

A BRIDGE OF LETTERS

Published by Duncan James

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Marjorie Northcot died quite suddenly. It turned out to be a heart attack, but it was a great shock because nobody was expecting it at all. There were no real signs, early on.

There is never a good time to die, but, although she had no real say in the matter, this was about the worst time she could have picked.

Her husband, Maurice, was abroad. He was ‘something’ at the Foreign Office, although no-one, not even Marjorie, was ever quite sure what. Neither was anyone quite sure where he was. One thing soon became clear, though. He was not ‘abroad’ in the sense of ‘gone to a conference’ or anything like that. He was *travelling* abroad. One official at his office thought he had flown to Singapore, while another thought it had been Hong Kong. One chap, a clerk of some sort, even suggested he had gone to Korea, but nobody took much notice. Not that Maurice had a proper office either, really. Not the sort one commutes to every day, because that is something Maurice never did. Commute.

In the end, when they did eventually track him down, it turned out that they were all wrong, as he had intended.

He had gone to Helsinki, but only a couple of people knew.

So it took some time to find him, and even longer, since he was *travelling*, for him to get home for what, in the end, turned out to be a much delayed funeral for Marjorie.

Not that it made much difference to her, of course. The one who really suffered was son Peter.

He was only ten at the time, and devoted to his mother. She was gentle and kind and loving, but strict just the same. She spent as much time as she could with Peter, and realised that what he really needed was a father. Peter realised this too, but he never saw much of him because he was always travelling. When he was home, though, they got on like a house on fire. Football, fishing, long walks with the dog, playing with the train set – everything. But only ever for a day or so at a time - never for

long enough. His mother was useless at fishing, didn't play football or enjoy watching it, and didn't understand about railways, real or toy.

Suddenly, Peter was a very lonely, small boy. No mother at all, and not much of a father either.

He had no time to wonder what might happen to him, because it happened anyway, and immediately. Aunt Elizabeth moved in, for the time being, especially to look after him. After the funeral, when they had finished packing all his stuff, like toys and books and clothes and so on, they took him back to their place. He ended up staying there for ever, with Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Norman. His old home was put up for sale, and his Dad bought a small cottage somewhere else.

Now; there was nothing wrong with Aunt Elizabeth, or her husband, Uncle Norman, who was OK, too. But they were no substitute for a real Mum and Dad, and they had no children of their own, so he still had no-one at home to play with. However, it was as strange for them to have Peter staying there as it was for Peter to be staying with them. It soon became obvious that he was not just staying there, either – he was living there. This was his new home. Uncle Norman and Aunt Liz had a nice house, in a sort of rural area, and they had a dog, and they had a decent sized garden where you could kick a ball about without annoying the neighbours, who were also OK by the way, and the nearby school he was sent to was, in many ways, better than the one he had started at and just left.

But somehow it wasn't home, and never would be.

Peter and the dog got on really well; he made a lot of new friends there, at school, and, for some reason, seemed to be learning a lot. He was probably quite happy, given the stress and upheaval and sadness he had recently gone through. But he longed for the rare visits his father was able to make. He knew his father couldn't visit more often, but, for a few months, actually saw him now more often than he had when his mother was alive. But it wasn't half often enough, and the visits quickly became less and less frequent.

One day, not long after Peter had moved to his new home, his father sent him a letter. There was not a lot of news in it, and his father didn't say where he was, but the envelope had a London postmark, so Peter guessed he was not 'travelling'.

My Dear Peter,

I thought I would drop you a line just to see if you are all right, and to send you my love. It was wonderful to see you again the other day, and I wish I could see you more often, but you know my work keeps me away from home quite a bit. I'm afraid I shall be away quite a long time this trip. Auntie and Uncle tell me that you are well, and I hope you are starting to settle in with them OK. They are good people and are very fond of you so I am sure you will be all right staying there. But I know it is not the same as being at home, and perhaps one day we shall be able to live together again in another home of our own. That will be really

nice, and it is something I shall look forward to. They say you are doing well at school, which is good news, so keep working hard. If you get the time, it would be nice to get a letter from you to hear your news. The address at the top will always get to me.

With much love, Dad.

The address at the top was just ‘Dept. OS 19, The Foreign Office, London, SW.1.’

Peter wrote back, almost at once, thinking his Dad would do the same.

