



VINTAGE

---

# THE CROOKED MAN

PHILIP DAVISON

# CONTENTS

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Philip Davison

Dedication

Title

Epigraph

## PART 1: NOT STRAIGHT

Chapter 1: THE TESTIMONY OF HARRY FIELDING

Chapter 2: ABOUT HARRY

Chapter 3: THE DEEP HOLE

Chapter 4: WATCH HARRY DIG

## PART 2: NOT LEVEL

Chapter 5: THE SHADOW BOX

Chapter 6: HARRY IN THE RAIN

Chapter 7: DOING THE RIGHT THING

## PART 3: DISTORTED

Chapter 8: HARRY ON THE RUN

Chapter 9: PROTECTING THE FAMILY

Chapter 10: CHINATOWN BEAT

## PART 4: TWISTED

Chapter 11: THE CROOKED MILE

Chapter 12: CUMULATIVE PROVOCATION

Acknowledgements

Copyright

## ABOUT THE BOOK

---

A darkly funny, moving and original novel about a man coming to terms with the corruption around him and the conscience within.

Harry Fielding is a shabby, solitary, but basically cheerful sort, living in a seamy flat in London and subsisting on a diet of gin and pre-packed airline meals in unmarked silver containers. He also works for MI5. Surveillance, protection, the occasional rough-and-tumble - just enough to keep body and soul together. However, when Harry witnesses Lisa, his next-door neighbour, killing and burying her sister's violent husband, he begins to lose his appetite...

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

Philip Davison was born in 1957 in Dublin, where he now lives. He has written three previous novels: *The Book-Thief's Heartbeat*, *Twist and Shout* and *The Illustrator*. He has also written television drama and, most recently, *The Invisible Mending Company*, a play for the Abbey Theatre's Peacock stage.

ALSO BY PHILIP DAVISON

*The Book-Thief's Heartbeat*

*Twist and Shout*

*The Illustrator*

*The Crooked Man*

For Joan

Philip Davison  
THE CROOKED MAN

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



THERE WAS A CROOKED MAN  
WHO WALKED A CROOKED MILE

I can understand that, thought Harry Fielding.  
It makes perfect sense to me.

Part 1

NOT STRAIGHT

## CHAPTER 1

### THE TESTIMONY OF HARRY FIELDING

It has been said that in every being there is another being and this being is the true self. Not a double. Not an opposite. Simply, the one each of us strives to be all our lives. Some who have suffered cruelty, violence or abuse as children somehow short-circuit this search with their cries. They are kidnapped by the other self and abandoned in a strangely familiar place where they are victim to the same cruelty, violence or abuse, but can remember little or none of it until such time as they are strong enough to cope.

This was part of Lisa Talbot's experience of growing up. You must understand that if what follows is to make sense.

Lisa and her sister, Maureen, were assaulted and abused by their father as children. Their mother failed to protect them. She, too, was beaten. Their father was a junior banker. A money-lender to the small man. He believed everybody had their proper place in life. The fashion for the rich and royalty to appear to be like the rest of us appalled him. When he had administered a severe beating he would leave the house and seek out the company of prostitutes. Amongst them he was courteous and attentive. He would buy them drinks. On occasion, he would take one out to dinner in a cheap Soho restaurant. He would never touch them. He would secretly take satisfaction in not having to pay in full for their time. He would go home late and apologize sincerely to whomever he had beaten.

Lisa and Maureen are in their early thirties now. Their father is dead. Their mother has returned to Ireland to live

with her sister.

I live next door to Lisa. Our flats are on the ground floor. We both live alone. Late one night she was startled by a man standing outside her bedroom window. It was too dark to make out his features. She knocked on my door. She was very frightened. She said he had made a menacing little whistling noise through his teeth.

This is how I came to know her. That night I went into her bedroom but, of course, the man had vanished from her window. I went outside. I saw no one. Lisa said he was probably watching from the bushes. In any case, he did not show himself again.

On the nights Maureen sought refuge in her sister's flat Lisa would spend the small hours standing in the dark thinking what she might do to protect Maureen from her violent husband. She would stand back from her bedroom window and stare out into the night as if willing the intruder to return. She would softly mimic his whistle.

