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THE PROFESSOR

OF TRUTH

JAMES

ROBERTSON

a novel

**ALSO BY JAMES ROBERTSON**

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THE PROFESSOR

OF TRUTH

JAMES ROBERTSON



*Other Press*  
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v3.1

*For Marianne, again, with love*

The distance that the dead have gone  
Does not at first appear;  
Their coming back seems possible  
For many an ardent year.

And then, that we have followed them  
We more than half suspect,  
So intimate have we become  
With their dear retrospect.

—*Emily Dickinson*

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## PROLOGUE



WHEN I THINK OF NILSEN NOW, HOW HE CAME AND VANISHED again in the one day, I don't feel any warmer towards him in the remembering than I did when he was here. I don't even feel grateful for what he gave me, because he and his kind kept it from me for so long. But I do think of the difficult journey he made, and why he made it. What set him off, he told me, was seeing me being interviewed on television, after Khalil Khazar's death. He said he'd watched the interview over and over. He'd wanted to feel what I felt. But you cannot feel what another person feels. You cannot even imagine it, however hard you try. This I know.

When Khalil Khazar died, the news went round the world in minutes—in text messages, in emails, through social networks, on radio and television, via websites and by telephone. I got the call at home from Patrick Bridger, a BBC journalist I knew and trusted. We'd talked, a week or so before the end, about what we would do and where we would film, knowing that it could not be long. "Alan, I'm on my way with a cameraman and a soundman," Patrick said. "We'll pick you up and head straight to the location." I didn't take any more calls. I was giving Patrick an exclusive. It was a way of controlling things.

While I waited for their car I thought about how the news would be received in different parts of the globe. There would be tears, I knew, but also there would be laughter. There would be grief and jubilation, clasped hands and clenched fists, loud dismay and quiet satisfaction. There would be one family mourning, other families celebrating. Some people would feel a sense of resolution, of justice having been done. Others would feel, as I did, a sense of things unresolved, of justice having not been done. A guilty man or an innocent man had gone to his grave: it depended on your perspective. Soon enough, politicians would be making statements; mere citizens such as myself would be making statements. Others, politicians and mere citizens alike, would be keeping their mouths closed. There would be headlines in the papers, archive footage on the news channels. Opinions would be voiced, opinions withheld. And through all the noise and all the silence, one thing and one thing only would be certain: Khalil Khazar was dead.

I knew what I was going to say in front of the camera. I had a good idea of the kind of questions Patrick would be asking. *What happens next? With Khazar's passing, will new information come to light? Do you think there is any previously unseen evidence that might prove his innocence? Or do we already know everything there is to be known about these events?* Would his guilt still stand, in other words, and was there nothing more to do but watch as more hatred was

heaped on his departed soul?

Last night I replayed the clip of that interview and tried to see it from Nilsen's point of view. I found myself wondering about his life—where he had come from to reach me. I had no knowledge of him except what I'd gathered from those few hours we spent together. I watched myself speaking against a backdrop of old grey stone and grass so green with life it must have hurt him to look at it. The camera pulled back to reveal the castle, panned to show the town spreading down the hill, the farmland and hills in the distance. It looked like a good old country, Nilsen had told me, and it did. Scotland, at the end of a Scottish summer. I looked tired, he'd also said, and he was right about that too.

"I do not believe his death changes anything," I said to the camera. "I do not believe anything will happen as a result. I am sorry that he is dead, because he was a human being, like me. He had nothing to do with the bombing. He has died because of his illness, but still suffering a terrible injury, an injury that our justice system inflicted on him. I wish I could say that his death makes things different, or better, or that it closes a chapter, but none of that is true. Everything is still as it was, and we are no closer to finding out the truth about who really killed all those people twenty-one years ago, who killed my wife and daughter. There is nothing to celebrate today. I am sorry that Khalil Khazar is dead."

Then Patrick asked his questions, and I answered them. While the clip was still playing, my phone rang. I paused the film and picked up the phone on the third ring. It was Carol.

"How are you doing?" she said.

"I'm fine," I said. "And you?"

