

THE RED LANTERN

and other stories

Terry Morgan

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The Red Lantern is a selection of six short stories about international crime, corruption, espionage and terrorism taken from five of the author's full-length novels – An Old Soy Story, Whistleblower, Vendetta, An Honourable Fake and Bad Boys.

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The Red Lantern is a back street Chinese restaurant in the Nigerian capital, Lagos where Frank Marshall has been living for too long when he is approached by businessman Oliver Thomas. Thomas has, himself, been tasked with solving the problem of a prominent member of the British House of Lords whose lifestyle as an adviser on African affairs has become a deep embarrassment to the British

government. In return for help, Frank is to be offered his long-awaited chance to return to the UK.

Mitchell. Sierra Leonian truck driver Mitchell is so reliable and hard-working that according to Mr Suleiman, Mitchell's boss at Mambolo Transport Enterprises, he is definitely management material. So, when Mitchell reports that charity goods and even United Nations supplies are finding their way into the warehouse of Rocki General Supplies on Sani Abacha Street, Mr Suleiman quickly concludes that Rocki's owner, Mr Moses, is "a fraudster, a crook, a skimmer and a thief." And Mr Suleiman is not one to turn a blind eye. "Mr Moses might pull knife on me," he says, "But I pull carpet, I pull strings."

The Pink Coconut is an open-air nightclub in Lagos where businessman Oliver Thomas, already a reluctant participant in dubious MI6 operations, meets his Nigerian friend William Akinbiyi in an attempt to stop vast funds of money being diverted from essential medical supplies into the pockets of corrupt individuals. But with Thomas's suspicions that his MI6 controller is planning to be one of the main beneficiaries what can they do?

The Peacock, a flashy night spot on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand, has become a meeting place for all sorts of foreign criminals. It's also where Ritchie Nolan, straight out of a London drama school and a raw recruit to international commercial crime investigation is sent to infiltrate a Russian-led gang engaged in counterfeiting, money-laundering and narcotics. Posing as Micky Parker from East London with a bag of fake perfume samples to tempt them, his first task job is to become accepted enough to be invited into their gang.

Lazarus. Two self-proclaimed Nigerian Pastors, Lazarus of the Good Tidings Christian Peoples Church and Ayo of Christ's Centre of Holy Visions are up to their necks in corruption, but their fragile relationship is crumbling. Under huge pressure to find two million dollars to pay off politicians and other accomplices, it is the sad, guilt-filled and genuinely God-fearing Lazarus who belatedly realises that Ayo is far better at crime and corruption than he is.

The Printer. Grzegorz Samoszewski (Greg) has retired and lives only to care for Dalia, his sick, wheelchair-bound wife and for the hobby he pursues in his garage – experimenting with high tech printing. But Greg's quiet life changes abruptly when he receives an unexpected visitor from the local Moslem community seeking some specialist printing jobs. Having succumbed to threats and increasingly worried at what he's become involved with, Greg desperately wants to move away but what can he do with Dalia to take care of? And Greg's other problem is that he's Jewish.

The Red Lantern (from "An Old Spy Story")

As usual I blamed myself.

I was the one who told Donaldson about Frank Marshall.

Frank was my man in Nigeria. He was seriously caught up in quicksand before I even knew him but as soon as he also became Donaldson's man the quicksand was to become, as Frank would have said, "like deep shit".

In some respects, Frank was well suited to Donaldson's style because Frank certainly didn't run his business on a strong set of ethical principles even though he was supposed to be in pharmaceuticals.

Frank Marshall managed his run-down business in Lagos from an asbestos roofed building in Ikeja employing a small team of ladies in faded, green overalls who poured thick red cough mixture from big drums into small bottles, stuck labels on the bottles and put the bottles into boxes. Frank then sold the boxes. Frank also made money from deals he negotiated for international pharmaceutical companies though he'd always seriously undervalued his input.

Frank was a commission agent of the old school. Frank was the underpaid, dishevelled, sweaty, expatriate side of overpaid pin-striped, Eau de Cologne corporate life. He was there for those who sat in plush, oak-panelled boardrooms with Chinese carpets in Basle, Paris and London.

He was there for those who could then claim legitimately that he was solely responsible for the manner in which the orders they accepted were obtained. Bribery is subcontracted out even more often than murder.

In short, Frank ensured that many of the pharmaceuticals selected for importation by the Ministry of Health into Nigeria were not for the well-being of the nation's poor and sick but for the well-being of the officials who ran the Health Ministry and the directors and shareholders of corporate Switzerland and America. But to stay on the right side of what little law was upheld, he was a mere manager of the business.

Frank was a fixer.

The company chairman, to whom he owed so little, was an ex-Minister who had once been in charge of the Nigerian Ministry of Health. It was the ex-Minister who did the travelling to London, Basle and New York, wearing his Saville Row suits, staying at the Nigerian Embassy and lunching with the manager of the New Nigeria Bank in Cannon Street.

Meanwhile, poor old Frank stayed entirely in Lagos with occasional trips to exotic spots like Kano, Port Harcourt and Ibadan. He had ventured as far as Ouagadougou once and had also been to Accra several times.

So, Frank's international business career had not materialized in quite the way he had foreseen when he first arrived in Lagos with his bag of samples as an immature young export salesman. But, his appointed role as occasional escort or agent for people he thought represented Her Majesty's Government had given him a sense of importance, however false and however short lived.

Frank's English wife had taken one look at Lagos and left him many years before to return to Maidstone. So, Frank lived with a very dark woman who wore a very recognizable and ornate headscarf like a turban. She spoke a very rare, native dialect, a little French and even less English. But it didn't seem to bother either of them as they communicated mostly through grunts and sign language. Sex is, after all, a fairly similar exercise wherever you go.

She had come from a place we once called Upper Volta and Frank had imported her into Nigeria in exchange for a few crates of cough mixture when he went on a visit to Ouagadougou.

Frank called her Olga as if she was a blonde Russian but this was far from the case. I suspect that Olga was actually the closest Frank could manipulate his tongue to say her real name, which stretched to many long syllables and included strange clicking noises unknown to anyone living outside Olga's village.

But Olga acted as wife and maid and they lived an exotic tropical existence in a fortified concrete villa with a corrugated roof and surrounded by rolls of barbed wire, several grubby Alsatian dogs and an ageing Nigerian ex policeman with a pistol tucked in his belt.

Frank spent the mornings in his factory overseeing quality control and production schedules. He then lunched at the Red Lantern Chinese Restaurant, where he had developed a remarkable resistance to no end of gastric complaints, and then spent his evenings at a notorious den of sophistication in Ikeja where he concluded his business deals if he could stay awake long enough. The Pink Coconut was also known to me as one of these high society places where you met other fixers.

On that trip, my first sight of Frank was as he pushed his way through the crowds of jostling, sweating, humanity. As always, he was wearing his stained safari suit, sandals and grey socks.

He was shouting, cursing and waving a rolled newspaper. Frank's arrival had been very timely because the hot and stressed Immigration Officer sat at his high desk in his unnecessarily thick uniform and rows of medals, had been questioning everyone's right to enter Nigeria.

And until Frank arrived it looked as though there might be difficulties with my right to enter the country. My vaccination certificate for Yellow Fever was not in order and this was vital for compliance with the sophisticated bureaucracy of Nigerian Health and Immigration Policy. But Frank's newspaper had done the trick, containing as it did several crumpled Naira notes tucked inside. He crept up behind and tapped the Immigration Officer on the shoulder.

"Here, General, whatever your bloody title is, catch up with the news. Have a looksy at the sports page. Lagos Loonies beat the Kano Crappers. It's all there. It'll make your eyes smart."

I can see Frank now.

Frank spoke so fast that it didn't matter what he said or to whom he said it or whether or not English was their first language. And I had never seen Frank in anything except the same, grubby, beige safari suit. He had long hair in an untidy Beatle's style that was totally unsuited to the Nigerian climate. It stuck to his head and clung around his ears with sweat. He had a red, sun burned face and, on that occasion, a burning cigarette cleverly tucked between the same fingers that held the newspaper. His blue eyes were a nice feature though they had taken on a permanent sparkle from too many evenings drinking Nigerian wine in rooms filled with ganja smoke or other narcotics.

But Frank's payment was duly pocketed, the newspaper dropped on the floor and my passport duly stamped. Frank grinned, grabbed my bags and shouted at me to follow with words like, "Don't lose me, for Christ's sake. Let's get out of this fucking hell hole." Despite his recent appointment of working for the Crown via Donaldson, Frank was not known for his sophisticated use of the Queen's English.

Frank's company car, too, was also less than sophisticated. It was a rusting Peugeot with sagging seats, the body parts held together by layers of dried, red mud.

I felt privileged because Frank regarded me as a friend, the third amongst a crowd of two others. One was Olga and the other was sat waiting in the car with the engine still running. Frank's driver, Smart, was a young, athletic Nigerian who, if opportunities for fulfilment had been available, looked as if he should have tried professional boxing or athletics. Smart was not smart but he was very reliable. He would do anything Frank asked and would drive for hours without a break, even sitting in the car in the hot sun whilst Frank refreshed himself in the shade of banana trees at roadside beer houses.

"So! Ollie!" Frank shouted above the general melee. Frank knew me as Oliver Thomas although I had a few other pseudonyms I used when necessary. "Got a cable to say you'd be coming."

Such were communications in those days. Phoning my London office from Lagos could take so long I'd end up with a sore middle finger from all the repeat dialling and then be so shocked by the sudden connection I'd forget why I'd called.

We clambered into the car and Smart drove off into the traffic. "Where are you staying, Ollie?"

"Airport Hotel."

"Luxury. Must be on good expenses."

The Airport Hotel had never struck me as luxurious but I let it pass. Fried eggs were the only breakfast at the Airport Hotel. Sometimes they were the only lunch and the only dinner. It was never boiled eggs and never poached eggs and they didn't know how to cook scrambled egg or omelette. It was only ever fried eggs. I had queried it one morning. "Sorry sah. No water."

It was the obvious explanation and I should have known, after all I'd cleaned my teeth in beer earlier.

"How are you doing, Ollie? Business good?"

"Can't grumble. Dodging and diving, bit of this and a bit of that, you know."

I often spoke like that to start. It depended on the person I was with. Frank with his East London accent, was a suitable person for this particular style and I'd needed to create the early impression that today I was not in the business of bothering about too much legitimacy. Frank needed to know that anything would interest me if there was a chance to make a quick and easy buck. And if this meant a bit of under the counter stuff to get around stuffy government regulations that just got in the way of healthy international trade, frankly I couldn't have cared a fig.

"Pharmaceuticals?" Frank was prying into my motives for being there.

"Always."

"To ship home or ship elsewhere?"

The number of pharmaceutical wholesalers in England who would have risked their reputation importing medicines that had passed through Frank's factory was going to be limited. But, to me, it was proof that someone had used pharmaceuticals as a ploy to get his attention before I'd even left London.

Frank dropped me at the Airport Hotel, I thanked him for meeting me and told him I had another meeting early the following morning and suggested we continue our chat over lunch. With that, Frank's mud-plastered Peugeot departed in a cloud of blue smoke with Smart at the wheel.

I had fried eggs, rice and beer for my dinner that night. But next morning after an uncomfortable night spent scratching in a bug infested bed that smelled of stale sweat I took a taxi to downtown Lagos for my meeting. My job, given to me by Donaldson, was fairly straightforward. I was to introduce a senior British diplomat to Frank Marshall by means I needed to invent and then carry on with my own business.

The distinguished diplomat was also, Donaldson had informed me, the spoilt English heir to half of the Scottish Highlands and held an Oxford degree in Ancient Greek. His specific training for his current role was, though, limited to having read "Teach Yourself International Trade."

So far in his life, qualifications hadn't mattered because his upbringing meant he was automatically destined for the House of Lords and had diplomatic immunity wherever he went or whatever he did. He had risen through family connections to a role as a sort of government advisor on African affairs although Africa was not regarded as a Foreign Office or a Defence Ministry priority. His only knowledge of Africa appeared to have been as a boy of six living with his parents for a year in Nairobi.

Not content with the thought of one day inheriting a Scottish Castle, the odd commission paid into a Swiss account had, it seemed, started to take on the innocent legitimacy of normal, day to day expenses to top up his income and he was becoming a liability for diplomatic progress on many fronts. He had started out as a spoiled child. Now, on the frail excuse that Her Majesty's diplomats, unlike small businessmen, needed refreshing after seven-day stints visiting the Third World, he was being spoiled by attending too many cocktail parties, staying at too many hotels on Park Lane and eating at too many places like the Ritz at the expense of others. He was in fact thought to be becoming, or already was, a risk to national security.

Having been mistakenly employed by the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence he was known to have acquired information that was strictly confidential and, also since the age of six, was well known for being unable to keep secrets.

So, at 9am, armed with this background, I found myself at a far more salubrious residence than the Airport Hotel with an aroma of smoked bacon and toast filling my nostrils. It was, nevertheless, surrounded by coconut palms and a high concrete wall with metal spikes along the top. But the garden, if that is what it was, was a sea of red mud because black thunderclouds had only just finished depositing an inch of rain in the space of half an hour.

When I arrived, a bare-chested boy was sweeping flood water full of floating debris, but his toils were in vain. A foot of water had breached the front steps and a gritty, red stream ran into the open plan reception area where someone else was sweeping it out of a rear door.

But I knew what to do. I took my shoes off, folded my trousers to my knees and put my briefcase on my head as a shelter from the water still dripping off the palm trees. Suitably attired, I waded towards the building and up to the long wooden reception desk. Above me was a high ceiling with a huge, creaking, wooden fan that slowly turned, hitting the top branches of a tamed coconut palm growing from a clay pot.

The muddy, red water ran across the scratched marble floor between low wicker chairs placed against dull, unpolished wooden coffee tables showing round stains of tea and coffee spilt from cups.

It was steamy and hot but, despite the conditions, a waiter hovered with a tray and an off-white cloth draped across his arm ready to serve coffee to a few white guests sat in mud stained suits. A white woman in a light chiffon dress and a wide brimmed hat sat with her long legs crossed near the clay pot with a cigarette in a long holder held between her thumb and first finger. Her feet, fortunately, were on a dry part of the floor, proof that the floor itself was uneven.

The equally unsuitably dressed receptionist, sweating in his black suit and bow tie seemed to be expecting me. "Yessah. You are expected. The Lord is waiting for you sah."

Since then I have always wanted my entry into heaven, if ever that happens, to be announced like that.

The Lord was not slow in appearing but I hope the real Lord, if we ever meet, avoids the image that this one created. He minced towards me with his hand outstretched like a peacock on a catwalk and I could not help wondering how someone who apparently spent so much time travelling in Africa and the Middle East could look so anaemic and pristine. He wore pure white slacks and shirt, shiny brown shoes with a matching belt and a white hat, slightly less frilly than that of the woman's sitting by the potted plant. But his main adornment was a cravat, a long, wide, multi-coloured specimen made of the finest silk, which he swished like the tail of a pedigree filly in season.

"Ah, Mr Thomas? Good morning. I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance. Glad you could make it. Sorry about the weather here. Damned messy at times. But been here before, I expect, have you? If so you will be quite used to it. Damned perspiration. Seems destined to leak from every conceivable orifice, don't you think?"

I tried hard to avoid lengthy eye contact but became very uncomfortable at the way my knee was being touched. We sat in the opposite corner to the white woman who kept flapping at flies with a handkerchief and we started with a general discussion about my business. I quickly, deliberately and sneakily dropped in a suggestion of some interest in military supplies to North Africa. That was not my only interest of course. I had always been an exporter of anything I could get an order for.

But with no prompting he said: "Yes. I have to say that my confidential discussions in Tripoli suggest that arms get in through Chad anyway. So, whatever we can do to ensure we supply direct will limit their clandestine operations. Keep some control. Don't you agree?"

What, on earth, was this man talking about, I thought. We had only just met and yet he was taking no precautions. He could not possibly have known much about me or how a small export business based in south London might be useful to Foreign Office or Ministry of Defence policy. And, at the time, I was probably more of an expert on Libya than anyone in the British Government. I certainly knew all about Chad but there are things in business you only keep to yourself.

Then he said: "Cup of tea? I'm sure we can order some." He waved at the waiter holding the grubby towel and ordered tea before moving rapidly on.

“So, Mr Thomas. May I call you Oliver? Tell me just a little about the other opportunities you’ve apparently been lining up, besides the military ones, which might benefit from my input and a little official backing and encouragement from Her Majesty’s Government. We so need to keep all our options open, but at all times we wear our desire to help British trade openly on our sleeves.”

I had briefly wondered what to say at this point but was well used to handling inquiries about my business, even when they were often at odds with the other unofficial jobs I performed for Donaldson & Co. What I found myself saying was a figment of my imagination but one founded in such confidence that if challenged to give more detail would not have required me to dig too deeply to appear utterly convincing. It was an acquired skill that had required long practice. I also knew that Frank would back me up.

“Well, yes,” I said. “I have some pharmaceutical interests here as well – a small, local operation – an agency, distributorship and some small-scale local manufacture. It is a joint project with Pennex Pharmaceuticals. Their headquarters are based in Kent. Do you know them?”

“Oh Kent, the Garden of England. How lovely,” he pronounced with great delight.

“Yes, well,” I said, moving my leg again. “We need a few high-level government contacts to help win contracts. Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia – that sort of area. Your name cropped up.”

“As it would, Oliver.”

With that he gave a toothy smile, I got my knee patted and the cravat swung wildly. But the response was obviously positive and I was encouraged to continue despite the hand now resting more firmly on my knee. But, such is the selfish determination of a professional exporter who recognises an opportunity when he sees it, I resisted the urge to remove it. “Well. I wonder,” I said, “would you care to meet the local manager of the plant tomorrow morning? Say ten o’clock? He’s a British chap – name of Frank Marshall.”

“Of course, I’d be delighted. Here?”

“Well, I thought you might like to meet him at the plant. It’s out near the airport at Ikeja.”

“What a splendid idea. Ah, here’s the tea.”

And that was all I did face to face with the Lord. Sometimes the jobs I did on the side for Donaldson were not time consuming. I left shortly afterwards to meet Frank for lunch and the second part of the job.

The incentive for Frank, you see, was a commission and other benefits and someone had to explain things in more detail. As Donaldson’s subcontractor who lived quite dangerously half way down the mountain, I was to subcontract the job further down to Frank who lived on the edge of the jungle. My job was to persuade Frank to subcontract it to someone else who was living right in the middle of the jungle. At the time, dear reader, such were the methods I had become familiar with. Those sitting at the top of the mountain with its glorious view could so easily deny all knowledge of the sinister goings on at the bottom whereas those of us half way down looked both up and down.

I performed my job of persuasion on Frank over lunch at the Chinese Red Lantern but it was obvious Frank had already heard something before we met and I suspect it was the same man who would call at Frank's factory from time to time with other requests. That man was from the British Embassy or so he claimed.

I learned all this at the Red Lantern by plying Frank with gin and tonic. The gin and tonics were poured in and Frank's heart poured out. He got more and more drunk and then more and more emotional. "You're a good mate, Ollie. You see . . . well, fuck . . ."

Frank had been almost in tears and the embarrassment had been such that I spent most of the time in the Red Lantern studying the food-stained red flock wallpaper, which is why I remember it.

Frank's east London accent, that he had almost forgotten in favour of Lagos speak, improved all the time, as the gin proved amazingly effective. Quite why I had plied him with drink I don't know, but I had an uncanny urge to find out how Donaldson worked on others and Frank proved to be an excellent case study.

Frank was more used to beer, the local concoctions, and other forms of exotic stimulation, the sort that was inhaled, rather than drunk. His Beatles hair cut was lying across his sweating forehead, his eyes were red, his tongue was loose and his soul was being hung out to dry. But fortunately, in this state, his speech was slower and much easier to follow.

"See, Ollie, this time the bastard came with an official, bleeding letter from the Embassy stating that all British subsidiaries operating in Nigeria should adopt a code of practice when dealing with the Nigerian Government. Code of bleeding practice! I ask you, mate, what a load of shit!

