

Perfect Picture

Tony Compton

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Cover photo of Walltown Quarry, Northumberland, taken by T.C.

CHAPTER 1

‘Yes!’ whispered James Tuthill.

He planted his tripod on the cliff edge of the old quarry, long since transformed into a nature reserve. It spread below him, pools fed from a common stream, copses, tiny meadows, a miniature world in a limestone bowl. If you picked it up and shook it, plastic snow would fall through a liquid sky. To his left, disdained by quarrymen a hundred years ago, a promontory of harder rock held a filigree of bluebells and primroses, reaching tentatively from the woods behind James, his tripod and brand-new 22-Megapixel digital camera. He briefly consulted its manual, laboriously printed from the accompanying CD-ROM and half-filling the open rucksack at his feet.

James was a keen photographer, though never more than amateur. In the twenty years since his enthusiasm overwhelmed the joy of his day-job at a furniture warehouse, he had sold just half a dozen framed images through an art shop and seen two pictures printed in his local paper.

Loving final adjustments were made to zoom, position, focus, colour temperature, ISO speed and a dozen other parameters. But behind these technicalities whispered his late father’s voice: ‘Take care of the corners, lad, and the middle will take care of itself’. With his finger on the shutter button, he leaned forward and took a final glance through the viewfinder.

James held his breath, prickles at the back of his neck. What appeared to his eye was magic. The quarry, not quite regular in shape, was placed perfectly. Beyond its far side the woods, in their late-spring riot of greens and yellows, leaves, leaf-buds and tree-blossom underlain with a carpet of gorse blooms, set off the flowers peeping in lower left. The sun threw all into bright relief while shapely clouds counterbalanced the trees and pools below. He was looking at a Renaissance masterpiece. The Golden Section was in there somewhere. It was The Perfect Picture.

James clicked the shutter with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and closed his eyes.

He stepped back and his feet caught the bulging rucksack. He grabbed the tripod to steady himself, but its furthest leg was not secure and began to slide over the edge of the cliff. Worse, he was standing not on a firm edge but a cornice, unstable rocks supporting yet held up by matted grass roots, now stretching and yielding as he struggled to regain his balance. He and the priceless image were slipping into space. To avoid injury he must push tripod and camera away and fling himself backwards.

But he would not. Instead, he reached forward and enveloped the camera in his arms. The cornice collapsed and everything plunged ten metres on to the boulders

littered at the foot of the cliff. James felt excruciating pain as ribs punctured lungs, then oblivion as his head cracked against a rock. He lay distorted, senseless and still. The camera had escaped his grasp and lay misshapen on the edge of a small pool, broken glass from the lens scattered around it, one tripod leg bent irreparably.

But the fall had been seen. Running towards the casualty was a woman in her mid-thirties with a lad of perhaps twelve.

'Timothy, keep away! Let me get to him first!' she yelled. The boy skidded to a stop, fist pressed to his mouth in horror at the sight of his first serious accident. Treading with care, his mother neared the photographer and crouched down. She pressed the side of his neck, gently and expertly, then put her ear to his mouth.

'He's alive!' she called to her son and scrabbled for her mobile phone. Urgent words tumbled out after a flurry of buttons: 'Ecklington Quarry Reserve, north side. Serious fall by a man probably in his fifties. Patient alive but unconscious and bleeding from his left ear...Possibly other injuries...Have not moved him...Yes, I am a qualified nurse...Joscelyn Maddox, Amblethorpe Hospital...Thank you.'

She replaced the phone slowly in her bag and turned to Timothy. 'They'll be here as soon as they can. Are you all right?'

He was turning over the camera. 'It's like Dad's new one. But it's broken.'

The paramedics were there in ten minutes, using the old track through the reserve. One of them knew Joscelyn. 'Hi Jos! Lucky you were around. Is your lad OK? Looks pretty shaken.' Timothy was drifting around, trying not to look at the photographer. Suddenly he came to.

'Shall I go up? See if he left any stuff where he fell from?'

'Yes, do that. But take care,' said his mother, relieved to get him away from the scene.

By the time her son returned, laden with rucksack and a jacket, James Tuthill was safely in the ambulance and away. The siren wailed as soon as it reached the road.

'They didn't wait till you got back. Asked us to look after the poor chap's things. Including the camera.'

Timothy gently separated the camera from the broken tripod and put it in the rucksack, then collapsed the tripod, as far as it would allow, and put it under his arm. 'What are his chances?' he asked nervously.

'Slim, but not zero. We'll just have to hope.' She smiled briefly. They walked back to their car and drove home in silence.

