

AN OLD SPY STORY

Terry Morgan

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".....a masterful tale by someone who knows exactly what he is writing about...."

"....I loved this plot.....international trade, bribery, corruption and the murky workings of British Intelligence. The depiction of the may fixers and middle men ring so true, as do the dubious business practices. Gritty descriptions of far flung cities and their low budget hotels....easy reading."

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PART ONE: The Detention

Oliver Thomas had no wish to appear to be crying like a baby, but the strain of trying to make out the detail of a blurred silhouette standing over him was making tears run down his unshaven cheeks.

For an otherwise healthy man of eighty-six whose spectacles had also started to slide sideways down his nose, maintaining some self-dignity was still paramount. But attempts to deal with both the tears and the glasses with both hands then caused the walking stick that he was gripping between his knees, to slide with a clatter to the floor.

Both of them, the silhouette and he, listened but neither did anything to chase it as it disappeared from view beneath the table that separated them. Instead, Oliver Thomas took a deep, audible breath that whistled past the hairs of his nose. It was just another familiar problem that compounded what little dignity he still felt. The silhouette dragged up a chair and sat down. A pot of untouched tea and two mugs sat on the otherwise bare table between them.

“Come on Mr Thomas! Why would someone of your age fly to Spain, smuggle a hand gun past all the airport checks and surveillance gear and threaten another old man in his nineties?”

His interrogator was clearly getting impatient but Oliver Thomas was in no hurry.

“Tea, Mr Thomas? Milk?”

He breathed out again, noisily, and looked down to check if he could see his stick. Having failed, he coughed to clear the phlegm he could feel gathering at the back of his throat.

“Thank you,” he said politely, watching tea and milk being poured into the two mugs. Then, noting that the tea looked pale and stone cold, added:

“Sorry, I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Andy Wilson, Inspector Andy Wilson,” was the reply, spoken as though it was the tenth time he had given his name and rank. “Ah, yes, of course,” he said. The Inspector saw a faint smile appear amongst the deep creases in the unshaven cheeks and his suspicions that he was actually being taken for a bit of a ride by the old man were reinforced. But he ignored it. The detainee looked tired and unsteady on his feet and a little like his own grandfather. “So,” Inspector Andy Wilson sighed now, “any chance of an explanation?”

Oliver Thomas leaned forwards, took the mug nearest him and sucked on the contents. It was, as he had expected, tepid and tasteless but he swallowed the first mouthful and then drained the cup.

It was Andy Wilson’s turn to smile faintly at the speed with which the old man drank it, replaced the mug on the table and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“As we used to say in the RAF, a shit, shower and shave would be my preferred priority,” he said, aware of combining politeness with perhaps some unnecessary frankness. “One of my colleagues used to add the word shag to that list but I don’t feel like one at present.”

“Really,” Andy Wilson said. “We, in the police use similar catch phrases.”

Oliver Thomas edged himself back into his chair and tried, once more, to find his stick with his foot. Then he put his hand down to check that the old black leather bag that had accompanied him for the last seven days was still sat by his side.

"It's a long story," he said.

"I've got time."

"It goes back sixty years so it'll take sixty years to tell."

"Then give me a summary."

"Your friend whom I spoke to earlier said he wanted me to start from scratch."

"Clive's got more patience. Just give me a summary."

Oliver Thomas spent a minute or so rubbing his sore eyes behind his glasses.

"I still don't know where to start," he said.

"The only thing I know so far is that your name is Oliver James Thomas and that you probably live somewhere in Gloucester. And we got that from your passport. Perhaps you can start with explaining why you had such a problem with a ninety-year old gentleman who was apparently living in quiet retirement in a nice villa in Malaga."

There was silence from Oliver Thomas.

He just stared at the walls.

"Is it any wonder that the Spanish police have asked us to detain you, Mr Thomas? When a British national goes to Spain, uses a smuggled hand gun on another British national and then runs away or, as in your case, walks away using a walking stick, it poses the question of why," Andy Wilson continued.

"And while we're at it, what were you doing with six thousand Euros in a brown envelope? Was it unspent holiday money?"

Oliver Thomas tried looking at his interrogator across the top of his glasses as the lenses were far too greasy for a clear view through them and his hand went down to check that the black bag was still there.