"Anyway, we are not a subsidiary anymore. Wholly owned Nigerian buying raw materials from the bastards back home. So much for their commercial savvy, eh? But it was as though the commercial attaché himself was as clean as a whistle and all the rest of us were on the take or bribing officials left right and centre just for the bloody hell of it.

"We all know what they get up to at the Embassy. They can be as corrupt as any in the ranks of pen-pushing bleeders in the Nigerian Ministry of Health for example. If they can make some dash without too much fuss they will. But I was one of the few local Brits they knew was dealing direct with the local assholes. The rest, particularly those silly sods with their fucking suits and polished shoes passing through on short trips, all go through the Embassy and always seem to know who to see. They seem to know before they even catch the bloody B Cal flight out. They are promised action but that money may need to be placed in certain accounts.

"They aren't disappointed either. Fuck no. The money disappears from where it is put and they get the contract – a thousand times the size of the dash. It's the same with all types of business here – telecommunications, roads, civil engineering, water, electricity, medical equipment. You know, Ollie, mate. All those public services, utilities and things that'll still never fucking work properly even after the next fifty years."

How right Frank was. He was telling me nothing I didn't know but I listened nevertheless. Despite his condition, Frank had vision and was still being realistic. We both knew it.

Millions of pounds of good Nigerian money, money that would be publicly announced as destined for improvements to the country's infrastructure. Money that would never flow down to the pockets of the millions who really needed it but that would end up in the pockets of Nigeria's elite, the military, or in the pockets of international businesses who would never complete their sides of the bargain. Money that would end up in the private bank accounts of diplomats, politicians and other middlemen, men who, if the folks back home ever knew about their extra-curricular activities, would and should have lost their jobs and the hefty pensions that always came later.

This is the sort of money that seeps through cracks in the system and lines the pockets of people such as Donaldson. If I'd wanted to, I could have lined my own pockets but if I had I would certainly not be sitting here telling you this.

"So how does your own Chairman fit into the scheme of things?" I asked Frank.

It was my turn to pry because I was already pretty sure that this was Frank's weak spot. And I had not yet got to the point of giving Frank the envelope that contained money, a new passport and air ticket from Lagos to London.

Frank sat back in his Red Lantern chair, his eyes flashing beneath the greasy strands of hair. Meanwhile, Mr Ho the proprietor was fussing around his best customer, clearing the dregs of tinned chicken and sweet corn soup and handing it to his apprentice, a serious Nigerian boy aged about ten who scurried off towards the kitchen dropping spoons and forks all the way. The red wallpapered walls were splattered with the chicken and sweet corn soup of previous diners.

Frank leaned forward again and downed the last of the gin, the thick slice of orange and a small lump of ice sliding out, down his chin and on to the tablecloth. "His fucking Excellency, you mean?"

He laughed a drunken, bleary-eyed laugh and beckoned with his forefinger to come closer. "Shhh – not so bloody loud, Ollie. Got me by the short and curlies, ain't he? Know what I mean, mate?"

We stared at one another for a moment. Frank's eyes were moving from focussed, to wandering, to half shut.

"Go on," I said, to encourage him.

Frank looked inside his empty gin glass. "Get us another, Ollie. It's good to chat. I only get to talk to Olga when she's finished fucking me and we never go into much detail as I'm always too knackered."

I suppose that showed a degree of sensitivity and intelligence remaining inside Frank and I suddenly felt sorry for the man. He couldn't have been more than thirty-five. Yet here he was living with an African woman he couldn't talk to and caught up in some sort of quagmire, unsure what to do and merely succumbing to the inevitable. I knew the feeling and perhaps I had been lucky. But for the grace of better fortune perhaps it might have been me sitting there dribbling onto the table with Mr Ho's special chow mein noodles dangling from my mouth.

Meanwhile, Frank went on with the verbal diarrhoea, probably a precursor to the gastric version that was to come later. "You mean His Excellency, Doctor fucking Abu Fayinke, one-time head of the Ministry of Health, now Chief Executive of Pennex (Nigeria) Ltd and still the unofficial controller of all the sodding freaks and pen pushers who claim to be working for the good of the nation's health? Also,

brother to this chief and that chief, friend to every politician in Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt and Kano? Also, the best mate to all the chiefs in Sokoto and Rivers State, first cousin to General whatsit and every other big tit in the army? Mr Fucking High 'n Mighty? Wined and dined by six of the world's most unethical pharmaceutical companies and on the best of dishonourable terms with all those who run the Nigerian Central Bank. I shouldn't be saying it like that but you've got to live here to fucking know, mate."

He stopped and then added: "You mean that Chairman?"

"That sounds like him," I said.

Frank then looked down, sadly at the gin and noodle splattered red paper covering the table.

"You know what else, mate? Even the bloody ex policeman who sits guarding my fucking house allegedly to protect me from every cat burglar and murderer this side of Maiduguri is really there to stop me escaping at dead of night. You think he's more likely to shoot raiders or shoot me?"

Frank now started tugging on a corner of the red paper like a sulking boy. He tore a piece off, twisted it expertly between his thumb and first finger to form a small, rigid cone, stuck it up his nose and used it to soak the mucus that was running from each nostril. Meanwhile, Mr Ho brought the next gin, left it by Frank's elbow and left.

Frank said nothing for a while clearly waiting for the nose plug to work. Eventually, he extricated the sodden twist of paper, tossed it on the table, grabbed the glass and all but downed it in one.

"But why? Can't you just pack up and go?" I asked Frank, whilst looking at the wet plug which had landed near my plate.

"Got me by the short and curlies," Frank repeated.

"How?" I asked.

"Not enough money that's how. You need money to fix things around here. I got as far as checking in at the bloody airport once until someone suddenly decided my passport wasn't in order. Got into a right fight. Fucking bastards said I didn't have the right stamp in some place on page thirty-six, no bloody signature on this and that, no bleeding cross on a T somewhere . . ."

"The Embassy – couldn't they help? It's their duty to help a British citizen." I asked although I already knew the answer.

"Don't make me laugh, Ollie – conniving swine, they are. Seem to think I don't play by the local rules so leave me to my own bloody ends. Wash their hands so to speak. I got arrested once for peeing against a wall and was carted off by my shirt collar with a bamboo stick the size of a bloody tree trunk stuck down by belt.

"God forbid. They all bloody do it. You see notices on all the fucking walls in Ikeja. 'No Urinating Here' but everyone, including the fucking women, deliberately piss on the notices themselves. Or go shit behind them. But me, oh no! White you see. Got dragged off around the corner, paid my fine from my wallet and walked away. I told the Embassy. They laughed. Shouldn't piss on walls they said. Fucking useless bastards."

Frank paused only briefly. "I found out the bloody Immigration Officer was in the pocket of his Excellency as well. Also, he pays me in Naira. What's the fucking use of that? I came here with nothing. The wife's got the house in Maidstone and a new bloke. And . . ." Frank tailed off, tearing off another piece of red paper.

"And?" I prompted him.

"And then there are all the others. Those you met the night we went to the Pink Coconut."

"Augustus and Co?"

"That's them. Oh, great friends. Any or all of them could get me arrested at a moment's notice if they wanted. One is a senior police officer. Know that? I know you thought he's in Defence but, well, he is sometimes but it's more like a protection racket.

"That's the way it is - confusing. They carry all sorts of fictitious business cards. Another one is a lawyer. Another is a brother to Major Big Tit. And one is the manager of the bank where my money goes. They watch me like hawks between using me to act as the authentic, white face that goes with some of their money laundering activities. Scary, innit?"

"And what about Pennex back in England?" I enquired with great innocence.

"I'm nothing to do with them now. It's sold, I think. Here, we're wholly owned Nigerian Company but I didn't know it was happening till it happened. His Excellency's bright idea."

"Can't your pals at the Pink Coconut help? Anything I can say or do?" That was a nonsense, of course, but I was still working my way to the proposal.

"You think they care? As long as there might be some swag at the end of it or they thought you might be looking to me to help swing a thing or two. I'm the honourable white face again you see. The buffer between white hypocrisy and black corruption."

We both sat back, probably looking and feeling exhausted and for a moment, Frank looked, temporarily, a little soberer. I chose that moment. "So, why do you think I'm here?" I said.

"Christ knows," he said. "I just got a message you were coming. No one spoke you understand. Someone left a letter from the Embassy with one of the girls at the factory marked Private and Confidential. It just told me to meet you. Name, flight number, that sort of thing. I assumed it was the fellow from the Embassy from Florence's description and I smelt another chance to get me out of this fucking hole. It was signed by a guy called Donaldson and I knew the name. My dishonourable Chairman has a habit of name dropping sometimes. He likes to make out he's connected at high level in UK. He even mentioned MI6 once. Jesus Christ. The Dishonourable Chairman? Donaldson? MI6? Crap. But the note said to call someone at the Embassy but it wasn't an Embassy number, I know that.

"I called it anyway and it took a whole bloody day to get through. I spoke to the chap who answered the phone. He sounded foreign – not sure where from – not English – Arab probably – there's a few Lebanese here. I asked him what was meant by favours. Course, he didn't know. In the end, I just turned up to meet you."

Frank leaned forward holding his head as if to stop it spinning, which it probably was. "That's about it," he concluded forlornly. And then it was my turn.

I described my meeting with the Lord earlier in the morning and that he would be visiting Frank's plant at ten the next morning. Then I came the tricky bit. "Can you arrange a visit to your other factory?"

"What other factory?" Frank asked, suddenly appearing sober.

"The one you plan to build to allow for your expansion plans. The one you'd like to build amongst the lush green forest up near Ibadan. Ask Smart to take him there. You don't need to go. Just say you've got another site manager up there. Smart has friends near Abeokuta, doesn't he?"

There was no need for me to say much more. Frank understood what was needed and he fell silent for a while. As I waited for him to think, I beckoned Mr Ho for coffee. The chipped cups and saucers arrived and for a while we sipped the coffee in yet more silence although I could sense Frank was tempted to drink his direct from the saucer. It was already half full anyway. Finally, he said, "Mmmm."

Taking this as understanding, I said, "So, do you want to know the pay-off?"

"That would be very nice." Frank said it without looking up from his saucer, which had parted company from the cup and now sat on the edge of the table ready to fall off. Suddenly he sounded extremely polite but perhaps he was at the end of his tether. He looked up and tried grinning, although the result was not a pleasant sight.

"Want to know what I've got in my case if you agree?"

"That would be nice," Frank repeated.

I bent down to my briefcase and opened the brown envelope. "You'll need to get a haircut to look like the photo or you might get recognized by your Immigration friends." Frank stared at the passport, the air ticket and the pile of dollars held together with a rubber band. Call this number on arrival in London and they'll sort you out with more money."

"OK," said Frank. "So, all it means is that Lord Fancy Pants needs to get permanently lost, is that it? But I don't do anything and you don't do anything."

Frank had said it aloud. It didn't sound nice like that but we were both pretty much in the same sort of shit.

"That sums it up," I said with an ugly picture of Donaldson sitting in the office he said belonged to MI6 in my mind.

"Permanently lost" was one of Donaldson's favourite expressions. It was used to describe the fate of anything that was no longer required, from a piece of paper to a human being and I remember how he had put it to me as he stood, silhouetted against the window.

"Just think of it as another German or a bloody Jap old chap. The enemy, you know. You shot down one or two of the bastards in your time. Never thought of it twice afterwards, did you? Did your job for Mr Churchill and then, hey presto, back in the cockpit and onto the next one. On this occasion, you don't even have to pull a trigger."

My final minutes in the Red Lantern with Frank were spent in agreeing that Smart was just the man to carry out the deed.

In fact, Smart turned out to have all the attributes for the job.

From what I heard later, once the honourable Lord had been introduced to Smart, Frank's athletic driver, deliberately dressed, for the first time in his life, in a new pair of tight, white slacks, red socks and a royal blue, open necked silk shirt the battle was won. Smart looked really smart for the first time and even Frank had worn a cleaner safari suit. And the Lord went to inspect a non-existent pharmaceutical factory. He was never seen again, having displayed none of the skills required for a miraculous resurrection of the type the other Lord specialized in.

But Frank?

Frank never made it to Gatwick airport. Something went drastically wrong because he was picked up at Kano airport with his false passport and ticket and he, too, disappeared. The next time I went to Lagos, Pennex (Nigeria) Ltd wasn't there. When I crept around one night to look it was just an empty, boarded up factory surrounded by barbed wire. Someone had even stolen the asbestos roof. Frank's concrete house had also been treated in the same way. Frank, too, seemed to have been obliterated. No one knew where he was or where Olga was.

When I got back I told Donaldson. He didn't look at me, of course, but just stood there and shrugged with his hands in his pockets - the usual silhouette against the bright light from the window of his office in Regents Street.

"I heard they're still looking into the Lord's disappearance, Ollie."

The man was always called "The Lord". There was never a name or an official title. At times the poor man was mentioned in the same way as one might recall a sick dog that had had to be put down. At other times, though, Donaldson would infer that high-level investigations were still going on, that scapegoats were being sought and that arrests might be on the cards. He would come out of the shadow and look at me and I knew that if there was ever a necessity to save the skin of himself then I was to be the sacrificial lamb, tethered and ready to be offered up.

The full-length novel, "An Old Spy Story" is available from Smashwords at:

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/319948>

Mitchell (from "Whistleblower")

Mitchell's job that morning was to collect fifty-six boxes from the sea port. He expected hassle but Mitchell never thought too much about that. Life was hassle. Survival was about coping with hassle.

As a truck driver visiting the port of Freetown, Sierra Leone, hassle meant sitting in a sweltering queue of other trucks. It meant arguments over paperwork. It meant coping with obstruction from self-important officials and, if things got really bogged down, it meant handing over a few spare Leone notes that Mr Suleiman, his boss at Mambolo Transport Enterprises gave him to keep safely in his back pocket for whenever there was a need to oil the bureaucratic wheels.

Mr Suleiman liked Mitchell. Mitchell was future management material.

That morning, Mitchell dealt with the hassle by leaning from the open window of his truck shouting to fellow drivers and smoking cigarettes that he rolled himself with a few leaves of something he bought on the road out towards the port. And, in between, he would gulp water from a two-litre plastic bottle that stood amongst the clutter of newspapers, empty Coke cans and the old tee shirt he used to wipe his wing mirror when it rained.

He had finally driven out of the port at eleven fifteen with fifty-six boxes that, according to the paperwork, contained second hand laptop computers for a charity called School Aid, Freetown, Sierra Leone. They had come all the way from the port of Felixstowe in England. Mitchell's destination now, according to Mr Suleiman's instructions, was Rocki General Supplies in Sani Abacha Street. Ready waiting at Rocki General Supplies would be another one hundred and fifteen boxes waiting to be taken somewhere else.

In the heat of the market chaos on Sani Abacha Street, Mitchell was carefully reversing his tarpaulin covered truck into a small overcrowded space between boxes of tee shirts and crates of yams and surrounded by people walking by on all sides with bundles on their heads. Amongst all the heat and noise, Mitchell's simple plan was to get the rear of his truck as close as possible to the rusted front door of Rocki General Supplies. But an argument had erupted because the tail end had struck an umbrella being set up to shade a stack of cans of lime green paint and caused it to topple onto the yams. Mitchell, leaning from the open truck window with beads of sweat running from his forehead, was the target of the abuse. But, still smoking and still smiling, he reversed the last few feet up to the doors and rattled on a handle.

The man who opened it was wearing a dusty, ill-fitting suit, a tie and off-white shirt. A puff of cool, air-conditioned air wafted towards Mitchell as the door was scraped open and he stood for a fleeting moment to enjoy it. "Good day, Mr Moses" he said politely. "It is very hot today. I have fifty-six boxes of computers. They are for Daisy Charity. I think that is you, Mr Moses."

Mr Moses was a man of few words. "Over there."

Mitchell sweated for half an hour carrying the heavy boxes one by one into the dark recesses of the sweltering warehouse. As Mr Moses watched from just inside his cool office, he piled them as neatly as he could, but not too high in case they toppled. Then, when he'd finished, he went to the truck, swallowed the last drops from his water bottle and returned with his clip board for Mr Moses to sign the paperwork. "And you has one hundred and fifty boxes for me to collect, Mr Moses?"

"Be seated."

Mitchell sat on a wooden crate until Mr Moses reappeared. "Take your truck to the rear entrance. There you will find one hundred and fifty boxes."

"Is they big, big or small, small, Mr Moses?"

"It does not matter. You must take them all."

Mitchell clambered back into his truck, drove away, took the first turning left, left again and reversed up to the rear entrance of Rocki General Supplies where Mr Moses sat waiting on a chair besides one hundred and fifty boxes that Mitchell thought might just fit inside his truck. He removed his shirt and set to work. When he'd finished, he wiped his sweating face. "They is all loaded, Mr Moses. Is there something to sign?"

"No."

"So where is you want them delivered Mr Moses?"

Mr Moses scribbled something on a scrap of paper and Mitchell looked at it. "Ayyyya! Sulima is nearly in Liberia. Maybe I do not arrive today or tomorrow but the next day."

It took Mitchell two days to reach Sulima after a punctured tyre somewhere between Moyamba and Mano and trouble with his engine outside Sumbuya that he fixed with a piece of wire. But he found Sulima Construction. It was a rectangular concrete block building with a corrugated roof in a litter-filled side street by the river that smelled of used engine oil and sea breezes. But it was not until he started unloading the one hundred and fifty boxes that he noticed the labels on the boxes. 'Daisy Children's Charity', they said. Mitchell then drove back to Freetown.

A few days later Mitchell had another delivery for Mr Moses. "It is two hundred boxes," said Mr Suleiman.

"But I can only fit one hundred and forty boxes in the truck and ten on the front seat," said Mitchell.

"No problem. You take one hundred this morning and one hundred this afternoon."

"But if Mr Moses wants them taken to Sulima I will be gone for four days, maybe eight days." said Mitchell. "We need a bigger truck."

"No problem," said Mr Suleiman, "Let us see what Mr Moses wants."

"I don't like Mr Moses," said Mitchell, "And he doesn't like me."

"That's because he's a fraudster, a crook and a skimmer, Mitchell. All skimmers are like that. They don't like people. They only like money and they always want more. Now, go. Do not be late. And here is the money to give to the customs man if he is difficult today. We will add it to Mr Moses' invoice."

The hassle at the airport freight terminal was never as bad as the sea port and Mitchell's papers were all in order. Two hundred boxes of water purifiers it said on the documents and they were, indeed, smaller than the last consignment. One by one, Mitchell loaded them into his truck. He was sweating heavily as he prepared to leave. Then he heard someone shouting. "Stop, stop."

Granville, the warehouse manager, was running towards him. "Big mistake. They give you wrong pallets. These boxes are for not for you. Your boxes are still inside the warehouse. They arrived last night Swissair. Big mistake. Tamba very careless, too much girlfriend and too much poyo. I slap him hard."

"OK," said Mitchell, "So you want me to unload my truck again?"

"Please start now."

Mitchell began to unload the two hundred boxes once more and re-stack them on empty pallets.

"These other boxes are very light," said the forklift truck driver, "It is easy for you. You should not complain so much. Just do your job."

Job completed, Mitchell went to look for Granville to make sure everything was now in order. He found him in his office drinking ginger beer and eating benny cake in his

office. "I have reloaded the new boxes," he said, wondering if he might be invited to partake of a drop of ginger beer. "Is the paperwork OK?"

"Yes," said Granville with his mouth full. "No problem, it was the wrong boxes but not the wrong paperwork."

"I'll be going, then," said Mitchell, lingering just a fraction, his mouth as dry as the dust on Granville's desk.

"OK," said Granville and took another bite of benny cake.

This time, Mitchell drove his truck slowly and carefully along Sani Abacha Street, He reversed the truck up to the metal doors of Rocki General Supplies and knocked.

"You are late," Mr Moses said.

"Sorry Mr Moses," Mitchell said. "There was a problem at the airport. They gave me the wrong boxes."

"Bring them inside. There should be two hundred and fifteen boxes."

"Ah, no sir, two hundred boxes. It is two hundred. The papers show two hundred. I will show you." Desperately hoping nothing else was wrong, Mitchell returned to his cab, retrieved the paperwork and showed it to Mr Moses. "Two hundred boxes, Mr Moses. You see? And they have blue writing. It says UNICEF."

