

JUNK
and
other short stories

Published by Duncan James

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1 – JUNK

Gavin never opened junk mail. He took the view that if he wanted anything, he could get it himself, without prompting. So junk mail always went, unopened, into the bucket under the sink.

There always seemed to be a lot of it, too. The post usually arrived just as he was leaving for the office, so he quickly thumbed through it, and anything that was

addressed to him went into his briefcase, to be read on the train, and the rest went into the bucket. The only exception was the occasional begging letter from a charity, which included a ball pen. He kept the pens. He sometimes felt a bit - well, awkward, - but took the view that if they could afford to send him a pen, then they could afford for him to keep it. So that's what he did. The rest was thrown away, unopened.

Except that this morning, for some reason, he found himself on the train actually reading a letter that was obviously junk mail. It was from a firm called FreeRanger Travel, which he'd never heard of, and which addressed him as, 'Dear Sir or Madam'. He hadn't been called 'Sir' for a long time. He looked again at the envelope. It was certainly his address, and he was certainly 'The Occupier'. He read on, to discover that it was a competition for a five-day holiday in Hong Kong, staying on a privately owned luxury junk in the harbour, and travelling by scheduled airline. Sounded good - he wouldn't mind a few days in the Far East. He'd never been, and could do with a break. In fact, he'd never been anywhere much. He read on, completed the competition, and posted his entry in the reply-paid envelope on his way to the office from Bank station.

That was that. He thought no more of it.

No more, that is, until he had a phone call at home a couple of months later from FreeRanger Travel.

"Good news," said the voice. "You've won one of our free holidays."

"Really?" asked Gavin. He only vaguely remembered the competition, to be honest.

"I just need to ask you a few questions, to confirm your identity, and then I can send you details," said the voice.

He answered the questions, most of which confirmed information he had put on the competition entry form - name, age, address - that sort of thing.

"What have I won, then?" Gavin asked the voice.

"Five days in Hong Kong, staying on an exclusive privately owned junk moored in the harbour. The prize includes scheduled flights, private room with en suite facilities and breakfast. There is a choice of dates to select from when you get our letter, and the holiday includes free transfers from your home to the airport, and from the airport in Hong Kong to the junk. All you have to pay for is insurance, local taxes, your main meals, and any tours and excursions you want. We'll send you a leaflet."

This all sounded too good to be true. His mother had always said that anything that seemed too good to be true probably was, but he couldn't, off hand, see anything much wrong with this.

He didn't have to wait long for the letter confirming the details. This time, the envelope was addressed to him by name, but still said 'Dear Sir' inside. He was impressed. There was a leaflet, with details about the junk. Distinctly Chinese looking it was, too, from the outside, but the inside looked very smart. There was a map of Hong Kong, another leaflet about tours, and one from someone wanting to sell him holiday insurance, which he already had anyway, through his bank.

He selected a date, agreed it with his boss, and rang the free-phone number of FreeRanger Travel to tell them when he wanted to go.

“No problem,” said the voice. “You’ll get the tickets in a few days, with all the details about baggage allowances, check in times and so on, and you’ll be given the time your taxi will call to pick you up to take you to Heathrow airport. Please try to be ready, as traffic can cause delays and if you’re late for check in you could miss your flight.”

This still seemed too good to be true, but at least he appeared to be dealing with a well-organised company who knew what they were about. This was certainly no call-centre in India. And so far, he hadn’t had to spend a brass farthing, or been pestered into buying anything.

He tried to look them up on the Internet, but they didn’t seem to have a web site, for some reason.

Anyway, all the paperwork duly arrived, with the tickets and everything as promised. British Airways all the way, non-stop. It was a very long flight, but he was now getting quite excited about the whole thing.

Gavin had arranged for Nick, his neighbour upstairs, to look after the fish for him while he was away. Tropical fish, they were. Not many – there wasn’t room for a big fish tank in his small flat – but they were, in a funny sort of way, good company for him. He worked a lot from home, did Gavin, and the fish were always there for him to watch. Colourful and lively. You got colour and movement in a garden, but not a lot of it in a converted warehouse flat in Limehouse. The fish were a good substitute and no real trouble at all. The glass needed cleaning from time to time, but the water stayed clear so long as you didn’t give the fish too much food. That’s why he’d given Nick the key. The fish would need a feed while he was away. And Nick had offered to keep an eye on the place as well, so Gavin would have nothing to worry about.