Andy Wilson noticed. "Don't worry," he said. "The envelope is still in there. We've only held on to your passport."

"So, did your Spanish friends confirm the name of this so-called gentleman, Inspector?" Oliver Thomas asked.

"His name is Alexander Donaldson, which I imagine you know anyway. "

Andy Wilson sighed.

Oliver Thomas then copied him, noisily and deliberately, as if competing in a test of how much frustration a man could tolerate. He then scanned the depressing magnolia walls of the interview room with tired, red-rimmed eyes before trying to focus once more on the silhouette of Inspector Andy Wilson.

"My wife, Sarah, died, you see," he said.

"Excuse me?" Andy Wilson asked, unsure how this related to the case in hand.

"And so, did Beaty," Oliver Thomas added.

Andy Wilson stared back, now wondering if he was dealing with a case of geriatric infidelity and promiscuity having got out of hand.

Meanwhile, Oliver Thomas made one last attempt to find his stick, this time with his other foot and then said, "So is the bastard dead, Inspector?"

Andy Wilson said nothing but picked up his own cup and drained the contents.

Oliver Thomas noticed the reluctance to confirm anything.

"Oh well," he said, "the bastard was far from well when I last saw him. Perhaps he's already gone to his maker – the devil. Whatever I did, he seemed about to suffer a heart attack anyway. So perhaps I've done everyone a favour."

Andy Wilson watched him.

Clearly the old man seemed none too concerned. He was now sitting back as though trying to relax after a job well done.

"Damned hard chair," said Oliver Thomas fidgeting.

"So is mine," Andy Wilson replied impatiently. "As for Mr Donaldson, I understand he is in intensive care. We are still waiting for news."

There was a short silence as Oliver Thomas fidgeted a bit more and looked around the room again. Then he turned to face his questioner.

"I'd be happy to explain, Inspector, but I trust you were taught the art of patience during your police training. Because, if you really want to know, then it all started more than sixty years ago, and if I am to explain what happened, and why, then I need to start from the beginning and this could take a while."

"Go ahead," Andy Wilson said, "try to make yourself comfortable."

"Home comforts are not something that ever really bothered me, Inspector, but a softer chair might be easier on my bloody arse and, if you could retrieve my stick from over there, I'd be very grateful."

Andy Wilson smiled now and, as he bent down to pick up the stick, Oliver Thomas seized his chance.

"Could we not, perhaps, go and sit in your main office where I am sure I saw a sofa and coffee table as we passed by a while ago. I suspect that's where your staff go and relax, so perhaps the tea can be guaranteed to be of a better quality there as well. If we don't finish before midnight, I am sure I can find a room somewhere. I'd be happy to continue tomorrow as I don't have any other pressing engagements.

And a toilet where I could perhaps have a quick shit to avoid disgracing myself would be useful.

"Apart from that, I've got plenty of time and, frankly, the thought of returning home to the cold and empty house in Gloucester and running the gauntlet of my nosey neighbour Fred Carrington is something that depresses me."

Andy Wilson got up and handed him his stick.

"Here," he said, "come with me," and he came around to the other side of the table and put his hand on the old man's elbow to steady him as he struggled up. "Thank you," said Oliver Thomas, "I'm unlikely to run far away as you can see."

Andy Wilson bent down again, this time to pick up the black bag.

“I’ll take that,” said Oliver Thomas as though it contained his life savings.

He was led to another office with a desk, bookshelves, a few filing cabinets, a coffee table and an exotic potted plant.

“That’s much nicer,” he said to Andy Wilson, “and I can actually see your face now.”

Then he raised his glasses to rest on his forehead and peered at the potted plant.

“A Malaysian miniature coconut – how interesting. It’ll fruit in about four years but it won’t be anything like warm or bright enough just sitting there. I feel sorry for it. Trees like that should be left where they were born. I hope it isn’t one you borrowed after confiscation at customs, because I thought that was illegal.”

“Ah,” said Andy Wilson, unconvincingly. He beckoned him towards the sofa. “So you know something about customs regulations do you?”

“Oh yes,” he said, “I ran an export and import company for most of my life so I know most of the dodges.”

“You certainly know how to carry a gun onto a plane undetected, Mr Thomas. How many other little tricks are you up to?” Andy Wilson settled into the chair opposite and placed a notepad on the table. But, as he did so, a phone rang on a desk nearby and he leaned over to answer it. “That might be Spain, excuse me.”