"OK, I will check everything when you have finished."

"Do they need to go to Sulima, Mr Moses?"

"No."

It took Mitchell another hour to unload and restack the two hundred boxes. When he'd finished he went in search of Mr Moses and found him sitting inside the small, dark, inner office with the strip light on and the air conditioning unit rattling. He knocked, Mr Moses got up, opened the door and stood there, the cool air streaming from the inside like the meat cold store that Mitchell sometimes delivered to. "I have finished Mr Moses. Two hundred boxes with UNICEF printed on the outside. Please can you sign here."

"I will check first."

Moses closed the door behind him but Mitchell had already seen a cramped office, a desk piled high with files and paper, filing cabinets and shelves, box files and a trash bin overflowing with more paper. He also saw a crate of unopened Coca Cola bottles and a 'fridge with more files stacked on top. But Mitchell followed Mr Moses through the warehouse to the boxes he'd just stacked so neatly.

"Open one."

Mitchell took a box down, took his truck keys from his pocket and used it to score along the brown tape seal. He pulled open the flaps and stood back.

"What is this? It is empty. Just newspapers. Open another."

Mitchell repeated the operation.

"It is nothing but old Italian newspapers. What is going on? Where are the water purifiers?" Mitchell, seeing the look on Mr Moses's face backed away. "What have you done?"

"Nothing, Mr Moses. Maybe big mistake at the airport, but I only did what I was told."

As Mr Moses checked another box, Mitchell ran from the warehouse, jumped into his truck, started the engine, drove off and hit an umbrella. But he didn't stop to apologise.

At the end of the day, Mitchell was feeling more relaxed. The day had started badly with Mr Moses and the boxes full of nothing but newspapers, but his delivery of live chickens had gone without a hitch with only one chicken found dead on arrival. As usual he reversed the truck into his allocated space next to the concrete block headquarters of Mambolo Transport Enterprises and jumped out.

In a line next to his truck were the three small vans that made up the rest of the fleet, but he was surprised to find the three van drivers, Samson, Big Saidu and George, sitting together on a pile of wooden pallets outside. With the exception of Mr Suleiman himself, Mitchell was normally the last to leave. "What's up my man," he said to the three.

"You must go to airport," said George.

"Why? I was there this morning."

They looked at one another. It was Big Saidu who spoke. "Big problem, Mitchell. Mr Moses from Rocki Supplies came here this afternoon. Samson saw him."

"Yah," said Samson. "Big argue-ation. Moses very vexed. Suleiman come out, seem very gladdy and say to him, 'Ow du boddy?' - polite like - but Moses ala man, he stat to shout too much. Say Suleiman is big teef. Say cost him fifty tousin dollah. No much fun, Mitchell. I see every ting with mine eye. Then Moses he show big knife and come to Suleiman, but Suleiman brave man. He stop, say let me alone, I not big teef. Suleiman stand tall. Say come in office, sid dan, tock man to man."

"I warned Mr Suleiman," Mitchell said. "Mr Moses is trouble. Suleiman says Moses is a big teef and a skimmer. But Moses thinks I, Mitchell, am the big teef. I told Mr Suleiman. Where is Mr Suleiman?"

"He went to airport," said George. "He want you go there. Check things out. See what happen."

"OK, I'll go now. But you got any watta, man?" Mitchell asked, resigning himself to an extension to his day. "I gave all my watta to chicken but bastad still die."

Mitchell then raced to Lunghi airport, hoping Mr Suleiman was still there and thinking all the while about the old cargo warehouse he'd been to that morning. It was small, too small and many pallets and boxes were often left standing outside, even in the rain. No wonder they made mistakes.

"Disorganised mess," said Mitchell to himself as he drove. "And that bloody man Tamba - people like him only make things worse - drinking poyo, fucking around when he have job to do."

Mitchell knew about warehouses. He visited them nearly every day. But the old warehouse at Lunghi was not secure. There was nothing for cold storage, dangerous goods or even weighing and many airlines refused to carry goods due to the lack of security checks. But, somehow, Mitchell's consignment of two hundred boxes had arrived and so, it would seem, had two hundred boxes containing Italian newspaper instead of water purifiers. He stopped his truck at exactly the same spot as that

morning and saw Mr Suleiman and Granville, the manager, sitting on chairs just inside the warehouse entrance.

"Ah, here is my driver," Suleiman said. "We will ask him..... Now then Mitchell, please sit.....OK, no more chair, then you must stand..... Are you sure that all the boxes contained newspaper and not water purifiers?"

"I don't know, I didn't check all two hundred. Mr Moses was still checking when I left."

"OK, listen. There is too much confusion here. Still sitting in the warehouse behind us are two hundred boxes. Granville and I just checked them. They all contain water purifiers. The paperwork says they are for Daisy Children's Charity but there is no Daisy Children's Charity in Sierra Leone. And Mr Granville cannot find Freeways Freight Forwarding in Milan in his book. That is why these boxes are still here.

"But Mr Granville received a telex from Freeways Freight Forwarding admitting an error in the paperwork and asking that the boxes be released to Rocki General Supplies. Mr Granville did not know what to do because Daisy Children's Charity is in Liberia not Sierra Leone. And also, something was changed on the documents that were faxed. Mr Granville said it smelled like old fish.

"Then the new consignment of two hundred boxes arrived by Swiss Air also addressed to Daisy Children's Charity with a Post Office Box address but with no consignee's name. Contents of boxes shown as water purifiers. Correct, Mr Granville? I will now ask the warehouse manager, Mr Granville, to explain."

Granville coughed. "This is very bad. I do not know what is happening here."

"Thank you, Mr Granville. That is a very clear conclusion and very honest."

"Now then, Mitchell. Please tell Mr Granville that I once told you that Moses from Rocki General Supplies is a fraudster and one big-time skimmer."

"Yes, sir." Mitchell replied. "It is true. My boss warned me that Moses is a teef and a big-time skimmer, Mr Granville."

"You see?" said Suleiman. "He is up to no good. It is well known in Freetown, but people are scared to say. They keep quiet because Moses has a big silver Mercedes and a driver with a gun and knows the Government and the Ministers and they think he has other big friends with important jobs. But I am not afraid."

Mitchell raised his hand as if wanting to offer something new. He did.

"Mr Suleiman, sir. Please do not forget that I delivered fifty-six boxes that according to the paperwork contained three hundred second hand laptop computers to Mr Moses last week. These were for a charity called School Aid but I delivered them to Mr Moses. Do you think you should also check if there is a charity called School Aid? And there were boxes marked UNICEF. I see same UNICEF on TV. And I took many boxes from Mr Moses all the way to Sulima. It took me four days. It was for a company called Sulima Construction but Sulima Construction was like an empty garage, Mr Suleiman. And I saw labels with Daisy Charity on these boxes also. And I see UNICEF boxes on a boat going to Liberia."

"This is all good thinking, Mitchell," Mr Suleiman turned to Granville. "There is something going on here. I smell bad fish and dead rats. Mr Mitchell is my best driver, Granville. He is the eyes and ears of Mambolo Transport Enterprises Maybe he will become a manager one day."

"So, what will you do?" Granville asked.

Suleiman beckoned Granville to sit forward. "Mr Moses pull a knife on me but I never pull a knife. I pull rugs. I pull carpet. Moses is not the only one with friends. I pull strings."

Suleiman started with a manager at Standard Chartered Bank. "There is no Daisy Children's Charity in Sierra Leone," said the manager, "Neither is there a charity called Schools Aid, but we checked and there is a charity called Schools Aid for Africa in England. They send second hand laptops to Africa."

Suleiman noted it and went on his way. His next stop was his old school friend Seymour at the Pyramid Bank because he knew they had a branch in Sulima.

"Sulima Construction?" Seymour scratched his head. "I'll phone Wesley in Sulima."

Suleiman waited.

"Wesley says there is no company called Sulima Construction and he has lived in Sulima since he was born."

"Let me speak to Wesley," said Suleiman and took over Seymour's telephone. "My driver has been there so there must be a Sulima Construction. It is by the river, across from the boatyard, a concrete building with a tin roof."

"Ah, no sir, I know that building. It is owned by Cherry Enterprises. It is a warehouse for storing goods before they are put on the boats for Liberia."

"And who owns Cherry Enterprises, Mr Wesley?" asked Suleiman.

"It is a man called Mr Moses."

"Aha," said Suleiman, smiling and nodding towards Seymour. "And the office of Cherry Enterprises is also in the concrete building?"

"Oh, no, no, sir. Cherry Enterprises has an office in the town. There is Cherry Trading, Cherry Transport, Cherry Industries, Cherry this and Cherry that, sir. So many cherries I cannot remember."

"And Mr Moses owns these companies?"

"That I cannot say, sir. Maybe he owns all of them or just some of them, but all of the Cherry companies trade in Liberia and Nigeria and they own many boats by the river."

Suleiman thanked Seymour and Wesley, returned to his office and checked his watch. It was late morning in London - a good time to phone his cousin, Cole.

Cole Harding, distant cousin to Suleiman, a lawyer and senior partner in Fitzgerald, Waterman & Harding was, just as Suleiman imagined, at his desk in his smart office in Brighton, England. He had long ago ditched immigration problems in favour of commercial advice to West Africans with businesses. He could smell a rogue a mile off and deeply disliked the fraud and corruption that was rife across West Africa. "It is the hard-working poor who create the wealth," he had once written in a commercial law magazine, "Why should they be the ones who suffer from greedy politicians, thieves and corrupt big businesses?"

The keen sense of smell for bad fish and dead rats ran in the extended Suleiman family and Cole Harding would drop everything for a day or so if he smelled something rotten. He quickly understood what Suleiman was saying and noted

names, companies and charities. By mid-afternoon he had also spoken to the Charity Commission and the National Fraud Authority about the level of charity fraud. The information, as he had expected, was shocking with the National Fraud Authority estimating that fraud against the charity sector cost over one billion pounds a year.

He spoke to Schools Aid Africa, a small English charity that took free gifts of old laptop computers from the public, made them fit to use, boxed them up and sent them to places like Sierra Leone. "Do they reach their destination?" Harding asked. They didn't know. They hoped so.

"If I told you a consignment you recently sent to Sierra Leone was stolen and resold in Liberia and Nigeria for tens of thousands of dollars what would you say?" They were shocked.

"So, who do you deal with in Sierra Leone?" he asked.

That was easy. It was Daisy Children's Charity who were not just in Sierra Leone but had branches in Liberia, Nigeria and Ghana. Had they checked Daisy Children's Charity out? Well, no, not thoroughly, after all it was a name given to them by the British Embassy and so was bound to be legitimate. Had they ever meet anyone from Daisy Children's Charity? Oh yes. A nice man called Mr Moses had met them in London two years ago to explain how his charity worked. And how did they send their computers to Sierra Leone when the airport was well known to be a little unreliable. That was also easily explained. They had been told to use an Italian company, Freeways Investment, who always used Swiss Air. All they had to do was send the computers to Freeways Freight Forwarding in Milan and Freeways did the rest. They were, after all, a charity, so couldn't be expected to check everything. Resources were thin on the ground.

By midnight Harding had decided that all the businesses run by the man Moses - Rocki General Supplies, Sulima Construction and a whole list using the name Cherry - had all the hallmarks of professional scam organisations. At four in the morning, Harding was at his computer researching fraud in charities and international aid and at 9am he phoned a company that advised governments on criminal use of international aid. Oh yes, they said, this fits perfectly into what we already know. In fact, we are working closely with the FBI, Interpol and the Commercial Fraud Authority on this very matter.

Cole Harding called Suleiman. Suleiman summoned Mitchell to his office.

For Mitchell It had been another long, hot day and the sun was setting in a red ball over the Atlantic Ocean beyond the fence and through a row of silhouetted coconut palm trees. He reversed his truck into his allocated space, switched his engine off and jumped down. Samson, Big Saidu and George were already there, sitting and smoking on the wooden pallets outside.

"What's up my man?" Mitchell called out.

"Mr Suleiman, he want to see you," said Big Saidu.

"Him very serious this day," added Sampson, grinning. "He tok about that bastad Moses, say he know now he big teef and skimmer. Say he have proof. Say he wanna speak to you, Mitchell. You must go, fast like. He's in the office."

"OK," said Mitchell. "But you got any watta, man? I gave all my watta to lady who sell banana but still not get any free banana."

Mitchell knocked on Mr Suleiman's office door and went in.

"Ah, Mitchell. We have a serious matter."

"Something I did, Mr Suleiman?"

"No, no. It's that bastard Moses. He is a criminal, Mitchell, a big-time crook, a scammer and a thief."

"You see, Mr Suleiman? I told you."

"But my cousin Cole in England told me more. Now then, Mitchell, listen carefully. Tomorrow I need you to be like that big, fat lady from Botswana. You know who I mean? The lady detective - except you are not a lady."

Mitchell scratched his head.

"I have a plan, Mitchell. Tomorrow you must deliver some boxes to Rocki General Supplies."

"How many. Mr Suleiman?"

"I don't know, maybe ten. The number is not important, Mitchell. Listen and do not interrupt. Tomorrow you will deliver ten boxes to Rocki General Supplies. They are water purifiers that were lost at the airport but now found. It will be a nice surprise for Mr Moses so when you turn up he will be very pleased to see you. Now, listen carefully. Mitchell. Tell him you want him to check inside the boxes. When he is not looking you must do something. You must stick this little machine in his office near his telephone. His office is a big mess, yes?"

"A very big mess, Mr Suleiman, but what is that in your hand?"

"This? This is a voice recorder."

"Where did you get it, Mr Suleiman?"

"From my cousin, Cole, in England. DHL delivery this morning. There are two little machines. They are like brother and sister. This one is for Mr Moses and this one is for you. You must take it and sit outside in Sani Abacha Street for three days to listen to what Mr Moses says. Then you must go back and retrieve the first machine before he finds it."

Next morning, Mitchell knocked on the metal door of Rocki General Supplies warehouse for so long that his knuckles hurt.

"Shit, shit," he muttered, increasingly worried he'd have to return having failed to accomplish his mission. In the truck were ten boxes and in his pocket was the little black box with the wire hanging from it and he knew exactly where he was going to stick it if he got inside. Tired of waiting, Mitchell shouted, "Mr Moses!" through the gap by the hinges.

"You looking for big boss Moses, my man?"

The voice came from behind - a tall, thin man in jeans and tee shirt, a ring hanging from his left ear, a colourful, hand-knitted hat on his head and a burning cigarette fixed between his thumb and first finger. Dense blue smoke drifted in Mitchell's direction. The man, it seemed, had just arrived in an old Peugeot car. Its passenger door hung open and loud music blared from inside. Another man was in the driver's seat, tapping his fingers and shaking his head in time with some heavy beat.

"Ah, yes," said Mitchell. "I have an urgent delivery."

"Moses, he's gone away, my man."

"When is he coming back?"

The man shrugged and looked at Mitchell through the smoke but said nothing. Mitchell scratched his head wondering what to do"

"You wanna open the door, my man? Go inside?"

Mitchell looked at the man who was smiling broadly and dangling a big bunch of keys. They rang like church bells in front of his beaming face and white teeth.

"You work here?" Mitchell enquired.

"That's so, my man. Today anyway. You wanna go in or you wanna stand outside all day? What the fuck's your business?"

"A delivery of water purifiers," said Mitchell.

"Them paid for already?"

Mitchell nodded. "Sure, sure."

"That's OK then. Let's do the business my man." He jangled the keys once more, pulled a shiny one out and showed it to Mitchell. "That your truck?"

"Sure, mon." said Mitchell quick to realise he was conversing not with a local but with a Nigerian and so deciding to speak like one. "You like Fela Kuti, my mon?" Mitchell added, nodding towards the blaring noise coming from the car.

"Wottsa Leoni doing liking Fela?" The thin man laughed and puffed on his cigarette. "Unload your boxes area boy while I open up this old tin shop."

As the man in the woolly hat disappeared inside in a cloud of smoke, Mitchell returned to his truck, piled up his ten boxes, carried them in, put them down and went back for the paperwork. "I need a signature," he shouted into the dusty darkness of the warehouse.

"I'ze in the office, driver."

Mitchell found the Nigerian sat in Mr Moses' chair, surrounded by the usual piles of files, paperwork and boxes. He was rifling through the contents of a drawer and the air conditioning was on full. "So, what's to sign, my man?" He snapped his thumb. "Give."

"Sign there please," Mitchell said. He looked around as if admiring the luxury and simultaneously stuck the device exactly where he'd intended if Mr Moses had been sitting there. In the gap between the two halves of the desk and covered in files, it was invisible. The Nigerian hadn't looked up from whatever it was he was pulling from the drawer, but he scribbled something on Mitchell's paper and handed it back.

"Is Mr Moses on holiday?" Mitchell asked as he stuffed the useless paper in his pocket.

"Yeh, long one."

"Coming back soon?"

The smoke swirled. The chair squeaked. "Nope."

"Aww. So, you the new boss?"

"Nope." The lanky Nigerian looked straight at Mitchell with red, watery eyes and puffed out another cloud of pungent smoke. He shifted his hat. "Moses is gone, my man. We took over his business."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"To visit the angels."

"Waaah! Was he so sick?"

"No, someone shot him. He's ti ku ati lo, my man. Dead and gone to the angels."

"Waaaah jeez" said Mitchell holding his hand to his mouth. "So sad. I liked Mr Moses. Would you like to negotiate a contract with Mambolo Transport Enterprises?"

"What's your terms my man?"

"Anything, anywhere, anyhow," said Mitchell rubbing his eyes because of the smoke.

"Come back tomorrow. I gotta go - my driver's outside."

"So, is it still called Rocki General Supplies?" asked Mitchell.

"No, no. It's now called Freeways Investments."

"So, you the big boss of Freeways Investments?" Mitchell said, edging towards the door.

"No, man, they are in Italy. Big shots, big power, no nonsense. One big, white Dutchman arrive. Make commands like big soldier. Point finger here, point finger there. They took over everything - all the business and all the boats by the river. One same day. Same day someone shot Moses. Co-incidence huh? I work for Freeways in Nigeria. Freeways don't stand no messin' about, man. Know what I mean?"

"Good, good," Mitchel said. "You have a business card?"

"No need for all that shit, area boy. You just deal with me OK? I'm Dada and my driver's Sunday."

"Good, good," Mitchell said. "I'm Mitchel."

Mitchell left soon after and reported to Mr Suleiman.

Mitchel's reward for the new business with Dada and Sunday was a bigger truck but his popularity with the two Nigerians might have been soured if they knew that he often sat in the truck outside recording their conversations on the device he had planted on the desk of the now dead Mr Moses.

"You can stop that job now," Mr Suleiman told him one morning. "All the bad fraudsters, crooks and skimmers have been caught."

"OK, Mr Suleiman," Mitchell replied. "That thin boss man wiv hairy hat, he smoke too much, drink too much poyo and talk too much on phone. And Sunday he da fitta and drivah and sit wid ear to Nigerian music. I like da Fela Kuti music and learn new English."

"What are you saying, Mitchell? You are learning very bad English from those Nigerians. They speak no good."

"But. I learn a lot, Mr Suleiman. Dada's business is very interesting. I shine mine eye"

"Shine mine eye? What sort of English is that?"

"I keep mine eye and ear open. Dada tell Sunday same ting every hour."

"And who is this fella Dada?" asked Mr Suleiman.

"Dada, the thin boss man. Smoke weed and take visitors to bah."

"Mitchell - please speak proper English not Nigerian. What is bah?"

"Bah, Mr Suleiman, bah. Where go drink beer and have lady."

"So, what did you deliver to this fellow Dada today?"

"Free gift from Mambolo Transport Enterprises for to get new business, Mr Suleiman. Two bottles of Star beer and two benny cakes. But Dada have visitor. Big man, fine suit and tie. Very rich but very fussy and speak like no good. Tell me to fok off. That's why I went to sit in my new truck to listen. But I need a new battery soon, Mr Suleiman."

"Who was this rude and badly spoken visitor?"

"Mr Johnson, from London, sah."

"And what is Mr Johnson's business? Can you speak without sounding like a Nigerian?"