Gavin had just put the final pinch of food into the tank when the doorbell rang. It was the taxi, a bit early, but Gavin was all ready, so it didn’t matter. The driver was a real cockney, as you might expect in this part of London – chatty and friendly. It was a private car sort of taxi, too, not a black cab.

“Is this all the kit you’re takin’?” asked the Cabby, jerking his thumb towards Gavin’s small suitcase and even smaller rucksack with his overnight things in it.

“That’s all,” replied Gavin, collecting his luggage. “Don’t need much for five days.”

The cabby held the door open, while Gavin set the alarm. “One...two...oh...eight,” he recited to himself.

“Got yer keys?” asked the cabby.

“In here.” Gavin dropped them into the front pocket of his rucksack.

“Orf we go then,” he said slamming the door shut and grabbing the suitcase. “Goin’ anywhere nice, are yer?” he asked.

They chatted on, and Gavin learnt the man’s views on almost everything, from Muslims to Meusli, but in particular about the Government.

“eafrow in abaht ten minutes,” announced the cabby, as if Gavin was a complete stranger to London. “Yer’ in good time.”

So far so good. He checked in at terminal five, and had time to browse round the duty-free shop. Very tempting that was, too, but he avoided temptation, and settled for a small bottle of gin for use on the junk when he got there.

Gavin enjoyed the rest of the journey as well. The plane was on time, he had a couple of gins before a good meal with a small bottle of wine, and after checking for emails on his laptop computer, slept through what might have been a good film.

He was glad to get to Hong Kong’s Chek Lap Kok airport. It had been a long and tiring journey – nearly 12 hours. He wasn’t the world’s greatest traveller, and this was a massive adventure compared with his daily commute on the Docklands Light Railway.

Hong Kong smelt different. Probably the heat, he thought. It was lunchtime when he got there, but he wasn’t hungry – he’d had lunch on the aircraft, seemingly minutes after they’d served breakfast. There was a taxi waiting for him, which he thought was a bit extravagant, since he’d noticed there were plenty of coaches into town, and an express train. But he wasn’t grumbling, especially as it was over 20 miles, and he was able to sit back in comfort and admire the view. The driver spoke a bit of English, but they travelled in silence, and eventually arrived at the harbour area. The driver parked, and escorted him to where water- taxis could be hired. But Gavin didn’t have to pay for that, either – there was one waiting for him. Another short, slim Chinaman helped him into a rather battered dinghy with a smoky outboard motor, and a rickety awning supported by stout bamboo canes to keep the sun off his passengers. They set off across the busy harbour, home to everything from huge cruise liners to rusty tramp steamers, all surrounded by a seemingly endless number of barges and small craft like his, scurrying around like bees at the hive.

Gavin could smell the sea. At least, he thought that’s what it was. They were heading towards a large and very smartly painted junk, not too far out, and he could see a tall, bronzed man standing at the top of the steps on the deck. Don Stevens eventually greeted him, welcomed him aboard, and helped him with his luggage.

Also on deck was a large, colourful, parrot sort-of bird, chained to a perch, who greeted Gavin with a shrill “g’day sport.”

“That’s Bradman,” said his host, with a broad Australian accent. “Don’t feed him – he’s got a beak like two razor blades and he’ll have your finger off soon as look at you.”

Gavin gave the bird a wide berth, and the two eyed one another suspiciously as he edged past, the parrot hunched like a vulture. “Shove off,” screamed the bird.

“Take no notice,” advised Don. “I can’t think where he gets it from, but he’s a good alarm system.”

Noting the bird’s name, Gavin resolved to keep off the subject of cricket altogether, and certainly not to mention the recent Test matches.

His cabin was small, but clean.

“There’s no air conditioning, I’m afraid, but the two fans are adequate. There’s always a sea breeze out here,” explained Don. “Make yourself at home, and when you’re ready, join me on deck for a cold beer.”

