

AN OLD SPY STORY

Terry Morgan

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During a long and exotic career with his own export business, Oliver (“Ollie”) Thomas was also carrying out parallel assignments in Africa and the Middle East loosely connected to British Intelligence. But, by using threats and blackmail, his controller, Major Alex Donaldson, was forcing Ollie to help run his own secret money making schemes that included financial fraud, arms shipments to the IRA through Gadaffi and Libya, money laundering and assassination.

Now aged eighty six, recently widowed and alone Ollie still struggles with guilt and anger over his past and decides to make one last attempt to track down and deal with Donaldson.

"...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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PROLOGUE

Sixty years is a long time to look back and realise I should have been more cautious over my involvement with MI6, the government's secret service. But I was younger then and was only concerned with finding ways to build my new business. I had no idea that offering to do one simple job would be like stepping into quicksand.

Neither did I know that MI6 was already racked with scandals, defections and mistrust.

Books have been written about big name spies like Philby, Burgess and Maclean. The extent of that treachery has never been fully told so perhaps, by writing this, I am exposing yet more inconvenient truths that were silently redacted. Unlike Philby and co, though, I was a total unknown to those who drank tea and shuffled paper in the corridors of power. No-one knew what Major Alex Donaldson was up to whilst drawing his salary and building his pension. No-one knew that Donaldson spent much of his time in a dingy office on the second floor of a block in Regent Street and in a smoky pub called The Feathers in a side street of Victoria.

I never questioned it either because I had no idea how secret Government departments worked. My upbringing had ingrained in me a bizarre sense of respect for those I imagined had greater knowledge and authority. I merely thought this was the way things worked and did as I was told.

What I slowly learned was that Donaldson was only very loosely connected to British Intelligence and, as you will see, it took me a long time to understand what was going on and far too long to do something about it.

I've always said it's never too late to deal with outstanding matters, but things have never gone according to my plans. Until the last few days, that is.

My name's Oliver Thomas. I'm eighty-six years old but when I was pulled from the passport control line at Heathrow Airport and escorted to an office like a common criminal age didn't seem to matter.

I was not unduly concerned about being arrested until a dark silhouette stood over me with his back to the window. For reasons you will learn, I have a deep dislike of silhouettes. I was tired and had no wish to look as if I was about to cry, but my spectacles had fallen off and my eyes were sore. The glasses had

disappeared beneath the table alongside my black bag and walking stick so how could I have possibly seen the policeman's face through a stream of tears?

I suppose that growing old means becoming clumsy. I needed the glasses for reading but I could have ditched the walking stick. For a week I'd managed perfectly well without it. Things still bent and did their job.

In fact, a few days ago, I'd even had to run and bend down all at the same time. It was the only way to retrieve the gun I'd dropped.

PART ONE: DETENTION

Loss of dignity: That's the problem for most eighty-six-year olds.

It's like a sad return to the time when you were carried everywhere, were fed on milk and wore diapers but I'm luckier than some. During the previous few days, I'd shown I was still capable of doing the sort of things I did fifty years ago. More importantly, I'd completed a job that had been outstanding for fifty years.

I wiped my eyes with a handkerchief and watched the silhouette drag up a chair and sit down opposite me. "Come on Mr Thomas," it said. "Why would someone of your age fly to Spain, smuggle a gun past all the airport checks and surveillance gear and threaten another old man in his nineties?"

Did he really want to know? If so, how long did he have?

I glanced at the untouched pot of tea and the two mugs that sat between us. My interrogator was getting impatient but I was in no hurry. Patience is a positive feature of old age. When you reach eighty-six you've come to accept that time is running out. You stop thinking about time. Time has passed and time will continue. So why rush the present? For me, right then, nothing seemed to matter anymore. The job was finished.

"Tea, Mr Thomas? Milk?"

I looked down to check for my stick and the glasses. The glasses were retrievable. They were lying next to my black bag so I picked them up. The stick was another matter.

"Thank you," I said watching the tea and then the milk being poured into the two mugs and noting how pale and unappetising it looked. "Would you remind me of your name again?"

"Andy Wilson: Inspector Andy Wilson," he replied. It might have been the tenth time he'd told me but it was the Wilson part I kept mishearing. Wilton? Willman?

“Ah, yes, of course,” I said. I couldn’t help smiling. My hearing’s OK but people always say their own names too quickly. Perhaps he thought I was stringing him along or taking him for a ride because he then tried his question again. “So, any chance of an explanation?”

I tried the tea. I was right. It was cold, weak and insipid.

“As we used to say in the RAF, a shit, shower and shave would be my preferred priority,” I 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.”

He seemed slightly amused. “Really? But would you please answer my question?”

“It’s a long story,” I said. “It goes back sixty years so it’ll take that long to tell.”