"Buy and sell business, Mr Suleiman. It's why I tried to get an even bigger contract but Mr Johnson say they have other transport arrangements and I should fok off."

"What business is that, Mitchell? Speak properly."

"United Nations, sah. Four containers of rice, two containers of tents and six containers of medicine."

Mr Suleiman reached for his telephone and called his cousin, the lawyer, Cole Harding.

The full-length novel, "Whistleblower" is available from Smashwords at: <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/491873>

The Pink Coconut (from "An Old Spy Story")

Donaldson had tried to make a joke about my good friend William Akinbiyi.

I don't like people insulting my friends and I especially didn't like Donaldson doing it.

William had a pronounced lisp, which Donaldson, after meeting him for the first time seemed to find amusing. Coming as it did from a corrupt MI6 officer with whom I had, years ago, become badly mixed up with, I found the joke despicable.

"So, that's your black friend, Will, is it? I liked his mithing ethith and his yeth, thir, no thir, free bag fool, thir. Will o' the lisp, more like, ha!"

"William's an honest man, unlike some I could name," I told Donaldson.

Donaldson had drunk beer and several glasses of wine and was already in a bad mood. He turned to face me. "And what the bloody hell are you implying?" he shouted.

I didn't reply but continued to sit in the chair on the other side of Donaldson's desk, staring at the floor between my legs. My own anger welled up inside. The bastard's silhouette moved from the window. He grasped the back of his swivel chair, turned it, sat in it and then swung back to face me from his side of the desk. His face was flushed as if silence from an accuser was getting to him. "For fuck sake. The whole bloody place is awash with corruption. Top to bloody bottom. The only way to get to the bottom of it is to chance your arm a bit."

It was one of those occasions when Donaldson tried to turn the suggestion around to imply that he was the innocent party. In other words, to beat them you needed to join them. I knew better.

Then, still sitting staring at the carpet between my legs, I asked the question that had been troubling me since he'd asked to meet William with a problem concerning Nigeria. "That might be so, but what the hell has this got to do with MI6? It's a problem for the Nigerian government not yours."

Donaldson disliked questions like that. He exploded. "Christ's sake, man. How many times have I got to say it? Instructions are instructions, understood? Just get out there and get to the bottom of it."

"What instructions?" I asked, "Whose instructions? You think I don't know what you get up to?"

I was pushing it, still not wanting to directly accuse him of manipulating things for his own financial gain because I didn't yet have enough evidence. But he knew what I was getting at.

"Instructions must be obeyed, otherwise shit hits the fan."

He was trying to play the innocent one and I tried to keep calm, speaking slowly but firmly. But I was already mad about things that Donaldson had said during lunch with William.

"No," I said. "I've already told you. I've got my own business to attend to, I've got people coming to UK on business. I dislike letting people down"

It was true. I was trying to run a legitimate export business that for years had been hampered by Donaldson's constant requests for help whilst I travelled. What had started as innocent advice, some courier work and names of a few people had become way out of control. I knew this had nothing to do with MI6 but Donaldson was a manipulator, an intimidator and a vicious blackmailer. I was slowly gathering evidence but I had to be careful.

Donaldson's chair creaked as he leapt up and leaned over the desk towards me. One of his big hands clamped on to some paper, crumpling it still further. The other slid across the polished surface knocking the black telephone, which gave a sharp ring of discomfort at being hit.

Jack, his pathetic sidekick who I also suspected of being blackmailed, cowered by the door and jumped.

“Go now. Not next month, not next week, A-S-A-P, got it? This is fucking urgent. Cancel your bloody visitors and leave the country on the next available bloody flight. This is the best chance we’ve had for months. It cannot be delayed, do you understand? It is imperative we nip it in the bud.”

A few more, well-worn phrases poured out along with the spittle from Donaldson’s thick lips. It was the intense anger and desperation that unnerved me but, as usual, he finished his tirade with a direct threat. The Frank Marshall job had only just passed and memories of Donaldson’s earlier threats made with a gun pointing at my head were still fresh. Slowly sinking back into his chair, he swung it around to face the window again and fell quiet. Then he took a deep breath and spoke in short sentences in a surprisingly quiet voice as though trying to control his impatience and anger. He was facing the window, the usual dark silhouette.

“You know, Ollie, old chap, once you’re embroiled it’s difficult to pull out without all sorts of complications setting in. Government doesn’t like it. Always looking for a scapegoat to save face. I’ve seen it before. They watch you like a hawk. Got to stay one step ahead. Wait for them to lose their jobs. Blasted civil servants always linger though. Asking questions, tipping off Ministers. Don’t know what it’s like at the sharp end. Comfy offices, good pensions. Bloody paper shufflers.”

I was not clear exactly what he was trying to say as I already knew he was one of those bloody paper shufflers with a good pension, albeit enhanced by income from his extra-curricular activities. But he then swung around again and leaned back. Again, he spoke in those strange, short and incomplete sentences.

“You’re a man who likes a bit of spice in his life, Ollie. Never seen you as a bloody paper shuffling civil servant. Like the cut and thrust. Bit of a loner. Not one to sit behind a desk all day. Like me in a way. Need the excitement. But once you’re in it, you’re in it. No way back. Need to make a living. Save for the future. Got a wife and family to think about, but ideal chap for these sorts of jobs. But there’s a lot at stake here old man. We are – all of us – up to our necks in shit. Marked men, one way or another. Step out of line and your fucking throat’s cut. We’re all pushed and leaned on from somewhere. I’m leaned on. You’re leaned on. But the pushing and leaning has to stop somewhere, Ollie.”

Donaldson had paused, perhaps for effect before continuing. “But you, old chap, are bottom of the scrum, so to speak. Who do you lean on?”

He knew the answer to that, of course. I leaned on my wife. And it was Sarah and my family who were in the line of fire if I stepped out of line. Nice man was Donaldson. I left for Lagos.

When I arrived, there was no-one to meet me so I made my own way to my usual fleapit of a hotel and, as usual at the Airport Hotel, there was no telephone, the electricity was off and the water was of the brown drips variety. I ate a dinner of fried eggs and rice and, as night descended, walked the short distance up the red and dusty road to the Pink Coconut Club, the sound of drums and saxophones increasing as I got closer. Mixed with the sticky, humid, air, was the usual Lagos smell – dust, beer and stale sweat. I actually like it and, for a while, I forgot about Donaldson and why I was there.

The Pink Coconut club was largely a tin shack open to the air. Its clientele were mostly the slightly better off locals. But as one of the few, or only, white faces there I found myself, as usual, surrounded by ten or more girls standing, waiting and chattering outside the entrance waiting to be taken in. Then, as usual, I ran the gauntlet of the men in charge and was asked to pay ten times the normal entrance fee.

But one of the most persistent girls held onto me with her sticky hands and escorted me inside, where we found a wobbling, metal table and hard metal chair in the dark shadows, somewhere under the corrugated canopy. She ordered me a beer and for half an hour I sat there, sipping cool beer, soaking up the atmosphere and listening to the loud and throbbing music that blended jazz and blues with a unique West African sound.

And while I sat, I knew eyes were looking in my direction from the darkness. It was normal but I never felt intimidated. Whispering something to the girl sitting alongside to make her laugh would always break the ice. I called to one of the other group of girls who were still lurking in the shadows behind and cracked another silly joke to make them laugh. I bought some more beers, shared them amongst the girls and then sat back while the band played on under dim spotlights and as the flying ants, mosquitoes, moths and bats flitted around.

That night I had not had to wait long before William Akinbiyi turned up.

It was past eleven and I was on my third beer but I heard his characteristic, loud voice as he approached through the shadows behind. It was a voice that broke through the music. "Yeth. You mutht have theen him. You thaw him path thith way?"

I glanced around and the girl sat by me, helping me drink my beer with her hand on my thigh looked behind too.

"Ah. Yeth man. No worry. I thee him, now."

William's gleaming white teeth were the first sight to emerge from the darkness.

"Hey, Mr Thomath – Ollie, my man," he said pushing his way through from twenty yards away, "Glad to thee you. thee you. Making yourthelf at home, I thee."

The tall figure of William then appeared, holding out his big, hot hands.

William's greetings were always the same. One large, sweaty hand would grasp mine. The other would be slapped hard around my shoulders. He scraped up a chair in the dry dust opposite and sat down.

"Hey, haff girlfriend already. Very nithe."

The girl laughed and got up. "You wanna beer?" she asked William.

"Tuthka."

William slapped her as she squeezed by and the hand stayed there briefly, a finger easing its way under her bottom. She shrieked, wriggled, giggled, looked back and moved away to get his bottle of Kenyan Tusker. "So. Lagoth again, Ollie, my man?"

"Nice to be back William," I replied.

William Akinbiyi was one of my many business contacts.

He was an importer of farm tractors and other agricultural equipment and had taken over the business from his father who had died in a farming accident while William

was studying at University in England. We first made contact when I was looking for distributors for tractor spares and I met him at the back of a concrete-block house in Ibadan.

“Yeth. I can thell one hundred a year with all thpare parth. We thervith tractors all over Nigeria from Lagoth to Kano, from Maiduguri to Calabar. No problem.”

Confidence oozed along with the glistening sweat from every pore of William’s body and he had used his English University education to impress all those with lesser qualifications.

These included a wide spectrum of local chiefs and politicians from crooked Christians in the south to money grabbing Moslems in the north. As such William was well placed to know a thing or two about how to manipulate the wretched system that had evolved.

But William had his honourable side. Despite his size, his speech defect and his occasionally coarse behaviour he was likeable. The hard, extrovert layer was a form of protection because, beneath that hard, outer crust was a softer layer. He believed in fairness, respect for others and that you took as much as you could – but only by hard work or by being better than the others.

But it was the more visible, coarser streak that gave him an edge of respect from those in the more dubious quarters. They did not possess the sensitivity to recognize his deeper, nicer side. They thought that he was, like them, mean and selfish in all his dealings. They thought, too, that his respect for others was limited, like theirs, to those who could be snuggled up to, for material gain.

That hour with William was spent in drinking and listening to music but the next morning, after my breakfast of two more fried eggs, he came to the hotel and we sat in the shade offered by some wooden scaffolding to discuss how to deal with the latest assignment set by Donaldson. We had only been there five minutes, though, when William leaned back and said, “Are you hungry, Ollie?”

I wasn’t. The fried eggs were still lying heavily but a salesman’s sacrifices take many forms. “What have you got in mind, William?”

“Lunch my man. My stummy speak loud this morning.”

“A bit early for me, William but if you insist.”

William sprang to his feet. “I know a nice Chinese restaurant, Ollie.”

At the Red Lantern over Mr Ho’s special chow mein, I told William what Donaldson had told me – that large sums of money collected by charitable donations were going astray and that our job was to try to put a few spanners in the works. William seemed pleased. “Plenty thpanners in my shop, Ollie. Made in China so bend like chothtix.”

I didn’t tell William that I rarely believed a word Donaldson said because that meant telling him about my experiences of the last twenty years and I had no wish to sit in the Red Lantern for that long.

But, for William, poor people who gave to charity had no right to see their hard-earned cash being siphoned off into the pockets of the rich and those with know-how and influence. So, it was not difficult to persuade William to ask a few questions and dig around a bit in banks and other places in Lagos. We brainstormed a few well-placed villains likely to be behind it all and William came up with a very likely

candidate. It proved to be spot on and what's more William knew where he lived and had a way to contact him.

"You want tin lichees to finish, Ollie?"

"No thanks, William. That chow mein will stick around my stummy until tomorrow."

I left him to do his further digging and went off to visit another of my business contacts to see if I could get an order to cover the cost of my trip. Two days later, we had devised a rough plan and were off on our mission.

We took a mid-morning internal Nigerian airways flight and by afternoon were bouncing along a red, dirt track in a hired car with the sun flickering between rows of banana trees on either side. The car was swerving to avoid potholes filled with red, muddy water and William was driving with his sunglasses on, his seat on the farthest adjustment backwards, one hand on the steering wheel and the other lying across the back of my seat behind my neck.

"Long way but muth get there before dak, Ollie, my man. Not eathy to fine thith plathe."

Throughout the ride, we went over the plan as best we could although we knew we had to be prepared to change things to suit the rules of their game. I ended up telling William that Donaldson had said he was the bee's knees.

"Bee'th knee'th, Ollie? What the fuck is that? I ain't no little bumble bee. I'm a wothp with a thting and yellow and black thtwipes. Ha ha."

Eventually, he stopped the Peugeot and we walked towards a large house built of concrete blocks alongside a muddy track somewhere in Calabar. "Thith ith the plathe, man."

Later that evening we sat around a table with another Nigerian man in cumbersome ethnic dress of white and gold. A short, fat lady, presumably a wife, in a long colourful dress served up a meal of spicy fish soup and mashed yams as a bottle of Black and White whisky circulated. Much later, we groped our way back down the dark track to the car and headed off, slightly the worse for wear, to find somewhere to stay for the night. On the way, we chatted again.

"You thee, Ollie. There ith a lot of money going athtray. Millions."

It was true and a simple plan for transferring the two million US dollars destined for health clinics across the whole of Nigeria had been made very clear over the fish soup and pounded yams. William's digging and intuition had proved invaluable. Our host for dinner had, only a year or so before, been the Minister charged with delivering the state's health care.

But the one-time Doctor and student from a British medical school who had risen to such heights had, suddenly, found himself to be missing a friend or two and so was out of a job again. Having reached the heights, the only way now was in a downward direction and so he was looking for some income. He already had one or two accomplices but what he really needed was a legitimate company to bounce the deal off and move the funds somewhere.

That the one-time Minister seemed to trust William and me to help was, undoubtedly, down to Donaldson having said something to the Nigerian High Commission because the subject cropped up as we were emptying the bottle of whisky. "So, we

are in good company, Mr Thomas. The wheels are well oiled so to speak. But it's all done and dusted so to speak."

And then we'd had a long and tortuous explanation of why the medical equipment wasn't really needed anyway and that there was a far better use that could be made of the allocated funding if it was transferred elsewhere for other projects.

It was all the usual hypocritical nonsense and, after removing the hundreds of needle-like fish bones from my soup I think I dozed off. I remember our host describing how he had recently joined other high-powered dignitaries in visits to local hospitals and schools, all desperate for funds and, for good measure, speeches had been given about the evil ways of international big businesses that drained the country's limited resources on needless infrastructure projects that always failed to deliver. And the press who followed in droves had been encouraged to take many photos of poverty and terrible living conditions. Mostly they had been courted for votes, of course.

I woke up when we arrived at the crunch point.

"So, we'll soon find a far better use for the funds. But it's the bureaucracy you understand. It takes so long to get the funding in place and then we have to line up all the medical equipment. By then the need has gone."

"So is the equipment already ready and waiting to be shipped," I asked noticing that William looked fast asleep.

"Of course," he said as though I should have known. "It is already paid for. We just need to find a way to release the allocated funds to use for other humanitarian projects. This is where you come in."

He passed the bottle to me once again and I filled my glass. I tapped William with the bottle and saw him wink at me. He was listening.

"Your company will receive a number of Letters of Credit to cover the shipment. The total amount will be around two million dollars. The equipment is already paid for and waiting to be shipped. So, you don't have to buy it. That would put you to too much inconvenience. Then you will receive the shipping documents. You present them to the bank as usual and, under the terms of the credit, the funds will be paid into the Swiss Bank and that's it. Simple! No problem."

I jumped. "I would prefer that the money is paid direct to Thomas Import Export so we can deduct our charges first," I said. "Then we'll transfer the balance."

"Oh no, there has to be some trust here. But your percentage will be transferred immediately."

It was what I'd been expecting. The plan I'd put to Donaldson had changed. "OK," I thought, "I wasn't expecting to make anything, although one percent for my troubles might have been nice."

The question now was whether the rest of the plan would unravel. That plan had been that I would hang onto the whole two million dollars while the scam was reported to the Government and the charity concerned. The authorities were then supposed to pounce. The law would prevail. Honesty would win and Donaldson, as a servant of the Crown working for British Intelligence, the Fraud Squad, Interpol or anyone else that might be interested, was to arrange the pounce.

We left soon after that and groped our way in the dark through the bushes to find the car. Once in the driving seat, William was fully awake and talking nonstop.

“Nithe man, Oliver. Good food. Very fat you thee. Big money. Big idea. Well connected with all them high-grade politician around Calabar. He was Minithter of Health one time in the patht. Knowth all them big chief in Lagos too. Have big farm ath well. Told you already about that. Many people taking big dash to keep quiet. Travel a lot ath well. London, Thwitherland, U Eth A. Well known by High Commithun in London. Belong executive club with British Caledonian and Thwith Air. Friend of Thentral bank and ethpethially New Nigeria Bank. Talk to all them foreign politician too. Yeth, he very fat man.”

William braked heavily, the car skidded to a stop and I thought he’d spotted a place for us to stay but, instead, he looked straight at me and added: “He altho fucking big bathtard Ollie.”

“What to do then, William?”

“Good quethtion.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him, that my worst fears were coming true. “I think we keep to plan A, William. What do you think?”

“Yeth, Ollie. Plan A is the bee’th kneeth,”

Two days later and I was home.

Three weeks later I arrived at the office to find Beaty, my so-called secretary, with what looked like a smile on her face. A Beaty smile was a very rare sight. “Oh, Mr Thomas. Such good news. I’ve just opened the post. We’ve got six letters of credit for the medical equipment contract you mentioned. All confirmed. I can hardly believe it!”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her.

“Good, “I said, trying to look pleased. “Let’s see.”

“Here, Mr Thomas. Look! The big one is for nearly half a million dollars, the smallest for two hundred thousand. I totted it up and it’s one million, nine hundred and fifty thousand dollars. What do you think, Mr Thomas?”

“Mm,” I said, “That was quick. Surprising really.”

“That’s because you went out there, Mr Thomas. I knew you’d win a really big order one day.”

“Yes, good old William,” I said. “He’s done his stuff.”

“But the expiry date is so short, Mr Thomas. Look. It all needs to be shipped within eight weeks. How on earth will we organize it in time? And how are we going to buy the goods to start with? But I expect you have already thought about that, Mr Thomas.”

Beaty was actually very good. Commercial realities rarely passed her by. Normally, such an order would have required me to buy the goods in advance which meant cash. But, for an order of this size, a bank loan would have been the usual route and a charge on the house would have been the security. There would have been other ways but if I didn’t get paid for whatever reason the upshot would be unthinkable. But this was no ordinary deal. The medical equipment had, by means I could only

imagine, already been paid for and were ready to be shipped. Beaty knew nothing of course.

“Special arrangement, Beat,” I replied. “The goods are all ready to go and suppliers will get paid when we do. All we’ve got to do is process the paperwork. Margins aren’t good but we’ll make a little. Christmas bonus.”

“Oh, Mr Thomas, that would be nice.”

With that I seemed to put her mind at ease and she set about her typing once more.

But let me explain, in case you don’t know, that the most commonly sought skill for fraud, especially international fraud, is knowing how to get paid for supplying absolutely nothing. Empty containers can work but containers filled with stolen goods or crates of stones are best as they give weight. An Iranian dealer I once knew was highly skilled in this type of business. He would arrange for right footed army boots to be shipped through one port and left footed boots through another port on the other side of the country. Naturally he refused to accept delivery on the basis of incomplete shipments or wrong contents and also didn’t pay his supplier.

The shippers then auctioned off the containers as useless waste and guess who bid the highest? He then spent a week sitting in the dust of his warehouse in Tehran, carefully matching up the boots again and, hey presto, found himself in possession of two container loads of perfect pairs of army boots that had cost him nothing and were worth a small fortune.

In my case, all I had to do was wait whilst someone, somewhere, organized the shipment of eighteen containers of medical equipment. Then wait for the shipping documents, certificates of origin and all the other pieces of paper to arrive to submit to the bank. True to form, all the documents eventually arrived in the office and everything seemed in perfect order. Beaty did her usual perfect checking job, I double checked them and we submitted them to the bank.

I assumed then that the money would be released and paid to the specified bank. It would have been nice then to see my one percent paid but I didn’t hold my breath and got on with other things. Beaty, thinking everything had gone like clockwork waited for her Christmas bonus.

Not having the heart to tell William what had happened in case he thought I was totally inept and naive, I paid him his agreed amount immediately. Then I went to see Donaldson.

