

# **THE FEATHERS**

By rcheydn

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*The Feathers* is a work of fiction.

If there is any resemblance to any real person, living or dead, it is certainly not intended and is pure coincidence.

Of course there are indeed references to real persons relating to actual events. But they are accurate references and are used to knit together the fiction without in any way altering the facts.

Any references to government persons or positions are invented.

Yet if any similarities are deemed derogatory to any person, living or dead, in any way by any reader, the author points out again that this story is fictional and therefore no slur is intended.

## **About the Author**

rcheydn worked as a journalist for newspapers and magazines throughout Europe, Australia and the Far East for a decade before entering the world of public relations. For the next twenty-five years he was a senior PRO in the United Kingdom, Australia and, for almost 20 of those years, in Hong Kong.

Then he established his own public relations company in London which is regarded as one of the most innovative agencies of its kind.

*The Feathers*, is his latest novel.

*The Catskinner* was his first foray into the political thriller genre.

Crime or political thriller writing are not his exclusive interests. He is also the author of a children's book *Keepers of the Deep*.

rcheydn is now working on his next project.

# **Cover**

By Graphicz X Designs

## **Dedication**

For Molly C

## **CHAPTER ONE**

The adage that your entire life passes before your mind's eye in the split second before you die is not true.

The mini-cab driver knew that for a fact; she was certain that nothing could be further from the truth.

In her case death was painfully long drawn out suffering, and apart from the odd fleeting moment her total attention, her absolute concentration was focused on her personal agony.

Death in truth had yet to come, but she had tasted it many times she believed over the past six days and she prayed that the final darkness was close, very close.

Her torment must, had to, end.

There could be few who would not understand had they been aware of what the plump, not especially attractive 37-year-old Ukrainian, had been through.

For one day less than a full week Grazyna Litavincuk had been eating herself to death.

## CHAPTER TWO

It has often been said that a week is a long time in politics.

For the new, and for many voters, not eagerly anticipated coalition government the traditional honeymoon was short lived. In fact it barely got off the ground.

On the day it came into power it inherited a fiscal deficit of enormous proportions by any global yardstick.

There was also the ongoing major scandal involving politicians' expenses that led to Members of Parliament being ridiculed and reviled.

With barely a year into their rule the government was faced with a massively damaging new scandal surrounding one of Britain's most popular newspapers which was found to have hacked into the private telephones of some of the most high profile and vulnerable people in the society.

This led to the two top policemen in the country having to resign and other officers being investigated for taking payments from the press in return for supplying confidential information. The national police force was rudderless.

And then within weeks London and other major cities experienced the worst riots in decades.

Not that the previous government had fared much better in its formative years in government. In the latter part of the 1990s the Labour Party won a stunning general election victory after many years in opposition. The future could not have looked better. There was a new, modern Prime Minister with a whole new approach to politics and the government of the country.

Yet there is another political characteristic that can be relied upon and which history has shown irrespective of the hue of the ruling party. Before too long the rot will set in. And for that new, fresh Labour government it began with the type of scandal that has wrecked governments before it and will almost certainly bring down governments in the future.

The then Foreign Secretary had in the glare of public brashness shed his wife of two decades, shown scant regard for public opinion in quickly marrying his diary secretary twenty years his junior with whom he had enjoyed a somewhat strange and dark affair, and continued to leave political debris in the wake of a succession of overseas forays and domestic comments. His blunders, his perceived lack of tact and arrogance were indicative by then of the New Labour government, it was freely said, which had been rushed into power at Westminster in enormous numbers and with deep hope barely a year and a half before.

The new coalition government might rue their difficulties but even the charismatic Labour leader a decade and a half before faced his own problems which were not confined to his Foreign Secretary's peccadilloes. The Prime Minister and several of his Cabinet colleagues had already had their halos tarnished as well, and as a result the Party itself of even more serious import than the administrative organ of Government was under attack from inside as well as out. The broadsheet and tabloid media both found they had ample opportunity to criticise.

Yet the new coalition government's honeymoon also was shorter lived than everyone expected.