"Fine. I've just finished writing that paper on Muriel Stuart."

"Well done. Can I read it?"

"I was hoping you would. How have you got on today?"

"Not too badly," I said. "A bit of writing, a bit of thinking. I'll tell you when you come over."

"Is that all right? If I come?"

"Yes. There's a bottle of wine in the fridge."

"I'll be with you soon, then."

"Good. Remember to bring your paper."

She hung up, and I went back to my face, freeze-framed on the screen, older-looking than its years. I searched for my father in that face, but I did not see him. It was more like seeing a stranger, some grey visitant from the future peering in through a window. But it was myself, looking out from the past. I closed the thing down.

I thought of Nilsen deciding to make the journey, and me at the other end of it. He came with a purpose because, he'd said, it turned out that I was right in that interview. Khalil Khazar had died, and the world had waited—or it had not—for something to happen, and nothing had. One death—three hundred deaths—did not stop the world from turning.

Many things, of course, had happened. A tornado had left a trail of destruction. A civil war had raged. A famine had grown. A government had fallen. A sportsman had failed a drugs test. A film star had been exposed in some scandal. Weeks had become a month, two, three months. Snow had fallen. But Khalil Khazar had not spoken from the far side of his death.

So Nilsen decided to come and find me, and to make something happen before he ran out of time. He came because he could. He had knowledge, and it was in his power to give it to me.

PART ONE

ICE

I

NEEDED A BREAK. I HAD BEEN WORKING FOR HOURS—or so I could just about persuade myself, since I'd been sitting at the computer all morning. Through the window I could see the sky still heavy with cloud, but the snow had stopped falling for the time being. I felt half-asleep: some fresh air might not be a bad thing.

I put on a jacket, gloves and thick socks. I was just lacing up my boots when the telephone rang. It was set to ring eight times before the answer-machine kicked in. I reached it on the fourth ring. I said, simply, "Hello?" because I had learned that it was sometimes better to retain the option of not being myself, and a male voice said, "Dr Tealing?" "Who is this?" I asked, and the line went dead. I dialled 1471 and the familiar automated, polite, female voice intoned, *A caller who withheld their number rang, today, at 1227 hours. Thank you for calling. Please hang up.*

It was not so unusual. I didn't think much about it. I finished tying my boots, went outside, fetched the snow shovel from the garden shed, and started to dig a path from there to the back door of the house.

There had been quite a fall, three or four inches. Each shovelful lengthened the path I was making by less than a foot. The snow was dense and weighty. After a few minutes, despite the cold, I was sweating. Muscles in my back and shoulders began to protest, but I liked the feel of the effort. I worked like a machine, with regular, repetitive movements, and with the mindlessness of a machine. This, too, I liked. When I reached the back door I paused, stretched, then bent to the task again, this time going round the house to the street.

It is an ordinary suburban street, one of a number of drives, crescents and avenues that form a little residential district where once was rough pasture. The houses, most of them built in the 1960s, are modest in size and of no great character. When new, they were doubtless called contemporary. Now, surrounded by mature trees and hedges and having borne the effects of half a century of Scottish weather, they are all a little tired and dated. Some are doing better than others. Mine has not had the care and attention it might have received from someone else, or from myself in different circumstances.

I was—I am—a lecturer in English Literature. The University where I work is an institution of no great age located in a part of Scotland that positively groans under the accumulation of history. I am fifty-five as I write this, not much older than the University, yet I too feel the burden of past events upon me.

I am the PhD kind of doctor. Some of my colleagues are disdainful of other

academics who do not have these letters after their names. I, obviously, do not attract such disdain. Instead I receive sympathy, or a kind of hushed reverence which has nothing to do with the power of my intellect and which I do not find flattering. There are occasions when I would much prefer their disdain. I am, after all, like most of them, only a lecturer. But I am special, because unlike any of them I lost my wife and daughter when the aeroplane in which they were travelling was blown out of the sky by a bomb.

I never wanted to be special, not for this or any other reason. Nevertheless, I am.