Oliver Thomas listened.

“Yes, I see – thanks. Anything else from Malaga?” Andy Wilson replaced the phone and returned to face Oliver Thomas.

“Well, you won’t be going far anyway, Mr Thomas. There is another little problem. The long-term car park office reports that your car, an old Jaguar I understand, that you parked there some days ago, has no tax and no insurance.”

Oliver Thomas scratched his head.

“Oh! Yes, I’d forgotten about that with all the excitement. It’s in the post. But what about the medical reports from Malaga, Inspector? Is the bastard dead?”

Andy Wilson picked up a pen and started to write something on the pad.

“He is in intensive care. Though I understand the Spanish police are also now taking an interest in some other matters.” “Ah!” said Oliver Thomas again. “Good. Better late than never, I suppose.”

Andy Wilson was now the one to scratch his head. He then stuck the pen between his teeth.

“So, tell me about your business, Mr Thomas. Are you still running it? Are you not retired? Is this some sort of business feud or just an argument over girlfriends?”

“I would say it’s far more complicated than that, Inspector. Do you want to start from the beginning or not?”

Andy Wilson sighed once more.

If this was a long feud then perhaps, the old man was right in that it would not be a quick explanation. He glanced at the walking stick now propped up opposite him and down at the black bag. Then he thought about the detainee’s transport problem and the information from Spain, which was still vague.

Time was not something the old man appeared to be concerned with. But the long-awaited explanation suddenly seemed to start and he thought he had better listen. "I started the business after the war," he heard Oliver Thomas begin.

"Sarah and I had just got married and we moved to live in Croydon which was near enough to London, far enough into the country and yet near to the airport. Sarah called the house 'Brick View' and I knew she didn't really like it but it was an era of austerity, ration books, waste not, want not and beggars can't be choosers.

"You wouldn't understand, Inspector, as you're far too young. But it was a good time for those with ambition and energy and I was one of those with ideas to start my own business. Exporting was my plan."

"Why exporting?" Andy Wilson asked, trying to focus on something specific.

"I had always wanted to travel to more exotic places, you see," said Oliver Thomas. "Ever since I was a boy and first read about Captain Cook and stared at the illustrations. Afterwards I took out books on Africa, Persia and India from the library. After the war, I decided I wanted to visit more countries than the few that His Majesty had already sent me to in the RAF. And so, Thomas Import Export Limited was born several years before our two children."

He paused and seemed to glaze over. Andy Wilson thought that, perhaps, he was imagining a couple of babies bouncing on his knee – babies that would in fact be nigh on retirement age themselves.

But this had been described to him earlier as a possible murder investigation and he really needed to get to the facts.

He decided to jump in again.

"Let's cut out the family history shall we, Mr Thomas? Are you still in business or not?"

Oliver Thomas's mind was still sixty years behind and the question caught him unaware.

"I suppose so," he said, "I admit I hadn't thought of it like that. I've stopped doing tax returns but I suppose you could say my business plan has not yet been fulfilled."

Andy Wilson sighed and looked at his watch yet again, regretting his last question.

The old man was already in full flow again.

"Oh yes, in the beginning I had big plans for Thomas Import Export. If you had asked me sixty years ago, how it might have grown I would probably have described a multi-national trading company with plush offices in New York, Paris, Hong Kong and Buenos Aires.

"But looking at me now, Inspector, in my Marks and Spencer's jumper, jacket and stained trousers how do I look? Do I look like a successful businessman who worked his socks off and risked his neck for fifty years? Do I resemble some of your flash, modern jet setters with their credit cards, laptops and exaggerated stories about top level meetings with bankers in Sheraton Hotels in places like Singapore and Los Angeles? Or do I look like one of the few who ventured abroad even before the days of telexes and international telephones and were to be found waiting around at squalid airports carrying tattered cases of samples and staying at doss houses in places like downtown Lagos?"

“How, Inspector, do I compare with your vision of Mister, fucking, Alexander Donaldson, as you are apparently required to address him, who is living, as you so politely put it, in quiet retirement in a nice villa in Spain?”

“That bastard ruined my life, and that of many others. “Let me ask you. What was the final death toll in Northern Ireland?”