In the *London Diary* column which appeared thousands of miles away in the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong's leading English language newspaper, I had written: "*While this new government is losing its way others are finding theirs.*" These others, I maintained, included a new underbelly of British society which could be reflected in the American experience of a decade or two before.

The United States might account for three quarters of the world's crazies, but Britain was second on the dubious honour board without having to rely on the carnage of Northern Ireland. Children not even in their teens were killing. Teenagers hunted neighbourhoods in packs, praying on lone women, the crippled, the aged. More



seasoned thugs resorted to vicious violence in the commission of crimes. And the streets and highways of the country were witnessing road rage to a breathtaking degree.

*“If something is not done to take English society back to what it was, then our future is a place we will look at in awe,”* I had concluded.

But if a week is a long time in politics, decades can be an eternity.

Governments may be new. They may be of a vastly different hue. Their problems however may be very similar.

The riots that shook the very foundations of British society up and down the country did more damage to the new coalition government that came into power at the end of the first decade of the Naughties than the politicians’ expenses scandal, the police corruption allegations, even the phone hacking disgrace.

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“Of course the recent disturbances, or rioting if you will, cannot be excused, but can it be right to have young people incarcerated in adult jails, even just overnight, for what many would consider minor offences, as petty as stealing a can of soda in a supermarket? Can it really be that prisons for twelve to fourteen-year-old criminals, each one of whom will cost the tax payer more than five thousand pounds each and every week, are the way we should be proceeding in this battle?”

The questioner was the host of the popular nightly current affairs programme on terrestrial television. Renowned for his directness, viewers waited for the answer from the junior minister seated a length or two across the studio table.

Adrian Thomason was an example of the new administration in that he had been a Member of Parliament just six years, but found himself in the position of being responsible for the management of crisis flashpoints. His two university degrees and single term experience of backbench politics, when it came down to it, were not always adequate. Crisis management was an exciting prospect when the onus was on somebody else’s shoulders, but when it was you who had to stand at the dispatch box fielding awkward questions while the fixed camera rolled and the tourists gazed down from the Strangers’ Gallery above, and as the hecklers grinned at your discomfort, Opposition backbenches took on a new, more appealing character.

Thomason felt the same, if not worse, when it came to appearing on television. Talking to journalists outside the Home Office building or over a lunch was fine. Such occasions could be controlled. Sitting in a television studio, live, being watched by millions of voters who were only too well aware, if one was honest, that the question being put was fair, was far worse.

“Let’s make one thing clear,” Thomason began. “This government inherited the problem from the previous administration. If we did not carry through with it, the money would have been wasted anyway and I doubt you would be sitting there smirking and accusing .....

“I am not smirking and I have accused you of nothing,” broke in the seasoned interviewer. “I merely put to you what so many are asking, and that is, is it the best way to proceed. If you feel the need to be defensive about it, perhaps the critics might be right after all. On the other hand.....” He left an inviting opening.

The junior minister sensed he was heading for deeper water if he was not careful. Back-peddalling was often an ill-advised strategy he had learnt; rather a reasoned change of tack was what was needed.

“What we’re saying is that the money had already been committed under the previous government and we had no option but to continue with the programme. But it is not going to result in colleges for criminals as has been claimed.”

Thomason could feel the situation improving, that matters were regaining some equilibrium. No doubt the Secretary of State would be watching and would be noting

his success. Perhaps a note would be made so that when the Prime Minister reshuffled his Cabinet the next time around this performance would stand him in good stead as a solid reliable spokesman in a tight spot.

So he added: "We are not going to allow teenagers to be locked away so they graduate as hardened criminals. Certainly there is no chance these institutions will provide a .. a .... a ... training ground for monsters like the one out there now. These short sharp shock institutions will afford no time for these youngsters to sit around planning crimes of the century when they get out. They will be far too busy for that." He paused for effect. "We are talking rehabilitation here. Firm, tough even. But rehabilitation, not graduation in lessons in crime."

He was back in control. He had explained that the previous government had committed the funds, the new government was committed to ensuring they were allocated in the best possible manner, and young offenders locked away would emerge as improved citizens.

The interviewer sat back.