I could once have been a professor—*the* Professor—of English Literature. Important people in the University invited me to apply for the then vacant Chair, and I was advised that it was as good as mine if I wanted it. Yes, I could have been a real professor, and who knows, somewhere in a storeroom there might even be a real chair, commissioned in the 1960s. That was eighteen years ago, when the code of governance concerning appointments was less rigorous, and to be told such a thing, and told it not all that discreetly, was not uncommon. Perhaps the people who suggested it (the Principal of the University and the Dean of Faculty) thought that being a professor would take my mind off the bombing, which had happened three years earlier. Perhaps it was a suggestion born, at least partially, of kindness: they felt it would be good for me as well as for the University. And perhaps it would have been, but nobody can now say, because I declined the invitation and did not apply.

I *am* a professor, but only an imagined one. No one knows this but myself and my colleague Dr Carol Pritchley. It is our secret—our secret joke really. It is what this is all about and why I am writing it down.

I have plenty of space in this house that was built, and bought, for a family to live in. I have two rooms for work, and two computers. One room—the study—is for university work. It was where I had been that morning. The other—the old dining room—is where my special work goes on. The Case, I call it. The two rooms and what they contain are as separate and different as day from night.

It was late January. The days were short, meagre of light. A sense of confinement had pressed on me all winter. I'd seen no one for weeks, not even Carol. She was not just my colleague but also my friend. My occasional sexual partner, to be specific. Our relationship was an on-off one, and it was off at that time. We'd had a couple of ill-tempered days together at New Year, nothing serious, just enough irritation to make it seem like a good idea to give each other some space, and this was my space, closed-in and solitary. The snow added to the oppressiveness, yet there was also comfort in the way it deadened everything. To be half-asleep, or feel only half-alive, is sometimes a relief.

Carol and I would meet soon, say little, possibly nothing, about our fractious New Year, and resume our relations. That was how we conducted ourselves. It seemed to suit both of us pretty well, although a greater degree

of emotional commitment might have suited Carol better. But, to be frank, the way we were was about as much as I could cope with.

When the new path was complete I fetched the grey bin from beside the shed and wheeled it out to the pavement. There was a grey bin for general rubbish and a green bin for compostable matter, and they were emptied on alternate Fridays. That week it was the turn of the grey bin. But maybe the bin men wouldn't come. In a country of unpredictable winters you never know whether snow will bring everything to a standstill or people will soldier on stoically, even when it is futile to do so. So it was from force of habit rather than in faith that I brought the grey bin to the kerbside, ready for emptying in the morning. Others, I noticed, had done the same.

Actually I didn't give a damn about grey bins and green bins, not when I thought about it. That was the point: not to think about it. Just to do things, to get through the waking hours and the hours that were supposed to be for sleep, was all, at that juncture of my life, that concerned me.

That "juncture" of my life had been going on for twenty-one years.

There hadn't been a snowplough along the street all day. Presumably the priority was to clear the main roads. The street was churned and criss-crossed by tyre marks where some residents had managed to get their cars out. The parked cars were covered in smooth, thick, white mattresses.

My driveway was empty. No car had sat in it for twenty years, except when my parents came to stay, which had not happened in a long while and was unlikely to happen again. (I don't drive, never have.) If anyone had been going to attempt a journey that day it would have been Emily, but she wouldn't have wanted to drive anywhere. She'd have gone sledging with Alice.

For a moment they flashed before me, Emily and Alice, packed together on a sledge, whooping with delight, rushing down a white slope in bobble hats and with stripy scarves flying. They were the ages they always were. Then they were gone.

I gave Emily's car to my sister, or she took it away, I don't remember which. I just wanted it out of my sight. And indeed my sister obliged and I never saw it again.

I was alone in the street. I pulled back a glove to look at my watch: one o'clock. It occurred to me that the schools might have closed because of the weather. I had no memory of having heard children passing the house earlier. But if there was no school, why weren't there children outside now, building snowmen, throwing snowballs, taking sledges to the park? Didn't children enjoy snow anymore? Did they spend all their free time in their bedrooms, insulated from the real world, watching TV or playing computer games? *All* of them?