“I disliked him from the first time I met him but the feeling got worse the older I got and the more I realized what he was really up to. But since Sarah died and I found myself with the time and just about enough energy left I felt it was time to act.

“But am I partly to blame? Yes, probably.

“Do I have my weaknesses? Yes, as we all do.

“Am I honest and reliable? Yes, generally.

“Am I patriotic? Yes, definitely.

“But just after the war was a time when old Army and RAF chums still kept in touch.

“A group of us used to meet up in the Feathers in Mayfair.”

Oliver Thomas stopped and Andy Wilson thought he might be recalling pleasant evenings of seventy years ago.

“Ah yes, the Feathers,” he continued, “Do you know it, Inspector? Is it still there? Is it now covered in hanging baskets of geraniums and petunias and other tinsel? Does it now offer gastro food and serve organic quiche salads for lunch? If so it has changed a bit since I frequented the dive in the fifties.

“But relationships between old chums often became soured as we recognized our differences outside our uniforms. And this particularly sour relationship has taken me far longer to deal with than it should.

“Oh yes, the old man in his nineties, as you so decently refer to him, is a bastard of the first order.

“Have you ever met an old-fashioned money launderer, Inspector?”

“Do you know any ninety-year-old gun running arms dealers or drug dealers?”

“How many of your friends are associates of Sicilian or Russian Mafia and hide out in places like Malta, Inspector?”

“Are you familiar with the big money that can be made by being the instigator of military coups and other subversive plots in places like Algeria, Sierra Leone or Chad and do you know any nice people who ran the Provisional IRA?”

“In your recent career, Inspector, have you ever found it necessary to arrest a really nasty but clever piece of shit that operates internationally and is still going strong and unidentified like some New York Godfather? Perhaps you have so perhaps you know the sort. Perhaps, with luck, your Spanish friends are going to find one who’s been hiding in their midst for too long. Yet it’s me who is under detention and I find that strange. But then, that’s the story of my life. So, shall I go on, Inspector?”

Andy Wilson had sat listening patiently throughout this diatribe which seemed to get more and more passionate as it progressed. He had found himself staring at the old man toying with the desire to cut the old man short by telling him to get to the point. But he was also intrigued.

Was he an ex gangster, arms dealer or drugs dealer? Was he a money launderer? But he hardly looked the part and, what was more, he lived in Gloucester. Andy Wilson's only image of Gloucester was of a grimy place with docks and a rugby club. Malaga, on the other hand, was a far more likely headquarters for an expatriate criminal.

And although it may just have been the influence of David Attenborough documentaries, but travel to places other than Tenerife, that his wife preferred, had always intrigued him. And as for meeting gangsters, this was usually the job of other police departments. And the only Mafia types he knew were the sort portrayed by Marlon Brando. This old man looked, as he himself had just admitted, like an ordinary pensioner. Just like his grandfather, he reminded himself again.

But Andy Wilson had a job to do and he looked at his watch. "It's getting late," said Andy Wilson, tapping the watch. "We need to decide what to do here. But we're still waiting on information from the Spanish police."

"So, I'm not being charged?"

"You're being detained pending further enquiries." "So, where am I to be detained?"

"Somewhere close by. A hotel. Your car has been impounded and your passport is with me here," he said, and produced the passport from beneath the pad in front of him.

Then he looked down at Oliver Thomas's black bag again. "You're not carrying very much, Mr Thomas. When we checked, it was just a bundle of old clothes, some keys and your brown envelope of euros. Is that it?"

Oliver Thomas also looked down at his old black leather bag. He had owned it for more than forty years and he felt it was still in good shape.

"Italian leather," he said, "made to order by a craftsman in Naples. But you missed something Inspector. As did most customs and immigration officials for all the years I used it. It used to hold my other passports in a concealed compartment. I held several, at various times. But on this occasion, it contains something else."

He bent down and opened it up.

Andy Wilson watched as the old man ran a veiny hand around the lining. There was a sound like a Velcro fastening being opened and the hand emerged with a thick pile of A4 size paper held together with a single, large bulldog clip.

"I started it some months ago," he said, "I partly updated it in red biro when I was in Frankfurt. But this is as good a police statement as you'll find anywhere. I wrote it just in case I didn't get back. But there is a carbon copy with my solicitor along with some other papers. I hope you enjoy it."