In the brief silence when he rubbed his jaw with a thoughtful forefinger and arched his famous eyebrows, Thomason saw the gaping hole he had dug himself.

"Monster?" asked the interviewer. "Did you say we had, that we have, a monster on the streets out there?"

## CHAPTER THREE

Grazyna Litavincuk could not focus her eye.

She swirled uncontrollably in an imagined mist of heavy steam, horribly disoriented, with hot pain streaking down some parts of her body while in others she could feel nothing.

Reasoning had disappeared, and her memory suffered such lapses that events of the last week seemed like an unbearable nightmare lasting a single day.

There were no gaps however, no pauses, no let up in the torment.

Somewhere from behind, or was it above or below, she didn't know, there was a sound.

A groan.

A throaty rumble which rolled across the clouds of mist like empty oil drums across a concrete basement floor.

She could not decipher exactly where it came from. It reached her ears and filled her with dread. She had heard the sound many times before and knew what was to follow. Her nightmare was to continue.

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The call on her mobile was from a client she knew.

He was a lobbyist who ran his own office from Westminster. His accounts, he had told her, were a mixture of commercial operations, venture capital groups which required piloting around the British political scene, and a foreign government. There was also a human rights pressure group. He shuttled between London and Brussels and Strasbourg for meetings with Members of the European Parliament and Commission, and London and Geneva where the United Nations committees on human rights, the rights of the child, economic and social rights and so on met. When he flew out from Heathrow, he called Grazyna.

This time he was off to Geneva again where he was scheduled to meet a delegation of human rights activists pressing the human rights committee to strongly urge the British and Irish Governments to repeal what they saw as extremely draconian legislation on detention. He would be there for three days and then would return directly to London.

Grazyna was to meet the evening flight at Heathrow and take him to his St John's Wood apartment which overlooked the underground railway station. It was a routine run for her.

The traffic to the airport was normal, the drive lasting around three quarters of an hour. Along the way they chatted about books, people they shared a vague common connection with, and Grazyna's new plan for getting rich, the one to get her out from behind the wheel of the G registration Saab.

"Actually, there is quite a call for desktop printing and I have this friend who can set me up with all the equipment cheaply." Grazyna faced forty-five degrees through the windscreen, keeping both eyes on the road ahead while at the same time turning in the direction of her passenger. She spoke with an urgency which suggested she had no need of air, that she did not have time for breathing. The words ran on from one into the next in what became an endless, breathless stream.

"Well, not cheap really," she continued, "but a lot cheaper than I would have to pay without his help. I've known him for years and we used to work together when I was doing the advertising for the Guardian. He's now really successful and drives around in a Merc 500. Or it might be a 600. Whatever. He's done pretty well and he says he can get me started."

Grazyna had no trace of an accent even if she did look like her Eastern European name. She was a little over five feet tall and weighed in around sixty eight kilos. A lot

of it was in her thighs. When she met someone for the first time they drew on their recollection of Russian shot putters and the women who sat at the end of Moscow hotel corridors monitoring the comings and goings of foreign tourists. She looked the part. However, while her father was a burly Ukrainian he had left the country after the war in 1950 and been settled in Australia. That was where he met Grazyna's mother and spent the next twenty-five years of his life working on the railway lines with a pick and shovel.

When he died, Grazyna felt it was time to leave. She flew straight to London and had not left, except for annual holidays to Spain, Portugal, France and once to Switzerland for an ill-fated romantic skiing trip. She had visited Australia only twice since she left, the last time to see to her mother's funeral arrangements.

All of this her passenger knew, and more as well. They had become quite friendly over the last nine or ten months.

"Same flight this time," she asked.

"Yes. It gets in around 7.15 I think. OK?"

Grazyna smiled. "OK. If there's a problem I will let your wife know and arrange someone else to take the job. Either way, you'll be met. Have a good trip."

She watched him hoist his suit bag over his shoulder and disappear into the terminal. As she turned to check the traffic behind her, and began edging away from the kerb, there was a tap at the front passenger window.

She stopped abruptly.

\*

Only snatches of this Grazyna recalled during the last six days.

