never feel it when Grampy gives me my injection,’ Martha said. ‘He told me he was awarded the Order of the Hypodermic when he was in the Medical Corps.’

‘I still don’t understand why the baby can’t come with us to the airport,’ Nancy pressed.

‘Because there won’t be room.’

‘Because there won’t be room,’ Martha echoed unhelpfully.

‘She can go in the back with your uncle Fritz and aunt Helga ...’ Nancy continued.

‘Helmut and Frieda,’ Daniel corrected, turning the volume on the radio back up as a Foo Fighters track came on. ‘And they are not my aunt and uncle, they are my cousins. And, no, Martha can’t go in the back because they’re bringing Hans.’

‘Hans?’

‘Their son.’

‘You didn’t tell me they had a son.’

‘Did.’

‘He did,’ said Martha.

‘You did not ... How old is he?’

‘Fifteen.’

‘*For fuck’s sake.*’

‘Mum, you promised you’d stop swearing in front of me.’

‘Call me Mummy.’ Nancy folded her arms. ‘Where will he sleep? You thought of that?’

‘We could put the camp bed up in my study. He’s bringing a sleeping bag.’

The windscreen wipers thrashed against the thickening snow. The Foo Fighters began a growling chord progression. ‘I still don’t see why I couldn’t have stayed at the house with the baby while you went to collect them.’

‘Because you speak German.’

‘They’re bound to speak English.’

‘Apparently not.’

‘*Christ alive.*’

‘Look, it’s all organized now,’ Daniel said in a neutral voice. ‘Besides, they’ll be expecting me to bring my wife. Germans are big on family.’

‘No they’re not. That’s Italians. Germans are big on sausages and genocide. And anyway I’m not your wife, if you remember.’

Daniel sucked in air theatrically, as though Nancy had landed a low punch. As he regularly pointed out, he *thought* of her as his wife. They had been together for ten years, had a joint chequebook, a joint email address and a green but mean hybrid utility vehicle that they shared, and which they both usually needed at the same time. And they were named on the deeds of their house in Clapham Old Town, South West

London, as Mr and Mrs Daniel Kennedy, a mistake that amused them and made them cringe in like measure. It had become a vinegary joke between them that he called her 'Mrs Kennedy' and she called him 'Mr Kennedy'.

Nancy spoke in an undertone. 'How could you forget to tell me that your aunt and uncle were bringing their teenage son? Are you a complete fuckwit?'

From the back: 'Mum!'

From the driver's seat: 'They are not my aunt and uncle. They are my cousins.'

Daniel did wonder whether he had gone too far with the German cousins theme. While he had been planning this trip to the Galápagos Islands for several months, as a tenth anniversary surprise for Nancy, he hadn't thought of a good excuse to get her to the airport until the day before. But this had proved a sound tactic, as it turned out. In her anger at having German cousins foisted upon her without warning, Nancy was too distracted to notice his suspicious behaviour, as well as the tracks he failed to cover: the almost illegible prescription for diazepam which he left on the kitchen counter, the one his doctor friend, Bruce, had written out to help him cope with the flight; the bag that Martha and he had packed full of Nancy's summer clothes and unthinkingly left in the hallway; the phone call he ended abruptly when she walked into the room – the one in which he had checked with the receptionist at the dental surgery that Nancy's appointments had been cancelled.

All other preparations for the trip had been worked out meticulously. After a day in Quito they would fly by seaplane to Santa Cruz Island where the four-berth yacht he had chartered would be waiting to meet them. Assuming they could get a signal, they would ring Martha, have a swim, unpack, and then, maybe, have sex – loud, sweaty, on-holiday-without-children sex. This would be followed by a siesta. They would wake in time to get a little drunk on whisky sours as they watched the sunset from their hammocks on deck. And after dinner they would take a motorized dinghy to the shore and Daniel would propose on a moonlit, barefoot walk along a beach patterned with worm casts, crab trails and dead jellyfish – his idea of a romantic setting. If Nancy could be persuaded, they would get married in a secular ceremony the next day; in the equivalent of a register office he thought he had located, or, failing that, in the Charles Darwin Research Station, which to Daniel was holy ground.

It was Daniel's turn to sigh. 'Said I was sorry.'

As the early morning traffic on the South Circular began to build, he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, then felt in his jacket pocket for the box containing the emerald and diamond engagement ring he had bought. He was going to tell her about the trip when they reached the airport – he would ask her to check in the glove compartment for the arrival times, and she would find the passports and tickets there – but the engagement ring would have to be kept secret for a while longer. He gave her a sideways glance. She was tugging at a strand of her hair, crossly examining it for split ends.

'And why have you never mentioned you had German cousins before?'

Daniel dipped his head to avoid an interrogative stare. 'To be honest, *I* didn't know I had German cousins. They're on Amanda's side.' Daniel smiled to himself. Amanda was his stepmother. Nancy didn't like her.