I thought these thoughts, then chided myself for having them. It served no purpose to resent children for being what and who they were, for not being Alice. But again, that was the point: there *was* no purpose to my resentment. It was simply there.

My neighbour Brian Hewat had not only put out his grey bin and made a path to his front door, but had also cleared the snow from the stretch of pavement in front of his house. Seeing this, I felt an obligation to do the same, and set to work again. The red plastic shovel scraped less easily and more raucously over the surface of the pavement than it had over the smooth stone slabs around the house. I was slightly ashamed of the noise. It was as if I were boasting about my sense of civic responsibility, even if only to the deserted, smothered street.

Which, however, wasn't quite as empty as I'd thought. As I finished, and was shouldering the shovel to return it to the shed, I became aware of someone standing a few yards away. A man in a long black coat, hands in pockets, and with a black woollen hat pulled down over his brow and ears. I had no idea how long he'd been there. He must have walked up the street when I was busy digging, and the snow had muffled his approach.

"You're being a good citizen," the man said.

Even in those few words, the American accent was unmistakable, although I could not have identified the region to which it belonged. I was surprised, and then, almost immediately, not surprised. The voice of the man on the phone half an hour earlier, and that of this man standing in the snow, telling me I was a good citizen, were one and the same.

"People don't clear the sidewalks anymore," the man said. "They don't even consider it. 'That's somebody else's job, what do I pay my taxes for?' You know what I'm saying? But I come along here and I find not one but two of you, right alongside of one another."

I nodded in the direction of Brian's house. "He beat me to it," I said. Brian was retired, he had more time on his hands, theoretically.

"Good citizens, all the same, both of you," the American said.

"It doesn't take much."

"It takes more than some people are prepared to give."

I was not happy to be having this conversation. I felt it as an intrusion, that it in some way threatened my privacy, even though anybody looking at us would have assumed we were neighbours exchanging a few superficial words about the weather. The American, however, was not a neighbour. He was unknown to me, yet I was already sure that I was not unknown to him, and that our words carried some meaning to which I was not yet privy. A low anger began to simmer inside me.

"Can I help you in some way?"

"Yes, I think you can," he said. "And maybe I can help you."

"Who are you?"

Slowly he took his right hand from the pocket of his coat. It was as if his brain had consciously to instruct the arm to withdraw, bringing the hand with it. The hand was gloveless. It pointed behind me, at the house.

"I think we should go inside."

Of course I could have said no. I could have said, not until you tell me who you are and what you want. But I saw that this would be pointless. There was

an order in which things would happen, or they would not happen at all. For me to find out who this man was, I would have to allow him into my home. I did not want this, but it was necessary. Already I knew that it was essential to continue the conversation.

“This is about the bombing, isn’t it?” I said.

“Let’s go in,” the American said, and without waiting for a reply, because he knew that he was not going to be refused, he started to move, heading towards the back door, along the path that I had made for him through the snow.

S

SO MANY YEARS HAD PASSED, YET I WOULD STILL always try to reach the phone whenever it rang. Missing a call when I was out, that was one thing: it was what the answer-machine was for. But I never could get out of my head the notion that the one call I ignored when I was in would be the one that counted, the one that, if only I'd picked up the phone, I might later have thought of as "the breakthrough." There *had* been breakthroughs of various sorts, but each one had only ever been from one locked room into another. The years had been like a succession of cells in a vast old prison that refused to release me. Time was my Château d'If. I would scratch away at one wall with the blunt knife of hope, the ragged nails of despair, and then one day the stone would crumble and there'd be enough space to scramble through, so through I'd go, only to be confronted by another wall. Yet still I clutched the blunt knife, and sucked the ragged nails. Even after all the disappointments, I refused to abandon the possibility that I might find out who had murdered my wife and daughter; who had *really* murdered them. This was why I followed the American inside.

. . .