'I'll get a snack together,' said Joscelyn, once they were indoors. 'What do you want to do?'

'I'll have a look at the camera. I think it's a write-off. But the memory card might still be OK.'

Joscelyn looked at her son seriously. 'Timothy, I know you want to help, but you must promise me that even if you manage to get it out, you do not put it in the card reader. It's private. Anyway, you don't know what else might be on it.'

'What, unsuitable stuff?'

'Just don't do it!' said his mother, turning towards the kitchen.

The boy listened to what his mother said, took note of what she did not say and went quietly upstairs to his room.

A few minutes later came a knock at the front door. Two concerned-looking young policemen faced Joscelyn. The shorter one, slightly older, stepped forward.

'I understand you witnessed a serious accident at the quarry, Mrs Maddox.' Joscelyn nodded. 'We've come to take a statement and collect the unfortunate victim's property.'

‘Any news how he is?’

‘None. Sorry. All we had was a call from the hospital with your address.’

‘Come through,’ said Joscelyn and led them into the tidy lounge. She delivered a careful account of the events from the moment she saw James fall to the point when the ambulance drove away.

‘That’s very clear, Mrs Maddox. Thank you.’ The policeman put his recorder away. ‘Now, if we could just have his stuff...’

Timothy appeared with the camera, which he handed to his mother. He seemed distracted and only half-noticed the police.

‘I couldn’t get the card out. The release door’s been damaged too much. Someone will have to dismantle the camera. It’s broken anyway.’

The policeman glared at him. ‘You shouldn’t have done that, you know, lad. It’s evidence. You might have obliterated fingerprints, or anything. And you certainly shouldn’t have tried to get the card out.’ His voice was rising and Timothy blinked.

‘Sorry. I thought it would help. Anyway, he wasn’t pushed. He just fell. He was taking a photo. Seemed to miss his footing. He might have tripped on his rucksack. There wasn’t anyone else there.’

‘So you saw what happened before he fell?’ asked his mother, surprised.

‘Oh yes. Didn’t you?’

The policeman unpacked his recorder again and took a statement from Timothy.

‘Thanks, lad. Don’t worry about the card. I know you meant it for the best. I shan’t say anything’ He winked, picked up James’ rucksack, tripod and jacket, along with the remains of his camera, and left.

Joscelyn looked with concern at her abstracted son. ‘You’re still shocked, aren’t you.’ She put her arm round him. ‘Come on, let’s have some soup.’

* * * * *

In a small back room at Amblethorpe Hospital next day sat several doctors in urgent consultation. Nowhere among their patient’s possessions were his name, address, age or anything else. With no access to medical records, dare they give him anti-tetanus? A photo of James was about to be sent to the local police when a stout man in his forties knocked tentatively.

‘I think I know who your patient is,’ he said to the doctor who half-opened the door. ‘I’m Michael Angleby. President of Amblethorpe Photographic Society. Your chap is...was...?’

‘Still is, thankfully.’

‘...he’s one of our members. Jim Tuthill. I can give you his address.’

The door was opened wide to let Mr Angleby in.

‘Jim joined the club several years ago. Took some nice photos, though nothing out of the ordinary. Usually had two or three up on our exhibition days. Outdoor scenes mostly. Anyway, how is he? Can I see him? I’m the only one in the club he ever talks to. He’s very quiet.’

‘I’ll take you to him,’ replied the doctor who had admitted Angleby. They set off down the corridor and the doctor glanced at his companion, debating with himself what to say next. Eventually he confided:

‘I shouldn’t really tell you this, but if you’re a friend it’s probably OK. He’s pretty poorly. Heavily sedated because of his injuries. But he does respond occasionally.’

From coloured signs above his head, Angleby saw they were heading for Critical Care.

‘There’s a little mystery, though. The son of one of our nurses saw him fall. The boy’s convinced that if he hadn’t tried to rescue his camera, he could have scrambled to safety when the rock collapsed. Perhaps you’d understand?’ The doctor smiled but there was no response.

The two men washed their hands and entered the Unit. James lay wired, intubated, monitored and very still. His eyes were closed. The doctor glanced at the screens and nodded. ‘I’ll leave you to him. The nurse is over there.’

Angleby sat by the bed for a long time and observed his friend, a concerned expression on his round face.

‘Hi Jim,’ he said quietly. There was no response. Angleby glanced round at the nurse, busy at her computer screen. He moved closer to James, who half-opened his eyes.

‘It’s me. Mike. Can you hear me?’ The patient nodded, almost imperceptibly. His visitor glanced round once more and moved his head even closer.

‘Why did you try to save your camera and not jump clear?’