Andy Wilson took it from him and started to flip through the pages.

It looked as if it had been prepared on an ancient typewriter.

"By the way, Inspector," Oliver Thomas interrupted, "Alex Donaldson is no ordinary mister. For one thing, his rank is Major and, for another, he had tenuous links with British Intelligence."

Andy Wilson looked at him.

"Really? And you, Mr Thomas?"

“Me?” he replied, pointing a finger at himself. “Oh, I just ran a small export business.”

An hour later, Oliver Thomas found himself in a small hotel room overlooking the airport runway but with the black leather bag now containing little more than a week’s worth of dirty washing and a toothbrush. The curtains were not drawn and bright orange lights from the airport flickered and reflected off the ceiling and so he went to the window to look out. He spat on the lenses of his glasses and wiped them with the end of his woollen jumper and then put them on to watch as a plane taxied towards the terminal. Airports had been a way of life for him for many years and still held a fascination but he had never heard of the airline whose owner’s name was splashed on the tail alongside what looked like a sun and a palm tree.

“Like a bloody coach trip to Blackpool,” he muttered to himself and pulled the curtain shut.

Then he switched on the dim bedside light, went to the bathroom, filled a glass with water, drank it, filled it once again and brought it back to sit on the bed.

It was a dismal room but luxurious compared to some he had stayed in, so he lay back and closed his eyes. For a while he lay in the dark on the single bed, fully clothed, thinking about Andy Wilson.

He had warned him that his hand-written statement went back sixty years and could take a while to read but, for now, there was not much else he could do.

“Oh yes, Inspector,” he mumbled to himself, “I forgot one thing. Please add blackmail to the list of accusations to throw at that bastard.”

His tired, unfocused eyes tried looking around the orange lit room but he could feel himself drifting to sleep. It turned out to be the best sleep he had had for weeks.

Back at the police offices, Andy Wilson removed the bulldog clip and settled himself for a long read.

PART TWO: The Beginning

Starting from birth, eighty-six years ago, will be a pointless exercise and so I will begin with a time when, too often, I frequented the Feathers public house in Mayfair.

But, let me make it quite clear, I do not associate the Feathers with cosy, after works drinks with colleagues but with an ex British Army Major called Alex Donaldson.

Donaldson was a man I was very content to believe was long dead.

But I can still see Donaldson in his crumpled white shirt sat alongside his crony sidekick Jack Woodward on those red leather stools at the bar.

I can still smell the stale Bass beer and see the Red Triangles on the soggy beer mats even now, nearly sixty years later. I can also still smell Donaldson's stinking Craven A cigarettes and see him deliberately puffing the smoke down the dark and cavernous cleavage of Betty the barmaid. Sophistication was never Donaldson's style.

The room was always filled with an acrid blue haze, sticky with heat from the coal fire in the black grate with its brass scuttle, poker, dirty brush and small shovel. I can still feel the sticky warmth on my face as I sat there trying to be part of this ugly scene whilst all the time thinking I would be far better off at home with Sarah sat by our own fireside.

I can see Betty, as she then was, standing behind her bar, tolerating Donaldson's grotesque rudeness whilst cleaning her squeaking beer glasses with a cloth and winking at customers whenever their eyes rose from her cleavage.

I have had far too many dreams about this pub because I had been there too often in the past. But instead of diminishing over time, the dreams have increased. Perhaps it is because, unlike many of the others who visited the Feathers, I never went there to be sociable but with what I now see as a misplaced sense of patriotism and duty to King and Country left over from the war.

Those meetings were often arranged by a phone call to my Croydon office from Jack Woodward. Betty, who was my office manager, typist and telephonist would take the call before handing the phone to me to decide. And it bothers me now how easy it had been for me to be persuaded to meet. But I was younger then and the young are much greater opportunity seekers.

As we sat at the bar, Jack Woodward would gorge on dishes of shellfish and when I came in through the door, both of them would already be there, hunched over their drinks as though they had been there for hours already discussing what to say to me or how best to persuade me to do the next job.

But it was my fault.

