

## The Problem with Caffery

Pygmalion, the Cypriot sculptor, famously fell deeply, sumptuously in love with the ivory statue he'd created, while P. D. James is said to have created in Adam Dalgliesh a man with the qualities she'd like to find in any man she loved. This link between creator and created chimes with me. I am in no denial about it: Detective Inspector Jack Caffery is my poster-boy. My beau, my BF, my *petit copain*. In him I was writing myself a fantasy lover.

James cites sensitivity, courage and intelligence as the qualities she admires in Dalgliesh, so it may say something about me that Jack Caffery is a woman-beating alcoholic who carries his anger around like a short-fuse semtex and is congenitally incapable of sustaining a meaningful friendship, let alone a relationship. In fairness, it isn't these qualities I was most drawn to in Jack. Instead I was intrigued by a man who illustrated the dichotomy in a world where law and order increasingly tread a hazy line, where the protector can be the aggressor, the public servant the criminal. Jack Caffery is constantly challenged to define himself as good or bad.

And yet, according to my readers, these elements in Jack's psyche pale into insignificance when compared to his, apparently, most endearing trait. There is something far more memorable, far more remarkable about him. Because Jack, apparently, is *sexy*.

Yes! Sexy. Hugely, wantonly, red-bloodedly sexy. I have lost count of the number of women, and gay men, who have sidled up to me with a familiar and very private glimmer in their eyes, to whisper, 'I've never dared tell anyone, but I really, *really* fancy

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Jack.’ And admittedly, yes, while I like to imagine him as a little more complex than just sex on legs, I confess I have had more than the occasional reverie of what the DI might be like between the sheets.

And yet the most studly Lotharios have their limitations. Familiarity breeds contempt. You can have too much of a good thing. By the time I had finished writing *The Treatment*, I was bored with Jack. The romance had gone. His flaws, which I had initially found endearing, I now found irritating. It was the toothpaste-cap syndrome. At the end of 2001 Jack, with all his masculine energy, had been leaving off the toothpaste cap for too many months and I wanted him out of my life. I fired him, dumped him, excommunicated him. He was never again going to set his cloven hoof across my threshold. I had pleading letters from readers who wanted more of him, but I was adamant. No more Jack. He could slink away, flies buttoned, to fictional limbo for the rest of his life.

I was moving on: there was the more historical book *Tokyo* and the gothicky *Pig Island*, to write. And, in thinking about what was drawing me next, I started to concentrate on water. Deep, dark water. A friend scuba-diving in the Red Sea witnessed a fellow diver disappear to her death. One minute she was swimming with the group, the next, maybe affected by deep-water blackout, she’d turned face down and was heading into the depths. The diving instructor tried to catch her, following as far as he safely could but, obeying the dark and demoralizing law of diving that states that one should never tackle a diver at depths, was eventually forced to abandon her to an inevitable death. Stories like the Red Sea girl abound in the sport diving world: diving is a peculiarly seductive and dangerous pastime. Each year several divers perish – from toxic gaseous overloads, burst lungs or, most excruciatingly, from simply running out of air. This, I was sure, was something I wanted to write about. When I

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discovered that the police underwater search unit that covers much of the West Country was stationed only ten miles down the road from my new house in Bath I knew I was on the right path.

The underwater search unit doesn't have the most pleasant duties: primarily their remit is to recover items, including bodies and murder weapons, from the bottom of rivers, lakes, canals, water tanks, but because they are trained to use breathing apparatus and wear protective clothing they have been co-opted into dealing with any chemical, nuclear or biological contaminant. In theory they would attend a terrorist attack, should it ever come to the West Country. An even more depressing spin-off is that their ease in protective clothing makes them ideal for clearing up dead bodies wherever they are found. As one of their team put it: the force goes by the sniff test. If a police officer finds a body that makes him or her wrinkle his or her nose, the dive team is called. These are the people who scoop up corpses too decomposed to identify. Corpses that have become so remote from anything human that in some cases they have liquefied and run through the floorboards into the ceiling below.

With the diving unit, I knew I'd found a professional niche for a character, a female police diver. And the location too: out in the west where one has sun, sea and the excitement of the Atlantic, the Americas as the next stop over the horizon. Police diver Sergeant Flea Marley was born. She was going to be well occupied in the West of England, as far away from Jack Caffery and his troubled corner of London as possible. Everything seemed set for the start of the Flea Marley series. Until one hot day in June when I met the Walking Man. And everything changed.

His name wasn't the Walking Man, of course. His name was John. But he walked. It was his sole occupation, so I called him the Walking Man. I'd spotted him from time to time outside Bath, walking on the hard shoulders of the A roads. He carried a rucksack and even on the hottest days dressed from head to toe in

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foul-weather gear. Draped around his neck like a Palestinian militant, he wore a black-and-white checked *keffiyeh*. Everything about him made me think he'd walked straight out of a fire. One day, consumed with curiosity, I stopped the car and, in the shadow of the eerie Cannard's Grave pub at Shepton Mallet, stared at by curious motorists, the Walking Man and I began to speak.

His story was of love gone wrong. Originally in the army, while he was posted in Northern Ireland his wife developed a romance with a man in their neighbourhood in London. She was preparing to leave John, and by the time he left the army his life was in tatters. Then, one day, back in London he opened the door to accept a parcel from a courier and his life took a further nosedive.

The courier was his love rival in disguise. He handed John the parcel, got him to sign the docket, then leaned in, threw a petrol bomb into the hallway and slammed the front door, trapping everyone inside. It was like Armagh all over again. The house went up like tinder and, before John knew it, had been razed to the ground, his wife and two children, asleep upstairs, burned to death in their beds.

Shaken to the root, heartbroken, John was left alone, no possessions except the clothes he stood up in. Without stopping to speak to anyone, without stopping to salvage anything from the wreckage of his life, he turned on one heel and began to walk. In a trance he walked and walked. He was heading for the only place he thought would save his peace of mind: the Atlantic Ocean. The ocean, he said, would wash the fire and violence off him. It would wash away the hurt, the betrayal and the terrible loss. And when he was salvaged, when the water had rinsed off the pain of those three human hearts carbonized in three separate mattresses, John would start to swim. He would swim and swim until he reached the far shore, because that was the New World and the only place to start a New Life was in a New World.

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Of course I knew John was insane. None of his story added up. Why had the boyfriend been masquerading as a courier when he could simply have knocked on the door and thrown the bomb inside, or even slipped it through the letterbox while the family slept? And why, if the wife was leaving, had he put her life at risk? And why had the two children and the mother still been asleep in the middle of the morning when the crime had taken place? When John spoke his eyes wandered: strabismus, a tic common to schizophrenia sufferers. But even though I didn't completely believe his story, the Walking Man's imperative stayed with me: his headlong, lemming-like rush for the west coast, his yearning to walk and walk and walk, as if he could walk the madness out of him. That intensity and turmoil, and maybe John's eyes, too, which were dark-lashed and blue, made me think of one person. Jack Caffery.

What if, I thought, Jack befriended someone like the Walking Man? Where would that friendship lead him? And what would be the outcome, the dynamic of two people so identically driven? I couldn't get the picture of the two men out of my head. Eventually I was forced to admit it: Flea Marley had to make room in her sunny, fruit-laden corner of England for this urban refugee.

And so, a bit like an ex I could never quite forget, Jack Caffery is back with me. Maybe he'll never go away. While I can be impatient with authors who suggest that their characters act with a kind of autonomy, taking decisions out of the authorial hands, in the case of JC I'm prepared to admit that maybe, just maybe, he may have plans of his own over which I have little control.

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