Dear Dad,
Thank you for your letter. I hope you are well. I am alright and getting used to things. But I miss you and Mum of course. School is OK and I am playing football. We have started French which I like and am good at. Please write again soon.
Love Peter, xxxx

But he didn’t write soon. In fact, he didn’t write for a month or so, during which time Peter had sent at least two more letters. Eventually, they managed to keep up a pretty regular flow of correspondence, which, in time, became the only contact between them, as Maurice spent more and more time away. His letters to Peter never contained much news, and always seemed to be posted in London. *“I never have much news, as nothing much ever happens for me to tell you about. I just seem to work all the time”*, he once explained. Peter, on the other hand, always had plenty to talk about, and the older he grew, the more he enjoyed writing about his life. It was obvious to his father that he was doing well at school, and that he was particularly good at languages. He eventually started talking about his own future, and even thought he might one day join the Army, if he could get to university first. Maurice was delighted to read this, and was full of encouragement.

It was some years since Peter and his father had met, and yet through all this time, their exchange of letters was maintained to the point that they both felt that they knew one another quite well. But Peter was curious to know more about what his father did, and where he was, to the point that he once even phoned the Foreign Office. He didn’t really know where to begin, so asked to be put through to the mysterious “Dept. OS 19”.

“I’d like to know the whereabouts of Mr Maurice Northcot, please,” he asked the man who answered the phone.

“I’m afraid I’m not allowed to tell you that,” replied the man.

“Why not?”

“I’m just not allowed to, that’s all. But I could pass a message if it’s urgent.”

“But you must know where he is, because I write to him at your address all the time,” protested Peter.

“That’s the point,” said the man. “We’re just a sort of post office here, passing messages to and fro.”

“But I’d like to know where he is so that I can talk to him for a change.”

“We don’t do telephones,” said the man, “just letters and messages. We send them on via the Diplomatic Bag service.”

“But he’s my father, and I want to talk to him. He wouldn’t mind – he writes quite often. In fact I’m sure he’d be pleased and surprised if I rang him up. Why can’t you give me his number?”

“I’m not allowed to, that’s why,” said the man, irritably. “You’ll just have to keep writing, but you could ask him to ring you or give you his number.”

“I have asked him, but he says he’s never in the same place long enough.”

“There you are, then.”

“So how do my letters get to him?”

“Well, I suppose there’s no harm in telling you, but one of the Queen’s Messengers takes it to the nearest British Embassy, which passes it on to him. The same thing happens in reverse when he writes you”, explained the man.

“And you get it and post it on to me, do you?”

“Exactly.”

“At least I know now why his letters are always posted in London. For a long time I thought he worked there,” said Peter.

“I’m sure sometimes he does,” said the man.

Maurice was very amused by Peter’s account of this, and not a little proud of the fact that his son had shown such initiative. For the first time ever, he rang the boy for a chat, but even then wouldn’t say where he was. Thrilled though he had been to talk to his father after so long, it turned out to be a unique event, and the regular exchange of letters was maintained afterwards. His father only ever rang Peter on three other occasions. The first was to congratulate him on getting into university to study languages, the second was to congratulate his on being accepted for Army training at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, and the third, a year later, was to say how pleased he was that he had graduated and joined the Intelligence Corp.

Major Peter Northcot’s phone rang. His mobile.
He looked at the clock on his digital radio.

This was his second tour in Hong Kong, but nobody ever rang him at home on his mobile at 04.37 in the morning. On a Sunday. Not even his secure phone rang at that time. Not even in Hong Kong. Not often, anyway.

He switched on the bedside light, thumbed the button to answer the phone and said 'hello'.

"Who's that?" said a voice he didn't recognise.

"Who wants to know?"

It was plainly somebody he didn't know. All his contacts were in the mobile's address book, and one would have shown up on the screen if the caller had been listed.

"What number is that?"

"The number you dialled, probably."

"I want to know who I'm talking to," said the voice, irritably.

"You mean who you *were* talking to," he replied, and rang off.

The phone rang again. It was the same number as before, now automatically logged on his phone and displayed on the small screen. He jotted the number down – a quick check in the morning would find the owner of the mobile.

"Was I talking to you just now?" said the same voice.

"How would I know who you were talking to just now?"

"I dialled the same number as before, and you sound the same as the chap who answered it last time."

"Do you have the slightest idea what the time is?"

"Half past four – I'm sorry, but it's urgent."

"What is?"

"I need to talk to you."

"Ring my office later, then, and my PA will arrange a meeting. But only when I know who you are and what you want and if I agree that it is urgent."

He rang off again.

He didn't really have an office as such. His wasn't that kind of job. But he hired an agency to take care of things like this. They provided him with his own 'office' phone number, which they monitored. Nobody much rang it, but when somebody did, they told him.