“What can we do, old chap? You’ve done your bit. I understand, the Government wants to keep it under wraps at present. Let them deal with it through normal diplomatic channels. I’ll keep you posted.”

While his sidekick Jack stood nervously rubbing his chin by the door, Donaldson went to the window of the Regent Street office and looked out. But I could distinctly see his reflection in the window glass. Donaldson was trying not to laugh.

Oh yes, I thought, case proven.

I said nothing but took a deep breath and looked at his pathetic sidekick, Jack Woodward to see whether anything similar had registered with him. But no, there was no expression from the man except one that suggested confusion, uncertainty, doubt and a total lack of comprehension. He stood there, rubbing his cheeks and chin as usual, a man completely under someone else’s control or completely out of

his depth. Here was an ex-serviceman who had become a yes man, probably on a minimum wage and standing there like a dumb waiter too scared for whatever reason even to say boo. So, I gave Jack the same smirk I'd seen on Donaldson's face and spoke to Donaldson's back.

"Ah well," I said, "you win some and you lose some. I'll be on my way, then."

It was then that Jack managed to find a few words. "See you soon, Ollie."

"Sure," I said and walked out.

On Christmas Eve, I gave Beaty her bonus. On Christmas Day, William phoned me at home from Nigeria.

"Ollie, I don't understand."

"What's the problem, William?"

"About the two million poundth medical equipment." "You paid me my commithun."

"Yes," I said.

"But I think thumthing went wrong, Ollie."

"Yes, I know, William. But don't worry I was expecting it. You did your best and that's why I paid you."

"Did you get paid, Ollie?"

"No, William but, fortunately, it has only cost me some time."

"But you know what, Ollie? The fucking bathtards sent thirty thix Merthaydeeth cars in the containers inthted of medical equipment."

"Mm," I said, "I was expecting something like that. There's been a spate of theft of brand new Mercedes around south London."

"You get a Merthaydeeth, as well, Ollie?"

"No, William, still got the Ford."

"All of them are fucking bathtards, Ollie."

"I know," I said. "Have a good Christmas, William."

"And you Ollie."

The full-length novel, "An Old Spy Story" is available from Smashwords at:

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/319948>

The Peacock (from "Vendetta")

For his flight to Bangkok, Ritchie Nolan wore Converse trainers, tight black jeans, white tee shirt and a black, nylon jacket 'accessorised' with dark glasses and a Star Wars baseball cap worn back to front.

"Look the part," his new boss, Mark Dobson had told him and he'd done his best but Richie's main concern was whether he could live up to expectations. The phone call

had come as he'd been standing before a mirror practicing realistic sobbing at drama school in north London. He'd been told to meet someone at Costa Coffee. The interview had been one of the weirdest experiences in all his twenty-six years.

His interviewer's pale face had born all the downtrodden looks of a struggling family solicitor, an accountant or estate agent who rarely saw the sun and who's only source of nourishment was Costa's mozzarella paninis. Those superficial impressions were soon quashed.

"It's highly specialised detection work," Colin Asher of Asher & Asher had told him." International fraud, corruption, money laundering. That sort of thing. We often work with the SIS, MI6, the FBI and the CIA. Interested?"

Ritchie's face had brightened. "My father works for one of those. But he never talks about it."

"Quite right, too," Asher had said sipping his latte. "You can't bring work home every night to discuss around the dinner table with the wife and kids. Good friend of ours is Keith. He recommended you and said the chances of you finding any meaningful employment on TV or in Hollywood were limited to the point of unachievable. But he thought we might be able to use some of what you learned during your first week of drama classes."

Richie's black eyes set in his brown, part Jamaican face surrounded by long and tightly knitted black curls tied with brightly coloured strings, had shone briefly but clouded again when Asher warned him that if he bragged, exaggerated or even dreamed of telling anyone what he was doing, his father would quickly find a way of dealing with him. And if his father didn't, then one or more of Asher & Asher's foreign clients certainly would. So, was he still interested?

"Might be. Well, yes. I suppose. Big company, is it?"

"Just me and my partner Mark Dobson with two part-time ladies nicked from the old Fraud Squad. You'll work with Mark. He's in Taiwan at present. We cover all corners of the globe, north, south, east and west of Edgware Road. Still interested?"

"You travel a lot?" Ritchie had asked, wetting his finger to remove a speck of north London street dirt from the toe of his trainers.

"Me? No, not if I can help it. Mark does that with a few different names and passports. I just guard the office in Edgware Road. It's a bit like a miniature MI6, CIA or GCHQ. You any good on IT?"

Ritchie livened up again. "Oh sure. I've got an iPhone."

"Good man. Software? AshHack317, 318 and 319, for example?"

"Um, I'm not too familiar with those."

"Not surprising really," Asher had told him. "I wrote them myself."

But he'd passed the interview, spent a day or so with Mark Dobson and this was his first assignment.

It wasn't his choice of hotel, though. Its facilities seemed limited. The entrance area was provided with three red plastic chairs, a table and a drinks and snacks machine. To the left of the front door was a window into a small, dark office so Ritchie bent

down and peered through it. Unable to see anything with his dark glasses on, he took them off and dropped them into the top pocket of his jacket.

In the improved light he could see a Chinese waving cat, a bunch of plastic orchids and the hotel's receptionist spoon-feeding herself something from a plastic dish. Ritchie coughed. She didn't get up but pushed her dish aside, continued chewing and looked at him. Ritchie handed his passport through the window. She took it, opened it, sprayed soggy rice grains over it, brushed them off with her hand and tried reading the name. "How long you stay Mr Pakka?"

Richard 'Ritchie' Nolan, temporarily known as Michael 'Micky' Parker had, of course, no idea. "I don't know," he said.

"Room 20. First floor. Have a nice stay, Mr... ah, Pakka."

Ritchie nodded, took the length of dirty string that the key hung from, picked up his bag and headed for the concrete stairs next to the vending machine. He inserted some coins, pressed a button that said Fanta and a can rattled heavily into the box. He retrieved it, pulled the ring, swallowed some and wiped his mouth with his hand. That was when he spotted someone sitting behind the machine reading a newspaper.

"Good evening," Mark Dobson said.

Ritchie nodded but, as instructed, ignored him and took the stairs.

Micky Parker. Aged twenty-six. British passport, third generation West Indian, skin paled from its original chocolate brown by various mixed liaisons over those three generations. Course black hair, the vestiges of African curls, cut short at the back and sides but longer on the top where four inches of ginger rinse had recently added extra inches to his height. He almost made six feet three. The coloured strings had gone. This more recent hair styling was by Scissors of Tottenham, the gel from a tub by Gillette and the rimless Jaguar shades from John Lewis of Brent Cross.

Ritchie replaced the Jaguars, mounted the stairs and, because things had turned dark again, took the wrong direction at the top of the stairs. First, he turned left - odd door numbers to the left, even ones to the right, but then retraced his steps to try again - odd numbers to the right, even ones to the left.

Micky Parker's destination was, of course, door number 20 and when he arrived he finished the last drops of orange Fanta and, because he needed both hands, he put the can by the door, pushed it against the wall with his foot, found his key and entered his room. Then he retrieved his empty can, closed the door behind him, leaned on it and looked around.

"Fuck me."

It was a good start. The expression was undoubtedly what Micky Parker would have said. Richie Nolan was acting, feeling his way, dipping his toe in the character and mannerisms of Micky Parker.

The character had been Mark Dobson's idea because a middle-aged man who sat watching others and tried mixing with certain types of perhaps a younger generation was too easily picked out for what he really was however much he tried. And Dobson really did not look good in trainers, sunglasses, ear studs and a baseball cap. Bangkok had enough suspicious-looking middle-aged, male foreigners without him adding to the numbers.

Richie Nolan, though, had only a vague idea about what he was to become involved with. Whatever it was, and he was to find out sooner rather than later he suspected he'd already failed as Micky Parker because Micky Parker would have kicked that empty Fanta can right down the corridor just to see how far it travelled without bouncing. Richie Nolan, on the other hand, had retrieved it and looked for the nearest trash bin.

On the plus side, however, Micky Parker would definitely have said, "Fuck me," at the sight of his room because the room was clearly not in the price bracket of the Sheraton or the Hilton which Richie imagined he could expect in his new job as an international commercial crime investigator. His room at the Sabaidee Mansion offered little more than a single bed and a window with flimsy curtains that would never meet in the middle.

It was also swelteringly hot but there was an air conditioner, which he switched on, and a wet room of sorts with tiling done by someone learning the trade. It had a toilet with no paper but what was known in those parts as a bum gun that, depending on the variable water pressure either dribbled out or shot such a force of water up your backside that it almost came out of your ears. It had a sink with a single tap, a small, thin rectangle of wrapped soap and a blue plastic pipe that emerged through the concrete wall terminating in a shower head. And there was a faint odour of mould mixed with air that had passed through the air-conditioner. The single bed was covered with a white duvet so Richie flung it back to check beneath. No stains, no hair, no undue wrinkles. OK. It was sleep-able.

He parked his bag by the bed, removed his jacket and tee shirt and checked his phone. Nothing. So, he pulled back the curtain and looked out.

The view was what Micky Parker would probably have called 'a fucking donkey's arsehole of a mess'. This might be a modern suburb close to the international airport but there were still large areas undergoing modernisation and Thais still liked their long-legged chickens. And their dirty, scratching dogs.

There were clumps of weeds in corners shaded by dark, rough wood, a ubiquitous 7 Eleven plastic bag lying flattened in a pool of blackish water from a dripping air conditioner. And everything of course was covered in dust, pigeon shit, lumps of waste construction material and other crap.

Micky Parker's personal habits were unlikely to surpass this so Richie practiced the donkey's arse comparison aloud in his best north London. "Jesus, what a fucking donkey's asshole." He'd forgotten to add 'of a mess' but he was, after all, still rehearsing the part.

And that's when Richie's phone rang. It did so with a blast of electronically generated noise that no sane human could have composed. Richie didn't like it but Micky Parker would have. He swiped it. "Yo."

"Are you in?"

"Just arrived, mate. Saw you downstairs lurking like a fucking peasant."

Mark Dobson wasn't sure he liked being addressed like that by a new recruit but he rose above it.

"Right. Instructions. Head east along Lat Krabang road towards the airport turn off around nine o'clock. Look for the Peacock, a big, brash place. Unmissable. Snooker

and bar on the street front, another bar up the stairs. Loud music everywhere. You'll love it. Go to the upstairs bar. It's recently become popular with drinkers of the type we're interested in. Russians. Pattaya-types. Mingle. Sniff around. Get cosy. Casual chatting. You're in business, wheeling and dealing, looking for opportunities. You know the score, just like we discussed. Drink Tiger beer with plenty of ice to keep a clear head. Sit and play with your phone. If it looks good I'll phone you to perform the way we rehearsed."

"Where will you be?"

"Close by. You beginning to feel like Micky Parker yet, Richie?"

"Just don't fucking mess with me, bruv, OK? Shut the fuck up."

"Not bad but try making it a bit more Dagenham, Essex."

"So where are you staying, Mark?"

"Room 42 above."

"What here? In this same bleedin' dump?"

"Dump Richie? You're on generous Asher & Asher expenses. Be grateful for the nice room with views over the bright city lights."

"Yeh. One fucking cockerel that looks like Roadrunner and a rabid dog with a skin condition. You think I should try rubbing some moisturiser around his balls?"

"Not his balls, Richie. They're far too sensitive. You don't want to catch rabies on your first day at work. It won't look good on your CV. But it must be the same cockerel and dog I'm looking at from up here. But if you see me, don't even nod, OK? We don't know each other. We pass like strangers in the night until I tell you otherwise. Understand?"

"So how long are we staying, Mark?"

"As long as it takes, Ritchie. Stay cool."

Ritchie changed from his travel wear into clothes more suitable for a Micky Parker evening out. He still wore the Converse trainers and black jeans but pulled on a grey tee-shirt with 'Chang' printed across the front. His hair was freshly spiked and gelled and the red colouring glistened in the flickering bathroom light.

Mark Dobson's evening attire hadn't changed. He was reading a week-old copy of the Bangkok Post when, at eight-thirty, Ritchie trotted down the stairs with the small bag slung over his shoulder. After a good hour watching himself in the bathroom mirror and further developing the Micky Parker character, Ritchie was convinced he looked awesome.

Along the short, rubble-strewn track from the Sabaidee was the hectically busy Lat Krabang road, a noisy and brightly lit dual carriageway, an east-west artery into and out of Bangkok that passed close by Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport.

It was busy night and day. At night, bright, coloured lights dazzled from cars, motorcycles, shops, 7 Elevens, bars and cafes. Charcoal smoke from food stalls curled past bare light bulbs hung on wires, plastic bag fly deflectors whirled above meat and sausage stalls and the nearer you got to the night-market, the walkway become a dark, crowded and greasy obstacle course of broken concrete where no-

one looked where they were going because they were all on mobile phones. Cars, taxis, buses and motorcycles roared past, stopping only when the lights at the main turn off to the airport turned red. Away from the main road Lat Krabang was a modern suburb with gated residential areas and high apartment blocks. It was cosmopolitan and a certain type of foreigner loved it.

Richie heard the Peacock long before he saw the lights. Brightly lit peacocks in pink, red, green, purple and blue stood or perched everywhere as western music blared from loudspeakers. It was definitely a Micky Parker type of place so Richie took a quick stroll past to get the feel.

The front of the establishment was separated from the walkway by a thin line of gold coloured chain-link fencing. Behind that were the LED peacocks and tables and chairs occupied by girls in short skirts sitting with their legs crossed, eyeing passers-by over drinks that they sipped slowly through plastic straws. The eyes watched Ritchie pass by and he wondered what they thought. Was Micky their sort. Probably. They'd do anything for five hundred baht – or less.

What was it Mark Dobson had told him? "For a crime investigator like you, Ritchie, places like the Peacock are good fishing grounds, not just for the sport but for the netting and landing of big fish."

If you fancied a quiet evening drink after a hard day then the Peacock was not for you but this was definitely the place so Ritchie, with his bag slung across his shoulder, strolled back. He raised his John Lewis shades to wink at the front line of girls, lowered them again and walked in. As expected, one of the girls sprang to her feet, pulled her skirt down an inch and followed him to the bar. When he arrived, she was right there, alongside him, looking up with dark brown eyes topped by a neatly cut fringe of jet black hair. Ritchie raised his glasses once more and looked down.

She was about five feet two because instead of high heels like the others she was wearing a pair of fancy flip-flops covered in sequins that sparkled in the flashing lights.

"How're you, sweetie?" Ritchie said in excellent east London and, after remembering his few words of Thai, added: "You drinking cheap cheap or peng peng?"

"It depend," said his new friend with the short flowery skirt and tiny cleavage. "You rich rich or poor poor?"

That was quite clever, Richie thought, and he liked her already, but duty called. "Anyone upstairs?" He nodded towards the spiral staircase

"Maybe."

"You work upstairs or downstairs?"

"Up up and down down."

"Nicer up up, eh? Better than down down or out out, I always say. Air tamashad, too. Good view. Can watch Thai Airways taking off and crashing. What are you drinking, darling?"

"Sply."

Richie gave her a thousand baht note. "OK, order a Tiger and a Spry and bring both upstairs, OK? Don't run away."

He smiled an evil-looking Micky Parker smile, stuck a spearmint gum in his mouth, adjusted the backpack on his shoulder, pushed his shades over his head to watch her flip flop away and went upstairs to find a table.

Ten minutes later Richie was making good headway with the girl whose name was On, but he was also looking around. Mark was right. This was definitely a meeting place of big men. Foreigners with beer bellies, pink skin, well-filled shirts, blonde hair, grey hair, dark hair, little hair or no hair at all. There was one big, brunette woman in a scarlet tee shirt and tight white shorts with her hair done in neat, beaded plaits probably by a hairdresser on a beach somewhere.

They were split into three groups with the biggest, in the corner. There were five men with one Thai girl at the corner table. It was covered in bottles of Singha beer and Russian and other English accents floated across and mixed with the din from below and outside. The Thai girl was sat with her arms around a big man with a mop of thick fair hair, the front pushed into a low wave that could only be staying in place with a touch of gel.

Ritchie looked away because On was returning with another tray. She sat down, close to him, crossed her legs and pulled her tiny skirt down a fraction. "Who's the girl?" Ritchie asked her, nodding towards the table in the corner.

"You like her?"

"No. Just asking. She needs longer arms if she wants her hands to meet around the back."

On didn't get the joke. "Her name Om."

"Same as you, huh?"

"No, I'm On, she Om."

"Ah, got it. Who's her boyfriend?"

On shrugged. She didn't know. "What your name?" she asked.

"Micky."

"Like Micky Mouse."

"That's it. You wanna be Minnie?"

The humour was lost.

"Where you come from? Africa?"

"Nah, London."

"You know the Queen?"

"Only the band."

"I like Africa hair. Nice colour, how you make?"

"Stood on my head and dipped it in a bowl of Heinz tomato soup. You like?"

She ruffled the top, wiry strands and it moved as much as the twigs of a garden broom in a hurricane. "Nice."

"Mind you don't cut your fingers, darling."

They sat for a while. Conversation was limited but On seemed comfortable enough and Ritchie thought they were getting on famously. She seemed to like the music, jigged about and smiled a lot. Then she patted his knee. "You want another beer? I get."

"OK. And bring more ice."

"You wait, huh? Not go away."

"No chance. You've still got the change from my thousand baht."

As she flip-flopped her way back down the spiral stairway, Ritchie took another look at the group in the corner. "Christ," he thought, "First bar I try and there he is. Mark was right and he looks just like the photo. It's the Donald Trump look-alike."

The man was a blonde-haired Russian they knew as Dimitri Medinski.

Ritchie's first assignment for Asher & Asher was counterfeiting, money-laundering and probably narcotics. Their paying client was a cosmetics company concerned with counterfeiting but, as Dobson had explained: "These guys spread their activities around. We might start looking at counterfeiting but one thing leads to another. All of a sudden, we uncover people smuggling and blackmailing. It's what keeps us in business."

Ritchie had another quick look.

He certainly looked like the photos Mark had shown him. If it was Medinski, he'd been on their radar for a while – a man with several aliases, thought to be based in Pattaya and running a team of Chinese and Russian mafia. Was he dangerous?

"Put it like this, Ritchie," Mark had told him. "Get to know him but never fall foul of him. They stick together. Wives, girlfriends, they're all there and they're difficult to track as they mix with the thousands of Russian tourists and all the other beach and bar types. There's a hardcore living permanently around Pattaya and the other resorts, many of them in businesses of some sort – seedy stuff, often illegal - spending money and mixing it with ill-gotten gains from back home or elsewhere. Amongst them are some big-time international crooks with rings of protection spun around them. Pattaya is ideal. Sun, sex, money and beaches far from the dark and the snow and the ice. They're organised."

Ritchie drained his bottle and summoned the courage to do what they'd agreed in London. He didn't normally smoke but he'd been practicing for a full week in front of the mirror. In one day, he'd got through six packs because Colin had said he could put them on expenses. Afterwards, he'd felt more ill than his ferry ride across the Irish sea, but his smoking technique had improved no end. He now felt like he'd been smoking since he was six.

He flipped a cigarette out like a pro, slipped it between his lips, flicked a plastic lighter, blew a plume of blue smoke into the air and lay back as far as the seat would allow without toppling. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the fair-haired Russian and their eyes met briefly.

At the same time, the short-armed girl called Om, got up.

"I get more beer, OK, dalling?" he heard her say.

And, with that, she wriggled away from the Russian's left hand that Ritchie hadn't seen because it had been lodged in the back of her tight denim shorts. Om was a big

girl with big thighs that filled her shorts. It looked uncomfortable if not painful. Ritchie definitely preferred On.

She passed Richie's table, gave him a powdery and scarlet-lipped smile and, at the top of the stairs, dragged the denim fabric of her shorts from the crevice of her bum. It was just the cue Ritchie needed. He leaned over to the gang behind him and pointed. "That's the nicest bloody wedgie I've seen in a long while," he said in his best east London. Then he raised his empty bottle.