The two men settled with their drink, and Don explained that he and his colleague, Oz Windsor, owned the junk and had decided a couple of years back to let out the spare cabin. They were both journalists; Don worked for ABC and Oz for the Sydney Morning Herald – he was out on a story, but would be back soon. Don gave Gavin a guidebook and a large map, and was soon recommending where to eat and places to visit. He was told to help himself to anything in the fridge, run by a gently throbbing generator down below.

Oz Windsor appeared over the rail soon, and yelled at the bird before the bird had a chance to say anything. It kept quiet. Over a few more beers, they watched the sun set until Gavin eventually turned in at the end of a long and tiring day.

It was a couple of days later when he got the news. Gavin had been having a good time, no doubt about it. He’d done the markets, had some fantastic ‘real’ Chinese food, quite unlike the sort of rubbish they generally served in London’s West End, and had just got back from a visit to the top of The Peak, when his mobile phone rang. It was unexpected, and made him jump. It woke the parrot, too, which screeched at him to “answer the bloody phone.”

It was Nick.

“I thought I ought to give you a ring,” said Nick. “I’m in your flat.”

“What’s up then?” asked Gavin. “Fish OK, are they?”

“Yes they’re fine,” Nick reassured him. “I’ve just come in to feed them, and they’re fine,” he repeated.

“So what’s up,” asked Gavin again.

“Well,” said Nick, “it’s your flat.”

“What about it?” asked Gavin.

“Well,” said Nick again, “it’s kind of – well, - empty, that’s all.”

“What do you mean, ‘empty’?”

“I mean there’s nothing here,” Nick replied. “The place is empty. Everything’s gone.”

“Gone?” Gavin sounded a bit hysterical.

“Absolutely everything,” replied Nick. “Furniture, computers, hi-fi, clothes – everything.”

“You mean everything?” Gavin couldn’t believe it. “Is this some kind of joke or something?”

“I’m afraid not,” replied Nick. “Some bastard’s been in and stripped the place. There are some papers scattered about in what used to be your office, but there’s not even a saucepan left in the kitchen. Nothing. Oh, except the fish, of course. They’re all right.”

“Have you been on to the police?” demanded Gavin.

“I’m just going to do that,” replied Nick, “but I thought I should ring you first.”

“Don’t touch anything,” instructed Gavin, even more hysterical. “They’ll want finger prints.”

“There’s nothing to touch,” replied Nick.

“How did they get in?”

“Through the door,” replied Nick. “There’s no sign of it having been kicked in, either. It’s almost as if they had a key. And the alarm wasn’t on.”

“Hang on,” shouted Gavin.

“Pieces of eight,” screamed the parrot.

Gavin grabbed his rucksack, and went to the front pocket. No keys. *‘That bloody taxi driver,’* he thought. *‘And he watched me punch the code into the alarm system.’*

“Nick, I’ve been set up. Tell the Police to ring me, and then tell them to get on to FreeRanger Travel. They sent me here, as far away from home as they could get me, and then took their time to strip me of everything I’ve got.”

“Had,” corrected Nick.

“OK, everything I had. They had five clear days to lift thirty grand’s worth of gear from my flat, and it only cost them the air fare and a bit of rent for this place.”

“Sounds a pretty good sting to me,” commented Nick.

“I’ll get home as soon as I can,” said Gavin, “but I guess the air ticket was one of those cheap deal affairs which I can’t re-book. I’ll let you know.”

“Leave everything to me,” said Nick, with confidence. “By the way, there’s a pile of stuff on the mat, but it’s nearly all junk mail. Shall I ditch it for you?”

“Yes, please,” replied Gavin. “But keep the pens.”

2 - A FAKE WORSE THAN DEATH

He had never been to a car boot sale in his life. Neither did he know anyone who went to them, at least not regularly. He seemed to remember, when he was at work, that his secretary went to one once. She had told how she and her husband had arrived at the site, in a field somewhere, and had set out an old blanket on which to display their things, and that someone had immediately offered them a fiver for the blanket. He had been impressed.