He sat at the kitchen table. I made coffee, not because I was feeling hospitable but because some kind of preparatory ritual seemed necessary before we got down to whatever business it was that had brought him to me. After the nipping cold, the kitchen felt as hot as a laundry. It even looked a little like one as I had clothes drying on the pulley above our heads. I had taken off my gloves and jacket, but left on my boots because I felt that in my socks I would somehow be more vulnerable. The American hadn't taken his boots off either. He'd removed his coat and laid it across another chair. He kept the woollen hat on, but pushed it back to reveal part of a tall, sloping forehead. He was very thin: the coat had bulked him out greatly. A beard that hardly was a beard flecked his grey, gaunt cheeks. His hands and fingers were long and bony. He wore a dark-blue ribbed jersey with a round neck, out of which his own neck grew like the trunk of a scraggy tree. The eyes were black and intense. He had the look of a man who might recently have returned from a long expedition, in the Antarctic perhaps, on which many things had gone wrong.

His name was Nilsen. He'd had the grace at least to step aside and let me open my own door and go in first, and I'd turned and told him that if he was

coming in he should introduce himself first. “Ted Nilsen,” he said. I put the “Ted” to the back of my mind at once. I didn’t want to be on first-name terms. I wanted some distance between us.

Nilsen looked around the kitchen but he didn’t speak. He waited. I thought it likely that he had spent many hours of his life not speaking, waiting. In that respect, we were alike. Our feet pooled snowmelt on the linoleum.

“You telephoned,” I said.

“Yes, I did.”

“To see if I was here.”

“That’s right.”

“You can’t have been far away.”

“No, not far.”

He wasn’t too voluble. Just when I felt that I would have to say something else, Nilsen spoke again.

“I was out at the University this morning.”

“You wouldn’t have found me there. I’m on sabbatical.”

“I know that.” He was a man, I sensed, whose whole existence focused on knowing things about other people. “I had a look around, but they were closing the campus. Because of the weather.” He said this as if it were just the prissy kind of attitude you’d expect. “I got the last bus back into town and had a look around there instead. Then I came to see you.”

Another pause. Then, “A town like this, you get a sense of continuity from the buildings. I went into that old church up by the castle. That must be, what, four hundred years old?”

“More,” I said. Then, like a grudging tour guide, I added, “The nave dates from the fifteenth century.”

“Another world,” Nilsen said. He glanced up, as if he were seeing not the clothes pulley but ecclesiastical arches. “I spent some time in that church. It was very quiet. You know the thing I like? When you’re in a place like that, you’re on your own but you’re not alone. You hear occasional footsteps, maybe a hushed conversation, disembodied voices, you’re aware of somebody else in a pew, head bowed, praying. Shared solitude. I like that.”

I poured the coffee. We both took it black, no sugar. I didn’t offer lunch. I didn’t so much as break open a packet of biscuits.

“Although in fact I was alone,” Nilsen said. “Just pushed the door and went in and had the place to myself.”

“Can we get to the point?” I said.

The dark eyes looked out from under the long forehead. It was like being watched from some shaded observation post. He said—and it wasn’t clear if he was answering or ignoring my question—“It’s important to experience moments of quiet intensity. It helps to clarify things.”

Perhaps he wanted to be asked what things. If so, I disappointed him. But probably he didn’t need any prompting. He was going to have his say anyway.

“The point,” he said. “Okay, let’s get to it.”

The bony fingers of his right hand made a claw round his coffee cup. He

seemed somewhat fascinated that the fingers belonged to him. He did not drink from the cup. He said, "Are you ready to meet your maker?"

Whatever I was expecting, it was not this. The simmering anger I'd felt outside rose to the boil. I stood up.

"I don't know who you are," I said, "but I seem to have mistaken you for someone else. If all you're here for is to try to convert me or save me or whatever it is you people do, then you needn't bother finishing your coffee."

Nilsen was not in the least perturbed. "I'm not a missionary," he said.

"You can get the hell out, in fact."

"It was a question, that's all. Just give me an answer."

The dark eyes stared. It was possible that I had let a madman into my kitchen. I wanted Nilsen to leave. I certainly did not intend to humour him. Yet I found I could not deny him what he wanted.