The Russians may not have understood 'wedgie' but the two English or whatever nationality they were, seemed amused enough. They nodded. The others were too busy downing their beers. If, on the other hand, the blonde Russian was upset by impertinent comments about his girlfriend's arse, then so be it. Richie would just have to face the consequences.

Ritchie turned back, took a drag on his third foul tasting cigarette, gave one last thought to Mark's warnings and decided it was time to go to work.

Before he could make his move, though, On was flip-flopping her way back up the stairs with her tray.

"Innovate on the go" had been Mark Dobson's message during his brief indoctrination. "Never be caught without a Plan B, C and D."

"Cold cold," On said setting the tray down and pouring the drinks. "You like?"

"I like," Ritchie said. "Cold beer, hot lady."

She smiled sweetly. "Where you stay, Micky?"

It was always an early question if things were looking good but Richie needed to innovate on the go. He activated Plan B and leaned over and sniffed her neck.

Perhaps she thought he was getting intimate because she giggled and wriggled and moved her chair closer. "Nice perfume," Ritchie said. "Don't tell me. I'm an expert. It's called..." He sniffed her again, innovating. "Pansy. Am I right?"

On giggled from six inches away. "I not know Pansy."

Ritchie didn't either. He only knew the names of three flowers. Pansies were one, daffodils didn't sound right and neither did dandelions. It didn't matter. "Peng, peng," he said, "Rich girl. huh?"

On put on her shy look. "Ooh, not so rich."

"It's my business," Ritchie said proudly, lowering the dark glasses over his eyes to present an even cooler vision. "I give you present." And he bent down to the backpack and withdrew a small pink box. He laid it on the table next to his beer and opened it. "My perfume," he announced proudly.

And there it sat for a moment, a fancy shaped bottle filled with a golden liquid Mark Dobson had bought in a shop on Edgware Road and fitted with a new and fancy label created by Colin Asher on one of his printing machines. It was called 'Eau de Toilette by Ritchie of London.'

On seemed to like the look of it so Ritchie unscrewed the lid, dabbed some on the back of his hand, rubbed it in with a finger and held it to On's nose. "Nice, huh?"

"Ooh. Velly nice. Hom hom."

Ritchie decided that a couple of bottles of that could easily secure his short-term future but, he reminded himself again, he was on duty. "For you," he said like a man offering a long-term girl-friend an engagement ring. And he smeared a little on her neck as she waited, head raised like a purring cat having its throat stroked.

"Hom hom."

"You think Om would buy a bottle?" he said pointing with his thumb over his shoulder.

"Maybe," On said giggling as if she thought he might share the profits with her.

"Let's try, shall we?"

Ritchie picked up his bag and went over to the corner table where Denim Wedgie had just returned with more beers. "Evenin' gents," he said. "I'm just testing out my new perfume. Free samples. Care for a sniff?" He offered the back of his hand to Denim Wedgie's nose.

"Ooh. Velly nice. Hom hom. How much?"

He showed the bottle to the big, fair haired Russian and unscrewed the lid. "You sir, you look like a man who knows a good perfume, if I may so. Care to check this out?" He undid the lid and tried putting it to the nose of the Russian but the man was not amused. "Ty che blyad!" he grunted and raised a big hand to ward off the unwelcome intrusion.

But one of the others sitting next to him, a shorter, slimmer man who Ritchie thought was English seemed more interested. "Where the fuck did this come from?"

Ritchie, who had an actor's ear for accents, recognised not an Englishman but a Dutchman. As well as his ferry trip to Dublin, Ritchie had also been to Amsterdam, once.

"My very own, mate. 'Eau de Toilette by Ritchie of London'. Original flavours and smells to suit your every need. Give the girlfriend a drop. Unscrew the lid and end up getting screwed yourself. Ha Ha."

That seemed to break the ice and so Ritchie beckoned On to come over and join them because she looked lonely sat on her own. She held onto his arm in case he ran away whilst everyone took their turn to sniff the bottle until it ended up with the big, fair-haired Russian again.

"You sir, waddya fink? Nice huh? You in business? Could get a container load shipped to Moscow end of this week if you want? You are Russian ain't you mate? Thought so. I got a good mate called Yuri back in Tottenham. Bloody Watford supporter would you believe it?"

"Sit down." It was a command, made more forceful by a thick, pointed finger. "Who's this guy, Ritchie?"

Ritchie was already prepared for that. "You think 'Eau de Toilette by Mick' sounds like it might sell a million bottles? Give me credit for an ounce of commercial know-how, mate. I'm Micky but Ritchie sounds real cool."

As that put an immediate stop to that line of questioning, Ritchie pulled up two chairs, one for himself and one for On who was now hanging around his neck, and they started talking, drinking, laughing and dabbing the perfume on each other. Everything was going brilliantly and even more beers were being offered.

It was twenty minutes later that Ritchie's phone rang. It made him jump, after all this was only the second time it had rung since he'd uploaded the ring tone. He untangled himself from On.

"Yeh?"

Mark Dobson was sitting downstairs in the open bar near the snooker tables drinking Tiger beer with a lot of ice while watching two Spanish teams kick a football around on a wide screen. "That you Micky?" he said.

"Nick, my old mate. How's it hanging?"

"Good thanks. How's it going?"

"Magic my son. You?"

"Watching the football downstairs, Micky."

"You don't say. What the fuck's going on?"

Dobson, downstairs, heard Ritchie stand up, perhaps push his chair back and probably go walk-about but within easy listening distance of the table he'd just deserted.

They'd rehearsed the next part back in London. Ritchie was to perform solo as Dobson relaxed and listened with the phone held away from his ear and watched Barcelona score the winning goal.

"Fuck," Ritchie said. "But I've got customers, mate. What the fuck you playing at? Why? Bloody hell. Did he say that? Jesus. Just as we're, you know. Bloody hell, Nick. You're kidding me. I can't believe you're telling me this."

He went on like that for a whole minute until Mark butted in. "Well done, Ritchie. That'll do. I'm leaving now. Good luck."

"Fucking hell, Nick. What a sod. I still cannot believe you're telling me this."

Mark Dobson switched the phone off and returned to the Sabaidee Mansion for an early night. For the first time in his professional career he was about to enjoy the pleasures of delegating to a junior.

It was 4am when Ritchie reported in.

"Where are you?" Dobson asked.

"In my room, below yours. I can hear you snoring. Want a report?"

"Go ahead."

Ritchie was on a high through excitement and dilute Tiger beer. After the faked phone call Ritchie had turned into a sober, angry and depressed young businessman totally let down by his supplier and best mate Nick from somewhere in East London.

The bastard Nick, Micky told his new friends, was probably right then, right that minute in time, screwing Micky's Nigerian girlfriend who'd just got a swimwear modelling contract. You couldn't trust anyone since the last election. Bring back hanging, the stocks, the bloody rack that was standing underused in the dungeons at the Tower of London because after years of meticulous preparation Micky's perfumes business was in tatters and plans to introduce 'Soft & Smooth' hand cream and 'Cuticle Care' by Ritchie of London were back on the drawing board and lacking the key element - a supplier.

Micky had made himself so popular with his distress that the Russian with the frontal blow wave had suggested he might like to look into some other business opportunities instead and not restrict himself to cosmetics. Micky had style. Micky had undeniable commercial talent and the big Russian was proud to admit in more hushed terms, that though he might not look important, he was, in fact, the head of a worldwide group of companies with headquarters in Moscow and always quick to recognise a talented salesman when he met one.

Humoured by something, they'd all laughed – the two other Russians, the Dutchman from Sydney, an Englishman from Phuket and a Frenchman who didn't want to say where he came from because he didn't want either of his wives to know. Even Denim Wedgie had joined in the hilarity although little On had quickly fallen behind and couldn't catch up with such fast-moving events.

"Call me Igor," the blow-waved Russian had said.

So-called Igor had started drinking Smirnoff because there was no other brand behind the bar, but, oh yes, Igor could see plenty of opportunities for an entrepreneur of Mick's ethnic background and his many customers of a similar colour. And if, as Micky claimed, he knew many immigrants from the Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Bangladesh in a place called Tower Hamlets then global markets were clearly at his fingertips.

At 1am, they'd moved to a room at the Novotel near the airport.

"Two more women turned up, Mark," Ritchie said. "Big Russian types with loud voices and big assets. More vodka and other stuff arrived and the Dutchman produced a box of little white pills to try."

"But you didn't, did you, Ritchie?" Dobson butted in. "It's a sack-able offence according to Asher & Asher's employment guidelines."

"No, but I collected a pocketful if you want to try."

"Flush them down the john, Ritchie. Now. Do as I say."

"Yes, boss."

"What else?"

"I've been invited to visit somewhere tomorrow – no, later today."

"You get the name and address, Ritchie?"

"I asked. Igor said it was confidential."

"And you're convinced Igor is our friend Dimitri Medinski?"

"If he's not then your description is way off."

"Is that it, Ritchie?"

"Jesus, Mark, isn't that enough for one night?"

"Not bad," Dobson said although, in all honesty, he thought he'd done brilliantly. "What happened to On?" he asked.

"Sad, Mark, sad. I feel really bad. It was all coming along so nicely. I left her at the Peacock."

"Shame. Did you give her anything?"

"I left her my bag of Eau de Toilette by Ritchie of London."

The full-length novel, "Vendetta" is available via Smashwords at: <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/802410>

LAZARUS (from "An Honourable Fake")

Fate had brought the two self-acclaimed Nigerian Pastors Lazarus and Ayo together. Circumstances meant they depended on one another but mutual dislike caused the constant friction. Self-obsession meant that they had no idea they were being followed by a private investigator through the Arrivals hall at Heathrow and into the queue for the courtesy bus for the Radisson Hotel. They were an odd couple, Craig Donovan decided.

Lazarus, overweight, puffing and blowing in a heavy and unnecessary overcoat had boarded first. Ayo, in his brown trilby had deliberately hung back. As Donovan watched, Ayo passed something to a third, unknown, Nigerian standing amongst the waiting group. Ayo boarded. The stranger disappeared.

At the hotel, like two old women, they fussed again with coats, hats and bags, summoned a bellboy for help and checked in: two rooms next to one another.

"I need to sleep, Ayo," Pastor Lazarus of the Good Tidings Christian Peoples Church said. "Maybe an hour. And I will pray. In a stressful world, the safest place is close to Jesus. Air travel is so tiring."

Pastor Ayo of Christ's Centre of Holy Visions nodded. It suited him perfectly because he had a number of private arrangements to make. He locked his room and placed his trilby on the bed. He'd taken a liking to trilbies after seeing people wearing them at Ascot and, with his winnings, had bought six. Today he was wearing the brown felt one with the pheasant feather. Ayo liked changing his style though he stuck with the Armani suits - unless, of course, something really special was called for, in which case he'd go for an Ermenegildo Zegna. Light grey fabric with a faint sparkle was a favourite. Today it was just an Armani.

Ayo hung his clothes in the closet, checked the functioning of the room safe, helped himself to a Gordon's gin and Schweppes tonic from the fridge and sat looking out of the window at planes taking off from the airport. Ayo needed the gin. It was his second trip to London with Lazarus in as many months and the stress of Lazarus's company was getting to him. Things had come to a head at the Intercontinental Hotel.

Things had come to a head at the Intercontinental Hotel where they'd been taking afternoon tea in the Wellington Lounge. Lazarus, in a black, tight-fitting Italian suit with his short arms stretched over the back of the sofa was in full flow, his cheeks rippling with distaste. He mostly wore dark glasses outside, but took them off indoors so people could judge his emotional state through his eyes. Lazarus could turn salty tears into liquid gold just by squeezing his eyelids.

Ayo was emptying the last drops of the pot of tea into his own cup.

"It is no place for us, Ayo," Lazarus hissed, waving the glasses." They are like animals. I have been there before. It is the Nigerian High Commission for God's sake not some dirty office for issuing visas. It is run by imbeciles. It is like the hell without Jesus. I will not be treated like that."

Tears had formed in the red corners of his eyes as he stared at Ayo hoping for support. A waitress had arrived to ask if they'd like more tea and Ayo had pushed the tray towards her. She'd sniffed at the smell of aftershave, gathered the tray and walked away. "Patience, Lazarus. It is, I agree, a zoo," Ayo said waving an arm. "To wear a boubou in London is out of place. We business people should not need to change our dress."

"And it is such a mess, Ayo," Lazarus continued, turning the gold ring with the ruby on his middle finger. "Did you ever visit the Commissioner's office? It is so cluttered it reminds me of the kitchen of Abela's house in Calabar. You remember that day when we first met that bastard Pastor Gabriel Joshua and his assistant?"

"No need to remind me." It was Ayo's turn to rotate a gold ring - one with a huge blue stone. He'd glanced at his Rolex. "Our visitor is late."

"They are always late," Lazarus had giggled because the tears had evaporated. "An important man must always be late."

But that delayed meeting had put the fear of God into Ayo. It was the Nigerian President's brother who had eventually swept through the Lounge in an outfit Ayo had just denounced as impractical. He strode over in shiny black lace up shoes and his long white boubou embroidered with black and gold, the matching hat adding another six inches to his enormous height.

And the meeting itself had not gone well. It had ended with the President's brother saying in far too loud a whisper for the Wellington Lounge: "I don't care about the man's fucking business. What I care about is who runs the fucking country. Presidents decide what is important and what is not. Presidents decide who runs the army. Presidents choose their friends. Presidents meet other Presidents. Presidents, my God-fearing friends, don't like their plans upset by unelected actors and stage performers. Got it?"

The man he was referring to was another Pastor - Pastor Gabriel Joshua and because they were regarded, quite erroneously, as being in the same business and moving in the same circles, Ayo and Lazarus had been tasked to ruin him. If necessary, to kill him.

"And don't forget we need the money you so carelessly lost during what you described as a daylight street robbery. Do you understand?"

Ayo and Lazarus had both nodded. No-one seemed to believe that they had been the innocent victims of a snatch in Oxford Street and lost almost two million US due as pay-offs for others.

It was after the President's brother had left that Ayo realised that Lazarus had no concept of their own dire situation. "Ah," Lazarus had said. "Thank God. We can now

relax and return home to where people wait upon us, Ayo. And I would like to see my wife. More tea?"

Ayo lost his patience. "My stomach is distended with tea," he had shouted. "And as for your wife, she left you years ago for a Catholic, fucking priest."

"But she still lives inside my head, Ayo." Lazarus pleaded.

"If you are still living inside her head, Lazarus, I'd be very surprised. She'd tried out several Catholic priests before settling on the one from Cape Town."

Lazarus had nodded sadly. "God demands a man take the rough with the smooth."

Ayo was tempted to say that Lazarus's ex-wife was, indeed, very rough but held his tongue. Nevertheless, his patience with Lazarus was at its limit. "Do you ever use your brain, Pastor?" he hissed. "Do you ever think? Do you know what you are doing? Do you understand that you are up to your ears in things outside your control?"

Lazarus looked bemused. "It is God's doing, Ayo. We are in his hands."

Ayo's hiss became a scream. "Does your God never talk to you at night Lazarus? Does he never whisper into your ear: 'Lazarus, Lazarus, my son, you are in deep, fucking shit.' Does he?"

"No, never," Lazarus said. "He only tells me to live a good life so that when I die even the undertaker feels sorry."

"So, did your God in his infinite wisdom ever advise you to get out while the going was good? To cash in your fucking chips, Lazarus? Because if he didn't then your God's a different fucking God than mine because mine's telling me we're in deep shit. Mine's saying, 'Ayo, my son, you're on your own. Sink or swim. Go with the tide or go to prison. Got it now, Lazarus?'"

Lazarus had been twisting his big lower lip with his fingers. "I see. You mean it is no longer business, Ayo? Is it politics?"

"Congratulations, Pastor. Perhaps you should try talking to my God sometime."

In the Radisson Hotel, Ayo swallowed the last of his gin and tonic and thought about taking a few pain killers. Instead, he reached for his phone.

Blessing was a distant cousin who managed a newsagent's business in Slough and supplemented his meagre wage with night-time taxi driving and other nocturnal activities. It was Blessing who, since the handover at the bus stop, now had Lazarus's passport and an envelope taken by Ayo from the side pocket of Lazarus's bag.

"Lazarus Bola Lyabo," said Blessing as he sat in his Ford Mondeo in a back street of Slough examining the passport. "Is that he?"

"That is he," Ayo replied, copying Blessing's unusual English. "It is the passport for accessing Lazarus's bank accounts."

"Which bank is he?"

"Why do you ask Blessing? Read the damned papers. You will see he is the Baroda Bank. You will visit the bank first thing in the morning, you will withdraw the cash by copying the signature and showing the passport. You do not need anything else because I have already discussed the arrangement with Mister Joshi. Only Mister Joshi, OK? Mister Joshi will receive his tip."

"This man Lyabo he looks like me," Blessing said pointing and smiling at the passport photo, not that Ayo could see him.

"It is no co-incidence, Blessing. But if you think you look like Lazarus I advise you to lose some weight." Ayo paused. "Now listen very carefully, Blessing. I will ask you to repeat what I am about to say."

"I understand. He is very important."

"At the Baroda Bank you will say 'I am Mr Lazarus Lyabo and I wish to speak to Mr Joshi.' You will take out two hundred thousand pounds in cash which you will ask to be put into two envelopes. Then you will say to Mr Joshi that you want to close the account and transfer the balance to the Islamic Bank in Edgware. I will give you the account details this evening. Do you understand?"

"The Islamic Bank."

"You will show the passport to Mr Joshi, give him the Islamic bank account details and sign the papers. You will check the amount that is in the account before it is closed and write it down. Understand?"

"Write it down. How much is it, Ayo?"

"Maybe eight hundred thousand pounds."

"Waah! He is a lot, Ayo."

"There is just one problem. Mister Joshi will need to see a plastic card. I will obtain this from Lazarus this evening. Understand?"

"He is understood, Ayo. So, what is my present?"

"Your present will come when you have finished your job, Blessing. From the Indian Bank, you will go to Edgware Road. That is where I will meet you. You will give me the two envelopes with the two hundred thousand pounds. That is when your job is finished."

"So, what is my present?"

"Between nothing and five percent. If you fuck up it's nothing."

Ayo had another gin and tonic. He swallowed some Paracetamol tablets, slipped off his Italian loafers and lay on the bed thinking about Lazarus's bank debit card. Never mind. Taking things from Lazarus was easy. The plan he'd hatched back in Abuja was going well so he placed his trilby over his face like he'd seen someone do at Ascot and, behind it, closed his eyes.

They'd been using Ayo's white BMW but the fuel was running out and they were trying to find the Abuja Protea Hotel to meet the President's brother. The subject was the thorny matter of how they'd come to lose the cash in Oxford Street and what they planned to do about it.

Lazarus had been biting each of his finger nails in turn and gibbering away in the passenger seat. "What can I do, Ayo?" he whimpered. "I am just an innocent Pastor proclaiming the love of God, seeking forgiveness for my small sins and trying to make ends meet."

"If you are so innocent, Lazarus then I cannot imagine how much praise the Lord will hand to me when I follow you to his glorious Kingdom. Where the fuck are we?"

A dribble of saliva ran from Lazarus's finger onto the cuff of his white shirt. "But he phoned you, Ayo, not me. They know I have nothing to give but prayers."

Ayo had swung the BMW off Shehu Shagari Way into a Total filling station. "You frighten yourself without realising that it is you who frightens others with your ability to feign such false innocence."

Lazarus removed his dark glasses, stared, looked puzzled but said nothing. The tank was filled, the windscreen washed for a tip and they'd set off again in silence. Then: "I do not know where we are, Lazarus," Ayo had admitted. "This is Dikko Street and we are late because while I was eating watery fish soup you were eating peppered steak with the Chairman of Ministries TV to fill the overweight sack you call your belly."

"It is the wrong way, Ayo. You must turn around."

"You did not think to tell me before?"

They were thirty minutes late and it had not gone well. Lazarus, the fool, had asked too many questions and the President's brother didn't like questions.

"How many people are waiting to be paid, sah?" Lazarus had said as if only twenty dollars were owed to five people.

Ayo had then watched the thick fingers of a huge brown paw count off names, one by one. "First there are all your friends, Lazarus. How many fucking amateur vicars like you are there?"