But now he was thinking that it might not be a bad idea to go to one himself, just to see what it was like. He had a load of things to get rid of, and he had already taken more than enough to the local charity shops. Besides, he could really do with the money, and if a fiver for old blankets was anything to go by, then it shouldn’t be difficult to raise a few quid.

They held one, once a month, in the town centre car park. There was one next week, so he decided to go.

Having been, he wished he’d gone to one sooner. The car park was transformed into a veritable Aladdin’s Cave, and it seemed that there was somebody,

somewhere, who'd buy anything. The place was full of the most awful tat – at least, it mostly looked awful to him – and yet there were people buying stuff as if there was no tomorrow. All sorts of junk, there was. Souvenirs from holidays which people now wanted to forget; old woodworking tools; radios; gramophone records; tea sets; jewellery; old clothes; bits of furniture, most of which needed mending or polishing or both; kitchen utensils; ornaments – you name it. Thinking about it afterwards, he didn't actually notice any blankets, but then perhaps they'd been sold by the time he got there. They said the dealers always arrived first, to snap up anything worth having.

But he saw enough to know that it would certainly be worth taking a carload of stuff to the next one. He found out how to go about it, and paid to reserve a plot, wishing now that he had kept half the things he had taken to the charity shops. He supposed they might even be there, selling some of the items he had given them.

He spent a happy few weeks sorting through all the bits and pieces he no longer wanted, and deciding how much they might be worth. His wife would have been good at this – always knew a bargain when she saw one, and had a pretty good idea about what people might pay for things. But now she was gone, he had to sort it out for himself. Indeed, that was why there was so much spare stuff about the place. Until now, he hadn't had the heart to get rid of most of, but now he had decided that the time had come for him to move to a smaller place he could better manage on his own, and to throw sentiment to the wind.

It was amazing what there still was to get rid of, when he put his mind to it. Some of it he carefully cleaned and dusted, the odd thing he polished, and there were a couple of bits of furniture – a cane chair, for instance – which he repaired. He packed it all carefully into cardboard boxes, sticking labels on everything with what he thought was a reasonable asking price. If he only sold half the things he had turned out, he would make a hundred pounds or so – well worth the effort. And what was left, he could always take to the next sale, or find another one somewhere else. He was quite looking forward to this.

On the appointed day, he made sure he got there early, just in case a dealer spotted something among his bits and pieces that was worth having. He didn't spot any dealers as it happened, but he was soon attracting interest. Some of the things, which he hadn't a clue what to charge for, he simply asked interested potential customers to make him an offer. He was amazed that some of his old 78s went for two pounds each. As the morning wore on, so more and more people turned up, and at one time, trade was quite brisk – by car boot standards, that is. By lunchtime, he had already taken well over a hundred pounds he thought, when the smells from a hamburger stall across the car park proved too much for him. He realised he was hungry, and thirsty, so strolled over to buy himself lunch. The crowds were thinning, anyway, and he was able to keep an eye on his car as he strolled towards the stall. He thought it unlikely that anyone would nick anything, and if they did, so what. He didn't want the stuff anyway.

So he took his time, stopping to look at what other sellers had on offer. He noticed on one of the tables a couple of old toys – he used to have some exactly like that when he was a lad. He idly picked one up to look at the price. Staggering! A hundred and fifty quid for a van he remembered had only cost a few shillings of his pocket money. The chap selling it said it would be worth a great deal more if he had the box to go with it.

The only other thing that caught his eye was a rather nice looking oriental vase. Except that it had a lid on it, so it wasn't really a flower vase. A ginger storage jar, the man said, and real Chinese, too. You could tell by the characters scrawled underneath it. And there are dragons on it, and everything. Fifty pounds was the asking price, but he eventually settled for thirty-five. It would look rather good on the table in the hall, which was decorated in a sort of blue colour, like the jar. He must have been mad, he thought afterwards. He'd gone there to sell things, not to buy them.