"I don't believe I have a maker," I said. "But if I'm wrong and there is one, then, yes, I'm ready. There are a few things I'd have to say to him." And, thinking it would annoy him, I added, "Or her."

"Sit down," Nilsen said. He made me feel like a fractious guest in my own house. "I'm trying to give you some context," he said. "The thing is, I *am* ready for my maker. We've got a contract, him and me. He's going to take me to him, but first I've got to straighten a few things out."

"Oh for God's sake!" I said. If he heard this as a profanity, if it offended him, he didn't show it. That face didn't show much in the way of emotion. For a man who'd found Jesus—I presumed that was the particular maker to whom he referred—he didn't seem filled with joy and gratitude.

"I'm dying," he said.

"We're all dying," I retorted. I was still standing. Out of nowhere a wave of something—not sympathy but perhaps grief or bitterness or exhaustion—washed through me. This happened, still, after twenty-one years. To cover myself I went to the window, as if to check the weather. Snow was falling again, lightly whitening the cleared path. "Tell me something I don't know," I said.

"I have cancer," Nilsen said. "So I am dying in a certain way and at a certain rate."

I turned to face him. "That has nothing to do with me."

"Yes it does," he said, and with a skeletal index finger he pointed very firmly at the other chair. Again I could not resist. I sat down. Nilsen had my attention. I thought, I'll give him five minutes.

"It doesn't make me unique," Nilsen said. "I know that. There are millions of us. But when some doctor tells you your days are, literally, numbered, you start counting. And you weigh up a lot of stuff. First off you weigh up the chances. Maybe you bitch about the bad hand you've been dealt. Me, I never smoked, never drank to excess, ate well, kept fit—so why me? You chase that one around for a day or two, and then you quit. That's all past, and there's no profit in it. Then you think about the time you have left. You make a list of things you want to do while you still can. I started to do that and then I threw

the list away. I didn't need a list. Anything I could put on it would be nothing to what I'm going to experience. I've got the keys to the kingdom. But like I said, God has a contract with me, so I need to make everything straight before I stand before him. I need to settle my debts. I've been doing my rounds."

"Then you do have a list," I said. "A different one."

Nilsen sipped from his cup. "Good coffee," he said. It sounded genuine. That a man in Nilsen's situation should still appreciate the insignificant things of life did not surprise me. I had my own "situation," took my own momentary pleasure in tastes, smells, sounds. Maybe that is the most delight there can be—swift, sensual, small—when the roof of your world has fallen in. The difference with Nilsen was that he saw a ladder to some other place ascending from the wreckage, and from the way he was talking celestial light was shining down through the hole. Whereas when I tasted good coffee, that was all I experienced.

"What kind of cancer?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" There was a brief defensiveness in his voice, then it resumed its controlled calmness. "Let's say it's the kind that kills you."

This sounded evasive and I did not like it. I had had my fill of evasion over the years.

"Maybe your maker will pull off a miracle," I said.

"He already has," Nilsen said, "but not in the way you mean. I've had the treatment, the chemo, all of that. That's over. The miracle is that he has promised to save me in the next life."

The flat, matter-of-fact way he made this statement was striking. In it was neither sanctimonious whine nor eager, preacherly insistence that I join him on the salvation road. He seemed entirely rational about something entirely irrational.

"This," he said, glancing around the room, "all this, is just a prelude."

I picked my next words with care. "I've been told a lot of things," I said, "which turned out not to be true."

"It's why I'm here."

"That were downright lies, in fact."

"I understand."

"Would you take off your hat, please?"

He frowned. "Would I what?"

"Listen to me," I said. "A total stranger appears. He may have some information for me, or he may not. How would I know? He tells me he's dying. How would I know? I'm asking you to take off your hat."

"That won't prove anything."

"Perhaps not," I said. "Nevertheless ..."

Nilsen sighed, then bared his head with a single sweep of one hand. Soft white hair sprouted in uneven patches from his pitted scalp. Until that moment I had not noticed how sparse the eyebrows were. "Satisfied?" Nilsen said, and replaced the hat. He sounded almost hurt that I had doubted him. For a moment I felt that I had the advantage.