Lazarus had shrunk into his chair, shocked by the insult of amateur vicar. "Ten sah? Twelve?"

"What about family members? Kenneth and Kenneth's wife? You know Sammy? Matty? Tami" Ayo had watched as he started on the first paw again.

"Then we have Abdul Hakim and Precious Johnson. You know Happy, Pastor Lazarus? Happy Jacob, the Chairman of Ministries TV? He says he knows you well. Didn't you have peppered steak lunch with him today? How about Sandy, Misty and Cozi who ensure your jewellery business doesn't suffer from criminals?"

Ayo had been shocked at this revelation. He didn't know that Sandy, Misty and Cozi were linked with protecting Lazarus's jewellery business. But the brown paw was still busy and started on Ayo. "Then you got the big, big names. Your friends, Ayo. Top names like Festus and all of Festus's group - how many? Six? Seven? Eight? Big men, big style, big budgets, big power."

And then the President's brother's voice had grown from a bear's growl to a lion's roar. "You want me to go on, Pastors? You asked who is owed. All of them expect their share. Yet you.....YOU." The roar increased. "YOU FAILED. Everyone else worked hard to ensure the contract was awarded to the right company but YOU have STOLEN two million dollars. WHAT DO YOU SAY?"

There had been another silence as Lazarus screwed his face, bit his finger nails and looked at Ayo. "WELL? WHAT DO YOU SAY?"

"Yes, sah. " Lazarus whimpered. "Very sorry, sah."

Afterwards, Ayo had stopped the car on the side of the road because of a tightness in his chest and his breathing felt erratic. He'd put it down to stress but he had heard about heart attacks that started with chest pains and heavy breathing.

He'd taken a deep breath, felt his chest through the sweaty dampness of his silk shirt and looked at Lazarus. "You trembled like a fat little mouse, Lazarus."

"It is because that man is like a big, fat cat, Ayo. I hate him."

Ayo's heart rate had slowed as he tried to control himself. He'd adjusted his trilby and said, "I've often wondered how you made it as a man of God with your own church, Lazarus."

Most people would have ignored the mild insult and moved on. Not Lazarus. "My father left money when he died," he said sadly.

"Your father was a preacher?"

"No, Ayo. He was a God-fearing man who owned a jewellery shop."

"How did he die, Lazarus? Please tell me."

"By a bullet from a gun, Ayo."

"Thieves? Armed men with guns?"

"He shot himself." Lazarus had then paused, apparently thinking. "Ah. No, no, no," he went on. "That is not true. I must be honest, Ayo, because that is what my dear, dead Pops taught me. Do not lie my son, he told me. A little lie is like a little pregnancy. People soon find out."

"So how did he die, Lazarus?"

"He tried to shoot himself but missed so he cut his wrists."

Ayo had wanted to laugh but found he couldn't. Things were far too serious. Two million dollars had to be found quickly or their days were numbered. But an idea was

forming so he'd slipped the car into drive and, at the speed of a snail, moved off onto the highway. "How much cash do you have, Lazarus?"

Craig Donovan was sitting in the lobby of the Radisson when Lazarus and Ayo appeared from the lifts. He could sense immediately that something was wrong. They passed right by him, the shorter, fatter Lazarus hanging on the sleeve of Ayo's jacket.

"It was there, I tell you, Ayo. In my bag. How could I come through immigration without my passport? Maybe it was that bus driver. We should check with the reception, maybe it dropped out, maybe....."

They headed to reception, Lazarus leading the way, almost running on his short legs. But then he stopped, suddenly, Ayo colliding with him. "Yaaah," Lazarus screeched. "My bank papers. They were in an envelope." And he ran back to the lifts as Ayo, seemingly unconcerned, wandered along the corridor in his trilby, past the disabled toilet and stood looking into the gift shops.

Donovan watched. Ayo took a seat, checked his nails and his Rolex, removed his trilby, placed it next to him and leaned back to stare at the ceiling and the crystal chandelier. The porter walked over, nodded and spoke to Donovan. "Nice weather, sir."

"Very pleasant."

"Where you from, sir?"

"Washington, USA."

"Enjoying your stay, sir?"

"Quiet so far."

The quietness was broken by a shout from the lifts area. Lazarus was running in circles in the reception area. "It's gone, it's gone."

The porter went up to him. "Sir, sir. Please. What's the problem?"

Genuine tears ran down Lazarus's fat cheeks. "My passport is gone. My bank letters are gone."

"Please sit sir, take a moment, relax."

The porter's patience, Donovan decided, was worthy of the 'employee of the month' award. "Let us go through what happened.....where did you last see it?.....did you use it at the airport?.....yes, of course, you must have.....the bus driver?.....I can check sir.....Is this your friend coming?"

Ayo appeared, looked at the tears on Lazarus's cheeks but felt nothing as Lazarus started again. "We are finished, Ayo. We will die. We cannot fall further when we are already on our knees. It is the bastard Gabriel Joshua. It is a conspiracy."

It took twenty minutes to calm him. Eventually Ayo suggested they return to Lazarus's room and search the contents of the bags. "Yah, yah, maybe that is it," Lazarus said running to the lift. "My father always told me: Whenever things are dark, follow the Son."

Twenty minutes later, as Lazarus lay on his bed sniffing and trembling, Ayo left the room with Lazarus's plastic debit card concealed in his pocket. Craig Donovan was halfway through a John Le Carre novel when Ayo appeared once more. He followed him outside to the car park and saw him get into a parked Ford Mondeo.

"Can you get me a taxi?" Donovan asked the friendly porter.

"It might take a few minutes, sir."

"As quick as you can."

When Donovan's taxi arrived, Ayo was still sitting in the Mondeo, talking to the driver. But then the door opened, Ayo got out and walked back to the hotel. Donovan decided to use his waiting taxi. "Follow the Mondeo."

"The 06 registered one?"

"That's the one."

The Mondeo took the M4 motorway and headed west. It was now dark, heavy M4 commuter traffic almost at a standstill but the Mondeo was only a few cars ahead. "Just keep following it."

"How far he's going, mate?"

"I've no idea."

"Christ, mate, we could end up in Wales."

"It's OK, I speak Welsh."

"Yeh, right, mate. Pull the other one. Americans can't even speak English proper."

But the Mondeo turned off at the Slough central turn, headed for the town centre and then into a maze of roads in a low-cost housing estate. "You still want me to follow him?"

"Sure. Keep on his tail."

"You CIA or something, mate? He's stopping now and getting out. See?"

"Drive past, stop and wait for me."

Donovan walked back to the Mondeo, checked the registration number and the house number and returned to the taxi. Half an hour later he was back at the Radisson. By then he had the car owner's name: Mr Blessing Akami of 67 Thompson Road, Slough, a possible relative of Ayo's. And that wasn't all. The listening device they'd put inside Ayo's white BMW in Abuja had picked up the conversation between Ayo and Lazarus.

"OK. Here's the plan," said the voice in Craig's ear piece. "'Most likely theory is Ayo will use Blessing to clear Lazarus's bank account and deposit it at the Islamic Bank on Edgware Road. Proposed action is you watch the Indian Bank in Southall. Meanwhile, I'll take a walk down Edgware Road and sip tea at Zabiollah's opposite the Islamic bank in case you lose them or they go somewhere else. The only problem is how much mint tea I can drink in one morning."

At eight next morning, Ayo hammered on the door of Lazarus's room. From inside came a moaning sound accompanied by the shuffling of feet and a chain being drawn. The door opened an inch and a red eye appeared.

"I am leaving for my bank Lazarus." Lazarus's red eye blinked slowly. "As you were careless and lost your passport and bank cards, I now have to take full responsibility for resolving our financial problems. Do you understand?"

Lazarus's red eye moved up and then down.

"Do you want to debate serious financial matters through the crack of a door, Lazarus?"

Lazarus's red eye moved from side to side.

"I will withdraw half of what we owe. Then I will go to the bank of our friend. Do you understand, Lazarus?"

There was a wet sniffing sound as if Lazarus's nose lay flat against the other side of the door. "Something happened, Ayo," he sniffed. "Someone stole everything."

"Nonsense. It is your stupidity, your carelessness."

"I am fastidious in my ways, Ayo. My father always said a clear conscience makes a soft pillow. Something happened. Someone stole it, Ayo. Someone close to me. Someone I thought was my friend."

"Do you have any friends, Lazarus?"

"A rich man without compassion is a poor man with money, Ayo," Lazarus whispered.

The door closed and the bolt was slid back so Ayo spoke to the closed door. "Another fine saying, Lazarus, but do you know the real meaning of the cross?" He paused. "The cross is God's way of turning a minus into a plus." Then Ayo laughed and wandered away down the corridor.

Southall, just a few miles from Heathrow, had a historic reputation for being the largest Asian community in the UK. Nigerians were not uncommon but were far outnumbered by Indians. Craig Donovan had asked why a Nigerian like Lazarus might have an account at the Bank of Baroda.

"It might be linked to jewellery or gold deposits," he was told. "Lazarus's father owned a jewellery shop."

It was a clear, sunny morning when Donovan arrived in Southall Broadway. Being on a dual carriageway, it was a poor place for a stakeout so Donovan waited outside a supermarket with a canned coffee. He was on his third can when he saw the Nigerian, almost hidden inside a black, hooded anorak. He was carrying a brown envelope and, as he stopped to look up at the Bank of Baroda sign, Donovan moved. The bank had just opened but an orderly line of customers was already waiting inside - long beards, brightly coloured saris and white turbans dominated.

"Can I help, sir?" An Indian girl in red uniform asked Donovan.

"I'd like some information on mortgages for a friend," Donovan said. "Do you have a leaflet or something."

"Just one moment sir." She pulled a leaflet from a bundle on a table. "If you need more help, sir, please ask."

"Thank you. I'll read it here if you don't mind."

"Of course, sir. Please take a seat." And she went straight to the next customer who had come through the door, the Nigerian. Donovan was the only white person in the bank. He checked in. "He's arrived."

Blessing Akami stood for a moment and then joined the queue. He pulled his hood back a fraction, scratched his face and the girl in red saw the uncertainty. "Yes sir?"

"I have an appointment. He is Mr Joshi."

"Ah yes, sir. Your name sir?"

"My name? He is, uh....." Blessing fumbled in the envelope, pulled out the passport, opened it, went to the name page and the envelope fell on the floor. He retrieved it, then read, far too slowly: "He is Lazarus Bola Iyabo. I want to see Mr, ah, Mr Joshi."

The girl looked at him suspiciously. Blessing Akami possessed all the classic looks of an opportunist bank robber. "Please wait a moment, sir." She went to the counter said a few words to another girl and pointed towards Blessing.

And Blessing came to sit beside Donovan, his unnecessary anorak rustling as he rested one trainer-clad foot on his opposite knee, almost rubbing its street dirt onto Donovan's clean and pressed trousers. Donovan, watching him stuff the passport back in the envelope, said: "Good Morning," and continued reading his mortgages leaflet.

Blessing nodded and waited perhaps five minutes until the girl in red came over and spoke to him "Mr Joshi will see you now. Counter five."

Donovan watched the transaction - quiet, muttered words, a dark green passport handed over, a letter from the bank on headed paper, a plastic card and a signature that Blessing struggled with. Another piece of paper that Mr Joshi struggled to read. Then another signature and a wait as Joshi typed things into a computer and stared

at the screen and the electronic transfer that would empty and then close the account. Then another wait. Blessing looked around. Donovan looked away. Then two envelopes were passed over, thick white ones held together with wide rubber bands and Blessing, with no sign of a thank you, walked out of the bank with the envelopes inside his anorak.

Donovan followed him west along the Broadway, turning right, then right again. At a corner, Blessing walked into Habib's Tyres and Exhausts Centre and there was the Ford Mondeo. As Blessing drove away, Donovan checked in once more.

"OK. I'm on the case. Call the NCA and get down to Edgware Road. I'll be in Zabiollah's."

Craig called the Director of Organised Crime at the UK National Crime Agency. Within twenty minutes two men from the NCA would call at the Bank of Baroda, flash a card and ask to see the manager. By then Craig Donovan had arrived at Zabiolla's Iranian tea, coffee and pastries shop on Edgware Road. His partner was sitting in the window drinking mint tea and watching the bank opposite.

"Anything yet?" Donovan settled onto the stool next to him.

"Not yet but I need to get back. The transaction at the Baroda bank is already being looked into. If things happen as expected, we'll then deal with the bank opposite. Enjoy your kadaifi."

Donovan took out his John Le Carre, opened it at the curled-up corner, sipped his tea and was taking the first bite of the kadaifi when he saw the heavy overcoat and trilby of Pastor Ayo. He was standing in a shop doorway next to the bank, one hand grasping the handle of a bag on wheels at his feet. Seconds later, the hooded figure of Blessing rounded the corner and the two white envelopes were handed over. Ayo flipped the rubber band off one of them, withdrew a bundle and, hidden between his own overcoat and Blessing's anorak, passed it over. Blessing nodded and scurried away. Ayo bent to his case, stuffed both envelopes inside, glanced around and waved down a passing black cab. It had taken less than a minute. Donovan pushed a twenty-pound note under his cup, ran outside and hailed another passing cab. Ayo's taxi was already stuck in traffic further up Edgware Road

"Where to sir?"

"Follow that cab. Just don't lose him. OK?"

"Got it. You American, sir?"

"How did you guess?"

The driver grinned through the partition. "Don't tell me. FBI."

"National Crime Agency," Donovan said and immediately liked the sound of it.

"Bloody hell."

Ayo's taxi turned into Sussex Gardens, then onto Bayswater Road and west then through Holland Park. Within twenty minutes, they were on the A4, Hammersmith Flyover and heading towards the M4 motorway.

Donovan checked in again, adding that he assumed Ayo was returning to the Radisson. He was wrong. Ayo's taxi turned off and headed for the Heathrow airport tunnel. Ten minutes later Ayo checked in at the Air France counter and headed straight to Departures. Donovan had only just caught up with him. As he ran, he called in again. "Christ. OK. Stand by."

Twenty minutes later: "Sorry Craig. We've lost him. My suspicion is he's used a different passport to check in and maybe slung the overcoat, but I can't get anyone in security to respond. But where the fuck is Lazarus?"

"Last time I saw him he was at the Radisson. What can I do now?"

"Stick around while I do some more checks. Go and read your book."

"I can't. I left it at Zabiollah's."

"Buy another. But an interesting morning's work, Craig. Ayo has emptied Lazarus's bank account, taken a huge amount of cash for himself and moved the balance to the Islamic bank. I assume that might pay of some of their debt and secure Ayo's safety back home. We're checking how much was moved."

Craig bought a newspaper and sat down to wait, but after an hour and nothing fresh from anyone he called in to say he was returning to the Radisson. For some reason, he was worried about Lazarus.

He asked at reception. "No sir," he was told. "Neither of the two Nigerian gentlemen has checked out yet."

Deciding it was not his business to tell them he'd just watched one of them take a flight out, probably back to Nigeria, he took a walk along the corridor outside their rooms. A 'Do Not Disturb' notice hung on both doors so he returned to reception. "Would you mind checking if there is anyone in Room 218."

"Of course, one minute, sir.....Sorry sir, there is no response."

"I'm worried about the occupant," Donovan said.

"That is the Nigerian gentleman who lost his passport, sir?"

"That's the one."

"Is there cause for concern, sir? He seemed very upset yesterday."

"His partner has already flown back to Nigeria - alone," said Donovan.

"Mmm..... without checking out it seems. I'll get someone to check."

Donovan was there when the Portuguese maid knocked on the door of 218 with its 'Do Not Disturb' notice. She called but got no response so opened it with her universal key. Donovan followed her inside and was right behind her when she pushed open the bathroom door and screamed. She turned, collided with Donovan and rushed out, her hand over her mouth. Lazarus's naked body was lying face down in a pool of blood that had spread across the tiled floor to the door.

The Radisson called the police. The London police called the French police, but no-one called Ayola Eniate was on the passenger list of any Air France connecting flights even to Abuja. They were now checking CCTV.

Donovan wandered the lobby at the Radisson answering phone calls and watching police and forensic people coming and going. Blessing Akami has been arrested over the bank fraud but was not a suspect in Lazarus's killing. Then his phone buzzed again. "The ICC Commercial Crime Services (CCS) is acting on something they'd been following for years. The CIA, FBI and Interpol are involved.

Another call: Fraud-Net, the global network of law firms that specialised in tackling business crime was back on a string of cases just through one single piece of evidence from Bank of Baroda. "It's pack of cards time, Craig. I never thought I'd live to see things happen so quickly. Police arrested a guy called Alhaji Ahmed and a woman, Nabila Alhassan who were on the same flight in as Ayo and Lazarus. Since then, one name leads to another. They're going down like flies."

Then a plain clothes police officer approached him. "Mr Donovan? Detective Chief Inspector, Don Savage. I understand we should be talking to you. Can I have a word?"

Craig nodded.

"You knew the dead man?"

"I've been following him and his friend for weeks. I'm a private investigator. It's a long story but I'm happy to tell you what I can."

"Then, I can tell you it looks like suicide, sir. I can't confirm just yet of course. You know what the system's like, but we found a note."

Later that day, Craig was given a copy. DCI Don Savage waited whilst he read it. It was written in a scrawling, backward slanting style in red ink

"Dear Lord," it began. "I am Lazarus, Lord, Lazarus of Warri Nigeria not Lazarus of Bethany who was resurrected. I am Lazarus of the Church of Our Lord of Mercy and Forgiveness and of Lazarus Gold and Jewellery Limited. Lazarus of Bethany was resurrected, Lord, but I do not want to be resurrected. Be merciful to me, O Lord.

Because of your constant love, because of your great mercy wipe away my sins and wash away my evil for I know I have sinned, many times, Lord. I have done evil things, Lord and the world has turned against me and I feel lost in your world Lord. You can condemn me but please forgive me Lord for I have been evil since the gold bracelet my father gave me at my Christening was stolen by my brother and I saw it on his wife's wrist, Lord."

"I am the son of my father, Lord, who taught me the jewellery business and how to give thanks in Church for food and for the shoes on my feet. But I am not happy, Lord. I am sad. My many suits are like me, Lord. They hang empty and lifeless in my closet waiting for a heart, a soul and a body to fill them. To see them makes me cry, Lord.

“But it is anger that makes my tears to flow like rain. So, I come to you, Lord, empty and guilty and to confess. I am a poor man in my heart. Perhaps I am now also a poor man in my pocket.

“My words are not enough Lord. I cannot write now. I cannot think, I cannot see, I only remember bad things because there are no good things to remember. I have lived a life that is not true to my heart, Lord. And I speak in strange tongues, with foul language full of bitterness and hatred, Lord.

“Pastor Gabriel is not a bastard, Lord. I confess that Pastor Gabriel taught me many things. I have all his videos. I watch them at night and when I feel lonely. Pastor Gabriel did not have a rich gold merchant for a father but a poor mother who died in the fierce fire in Makoko, Lord. Pastor Gabriel is your true follower because he tells the truth and sees the future. I tell lies. Lord and I see no future, only my past mistakes.

“Forgive me Lord but I have been led astray by real bastards because I am too weak to stand before them and say what is true to my heart. Today the big bastard is Pastor Ayo, Lord. Today he will break my bank just like Daisy broke my heart with a Catholic priest and my brother Kenneth broke my trust and broke the rules. They are the real bastards.

“But there are many others, Lord. I have a list. These people must be stopped so that Pastor Gabriel can continue to shine a light in my heart and the hearts of others. That is my honesty, Lord.

“So, my most merciful God, I confess that I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what I have done, and by what I have left undone. I have not loved you with my whole heart. I am truly sorry and humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on me and forgive me that I may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name.

Beneath was a scrawled signature: 'Lazarus' And beneath that, like a post script, as if he'd had yet one more last thought, he'd written:

“Blessed are those who do not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.”

When he'd finished, Craig handed the copy back.

“A sad note, Mr Donovan.”

Craig nodded. “Yes,” he said.

” We found the red pen in his bag. It was clipped to a long list of names. At this stage, they might mean more to you than us.” He handed Craig a copy.