She remembered she had been to the airport. She could not remember how things had happened after that. There was the knowledge that she had met someone, someone she could not place and whose face she could not recall. It might have been a man, a woman; she was not sure. Perhaps it was a man. She knew where she was now, even if she did not know how she got there.

Hell existed, and she was in Hell.

\*

At the sound of the knocking on the car window Grazyna had braked sharply and turned. Looking through the glass was a man. He was not smiling but looked anxious, questioning, appealing. His nodded slightly.

Grazyna leant across the front seat and rolled down the window.

"Yes," she said. "What do you want?"

"Are you a mini-cab?" asked the man.

"Yes," repeated Grazyna.

"Are you going back into town? Can you give me a ride?" He was probably in his thirties, pleasant looking, dressed in a casual jacket and light beige trousers. His pale pink shirt and predominantly red tie were an excellent match. The arched eyebrows lowered and a smile of even teeth spread across his face. "You would save a life if you would."

Normally Grazyna would not pick up a passenger without prior arrangement with the radio control centre. A journey to Heathrow would often involve a pickup for the return trip either from the air terminal or an address nearby. But this time, it had been a solo run.

"I am just going off," Grazyna said through the window. "Where do you want to go to?"

“North London. Hampstead Garden Suburb.” The man suddenly squatted and looked pleadingly at Grazyna. “Please. I really would be grateful. I have to get home and the taxi queue is about a mile long.” He spread his open hands on the window sill.

Grazyna made her decision. “OK. I suppose I can. But if control calls and I have to pick up another ride along the way you might get home later than you think.”

The man smiled again, opened the rear door and tossed onto the back seat a brown leather travelling bag.

“Thanks,” he said as he slid into the seat next to Grazyna. “This is great. You don’t know how good this is.”

Grazyna eased into the traffic, and as she began a fast one sided conversation, she mentally added the fare and presumably a generous tip to her special bank account she had dubbed her Escape Fund.

She did not know this trip from Heathrow airport would be her last.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I have been a kitchen worker, a salesman of shirts and saucepans and children's toys in a leading department store in Oxford Street, a distributor of leaflets around my local pub area, a tele-ads salesman, and a policeman. I have also travelled some. Now I am a writer. Not a bad record for someone who went to a red brick university and read politics, philosophy and economics.

I am thirty. Soon to be thirty-something. I cannot do anything about that. I am single and I have no plans to change *that*. Playing the field is not a description which fits me too snugly, though I am I honestly believe as popular as the next man in my circumstances. I have girl friends; they number in the plural, but they are friends, and the last time I was more than friends with a woman was almost seven years ago.

She was a nursing sister with a name out of the Fifties. Constance. Constance Cummine, with an *e*, not a *g*. In a way that was typical of me. I seem to attract the extraordinary. She worked at the St Margaret's Hospital on the bank of the Thames, opposite the Houses of Parliament, in the operating theatre where some of the country's most significant heart surgery is carried out. With long auburn hair, happy blue/green eyes, freckles fanning out on either side of her nose, Constance was anything but a Fifties girl. She was most certainly a woman of the Nineties with a self assurance and broad minded attitude to life that made our months together invigorating. Sexual exploration took on a deeper meaning for me as Constance with the auburn hair and I filled our infrequent hours together in laughing, sweating embraces in my small apartment, in bed and breakfast accommodation in Cornwall and Devon where we spent a few weekends together, and on stony earth in wooded countryside. Nor did she, it turned out, mind who knew of her wantonness. I did though, which was why my life changed dramatically as a result.

It was while I was on the verge of drunkenness with some of my sales friends that I made one of the biggest, certainly one of the least thought through decisions, of my life. I would leave London; no, I would leave Britain.

The pub on the corner of the street where I worked the telephones, trying to close out full or half page, full colour or mono, sales with chief executives and managing directors of large companies around the world, was fairly rough and ready. But it was after all just down the street, a few minutes walk during the lunch break, and anything more salubrious was over the bridge on the other side of Paddington railway station.

It was during one of the occasional after work sessions when another of the salesmen, a black would-be stage actor, remarked on his relationship with Constance. He did not say how he knew her, but that he knew I was seeing her.