James rolled his eyes, gave a gentle cough and mumbled: ‘Berfick bitcher.’ He closed his eyes once more.

Angleby sat back and folded his arms. He watched his friend for a few more minutes, but seeing no further response got up, nodded to the nurse and left. He found the doctor again and provided what few details he knew of James’ life, then left the building. His face carried a thoughtful, almost guilty expression.

James’ condition worsened abruptly during the evening. He was moved to a specialist brain injuries unit about twenty miles away but died there next day. His last thoughts were not fearful, nor even resentful. He had always considered his contribution to Planet Earth pretty small. But now, within his camera, he had left the world something wonderful, unique. He was content.

* * * * *

The same could not be said of Police Constable Myron Davies. Chained to his desk for a fortnight with a rugby injury, he was to glean all he could about the person now called by necessity the late James Tuthill, and to discover any living relatives. At first this was welcome relief from form-filling for his colleagues, but the task led to as many dead-ends as a badly designed car park.

Three solid days of trawling police records, censuses, the National Records Office and the Internet, culminating in a final desperate appeal to the Mormon website, had uncovered virtually nothing. He trudged into his superior’s office:

‘Imagine a piece of knotted string held up so it dangles. That is Mr Tuthill’s family tree. Himself, parents, grandparents all only children. Therefore no siblings, cousins or second cousins. His great-grandfather had a brother, so there might be third cousins, but the old boy went abroad just before the First World War so they could be anywhere. Parents and everyone older dead, so no known living relatives, though we’ll keep looking for third cousins. Sorry it took ages, but none of them stayed in one place for long. If our chap was here five years it’d be a family record.’ PC Davies sat back with a sigh of satisfaction in a job well done, though tedious beyond measure. His boss nodded appreciatively.

‘A will?’

‘Apparently not.’

‘OK, so all his stuff is sold and the proceeds held for some period – I forget how long – then end up with the Exchequer.’ He scribbled a few notes and looked up. ‘What was he like?’

Davies shuffled his pieces of paper.

‘Age 53. Good health. Lived with his father till the latter died three years ago, then on his own in the same flat. Competent enough at his job in Barclay’s Warehouse, though never said a word unless spoken to. His only contact outside job and flat was the Photographic Society. Friendly enough there, though again very quiet.’

‘Introverted? Depressed perhaps? Suicidal? Got to look at these possibilities for the Coroner.’

Davies considered this.

‘Unlikely. That chap from the Photographic Society – you know, the one who keeps badgering us – thinks he was pretty relaxed about most things. Anyway, arranging yourself on an unsafe cliff-top with a tripod and camera would seem a pretty bizarre way to go when a few packets of sleeping pills would do just as well. And he nearly survived that fall.’

‘Yes.’ The two were silent for a moment. ‘Sad business altogether. What about this photographer – Angleby? What’s he want?’

‘Keeps asking about the broken camera. Thinks one of his friends could fix it, or at least get the memory card out. Says it could be a tricky job. Thought there might be some pictures his family would appreciate – ah, but there’s no family.’

‘Mm. I’m tempted to take him up even so. Forensics are pretty busy at the moment and I’m not sure we’ve a specialist in that area. Call him in. We can describe him as an independent photographic consultant or something. Pay him a nominal amount so he takes it seriously.’

* * * * *

James’ death, in a hospital outside the *Amblethorpe Herald*’s circulation zone, received barely a mention. His demise was reported as an accident, without specifics, so Joscelyn Maddox saw no connection between his name and the photographer on the cliff top. Her son never read the local paper anyway.

However, even Timothy gave a gasp when he saw the front page of the *Herald* three weeks later. Under the headline Perfect Picture was a breathtaking photograph of Ecklington Quarry. Everything was right – balance, detail, interest; it was stunning. According to the article, the reproduction in the paper was but a pale shadow of the genuine image, which could be seen in the Library foyer throughout the whole of the next month. Moreover, art experts from London had already proclaimed it one of the finest photographs ever taken, perfect in every respect. A major gallery had offered Michael Angleby, who had achieved this amazing feat, a five-figure sum for sole use of the digital image. An art dealer was discussing considerably more.

‘Mum, look at this! That chap who fell off the cliff. He survived! His name’s Michael Angleby! And the photo he took is famous! No wonder he tried to save his camera!’

‘Well!’ said his mother, after a quick glance at the paper. ‘I was wondering what happened to him. He’d vanished from Amblethorpe next time I was on duty, so I thought the worst. Seems the gurus up at Royal Billimore sorted him out. That’s great! Shall we go and see it?’