It was a long list of names written in black ink on different paper and in capital letters as if Lazarus had written it before but hidden it somewhere. A quick scan of the forty-six names was enough for Craig. He read it through twice and then handed it back.

“I agree with Lazarus,” he said. “These are the real criminals. Lazarus was a victim but he always had a nice way with words. He puts it very well. Pastor Gabriel Joshua must be allowed to continue to shine a light in people's hearts. Gabriel is our client, detective.”

An Honourable Fake is available on Smashwords at:
<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/704401>

The Printer (from “Bad Boys”)

Grzegorz Samoszewski had been known as ‘Greg’ for as long as he could remember.

He was a quiet man who preferred to keep himself to himself. He was, or so Greg’s wife Dalia used to say, a social misfit. It was a view with which Greg was happy to agree for what he lacked in social graces he more than made up for in technical ingenuity. Greg was a natural and quite brilliant engineer who had studied printing technology from its origins as Chinese woodblock two thousand years ago right up to modern 3D printing. If Charlie Bywater, his old boss, at Bywater Printing Company had seen sense he’d have made Greg a full partner in the firm and let him run it and drag it into the twenty first century. That’s what Greg had always hoped for and why he’d never moved on.

Instead, Charlie, the miserable fool, had sold the business and made everyone, including Greg, redundant. Was Greg miffed? Of course. But the good thing was that he’d bought a few pieces of Bywater’s printing equipment at a discount with his redundancy money and re-installed them in his garage at 18, Lansdown Road.

It had been a tight squeeze but moving house had been out of the question with Dalia’s increasing health problems. She’d been the manager of a haberdashery shop called “Ethel’s” in the High Street. Like many small shops, Ethel’s had closed some years ago but it had once been well known for its knitting wools, threads, ribbons, trimmings, zips, buttons and Dalia’s skill at invisible mending though she no longer had any of the nimble dexterity or keen eyesight she once had of course.

So, they still lived in the detached, sixties house they’d bought thirty years ago. From the outside it still looked the same with its white window frames, black front door and rendered external walls that Greg painted every three years in Dulux exterior magnolia. Being on the corner, 18, Lansdown Road was the only house with a decent driveway to park Greg’s fifteen-year-old Peugeot people carrier.

Greg’s various pieces of printing equipment were not all in the garage. Some were beneath it. Realising he’d needed more space he’d hired a mini excavator, removed his jacket, tie and pullover and sweated to create a cellar. He’d lined it with concrete paving slabs and made an entrance through Dalia’s old greenhouse where she’d once grown her herbs. Heat was extracted with a fan linked to a pipe connected to the downstairs toilet vent.

When he’d finished constructing everything he would have liked Dalia to see it. “Dalia, my flower, what do you think? Wonderful, isn’t it?”

But Dalia, Greg’s flower, never ventured far these days and because he knew she’d never venture down the steep steps, Greg had placed their wedding photographs on a bench top and fixed photos of his mother, Eva, and his father, Isaac, to the wall.

Whilst drinking his morning mug of tea, Greg often sat and looked at the photo of his father and how similar he now looked to his father when he'd last seen him. He had his father's grey ring of hair around the bald patch, the same lines on his forehead and, because he was similarly short sighted, the same glasses with the thick lenses. Just like his father, Greg always dressed for work in grey trousers, a white shirt, a plain, navy-blue tie and, unless it was too warm, a grey knitted pullover. He only wore a kippah though when he and Dalia visited the synagogue in Cheltenham on special occasions. Greg would then take along the cap onto which Dalia had sewn a blue Star of David and put it on just before they arrived.

Greg liked the old photos but he never made his mug of tea last long for he always had jobs to do.

Greg's printing was small scale, using computers, software and a six-year-old Xerox digital printer he'd brought in in parts so no-one noticed and then reassembled. Perfection was Greg's aim and 'Quality not Quantity' might have been the simple strapline he'd have used if it was a real business. Printing, though, was Greg's hobby. It helped distract him from Dalia's increasing suffering.

One morning as he sipped his tea Greg decided to adapt one of the old Bywater machines so he could stitch small, hard back booklets. On another morning, having examined his own driving licence and debit card under a magnifying glass, he decided to try printing onto plastic and making a hologram. Pleased with the results he decided to apply for a new passport in order to check the claims of new, high security technology. Between attending to Dalia, Greg began experimenting with new papers, with special inks detectable only in infra-red or ultra violet light or by touch. He made watermarks, perforated numbers and tried embedding security fibres.

In six months, Greg had produced a copy of his own, new, high security passport that he felt was quite passable. What he'd have liked to do was to check it by using it to visit Poland, to Wroclaw, to see his cousin, Boris, and his old aunt who was in her nineties. If it had worked, Greg planned to have a bit of fun by informing the Immigration people that he had, quite deliberately, fooled them. They needed to be more careful. In his heart, though, Greg knew he'd never be able to test it out because of Dalia.

One morning, after he'd given Dalia her breakfast and left her to watch the birds pecking at bread crumbs on the back patio, the front door bell rang.

Thinking it was a delivery of some special paper he'd ordered, Greg wiped his hands, straightened his tie, made his way upstairs and opened the door. Standing there was middle-aged Asian with a white prayer cap and a long, straggly beard of the sort Dalia used to call pepper and salt.

"Good morning, Mr Greg," the man said. "Remember me?"

Greg frowned and adjusted his spectacles.

"It is Akram. I used to visit you at Mr Bywater's printing works," he said in a Pakistani-English accent.

Greg nodded out of politeness. He couldn't remember the face at all. Parts of the city had very mixed communities and he saw many different nationalities and types of dress when he took Dalia to the hospital.

"It is with good news we hear you are still in the printing trade," the man called Akram said.

Greg sniffed, scratched his head and said nothing. But how could anyone know about his workshop beneath the garage. He looked past the man and onto the road. There was a red Toyota parked opposite with someone sitting in the driver's seat.

"You see, Mr Greg, we are needing some certificates to be printed. Industrial certificates for driving, health and safety, construction and so on."

Greg adjusted his glasses once more and found his tongue. "I see.... but."

"Can I come in?" Greg shook his head defiantly. "I see. In that case, I will show you the sort of thing we need."

From the envelope, the man pulled a bundle of papers. His eyes looked up at Greg from the lower level of the door step and past him into the hallway and up the stairs.

"Sorry," Greg managed, "Printing is my hobby. It is not a business. I could not possibly....."

"Why not Mr Greg?"

"No, no. Thank you for asking but...." Greg tried to shut the door but a foot appeared on the step.

"But you are still a printer, Mr Greg. Do you still not remember me? You took the equipment from My Bywater. Where is it now, Mr Greg?"

Greg took his handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his nose.

"Mr Greg. Look at these. This is the sort of thing we need."

What Greg saw were diplomas, birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates, industrial skills certificates, each showing features like the ones he'd recently learned to make."

"But printing is my hobby," Greg repeated. "I have no wish to make money."

"Mr Greg, do not be so modest. Why would someone be buying all those special papers, the inks and small machines. We have it on good authority Mr Greg that you are very ingenious, but to run a business like yours from home the City council, the tax people, the insurance people, they should all know. It is a great pity but if you are unable to help then we will have no option but to tell them." He paused and grinned, exposing a row of big teeth between fat lips. "And how is your wife, Mr Greg?" The grin changed to a toothy snarl.

"My wife? But she....."

"Is unwell, Mr Greg. We know. It is a very close community isn't it?"

The man removed his foot and turned to go and Greg watched him scuff towards the gate— a shortish, middle aged man with a dark jacket, baggy white trousers, fitting more tightly around his dusty, lace up shoes. A Pakistani Moslem. At the gate, though, he turned and walked back. He walked right up to the doorstep again and stared up at Greg.

"Shalom is it, Mr Greg? Lehitraot - see you later. Do I speak your language well?"

And then he left once more and Greg watched him get into the parked red Toyota. He left the gate wide open so Greg went to shut it and returned to his kitchen to sit

beside Dalia who was still in the wheelchair staring at the birds. She looked up at him with her tired, blue eyes, a line of clear saliva running from her mouth and a tear trickling down her cheek.

“It was only a man wanting to sell something, my flower,” Greg said wiping her mouth but picturing what little he’d seen of the man’s face behind the beard. Had he met the man somewhere? It seemed unlikely. Even at Bywater’s, Greg rarely met visitors. The man had looked like many he’d seen pouring from the city mosque so why did a Moslem man try speaking in Hebrew. And how did he know about Dalia and about his purchases of paper and inks?

“He’s gone now, my flower.” Greg said. He wiped the tears from her cheek. “No need to worry.” Then he returned to his workshop to think.

What had once been somewhere he dabbled at weekends with the old Triumph motorbike he never rode and fixed the washing machine and lawn mower and dismantled and reassembled things to find out how they worked had, he had to admit, grown into something quite different.

All he had meant to do was prove to himself he would have made a better job of running Bywater Printing than Charlie Bywater but what he’d created beneath his garage suddenly felt different. Risky, in fact. Was it illegal to make a reasonable copy of his own passport just for the technical challenges? To make a good copy of his driving licence? And Greg didn’t know about tax, VAT, business rates and about making major alterations to a property without permission. How did that man know so much? Was it, perhaps, the postman, the Pakistani or Afghan man who rang the doorbell with small parcels and who lingered and tried to engage him in conversation and told him his name was Farouz?

Greg suddenly felt very nervous. He felt threatened and unsafe. He walked in circles around his workshop, feeling hot and sweaty. He removed his tie and stood, looking at the photo of his father and mother who had survived the war and the murders and who, during the anti-Zionist purge by the Politburo in 1968, told him it was best to leave and start afresh with his new bride, Dalia. Greg lifted the photo down and held it to his chest. Was it time to move again? Grzegorz Samoszewski, who had, for years, felt safe living in England, suddenly felt as if history was about to repeat itself. But where should he go and what about Dalia? How could he sell the house and everything they owned and just leave?

Greg ran back upstairs. Dalia was watching the birds again.

Dalia’s monthly hospital appointments had now become fortnightly.

On a cold, wet Thursday morning Greg did what he always did on appointments day. He dressed Dalia in a fresh skirt, white blouse and navy cardigan. Then he pushed the wheelchair up the ramp into the rear of the Peugeot, locked the doors and at 11am set off.

Earlier that morning, he’d had another visit from the young man who occasionally called to collect or deliver small packages. He’d been expecting the delivery and hoped the young man wouldn’t be late because of the 11.30 am hospital appointment. He’d been watching from the front window when he arrived at 9.05am

Greg hoped the young man wasn't a gardening enthusiast because he was ashamed of his front garden. It was mostly overgrown lawn surrounded by four borders of what had once been Dalia's favourites. But the dahlias were now finished and the yellow roses wilting just as Greg felt his own heart was fading.

The young man in his black jeans and waterproof jacket opened and then closed the gate and walked up the path carrying a duffel bag just as Greg was blowing his nose into his fresh white handkerchief. The bell rang and Greg opened it still holding his handkerchief.

"Good morning, Mr Greg," the young man said in a clear and polite voice. "I have another package for you."

Greg said nothing but wiped his nose and stuffed the handkerchief into his trouser pocket. The man bent down, unfastened his bag and pulled out the package. He held it up for Greg to take. "I brought it all the way from Edinburgh, Mr Greg. It was very bad weather in Scotland. My car broke down in the snow."

Greg took the package and because of the young man's politeness said, "Edinburgh?"

"Seven hundred miles there and back, Mr Greg. I didn't get back until the middle of the night."

"Edinburgh, you say?"

"Yeh. Wazir, you know him?"

"Wazir?"

"Wazir Khan. You know him?"

Greg shook his head. Nothing had been made clear to him since he'd met that Pakistani man six months ago.

"Well, thanks Mr Greg, I'll be on my way."

"Who do you work for?" Greg asked.

"Myself, Mr Greg. I just do as I'm told. I'm a courier."

"Where's your van?"

"I use my car but my car is still in Scotland. A very kind man rescued me and brought me home. Today I came by bus."

"Do you work for yourself?"

"Well," the young man seemed unsure. "I work for Mr Khan from Faisal World Travel."

"Mr Khan? Faisal World Travel?"

"You know him?"

Akram had mentioned a Mr Khan, but there were a lot of Khans in the area. Greg had never taken much notice. Questions were not encouraged. "And what's your name, yutsayuh?" he asked.

"Kevin, Mr Greg."

Greg retrieved his handkerchief and blew his nose again. The young man called Kevin looked at him and shrugged. "Well, see you again, Mr Greg. Have a nice day." And then he left, quietly shutting the gate behind him.

At the hospital, Greg parked the wheelchair at the end of a row of hard plastic chairs and knelt to talk to Dalia though whether she knew where she was or why she was there was difficult to tell.

She was thinner now, her grey hair sparser and her complexion paler Her eyes did not focus and her head wobbled on her frail neck. Her bony and veiny hands shook slightly. Greg placed them beneath the tartan blanket, kissed her cheek and settled into the adjacent seat. A man then sat next to him although there were other spare seats in the row.

"Good morning," the stranger said. "Is this seat free?"

Greg nodded and held onto the arm of the wheelchair but Dalia mumbled something so he stood up again. He adjusted the towel that was supporting her chin and whispered, "It won't be long, my flower."

"What time is your appointment?" the man asked.

Greg turned. He saw a man of his own age wearing glasses and a damp, tight-fitting knitted hat that came down to his ears. Greg thought it was called a beanie. "At 11.30 am," he said.

The man dragged off his hat as if realising it was inappropriate attire for a hospital. He smoothed down the sparse grey threads of hair and leaned back with his legs outstretched. He crossed the black army-style boots on his feet and folded his arms. His green anorak rustled and he leaned towards Greg. "How is your wife?"

"My wife?"

"I'm sorry but I assumed the lady was your wife."

"She is much the same. Nothing changes."

Greg looked away but the man nudged his elbow. "Excuse me, sir, but I'm sure we've met somewhere before."

Greg's mind shot back to the last time someone had said that. "I don't think so," he said.

"Mill Lane. The old industrial site. I used to make deliveries to Benson's Paints. There was a printing company. I remember having to back my truck up the lane past the printing works."

Greg sniffed, produced his white handkerchief and wiped his cold nose. "Yes," he said, "Bywater Design & Printing."

"That's it. It was a few years ago."

"It's closed."

"Has it, indeed? Did you work there?"

"I was made redundant."

"It's a sign of the times."

"They wouldn't invest."

The man shook his head. "Have you retired now?"

"I look after my wife."

"What's wrong? Sorry, I don't mean to pry but..."

"Parkinson's Disease Dementia."

"I'm sorry. How long?"

"Ten years. It started with the Parkinson's." For a brief moment, Greg felt a desperate need to talk, to offload. The man in the anorak, boots and beanie looked like a truck driver who'd come straight from work.

"It must be very hard on you? How often do you come here?"

"Every two weeks."

The man produced a big hand, "My name's Roger. Roger Smith."

There was no shake, just a brief holding of hands. "I'm Grzegorz Samoszewski,"

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr Samoszewski."

Greg nodded. "You pronounce it very well."

"It is Polish, yes?"

Greg nodded.

"I have driven to Poland many times over the years," Roger said. "What is your wife's name?"

"My wife? She is Dalia. We have been married for forty-five years. "

"Forty-five years is a long time, Mr Samoszewski."

Greg caressed the arm of the wheelchair. "Yes," he said. "I call her Herach."

"She is your flower, yes?"

Greg sniffed. "You know some Hebrew?"

"Only a few words but I know herach. You are Jewish Mr Samoszewski?"

Greg was saved from responding. The time according to the clock above the reception desk showed 11.36 and a nurse appeared, reading from a card. "Mrs Samo?" Greg stood and turned to the stranger. "That's us," he said.

Afterwards, when, Greg was pushing the wheelchair outside and struggling in the rain to lift it into the car, he heard a voice from behind. "Can I help you?"

"Thank you," Greg said, recognising the man in the boots and beanie.

"Can we talk?" Roger Smith then said after Dalia was safely secured.

Greg sniffed and drew out his handkerchief to wipe his face. "What about?"

"Printing, Mr Samoszewski."

"What is this?" Greg said, shocked at yet another complete stranger knowing about this. He climbed into the driver's seat and put the key in the ignition ready to drive away but Roger caught his arm.

"You met my young friend Kevin this morning?"

Greg frowned.

“Kevin is in deep trouble, Mr Samoszewski and he needs some help. I think you have the same sort of trouble. What starts as threats and blackmail stretches way beyond that. Fake passports are too common, too easy. It’s what they’re used for that’s the problem – money laundering, illegal immigration, terrorism.”

“What are you saying?” Greg said with a noticeable tremble in his voice. “Who are you?”

“I’m only an old truck driver, Mr Samoszewski, but I’ve been around the block a few times during my forty years including trips to Poland where my old Jewish friend, Jack Hassenfeld, whose company moulded dashboards by the way, also had a wife called Dalia. He also called her Herach. It was Jack who taught me my few words of Hebrew. Small world isn’t it?”

He was leaning on the door so Greg couldn’t shut it without a struggle.

“But, you know what, Mr Samoszewski? My mother used to tell me that good things often come from chance encounters. I just happened to be passing through Scotland and picked up a young man called Kevin whose car had broken down. As I talked to him I sensed something was wrong. To cut a long story short, when Kevin then discovered he was, unwittingly, carrying forged passports he’d picked up from a house in Edinburgh, Kevin himself broke down and, oh my giddy aunt, how the flood gates opened. I brought him home.”

Greg now remembered Kevin.

“Kevin’s a nice lad, Mr Samoszewski. He’s younger than my son was when he was shot dead by the Taliban in Afghanistan but he’s as innocent as the day he was born. Polite. Thoughtful. Sensitive. But family history, religious beliefs and domestic circumstances can make a lot of difference to blackmailers. You know what I mean? In Kevin’s case his mother is a white English Christian and his father a radical Moslem from Pakistan with links to Islamic terrorism who uses different names and passports. Khan is a favourite name of his but he comes and goes and seems to have a lot of influence amongst the local community of Khans, Khokars, Faisals and Mohameds. Problem is people don’t like talking about it. They keep their heads down in their prayer books and go about their day to day affairs without asking questions.

“As a result, Kevin is scared and rather mixed up, I’m afraid, though that’s not particularly unusual for young men these days, especially for one living where he does, surrounded by thirty different nationalities and as many religions. When asked, he calls himself an agnostic but look where that’s got him so far.

“What I’m saying is, please help him, Mr Samoszewski. At the same time help yourself. If we can add a few more snippets to this jigsaw from total innocents who have, like Kevin, got involved merely to protect themselves and close family, we might expose a few things. We might then go to the Security Services who, by the way, seem to have given up bothering the local community out of political sensitivities. Such are the ways of modern liberalism, political correctness and democracy, Mr Samoszewski. But if we gave them some facts we might see some arrests. We might even see some better integration and tolerance and the world would become a much nicer place to live in.”

Greg stared at him. Roger continued.

“I think you should know, however, we made copies of the passports Kevin delivered to you this morning. They are missing a few things – photos and barcodes

for example - so I assume your job is to finish them off and make them look kosher, if you'll excuse my use of the word."

Greg stared at the man leaning casually on his car door in the pouring rain. "Where is this young man now? he asked.

"Waiting over there." Roger pointed to some trees bordering the car park.

"And where does he live?"

Roger pointed in the opposite direction. "Over there. He's got no money so he lives in the attic over the Faisal World Travel shop so certain people can keep an eye on him and use him to run errands now and again. In his spare time, he stacks shelves in an ethnic food store and is learning the fine arts of a halal butchery."

Greg scratched his nose. "Faisal World Travel? Mr Khan's shop?"

"That's it. It seems to me that Faisal World Travel is the epi-centre of a lot of dubious goings on."

Greg glanced behind at the wheelchair and Dalia. She hadn't moved of course but Greg, as always, wondered if she was listening. He hoped so. "I need to return home, Mr, uh, Smith isn't it? I cannot leave Dalia for long. Would you care to meet me later?"

"18, Lansdown Road isn't it? The house on the corner with a double garage big enough to house a printing press. Is there anywhere nearby I can park an eighteen-wheel Volvo truck?"

"The Printer" is taken from a full-length novel called "Bad Boys" due to be published on Smashwords in early 2019.