"She's nice," he said. "Nice."

"Mmm," I answered simply. The Guinness was working. The pressurised hard sell day was starting to blend into a warm, relaxed evening.

The actor took a deep swig of ale. "She is nice, isn't she Jason?"

The other salesman with us smiled. "Oh yeah. Constance is nice alright." He too drank from his glass before turning and calling to an older man behind the bar who wore his hair long, greasy, tied back with a blue string. "Constance, Ben. She's nice isn't she?"

The man named Ben did not smile. He looked straight at me. "Are you Constance's latest?"

When I said I was seeing her, Ben simply said: "Hrrmph" and turned away.

The budding black Olivier sought out the bottom of his glass. "A lot of people know Constance, Zachary," he said. "She has very many friends, if you take my point."

I took his point very clearly indeed. Suddenly I was sober.

Within a week I made my mind up, and took the first steps to carrying through my plan.

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Flying into Hong Kong is an experience not to be missed.

Like travelling to India where life takes on new meaning, where the visitor can understand instantly that how and where he lives is not so bad after all, arriving in Hong Kong by air cannot be repeated elsewhere. It is simply a unique happening.

Mind you, now that the new international airport has been opened on what was once a small island to the west, which was beheaded and levelled, the landing in Hong Kong is less adventuresome. The flight path in is more sedate and the view out of the cabin windows offers less.

When I went there the old Kai Tak airport in the heart of one of the most densely populated areas on earth operated, and planes plunged onto the mile long finger sticking out from Kowloon into the harbour in a sudden hurry. The aircraft seemed to drift across rooftops and then slice between high-rises so passengers could see families eating their meals or watching television screens. There were skid marks on the roofs was what I heard from new friends. I knew there weren't, but it would not have surprised me if there were.

The bustle of the place assaulted my senses like a damp cloth. There was also the heat. And the smell, a smell special to Hong Kong that disappeared with the old airport for some reason. Perhaps it was the proximity of nullahs. Whatever, it was an unpleasant smell which returning residents such as I sought out because it meant we were home.

Hong Kong was home to me for five years, the first three as a probationary inspector with the Royal Hong Kong Police. That was what Constance had done to me. For me. When I realised that I was one of many lovers she had taken I took flight.

Acquaintances of mine had headed east the year before to become secretaries and librarians and I had recently seen an advertisement for police officers in Hong Kong. So when I decided to abandon British shores I naturally thought of where they had gone, and because Hong Kong was still a Crown Colony then, yet sufficiently removed from my past and present life, it seemed to fit the bill exactly. It all sounded exciting, challenging.

A visit to the Hong Kong Government Office in Mayfair, followed by completion of the necessary applications forms, an interview and subsequent medical and I was soon on my way. To say the transition from telesales in Paddington in London to probationary police inspector in the Far East was marked would be doing an injustice to the English language. The change was mind blowing.

The first six months of my life in the "territory" as so many called it in deference to its soon to be changed sovereignty, was spent at the police training school in Aberdeen where sampans and motorised fishing junks which were floating homes to entire families huddled as flotsam.

I learned the arts and craft of policing. I patrolled the crowded streets in summer khaki or winter blue uniform with pounds of electronic and manual artillery hanging from my waist.

I loved it. I felt powerful. I was earning a respectable income, in a respectable profession, and taking full advantage of it. Life was fast and furious. I worked twenty-four in every thirty-six hours and played hard in the interval. I was involved in the investigation of major crimes which the vast majority of policemen back home would not even dream of confronting, and when off duty I drank copious amounts of the local San Miguel beer and had as many local women as I could afford to lay my hands on. There were exceptionally alluring oriental Constances everywhere and what others thought did not matter. Life felt good. Life felt very good.

In fact, my life was being eroded. After the second year I realised all was not well at all. My health was holding up but my conscience, if that is what it really is, was not. I am blessed/cursed with believing in the rightness of doing the right thing which is not

the same as believing in living the Christian way of life or not doing utterly foolish things for the unadulterated pleasure merely of doing so, but it is to me inhibiting in that there always comes a time when something inside me says “enough. Stop what you are doing. Get back on the tracks and start again.”