I have a friend at the airport. He has a company that loads food onto planes. He got me a job lot of dinners that come in individual foil containers. Something had gone wrong with their system and none of this batch got labelled. When I put one of these foil containers in a pot to boil I know it is going to be chicken, beef, cannelloni or curry. I do not know which. Sometimes I put two in for myself and I boil up some rice. One of these dinners tastes as good as the next if I don't think about it.

I had two of these aeroplane dinners in a pot when Lisa knocked on my door again. I was embarrassed to offer her something to eat, but I offered anyway, and she accepted. I told her I did not know what her dinner was going to be. She really did not mind. She had called to tell me she was thinking of getting a dog.

I made a fool of myself dishing out that food to her. I tried to make up for my clumsiness by flirting with her. That made me feel a bigger fool. It was not long before I

was offering to look after the dog when she was away on holiday, the dog she had yet to acquire.

I eat enough for two men, but I do not get fat. When I am not overeating, I drink too much. My eyes get clouded, even swollen. When they are in this state you will see in them a mixture of shame and desire. They see small conspiracies everywhere and I applaud the conspirators. I show that I am prepared to co-operate by exhibiting all the eagerness of a coward.

I have always feared my own impulsive nature. I have committed acts of violence in the past. I have fought with a butcher over his wife when I did not care anything for the woman. I have broken my wife's nose in my sleep. In my unconscious state I let my fist swing down hard on her face. I have taken an iron bar and smashed the car belonging to my estranged wife's boyfriend. Now, panel-beaters grin at me. Butchers regard me with suspicion. I look for a little bump on the bridge of every woman's nose.

I have got used to living on my own. There is nobody to call me selfish. If you invite me to dinner I will ask if you can cook. If the invitation still stands, I might not find your house. I blunder on, one day after the next, mostly keeping to myself. A great variety of accusations are levelled at people like me. In most instances we are innocent. We knew nobody guilty of these supposed transgressions. In most instances.

I did feel guilty about the thoughts I was having of Lisa, my neighbour. I was calculating how best I might exploit the circumstances. I had a good excuse to call. I could knock on her door to see if she was alright. I could remind her that she could call on me any time. I remember I did not eat or drink for a day when I finally decided to call on her.

She was not afraid of me. She had not closed over her bedroom door. She did not put on her shoes. I found myself earnestly fulfilling my role as good neighbour. I made a

point of refusing the drink she offered. I should have brought something, I know, but I had been too busy thinking about myself before I knocked on her door.

'Tell me something about yourself,' she ventured.

'What do you want to know?' I asked.

She did not reply. She wanted a lot. I could tell. The good and the bad. What would I tell her? What did she need to know?

'What shall I tell you about myself?' she blurted out. She desperately needed to fill the silence that followed her initial request. My question did not help.

Anything, I meant to say.

'Everything,' I said stupidly. I wasn't thinking straight. This woman pulled hard on me. Nothing was clear in my head and it showed.

I began to see her regularly. She quite liked my short-order cooking and my aeroplane dinners. I had never bothered before, but now I found a way of opening and successfully resealing the foil containers. It took time, but I could tell her what she was going to get.

Then, late one night, Lisa's sister came to her again in a distressed state. Her neck was bruised. Her lip was cut. The skin around her eyes was puffy. Two nights after that Lisa got in her car and drove to her sister's house in Wandsworth. She arrived just after midnight. She parked her car in the drive that ran up by the side of the house. She went round the back. When Maureen's husband, Frank, came to the door she hit him on the side of the head with a jack handle she had taken from the boot of her car. Before he had regained his senses she tied his hands behind his back and gagged him with a cloth. She wrestled him into the back seat of her car. She struck him again with the jack handle. Now that he lay slumped on the seat she could bind his feet. She had checked just once for the unwelcome attentions of neighbours, then she had set

about her business with grim determination. Now, she went back into the house. She filled a suitcase with his clothes and his shaving gear and put it in the boot of the car.

She had driven somewhere the night before and had returned in the small hours of the morning. This night I had followed her to the house. Now, I followed her as she drove through the streets with Frank on the back seat. I was careful to keep my distance.