“Then give me a summary.”

“Your friend who marched me in here said I’d need to start from scratch.”

“Clive’s got more patience. Just give me a summary. The only thing I know so far is that your name is Oliver James Thomas and you’re from Gloucester. We got that from your passport but perhaps you could start by explaining why you had such a problem with a ninety-year old gentleman living in quiet retirement in a nice villa in Malaga that you shot him.”

I looked at him and let him continue.

“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.

“And while we’re at it, what are you doing with five thousand Euros in a brown envelope? Is it unspent, holiday money?”

I’ve never done holidays. Holidays are a generational thing as if long weeks off work are an entitlement, but he wasn’t to know that. “Did your Spanish friends confirm the name of this so-called gentleman?” I asked.

“Mr Alex Donaldson,” he replied, “Which I’m sure you know anyway. So, I ask again. What’s going on?”

I took a deep breath. “My wife, Sarah, died,” I said, which must have sounded irrelevant to him. It wasn’t to me. “And so, did Beatie,” I added thinking that would confuse him into thinking this was a case of geriatric infidelity or promiscuity that had got out of hand and I felt sorry for him. He wasn’t to know. “So is the bastard dead?” I asked.

Andy Wilson picked up his own cup, drained the contents and shrugged.

“Oh well,” I said. “The bastard was far from well when I last saw him. He seemed about to suffer a heart attack as well. Perhaps I did him a favour.”

Andy Wilson watched me and I suspect he was thinking I couldn't care less, that I was sitting back, relaxing after a job well done. In a way, that was true.

“I'd be happy to explain,” I said. “But I trust you were taught the art of patience during your police training. As it all started more than sixty years ago, I need to start from the beginning. That could take a while.”

“Go ahead,” Andy Wilson said, “Make yourself comfortable.”

Home comforts are not something that have ever bothered me but there was something else I desperately needed. “First of all, I'd be grateful for a toilet to avoid disgracing myself,” I said.

Perhaps he'd been thinking whilst I used the toilet because when I finished he suggested moving to another room. “It's a spare office with softer chairs. Here's your stick and your bag. That suit you?”

I tried to sound appreciative. “Thank you,” I said. “If we don't finish by midnight, I am sure I can find a room somewhere and we can continue tomorrow. I don't have any other pressing engagements right now and, frankly, the thought of returning home to the empty house in Gloucester and running the gauntlet of my nosy neighbour Fred Carrington is quite depressing.”

The new office was much nicer. It had bookshelves, filing cabinets, a coffee table and, in the corner, a potted plant – a sad-looking Malaysian miniature coconut. I pointed to it. “I feel sorry for it,” I said. “Trees like that should be left where they were born. I hope it isn't one confiscated by customs.”

“You know something about customs regulations, Mr Thomas?” he asked.

“I ran an export and import company for most of my life,” I said. “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?”

We were interrupted. A phone rang and he answered it. I thought it might be news from Malaga but no.

“Well, you won't be going far, Mr Thomas,” he said. “We have another little problem. The long-term car park office reports that your car, an old Jaguar that you parked there some days ago, has no tax and no insurance.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “Things were rather hectic when I left home. I hadn't driven it for a while. But what about Malaga? Is the bastard dead?”

“He is in intensive care. Though I understand the Spanish police are also now taking an interest in some other matters.”

“Good,” I said. “Better late than never.”

“So, tell me about your business, Mr Thomas. Are you still running it? I imagined you were retired. Is this some sort of business feud or just an argument over girlfriends?”

“It’s far more complicated than that, Inspector. Do you want me to start from the beginning or not?”

Andy Wilson shrugged so I took that as a go-ahead.

“I started the business after the war,” I began. “Sarah and I had just got married and 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 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 had ideas to start my own business. Exporting was what I had in mind.

“Ever since I was a boy and read about Captain Cook and stared at the illustrations I had always wanted to travel to more exotic places. I then progressed to books on Africa, Persia and India from the library. After the war, I decided I wanted to visit some of those places. That’s how Thomas Import Export Limited was born. My son was born soon after.”

I was just getting going when Andy Wilson interrupted. “Let’s cut out the family history shall we, Mr Thomas? Are you still in business or not?”

“Yes,” I said, disappointed by the interruption. “I suppose you could say I am – or, at least, I was. I’ve stopped doing tax returns but I suppose you could say my long-term business plan was not complete.”

I saw him look at his watch and knew he’d quickly lose patience but I’d anticipated this. Talking was never going to be enough. I’d already written it all down but there was no harm in setting the scene.

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

“But looking at me now, Inspector, in my old 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 before the days of telexes, internet 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 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, Inspector. And that of many others. 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 enough energy left I felt it was time to act.