So I did.

When my three years as a probationary inspector were up I did not renew my contract. I packed it in. I did not try to explain it to those friends who eagerly signed on for another three year stint, but just told them it was not for me and that was that. They knew me well enough to accept my decision. But I did not leave Hong Kong. It was alright to move on from the Force but it was not alright just yet to move out of Hong Kong. Instead, I became a journalist.

I applied for a job as a reporter with The South China Morning Post where I had got to know a couple of reporters and sub-editors. There was no London holiday in between. In truth, it was six months before my parents knew of my changed circumstances. I just moved from a dangerous uniformed life in Mongkok to a fascinating cleaner life on the Island where I worked shorter hours, earned a lower salary and paid an obscene percentage of that salary as my share of the rent of a closet sized flat in Happy Valley. And I carried a notebook and pen rather than a .38 revolver, a baton, handcuffs, a portable radio and a number of other defensive and offensive odds and bobs. I was less well off, but once again, life felt good.

The pressure of working in the media in Hong Kong was greater than pretty well anywhere else. The reason is that there was no union protection in an industry where the proprietor had absolute control. If you did not produce, you were out. There were many other would-be Pulitzer winners out there chafing at the bit to accept a pittance to get on the treadmill which could in a comparatively short time lead to the heady heights of editorship conferring a considerable salary and even more considerable prestige; face.

So while I did not work twenty-four hour shifts any longer, I was constantly aware that if I did not pull my weight in the overall effort to fill the space between the advertisements I would not last.

For totally wrong reasons, trainee journalists such as I was were handed court reporting from very early on. It is considered a safe beat to learn the ropes, whereas practically anywhere else in the world that round is regarded as specialist, littered as it is with potential law suits. I guess in my case, the news editor reckoned he had less to worry about because I was a former police officer and therefore could be expected to niftily sidestep any of the legal potholes.

As it transpired it was pretty basic stuff with a group of us from different newspapers and radio stations gathering in the court building press room in the mornings to discuss the day's cases, some wandering off to actually sit in on them, and then all of us meeting up again later in the afternoon to compare notes. Then it was back to the office, slump down in front of the terminal and process the notes into non-litigious stories for inside pages. Routine, basic reportage. Albeit a collective effort.

From court reporting I progressed to political rounds which involved gathering up copies of speeches to be delivered in the Legislative Council chamber each Wednesday, composing introductions and then subbing down the rest. It also meant developing contacts within the various Government branches and departments and coming up with the occasional exclusive by-lined article.

For the first time I could put my investigative talents to good use. Politics and government are fine hunting grounds for those who like to ask questions. Yet it took a year and a half before the paper's editor decided that perhaps police rounds would be a suitable place for me.

Zachary Tighe, the former kitchen worker, salesman of shirts and saucepans and children's toys, distributor of leaflets, tele-ads salesman in England, and policeman in Hong Kong, finally became a serious writer.



That's what I am today. An investigative writer in my home town of London. One of my employers is Rupert Murdoch, who is a former owner of The South China Morning Post. He sold out long ago, but I did not. I kept up my association and still write the weekly *London Diary*. My column also appears in a popular afternoon paper in London.

In my latest column I covered what I saw as the deterioration of British society, not specifically or only since the new government had come to power, and more significantly not only because of the riots, but which had been happening for many years.

The problem as I see it is that we as citizens no longer have the responsibilities our parents and grandparents did. We have rights. This means that more and more is stacked in favour of the individual, which as a philosophy stands up, but as a practice leads undeniably in my view to a breakdown in society. It means that everyone, the bad guys included, has an escape route and can reject responsibility in the name of rights. Criminals exercise those rights and the authorities find themselves backed up against a wall with the result that more and more of the criminals are escaping their responsibilities, certainly escaping incarceration. The wrong message is being put out with the consequences being increasingly severe for our society.

That was the sideline subject of my last column. That law and order was under growing threat from more audacious and violent law breakers. It could not be long before Britain grew its own versions of the monsters that prowled the dark side of America.

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