She drove over Putney Bridge, went north to White City where she took the Westway. She got into lane and kept a steady speed. I got in behind her. I was thinking about what she had told me of her father over our in-flight dinners. She had described the beatings and the abuse matter-of-factly.

I kept a steady speed and I watched for Frank's head surfacing in the back window of her car, but he remained crumpled on the seat.

She did not stay on the motorway long. It was dangerous for her. She might have to stop to hit her brother-in-law again with the jack handle. She got off the motorway at Beaconsfield. There was very little traffic once we were clear of the town. The roads got narrower. I fell further behind. Only now, in a darker environment, was I aware that the moon shone above us. It was an unusually mild night. The air was uncomfortably thin. That moon looked heavy, like it might fall out of the sky.

I caught myself making that whistling noise through my teeth. I switched on the car radio, but could not tune in satisfactorily. The chimes of Radio Moscow were coming through.

Some way beyond Beaconsfield she got lost. I was forced to follow without headlights as she travelled a network of third-class roads that traversed a wooded area. She was looking for one particular turning, a foresters' gate, a track.

It was three and three-quarter hours from the time she left the house in Wandsworth to the time she found the

clearing in the wood she had selected. She had had to stop the car to strike Frank a third time on the head with the jack handle.

The track from the road swung in a wide arc and split into several routes. She took the one with a steep incline. This led to the clearing. I was some way behind. I parked half a mile away, near the gate, but off the main track. She would be leaving before me. I did not want her seeing my car. The trees were densely packed. Fortunately, there was not much undergrowth. I was able to cut across through the trees. The canopy above did not allow the moon to light the forest floor. It was difficult to remain on my feet as I advanced over the uneven ground. There were many dips and hollows. I had to take my time. She was on a plateau of sorts. There was a ridge that obscured her car but I had the spill light from her headlamps as my beacon.

When I eventually had covered enough ground to allow a clear, close view, I found that she had already dragged him out of the car. His hands and feet were still bound. He was caught in the headlights. I heard him moan. He rolled onto his side as she quickly moved away from him. He got no closer than one-half a body width to the line of trees that marked the edge of the clearing. The gag in his mouth appeared to make his eyes bulge. For a moment I thought our eyes connected. Then, Lisa drove over him. She travelled back and forth over his body four times. I watched her bury him with his suitcase in a grave she had dug the previous night when she had found this place. I watched her get back into her car and reverse down the track.

I stayed crouched where I was for some considerable time, staring into the dark where she had buried him. I moved when I thought it was safe to move. I stepped out into the moonlight that bathed the clearing and showed the way down the track. It began to rain. I could hear it raining in the trees, but it was not raining on me. Not in this



clearing. Not on the track before me. There were no clouds that I could see. The moon hung in a clear black sky.

I opened my dry mouth and drew a deep breath. I began the walk to my car. I kept to the track. It was a shorter distance than I had thought.

How far ahead had she planned? How often did Frank go on a trip and leave his car in the garage? I was sure Lisa had not confided in her sister. She had done it all on her own. For her build she had found extraordinary physical strength, and she had had the presence of mind required to carry out the deed. Had she buried him deep enough? Had she laid the suitcase across his chest? Did she know that the forest floor moves? In time, it bulges, it gives way. Like the sea, it tends to return a body.

It was dawn when I drove down Marylebone Street. The chimes of Radio Moscow were ringing in my head.

The curtains in Lisa's bedroom were drawn shut.

I was a little drunk when I knocked on her door at about six o'clock the following evening. I had a bottle of whiskey which was three-quarters full under one arm. I had a grubby old shoe I pulled out from under my wardrobe in one hand. I thrust the bottle into her hand.

'That's for you,' I said, my eyes narrowing. Then I thrust the shoe on her. 'That's for the dog,' I said.

It was for the dog she had not yet bought.

'You're a mess,' she said. There was disdain in her voice, but no surprise. Perhaps she had put her ear to the wall and had heard the neck of the bottle collide with the rim of my glass too many times to be surprised.

'I feel great,' I barked. My eyes had suddenly widened, but they must have been cloudy. They wandered a moment then fixed on Lisa's face. Her hands were full. That cleared the way for me to take hold of her small pink ears. I pulled hard on her ears thinking I might stretch that scowl off her face. 'Just great,' I said.