The phone rang for a third time.

“I’m going to gamble that I’ve got the right number,” said the voice. “I’m in Singapore, and arriving at Chek Lap Kok on UA 896. Meet me. It’s urgent and important. You’ll recognise me.”

This time, the man rang off before Peter could say anything. *What the hell was going on?*

Peter rang the stored mobile number. There was no answer. Not even a voice mail.

He swung his legs out of bed, and went into his small kitchen to make coffee and to think. It was five o’clock now. If he remembered rightly, it was about 4 hours flying time from Singapore to Hong Kong, so the man couldn’t arrive much before 0930. UA 896, the man had said. United Airlines, eh? American. The man didn’t have an American accent – very English, in fact. He didn’t recognise the voice, but the man said Peter would know him when he saw him.

All very strange. Peter didn’t like things like this. They made him uncomfortable – and nervous.

He rang the airport to check to arrival time of the United flight. Leaving Singapore at 0640 and arriving at 10.30. So the man was still in Singapore. He rang his mobile again, but still no reply. Maybe in the departure lounge by now, unless he was changing planes; in that case he’d be in the transit lounge.

Northcot checked on the mobile phone number. Not listed. Now that was very odd, and no mistake. It must be listed – the man had used it three times this morning already. He checked again. No trace.

This whole thing began to stink.

A man who refused to identify himself over a phone that didn’t exist, who Peter didn’t recognise but would know when they met, was arriving in Hong Kong in a few hours on an American flight from Singapore and demanding to be met because it was ‘urgent and important.’ What was?

Only one way to find out, decided Northcot, pouring a second cup. Get to the airport and meet the man.

He rang a contact in security at the airport. In spite of the fact that Hong Kong was now under direct Chinese rule, bits of the ‘old boy network’ from the Colonial days still worked. An airside pass would be waiting for him in arrivals, and Northcot could watch the passengers off the United flight from behind a one-way glass window overlooking the baggage gondola. If he saw someone he knew, he could slip out to meet him – if it was someone he would rather not meet, he would stay put until the man had gone.

Peter Northcot decided to walk to Lam Tin, and catch the A22 coach to the airport. Only 39 dollars, which he could claim back, and a nice morning for the 34 Km drive from Kowloon. He had nothing much else to do, anyway. He arrived at the airport early, and had breakfast before he picked up his pass.

The plane arrived on time, and it was only 15 minutes or so before the passengers started to arrive at the gondola in the baggage hall. His view from the security office was as good as it could get. It was specially located for an up-close view of arrivals before they went through customs. He recognised nobody.

He made his way, the long way round, to the arrivals hall the other side of customs, where people were met by friends, relations and hire-car drivers bearing the name of their intended passengers on bits of paper. He had access to a balcony above the crowds, where he could see but not be seen. Again, nobody. There was nobody he recognised, either, among the meeters and greeters.

He made a final check. All the passengers had now left the customs area, and there was no baggage from the United flight left on the aircraft, or in the immigration hall, or on the gondola. A helpful official, suitably impressed by his pass, provided him with a passenger list. None of the names on it rang even the faintest of bells.

This was altogether bloody odd, he thought.

He could not work out what was going on. The man who rang him three times at such an un-Godly hour this morning, had not rung again or left a text message or anything. But then, how could he. His phone didn't exist.

The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he became. Suppose - just suppose - that he, Peter Northcot, had walked straight into a trap. Just suppose - only suppose - that some villain or other had wanted him out of the way for an hour or so. Out of the flat. His mind raced to remember what, if anything, there might be in the flat. Nothing of any value, that's for sure - but papers? Code books, perhaps? He was certain there was nothing of value to be found; not to anyone, even the opposition. Almost sure, anyway.

Suddenly, he was in a hurry.

He dashed to the nearest police office, and within minutes was being driven, much too fast, back to Kowloon, blue lights, sirens and all. They dropped him off near his flat, having switched off the bells and whistles a few blocks further away. Kowloon is never quiet, even at this time on a Sunday, but it was as un-crowded as it gets. He sprinted down several back-alleys, cutting through to his block, and went up the fire-escape, two at a time. It opened onto the lift lobby, with its faded carpet and old Chinese prints on the wall. He could see there was no-one about, and the lift was on the ground floor.

Trouble was, he only had a front door. There was only one way in to his flat.

He had a spy-hole in his door – the sort that lets you see who’s outside, ringing the bell. He had modified his a bit, so that he could look in as well. He carefully adjusted the focus, and peered in to his front room.