Anyway, it looked good on the hall table when he got home, although he did take the lid off and put it in the drawer. It somehow looked better without it. The more he looked at his new purchase, the more he liked it. It was nicely glazed and delicately coloured, and there wasn't a bit of damage on it anywhere. He actually began to wonder if it might be worth rather more than he had paid for it. You read about these things, after all. Old vases in the attic for years, suddenly found to be worth thousands. He got a book from the library about old vases, and decided that his bargain could just as well be from the Ming Dynasty as anything. He was beginning to convince himself that he had picked up a rare collectors' item, so he took it to the local museum to see what they thought. They didn't think much, as it happened, as the man there didn't really know about rare vases, Ming or otherwise. He did suggest, though, that one of the big auctioneers in London would know, without a doubt.

So off he went with his precious possession, to Christy's, in Old Bond Street. The lady on reception said they had an expert on these things, and he eventually appeared from upstairs to have a look. He seemed too young to know much about anything, but studied it carefully, and gave the impression of knowing what he was talking about. He eventually decided that it wasn't a genuine Ming, but a very good copy, probably made in Holland, and, quite honestly, not worth putting in an auction, but he was curious to know how he had got hold of it. He told the man the story, from car boot sale to hall table, via the local museum. He gave the expert his address, so that he could be sent a catalogue of their next auction of oriental porcelain, in case something similar took his interest.

So that was that. For thirty-five quid, what more could you expect. It went back on the hall table, and there it stayed until one dramatic and frightening afternoon.

He had been out, shopping – a few bits from Sainsburys, nothing much. He got back to find that he had forgotten to lock the door, although he could have sworn he had – he always did. You could never be too sure these days. But it was open, so in he went. That's when he got the shock of his life.

There was a masked man in the hall, with a gun in one hand and his vase in the other.

“Stay where you are, or I’ll shoot,” said the man, but he was too late. Before he could even take aim, he had been knocked off his feet and all the breath taken out of him in a flying tackle. His head struck the bottom stair with a sickening crack – the sort of noise it makes when you break a stick across your knee – and he lay quite motionless, with the gun under his twisted body, and the vase in two pieces on the hall carpet. It was all over in a flash.

The proud owner of the vase was trembling with fear and anger. Whatever had he done? It had been a spontaneous reaction on seeing the man. He wasn’t violent by nature, and had never done anything like that in his life before. He didn’t know he had it in him to react like that.

He nervously went over to the twisted figure at the foot of the stairs, and felt for a pulse. There wasn’t one. The masked man was quite dead.

In a daze, he phoned for the police to explain what had happened, and then called an ambulance, which arrived first. He had picked up the two pieces of the broken vase and put them in the drawer of the hall table, with the lid.

He kept on explaining what had happened; how he’d feared for his life at the hands of the armed burglar and had reacted in self-defence. Eventually, the body was taken away, and he went to the police station to make a statement and face more questions. This time, he made sure he locked the door, which bore the marks of having been forced open. A jemmy or something like that, so the policeman said.

He was eventually allowed home on police bail, but hated going back on his own. His GP gave him a sedative to calm his shattered nerves, and he got a man in to mend the door and change the lock.

To cut a long story short, the coroner eventually brought in a verdict of death by misadventure on the masked man, who had no previous criminal record and was obviously acting on information, perhaps even from the local museum, which had led him to believe that the vase was worth trying to steal, which of course it wasn’t. To make matters worse, the man’s gun was a fake – an imitation – just like the wretched vase he had come to steal.

Some months later, a judge accepted a plea of guilty to manslaughter and agreed that he had acted in self-defence. He was given a two year suspended sentence.

It was a good time afterwards that he eventually plucked up the courage to get the broken vase out of the drawer in the hall table, determined to throw it away. Damn thing – he should never have bought it in the first place. But he began to change his mind, however, when he looked at it closely. The base had come away from the body of the vase where the two parts had obviously once been joined. It was as clean a break as you could wish to see. But what really caught the man’s eye was what looked like some form of document, neatly folded into the base of the vase. The manuscript, if that’s what it was, was in neat but tiny Chinese script, on very thin and flimsy paper of some sort. Perhaps rice paper, he thought.

He was very puzzled by this discovery. The man at Christerbys had said the vase had been made in Holland, famous for its Delft and other makes of porcelain. So why would they hide a document like this in the base of it – written in Chinese, too? All very odd.