“It all started in a pub, Inspector. Having been in the Royal Air Force, a few army and RAF chums used to meet up in the Feathers in Mayfair.

“Do you know the Feathers?” I asked him. It was unlikely but I was trying to engage him in the story. “Is it still there?” I added. “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 soured as we recognized our differences outside our uniforms. One sour relationship has taken me far longer to deal with than it should.

“The old man in his nineties, as you so decently refer to him, is a bastard of the first order, Inspector.” I paused. “Have you ever met an old-fashioned money launderer, Inspector? Do you know any ninety-year-old gun running arms dealers or drug dealers? Tell me, how many of your friends are associates of Sicilian or Russian Mafia and hide out in places like Malta?”

“Are you familiar with the big money that can be made by being the instigator of military coups or 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 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 been the story of my life. Shall I go on, Inspector?”

What Andy Wilson was now thinking about me I had no idea. Perhaps he thought I, too, was an ex gangster, arms dealer, drugs dealer or money launderer. Whatever he thought, I didn’t really care. It was all written down, cross-checked and referenced.

He looked at his watch again. “It’s getting late,” he said. “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?” I asked.

“You’re being detained pending further enquiries.”

“So, where am I to be detained?”

“Somewhere nearby. A hotel. Your car has been impounded and your passport is with us here.”

He looked down at my black bag lying on the floor. “You’re not carrying very much, Mr Thomas. When we checked inside it was just a bundle of old clothes, some keys and your brown envelope of euros. Is that it?”

I looked at it, too. I’m very fond of that bag.

“Italian leather,” I said. “Made to order forty years ago by a craftsman in Naples. But you missed something Inspector. As did most customs and immigration officials for all the years. I used it to conceal things like my other passports. I held several at various times. On this occasion, it contains something else.”

I bent down, ran my hand between the double lining and pulled out a copy of my handiwork of the past few months – a pile of paper held together with a bulldog clip.

“For you,” I said handing it over like an overdue Christmas gift. “It’s as good a police statement as you’ll find anywhere. I wrote it just in case I didn’t get back but there’s a carbon copy, with my lawyer along with some other papers. I hope you enjoy it.”

Andy Wilson took it and raised his eyebrows. Perhaps he’d never had a detainee arrive with a pre-prepared statement before. I watched him flip through the hundred odd pages. I admit it didn’t have the sleek look of modern documents because I’d used an old typewriter which required a whole day of practice to remember how to use it. But it was all there.

PART TWO: STATEMENT

THE BEGINNING

Starting from my 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 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, for many years, content to believe was dead.

But, sixty years later, 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. I can 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 Feathers was always filled with an acrid blue haze, sticky with heat from a coal fire in a black grate with matching 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 still 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 place because I was there far 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 usually arranged by a phone call to my Croydon office from Jack Woodward. Beatie, 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.

Sitting on one of the red bar stools, Jack Woodward would gorge on little dishes of shrimps or cockles and when I came in, both of them, Jack and Donaldson, would already be there, hunched over their drinks as though they had been there for hours discussing what to say to me or how best to persuade me to do the next job. I would fight my way towards them through the crowd of smoking beer drinkers and Jack might get up but Donaldson wouldn't.

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 shake my hand and, invariably, his face would betray something as if they had been discussing me for hours.

Donaldson would continue facing the bar and Betty until I sat down on the next stool. Then he might turn and nod at me. No smile, no words, just a nod. Donaldson always wore the same grey gabardine mackintosh over his suit and tie and only after he nodded might he decide to follow Jack and shake my hand. Perhaps he knew it 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 perhaps more 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 their 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 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 Co-Op 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. 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. It was picked up from many visits I made 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 at the time. We'd 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.

"Come over, this afternoon, Ollie. We want you to meet someone," Jack might say. And I might reply, "But I've got a Letter of Credit that I need to lodge before the bank shuts," which was often true as I was usually surrounded by paper and often due to fly off somewhere like Beirut the 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 later grew to hate.

And, from my small office in Croydon, Beatie, my newly found office assistant, would have been fussing around in her usual way but listening all the while. Beatie rapidly became indispensable to me but there was more to Beatie 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 Beatie'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 Beatie would take the calls and I would find myself catching the five thirty train and then a taxi 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 Robert 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. 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 Beatie came to my aid. “Tut, tut,” Beatie 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 Beatie 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 Beatie was also worried but, at the time, I was too blind to see it and so Beatie also forms a key part of this tale.

I sometimes still dream about Beatie, but please don’t misunderstand me. Dreams about Beatie 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 Beatie’s face whenever Jack Woodward phoned my office to invite me to another meeting.

Beatie’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 Beatie who quickly looked away. “How’s it all coming along, Beat?” I would ask with diplomacy and just a little humour, in order to quell Beatie’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 dollar – with an ‘e’.”

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