There was a man standing at his balcony window, looking out over the harbour.

He was silhouetted against the daylight, so Peter could see no detail, but the man appeared to be casually dressed, and was standing with his hands in his trouser pockets. *Did he have a gun?*

The man moved away from the window, and looked nonchalantly around the flat’s living room. He glanced at his watch, and moved back to admire the view from the window, hands in pockets again.

He didn’t appear threatening, but Peter knew he had to get into his flat somehow. And quickly. He heard the elevator on its way up. He silently put his key onto the lock and took out his Smith and Wesson.

In one swift movement, he opened the door, burst in and threw himself flat, levelling the gun at the man in the window.

“One move, and you’re dead.”

The startled man froze, still with his back to Peter.

“For God’s sake don’t shoot,” pleaded the man.

Peter stood up, and closed the door behind him.

“Put your hands behind your head, one at a time and nice and slowly,” demanded Peter.

The man did as he was told, nice and slowly.

Peter walked over to the man, jabbed his gun into the man’s ribs, and quickly frisked him.

No gun and no knife.

Peter took a few steps back.

“Now turn round,” demanded Peter. “Nice and slowly. I’ve had a bad morning already, so don’t make me any more nervous.”

The man turned to face him.

“Hello, Peter,” he said. “Long time, no see.”

This time, it was Peter’s turn to be startled. Shocked, more like it.

He lowered his gun.

“Dad!” What the hell are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story, but I need your help. Urgently.”

“I recognise the voice now. You rang me from Singapore.”

“I rang you, but I wasn’t in Singapore. I just wanted anyone who might be listening in to think that’s where I was.”

“Dad, you look terrible. But I’m not surprised – I nearly killed you. Come and sit down, and let me get you something.”

“I’ve had a bad couple of weeks, I won’t deny. Not much sleep and little to eat. But I can’t relax yet. I must get back to London.”

Maurice Northcot slumped onto the sofa.

“If you weren’t in Singapore, where were you? I went to the airport to meet the flight.”

“I know you did. But can you help me get back to London?” pleaded his father. “You’re my only hope.”

“Of course I can,” Peter reassured him. “Come and sit in the kitchen while I get you something to eat, and you can tell what’s happened.”

“Please get my return to London organised first.”

“OK. But why the great rush? What’s been going on? Why can’t you just go to the airport and catch a plane home like anyone else?”

“Because my life is in danger, that’s why, and I may well have put you at risk now as well. I’m truly sorry about that, but I was desperate for help. That’s why I came here.”

“Where from?”

“Korea. North Korea, as a matter of fact. I work for MI6, and I was sent to get vital information about the North Korean nuclear programme. But my escape route blew up in my face, and several people who should have been able to help me get out have been killed, or captured – which is probably worse. So I’ve had to make my own way out. I was just south of Pyongyang when it all went wrong. I made my way to Kaesong, mostly by night and by river, and then across the border into the south. But I had no money, apart from a few US dollars, and I don’t speak the language. It wasn’t much easier in South Korea, either, but here I am at last.”

Peter was appalled.

“But why here? Why did you come here rather than head for Japan, which is closer? The Embassy in Tokyo could have helped you.”

“I don’t know anyone in Japan, or speak the language, let alone read it. And the Embassy people would have known little or nothing about me. I would have stood out by a mile, and would probably have been caught.”

“Are they still after you, then, from the North?”

“Almost certainly. What I have is far too valuable for them to let it go without a fight, which is why I came looking for you. We’re in the same business, after all, and you speak Cantonese.”

“How did you get here, then?”

“Let’s just say I got in by unconventional means, and that’s how I’ll have to get out. With no papers, I can’t just turn up at the airport and book a ticket.”

“We have several escape routes from here,” said Peter. “Let me get on to my minder at the Embassy. She’ll help, even though it is Sunday.”

He got on to the secure phone.

“Suzy? I need to use the ‘tunnel’,” he said. “Urgently.”

“You? Not you, I hope.”

“No, a colleague who’s on the run after a job, and has made his way here.”

“Code name?”

Peter put his hand over the mouthpiece.

“She want’s your code name. It’s all right, she’s quite safe. In the same business as us. And this is a secure line – digital satellite link with agile frequency transmission.”

“Dr. Penny.”

Peter repeated the name to his contact. There was silence for a moment.

“Are you quite sure about that?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Describe him.”

“Medium build, about 5ft 9ins, grey hair. Broken nose with scar from mid forehead across his nose to his right cheek.”

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