‘Typical.’

It was typical, that was the beauty of it. Typical of him to forget to mention it. Typical of his stepmother to have German cousins. Typical of his German cousins to have a teenage son called Hans. What made the deception perfect, though, was the fact that Nancy often commented on how she could always tell when Daniel was lying; that he was a useless liar; that he couldn’t lie convincingly if his life depended upon it. Ha.

Nancy clicked the radio off and stared at the road ahead. ‘I’m not sure I feel up to seeing Grampy and Grumpy. They can be so ... I mean, why does your stepmother always have to raise the subject of marriage?’ She was holding up one hand, as though wishing to silence any objection.

Daniel ignored it. ‘She doesn’t.’ He checked his watch again and lowered his window to flick snow off his side mirror. His father and stepmother lived in Kew, in a double-fronted, ivy-covered Georgian townhouse that was, to their regret, directly under the flight path to Heathrow. The first of the transatlantic red-eyes, Daniel noticed, was slanting down, beginning its descent.

‘And why does your father always have to belittle your work.’

‘He doesn’t ...’ Daniel checked himself. ‘He doesn’t mean to.’ Nancy patted his knee with mock sympathy. ‘You go on believing that.’

Daniel slowed down as his headlights illuminated an ethereal figure in white trousers and shirt standing on the verge twenty yards ahead. His arm was extended and his thumb raised. As the car drew closer, Daniel saw the hitchhiker was wearing the shalwar kameez, the traditional Muslim dress of long white shirt and baggy trousers. It was inadequate protection against the snow.

‘Look at this guy,’ Daniel said. ‘He must be freezing his nuts off.’ Nancy was rummaging in her handbag.

As the car drew level, Daniel stared.

The man stared back and pointed, following the vehicle with his finger. A slow smile of recognition appeared on his face, the ghost of a smile, like a negative undergoing slow exposure.

Daniel was unnerved. ‘See him?’

‘See who?’

‘That hitchhiker.’

Nancy swivelled the rear-view mirror. ‘I can’t see anyone.’ Daniel checked his side mirror and frowned. The hitchhiker was no longer in view. He had looked familiar.

CHAPTER TWO

AS THE TYRES OF HIS CAR CRUNCHED UP THE GRAVEL PATH OF HIS parents' house, Daniel felt the usual low-grade nausea – a reminder that he loved his father without liking him, and that the feeling was mutual. His father, Philip, was a retired – and decorated – army surgeon. He was also a remote and unreadable man, one capable of terrible, genial coldness. It wasn't anything he said; it was what he didn't say.

Once Daniel had parked and opened the boot, Kevin the Dog sprang out and bounded across to a stone-balustraded terrace massed with pots. 'Kevin!' Daniel shouted too late as one of the pots shattered. The front door opened and Amanda stepped out into a semicircular porch which had two Ionic pillars and a curved fascia that looked more grey than white against the snow. She was in her stocking feet and the cold of the stone made her retreat back inside. Kevin skittered past her, trailing powdery snow indoors behind him.

'Sorry, Mum,' Daniel said, kissing the figure silhouetted in the doorway. 'I'll get a dustpan and brush. Thanks for doing this. House feels nice and warm.'

'You've time for a coffee?' Amanda said with an upward tilt of her head as she returned to the kitchen. 'Keep talking. I've got some milk on the stove.'

Philip was carrying logs into his study. 'Hello, everyone,' he said in his unhurried, oaky voice. 'Have you brought Crush?'

Martha held up a squashy green turtle with a goofy grin and sleepy eyes, its velveteen skin worn smooth and greasy. Crush was the name it had been given by the merchandising division of Disney Pixar. Daniel had brought it back from America as a first birthday present and it still went everywhere with her.

'Phew. Wouldn't want to leave Crush behind. I think there might be some Coco Pops in the kitchen if you're hungry. Daniel, can I have a word?'

Because his father used words sparingly, storing them like a cactus stores water, Daniel felt hollow-stomached as he followed him into a panelled room cluttered with antique glassware, Penguin Classics stacked crookedly on shelves, and display cases containing row upon row of medals attached to colourful silk ribbons. Philip tipped the logs on to the fire he was laying, brushed off splinters of bark caught on his tweed jacket and straightened his back. Though he had shrunk slightly since reaching his seventies, he was still 6ft 1in, an inch taller than his round-shouldered son – and he still had a straight spine. He also still had a stern expression, which owed much to the feathery eyebrows that formed a 'V' above his beaky nose. Noticing the poppy in his father's buttonhole, Daniel folded his arms and half covered his own lapel with his hand.

'You like this?' Philip said, indicating a brown, smoky mirror above the inglenook fireplace. 'We bought it on eBay last week.'