There was only one thing for it – he would pay another visit to the young expert in Old Bond Street.

He told the receptionist that he had been there before, told her what it was about, and asked to see the same young man again.

“An expert in oriental pottery, I think he said he was.”

“We certainly have a specialist in that field,” she replied. “I’ll enquire if he’s free to see you.”

An elderly man eventually arrived, shook his hand warmly and asked how he could help. This fellow looked much more the part, and instantly inspired more confidence.

He was shown the vase, and the manuscript secreted in the broken-off base. He showed immediate interest.

“Where did you come across this?” he asked, squinting at the manuscript through an eyeglass produced from his waistcoat pocket.

He told the old man the story, although did not go into detail about how the jar had come to be in two pieces.

After some time, the man said, “This is almost certainly a genuine piece of Ming Dynasty porcelain, I would guess dating from about 1400 to 1450. What’s more, I am almost sure that the British Museum has one exactly similar. But I have never seen a manuscript like this before,” he admitted, “and certainly not one hidden in the base of a Ming jar in this fashion.”

He carefully examined the two pieces of jar.

“It is such a clean break, exactly along the line of the join, that a restoration should be relatively easy and impossible to detect afterwards,” he pronounced. “That is, of course,” he added hurriedly, “if you should wish it to be restored. I can easily arrange for that to be done if you should so decide.”

The owner of the broken pot was speechless again, but nodded.

“I suppose it’s worth restoring?” he asked.

“Without a doubt,” replied the expert. “I can arrange for one of the top porcelain restorers at the British Museum to undertake the work for you, if you wish.” The man paused. “There is, however, one difficulty.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“We shall need to decide whether to remove the manuscript during the refurbishment, or to keep it hidden where it is. I am no expert on documents of this sort, but I can easily consult a colleague who would be able to help you decide. Much will depend on what the document says, and whether it has a value in its own right.”

“Ah,” he said, now quite bewildered. “I suppose we should know what the document is all about before we decide,” he agreed. “It could lead us to hidden treasure, or something!”

"I doubt it," said the expert. "And in any case, my guess would be that you hardly need hidden treasure now. You already have it in the shape of this historic jar."

"You mean it could be valuable?" he asked.

"Without a doubt," replied the learned old man again.

"How much?"

"I have no idea how much the manuscript might be worth, but the restored jar, on its own, could fetch at least a quarter of a million pounds at auction."

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "And I only paid thirty five quid for it at a car boot sale!"

"It's such a pity it's not quite complete," said the expert thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?"

"This is a storage jar," explained the man, "probably for keeping ginger in, or honey, or some such thing. It should have a lid."

"But I have the lid," he exclaimed, "at home, in the drawer of the hall table."

"In good condition?" asked the expert auctioneer.

"Perfect, so far as I can tell," he replied.

"In that case, add another half a million pounds to the likely sale price," said the man. "Perhaps you would be good enough to let me see it."

"I shall bring it up tomorrow," he promised, "and leave to rest to you - the valuation, repair, decision about the manuscript - everything. I would like you to auction it for me when you can."

"Certainly," replied the man. "It will be a great pleasure to act of your behalf, and it could well be that the British Museum would wish to buy it themselves, to put alongside the similar jar which, I recollect, they already have on display. Now, if you would be willing to leave this with us today, I will draw up an official receipt and immediately insure the objects for a sum of - shall we say - one million pounds?"

And so it was agreed.

As he was leaving, he said to the expert, "By the way, what happened to the colleague of yours I saw when I first brought this to you? He told me it was a copy, made recently in Holland."

"A young man?"

"Yes, he was. I thought at the time he didn't look old enough to have the experience to decide."

"As it turns out, you were quite right, and he certainly should have known better. Anyone with the slightest knowledge on the subject could have told you that it was an original, dating from the fifteenth century. But he is no longer with us, I'm pleased to tell you, although the circumstances of his leaving were, shall we say, unfortunate."

"Why, what happened?"

"He was killed in a somewhat mysterious incident. Something to do with a gun, I am told."

3 - A BRIDGE OF LETTERS

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. Aunt 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. Well, 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.

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