In the early days, I was far too easy going and had no idea what I was letting myself in for. Jack, being the politer one, would always see me first and stand up as though slightly embarrassed by what they had been discussing. Donaldson would continue facing the bar and Betty until I had sat down on the next stool. Then he would turn and nod at me. No smile, just a nod. Donaldson always wore the same grey gabardine mackintosh over his suit and tie and only after he nodded might he then decide to join Jack in shaking my hand. But I was always reluctant to touch

Donaldson because I knew my hands would smell of stale cigarettes for hours as a result of that fleeting but disgusting contact.

Jack would order the drinks and cockles and was always the one to pay Betty.

“Two and six, please, luv. Ta, luv,” in her broad east London accent. Then Betty would slide over a tiny white dish that always held three small, sharp wooden sticks and the cockles that glistened with vinegar.

Before and since my dear wife, Sarah, died I have dreamed about the Feathers too often. Mostly they are colourful nightmares with accompanying stereophonic sound effects and smells included and I often wake up in a sweat because the nightmares spiralled out of control onto other things. The nightmares are almost always linked to Donaldson.

When I awake in the middle of the night or the very early morning with my lap soaked in whisky from the glass that had fallen from my hand I often wonder if I am actually suffering from some sort of new and unnamed form of senile dementia.

I fear I may have a new type of Alzheimer’s disease distinguished by a vivid imagination and an uncanny ability to dredge up memories that are best forgotten. But I often amuse myself by thinking it should, perhaps, be called Thomas’s Disease after its first recorded victim. I have even dreamed of seeing a definition of it in medical textbooks or copies of the British Medical Journal.

“Thomas’s Disease: A condition of the mind characterized by symptoms that include an uncontrollable desire to analyse the past through dreams so that the sufferer finds it easy to pinpoint his past mistakes and weaknesses. And finally decides to wake up and do something about them.”

It is, I acknowledge, a long-winded definition but I feel it is accurate. But I often wondered if, perhaps, I was no longer remembering facts but embellishing things to make them more interesting. Perhaps, I just have an overactive brain that is long past its sell by date.

But I also have a theory that Alzheimer’s disease is not really a disease but a useful and highly evolved mechanism for protecting the old and decrepit from realizing their predicament.

I have often thought how much nicer that would be because Thomas’s Disease is far worse. It is a punishing and painful disease that is all too apparent to its victims.

What is certain is that the nightmares I experienced up until the moment I decided to do something about the cause had been a mixture of historic fact and vivid imagination.

But couple that with a mind-blowing ability to suddenly realize what had been going on beneath my nose and behind my back for fifty years and perhaps you will begin to understand why I need to deal with it.

Writing this is part of that process.

I still can’t accurately pinpoint exactly when it all started or when I suddenly saw the light. It was like the slow arrival of dawn when you can’t sleep. You lie there waiting until you can stand it no longer and finally get up, go to the window and draw the curtains. But, in my case, I didn’t see the rising sun. I saw that a dark and rainy day

had already begun, that the time was far later than I had thought and I wished I had got up much earlier.

For me, late dawning has happened too often and there is only so much cloud and rain a man can stand.

The final awakening began when Sarah became ill although even then it was not so much a sudden switching on of the light but gradual, like a dimmer switch being turned.

I had been feeling very lonely which didn't help. I was certainly bored.

Sarah was sick and a nurse had been calling daily. She had become bedridden, as they once called it, and spent her days upstairs.

I, on the other hand, spent my days and often my nights, downstairs sitting in the chair by Sarah's favourite log effect gas fire but with trips up and down the stairs with cups of tea for Sarah followed by other daytime trips to the supermarket for the newspaper and a few more bottles of Bell's whisky for myself.

I know I had been sitting around far too much but what else is an old man expected to do? But, to keep my brain occupied, I had also, mistakenly, started rummaging through an old box of papers and other things that had been gathering dust for twenty-five years in a cupboard upstairs.

Oh dear, what a mistake that was.

But then there were the nightmares, the main features of Thomas's Disease. I would wake up in the early hours or the late hours or even the daytime hours feeling uncomfortable, hot and sweaty and with an all too familiar taste of stale whisky in the back of my throat and an intense heat in my stomach like a gastric version of heartburn.

But what really used to wake me up was the uncontrollable and frantic tossing and sweating in the chair by Sarah's gas fire as I dreamed. I would hear voices. And Jack Woodward's voice – he of the Feathers public house in Mayfair – was one.