After school, Timothy joined his parents in the queue at the Library. Alan and Joscelyn were thrilled both with the picture and its effect on their son, who had never shown any interest in art before. Timothy inspected it closely, exclaimed at the luminous colours, stood back to admire the overall effect, then moved in again to trace out the detail of the bluebells in the left foreground, as beautifully in focus as were the trees beyond the quarry itself. All were touched by this creation of unique and exquisite beauty.

‘Didn’t see Angleby there,’ said Joscelyn when they were back home. ‘There were several important-looking characters, but no-one looked like our accident victim.’

‘There wasn’t anyone swathed in bandages,’ commented Timothy. ‘Would he have recovered that quickly?’

The Perfect Picture was a sensation in the serious media. A Renaissance expert discovered no fewer than four examples of the Golden Section within it, though this was hotly disputed over several TV programmes. Timothy, who had never listened to the radio before, was glued to a debate on Radio 3 which suggested the picture was a remembrance of the quarrymen who had lost their jobs a hundred years before: drooping bluebells overlooked a vanished world. Next day, he came home from school with a commendation from his English teacher, an accolade never achieved before.

‘We were learning about haikus. I wrote this one about the photo of the quarry. She really liked it.’ He stood before his wondering parents and declaimed:

‘Sadly the bluebells
bow to the invisible
ghosts of quarrymen.’

‘That’s beautiful!’ exclaimed Joscelyn.

‘Miss Winsor said it was the only one with a proper verb. The others were all full of adverbs and participles, she said.’

Soon came the news that Michael Angleby had sold the rights to the photograph, along with the digital file from his computer, to a high street bank for just over £1,000,000. The picture was enlarged to a spectacular width of two metres and was to appear in every branch, including the one in Amblethorpe. ‘A Perfect Picture for your Perfect Bank’ proclaimed the adverts. Joscelyn and Timothy took the first opportunity for a visit, at a quiet time when they were the only ones there. The boy looked unhappy.

‘There’s something wrong,’ he said. ‘It’s not the perfect picture any more.’

‘What do you mean? Is it too big? Can’t you get far enough away from it? For the full impact?’

‘No, it’s not that. There’s something...hazy about it. I wonder if they’ve softened the edges. Sacrilege if so.’ He said this quite loudly and one or two tellers looked up.

Joscelyn was startled, less by the volume than the appearance from her illiterate son of a word she thought he’d barely know. Worse was to follow. Timothy moved up close to the lower left hand corner.

‘Stamens! Where are they?’ he almost shouted.

Oh dear, thought Joscelyn, *is this a new oath he’s learned at school?* She knew that stamens are the reproductive parts of plants, but this was surely a euphemism too far for 12-year old boys.

‘Look, Mum! The fourth bluebell from the left. Its stamens are muzzy.’

She regained her composure.

‘So? Perhaps it was blowing about.’

‘No. On the photo in the library they’re clear. And you can see the ducks properly in that one. And the seagulls. Come on!’

They sped out of the bank followed by curious eyes, including those of the manager emerging from his office.

At the library they crept inside and headed straight for the photograph. Sure enough, the stamens of the fourth bluebell from the left were crystal-clear, as were the ducks and gulls in their improbably mirrored positions in pool and sky. And Joscelyn agreed the picture had much more impact.

Michael Angleby stood near them, more than casually interested in what they were saying. They had no reason to notice him, of course: he was not the man who fell from the cliff. Outside again, they put their heads together.

‘OK Tim. The bank could be using an inferior printer. To save money.’

‘Unlikely I’d say. Not when they’d spent that much on it. The clarity’s one of the things that makes it so special. Did you notice any other pictures when we were in the bank? About the same size?’

‘No. We could go back and look. Though I think we excited a bit too much interest. We’ll pop in again when it’s really busy. What’s the other possibility?’

‘Angleby’s sold them short. He’s compressed his original file and sold that. And kept the full-res one for himself. Perhaps to sell to someone else under the counter.’

Joscelyn started. This was a side of her son she had not seen before. She responded quickly: ‘I wish we could see a picture of him now he’s recovered. Perhaps we can tell how honest he looks.’

‘He might still be too bandaged up to appear in public. Honest-looking or otherwise. Just have to wait.’ He shrugged his shoulders.

Next day the photograph had disappeared from the library, to be replaced by a bland view of a local hill. Joscelyn and Timothy sauntered into the bank and inspected a different large picture. Its resolution was excellent: printer quality was not the issue.

‘They’ve been sold a dummy,’ said Timothy, quietly this time.

‘No, you’re just indulging in conspiracy theory,’ laughed his mother.