And Jack might not even have been talking in English. It had been a habit sixty years ago, for ex forces chaps to speak "in tongues" as we humorously called it. Arabic was one such language. Speaking in an accent supposedly to resemble that of President Nasser of Egypt was Jack's little habit. Mixed up with conversations that included "bints" and "kazis", it had all become rather predictable but in one of my whisky fuelled dreams I clearly saw him.

"Sabbah el kheir, kaif hallak?" Jack was saying, his voice seemingly coming directly from the empty whisky glass I was holding to my ear like a phone.

"Good day" and "how are you" are easy enough Arabic words, but, having spent a while in Cairo, Jack was almost fluent and so his Nasser accent was quite realistic. My Arabic isn't bad though, having been picked up from many visits to North Africa and the Middle East and I can easily distinguish between Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian or Egyptian accents. I had a smattering of other languages too or, at least, enough to direct various nationalities of taxi drivers to wherever I was heading.

I had even picked up some occasionally useful Russian words during a few lessons run by a Polish immigrant working out of a room in an office block off Whitehall. That was also sixty years ago but I still harbour memories of a dark room with dusty

bookshelves, hard chairs, a stained wooden table and a single, dim light bulb that hung from the ceiling. It had felt like the Eastern Bloc in miniature.

But Jack, who also had the remnants of an English public-school accent to go with his Arabic, had not risen very far after the war. He became Donaldson's errand boy. He was the one who would phone me with a job to do and, stupidly as I now see it, I would agree.

Donaldson and Jack had been old but distant acquaintances of mine at the time and we met, by sheer coincidence, at another pub in Victoria and it had all started as a few odd jobs that relied on a few years of RAF experience.

But, before I knew it, I was up to my neck in things. Not that I didn't find some of it exciting at the time. After all, I was young, enthusiastic, and motivated by the need to find opportunities and ideas for my new business. So, any chance to go abroad to mix with unusual characters of different nationalities looked like pure fun with the added potential of earning a shilling or two.

Actually, I was a natural and very good at it.

Did I have time, Jack asked me, to fly off with a camera that they'd provide to photograph a few buildings near an airport somewhere in northern Finland? That was in the very early days, one of my first assignments just after the war. It was the Cold War and it was very, very cold two hundred miles north of Helsinki in January.

"It'll only take a few days – in and out in no time," Jack had said, although the words he used were probably what he had been told to say by Donaldson. And, of course, driven by the excitement, I went.

Another phrase Jack often used was, "Come over, this afternoon, Ollie. We want you to meet someone." And my reply was usually framed by an excuse such as, "But I've got a Letter of Credit that I need to lodge before the bank shuts". This was often true as I was probably surrounded by paper on my desk and due to fly off somewhere warmer like Lebanon next day.

But so began long years of evening meetings in the Feathers with two men, one of whom, Jack, was just tolerable, the other, Donaldson, a serious but sinister man who in the early days I never fully understood.

And, from my small office in Croydon, Beaty, my newly found office assistant, would have been fussing around in her usual way but listening all the while. Beaty rapidly became indispensable to me but there was more to Beaty than I first realized.

But that's how it was in the beginning.

It was a creeping process made easy by my new business – a small venture that taxed the mind but offered endless opportunities for foreign travel whilst enabling me to mix legitimacy with the sort of antics that Donaldson and his crony Jack tempted me to pursue.

I didn't mind. No job was ever the same and, inevitably, I would meet someone who became a new customer or might lead to one.

But the assignments, as Donaldson always described them, gradually got more frequent. Business wasn't easy and I wasn't making much money after paying my overheads and Beaty's salary and I soon

realized the assignments were impinging on my business.

Meanwhile, at home, Sarah was busy looking after the new baby and our young son, Robert. There was not much saving going on. What little was coming in, was going straight out.

But Beaty would take the calls from Jack and, yet again, I would find myself catching the five thirty train and then a taxi to go to the Feathers. And all at my expense and when it would have been far better and sensible to go home to be with Sarah and the children and eat cottage pie and apple crumble.

And so, of course, Sarah got used to the loneliness.

She accepted it as part of my business but, looking back, I regret it so much now that it brings a lump to my throat just to write this. I should have understood things better so many years ago.

Suffering from Thomas's Disease, you see, has caused me to reflect on past errors of judgment. But in the weeks and months up until the day Sarah died I often woke up to find myself sobbing like a child.

And why, since Sarah died, do I still sit with lumps in my throat and tears in my eyes?

Because, in the weeks before Sarah passed away, whilst she was lying, gravely sick upstairs in bed, I was downstairs, drunk as a skunk and perhaps speaking to a voice from maybe sixty years ago, coming out of an empty whisky glass clamped to my right ear.

In fact, I have been known to be so far gone that the whisky glass would transform itself into my old black office telephone receiver with its twisted cable that I would waste hours trying to unravel, until Beaty came to my aid.

"Tut, tut," Beaty would say, "leave it to me."

And I would say to her something like, "Here, you sort the blasted wire, Beat. I've got to run. See what you can do to finish these quotes off."

And I would push a pile of papers and price lists towards her as Beaty said, "Are you sure, Mr Thomas?"

And then I'd be gone like some stupid boy summoned by the headmaster.

But, I was also driven by a sense of duty and patriotism. The assignments were for the good of the country, or so I believed. And if they could also be used to enhance my business, why not?

But my motivations were gradually driven by an added element of fear. And this was nothing to do with early onset Thomas's Disease.

This was a genuine fear for myself and my family and fear of other repercussions for failing to co-operate. Looking back, I can see that Beaty was also worried but, at the time, I was too blind to see it and so Beaty also forms a key part of this tale.

I sometimes still dream about Beaty, but please don't misunderstand me.

Dreams about Beaty are never erotic. She was my age but always at least fifteen years behind the fashions of the day and I usually see her dressed in a pink twin set with her Imperial typewriter noticeably hesitating in its clatter as she listened to me on the phone. She would then glance furtively toward me over her horn-rimmed

glasses, before looking quickly back to her work. Then the machine would ping back into action again as she hit the return.

But, Thomas's Disease has enabled me to remember the look on Beaty's face whenever Jack Woodward phoned my office to invite me to another meeting.

Beaty's expression was particularly exaggerated on the rarer occasions that Donaldson rang.

I would put the big black phone with its tangled cable back on the receiver and glance at Beaty who quickly looked away. "How's it all coming along, Beat?" I would ask with diplomacy and just a little humor, in order to quell Beaty's far too easy embarrassment at being caught watching and listening. In fact, I see now that she treated all phone calls from Jack and Donaldson as if she was nervous. She seemed to dislike the intrusions as if she was an unwilling witness to an extramarital affair and would cough, unnecessarily, nervously and say something like, "Nearly finished, Mr Thomas. But should we copy the text in the credit exactly? You see they have typed dollar wrong. They have put doller – with an 'e'."

"Oh dear. Yes. Better had, Beat. I'll speak to the bank when I present the documents. We don't want to have to request an amendment at this stage. We should have noticed it before."

"Sorry, Mr Thomas."

I had appointed poor old Beaty because she seemed to be a lonely spinster but she was very good at her job. She came with a very good set of references although I have to admit that one of them was from Donaldson. Lonely Beaty was, in fact, indispensable but I now know she also lived in some sort of fear.

So, the few jobs I found myself doing for King and Country or, afterwards, for Queen and Country gradually became more and more frequent to the detriment of my business.

And the plans for them were nearly always laid while drinking pints of draft Bass bitter and slurping bowls of cockles at the Feathers.

And it was in the Feathers that I started to dislike Donaldson although the feeling was undoubtedly mutual.

For some years, Donaldson had a thick moustache on his upper lip. One day it disappeared without warning although we never discussed such personal things. But it was then that I grew to notice and hate the white spittle that often appeared on his lips if he got angry.

And Donaldson could get very angry.

But I also disliked his eyes. They were furtive and he used to look out of their corners so that he didn't have to move his thick neck. He would not read a newspaper but use it as a screen for his face while he watched others. But in the Feathers his eyes usually looked down into his beer or down the front of Betty's blouse and he would congratulate me on my latest assignment. His speech would often start to slur towards closing time although the words were always fairly predictable and invariably interspersed with public school, army-trained "old chap" and "dear boy". And there was also a remnant of a Scottish accent which I never questioned at the time.

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