

The Future Shop

I arrived back in England from the theatre of operations in the dreadful winter of 1970. I'd expected confusion and incompetence out there, but not in our Embassy sitting smugly behind its palm trees. The Duty Officer seemed only marginally interested in the operation and it was made clear that my need for Foreign Office intervention had been 'the most frightful bore, don't you know?'

I had exposed an embarrassing schism in the local government, if you could call it that, composed as it was of tribal leaders and their hack men. But that fact seemed to be secondary to the requirement for extra effort caused by the sudden flow of top secret wires. Some of the Embassy staff had to work overtime and had missed the Ambassador's Garden Party. I was glad to get out of there. At the airport I sent a wire to Victoria. It read 'Ne8'. She'd know I was on my way home, but anyone else would think we were playing correspondence chess.

Even if England greeted me with the weariness that I expected, it was still home and familiar territory. I reported in and was met with less than enthusiasm.

"Mr Gorman will see you now," said the adenoidal girl, not looking up from her desk. It should have been a warning.

"Ah, Hare, yes, please, take a pew."

It was Gorman at his vaguest. I had never talked with him without this absurd front that he put up. I had once remarked, in annoyance, that he wasn't a University Don, causing him to drop his guard just for a second. He wasn't my friend, I knew that, but my particular skills were too much in demand for him to forget who he was dealing with.

"How much leave do you have, Hare, quite a lot I imagine." He knew, of course, to the day how much leave I had; if I took it all, I could sail around the world.

"I've authorized you to take all your leave, Hare, drop out of site, take a holiday, go away somewhere nice."

The message was clear, I was persona non grata. It was no good asking why; even if he knew, he wouldn't say, and he had probably been simply told to get me out of the way. So, I thought, the British Government had found it inconvenient to be told that their efforts to stabilise that particular local government had been for naught. Somebody in the hierarchy had his nose out of joint, and Gorman was just delivering a message, one probably delivered on a silver plate in a club somewhere.

I went out of that drab building on Northumberland Avenue into London in the rain. I was out of touch with what was happening in the sceptered isle, so I grabbed an Evening paper and made my way to my flat, tucked into a long-forgotten corner of one of the Horse Guards buildings with a view over St James Park. Not bad for a freelance, I thought, even if my security clearance was a notch higher than most people knew about. Gorman had muttered something about 'deniability'. It sounded a bit like the CIA talking. Perhaps it was.

I went through the side door that only opened if you had the two keys and turned them simultaneously. Something was wrong. I went up the stairs. None of my prints were on the walls. The flat was completely empty; I might never have lived there. It was the ultimate message. After a few seconds, I went back down the stairs and walked round to what we called 'The Local'. As I walked, I wondered just who had the power to order such a mean-spirited revenge. Someone higher than the Controller, that was certain. And there were only a few in that exalted stratum.

Rita, the monumental blonde barmaid, nodded at me.

“Wotcheravinthen,” she said out of the side of her mouth, her cigarette kept in place by lipstick that looked as if a clown had made her up. ‘Angel’s bow’, I think someone had called it once. She didn’t look very angelic to me. But she had a good heart under all that padding.

The evening paper was as depressing as the streets outside. Arthur Scargill was banging on about the need to strike and the nation appeared to be dying on its feet, with rotating strikes, three day work weeks and constant power outages. Apparently candles had long ago disappeared from shop shelves. By the time I’d finished my pint, I was almost in tears. As I stood up, Rita caught my eye. I knew enough to coast along the bar on my way out.

“Strangers in the House,” she said although if her lips moved I didn’t see them.

‘Strangers in the House’, that old Parliamentary phrase, was a standard low level warning that someone was in The Local, someone we didn’t know.

I walked away with my hands in my raincoat pockets. It was the standard reversible coat that the Service issued, about the only decent piece of kit they had. I had my folding hat in a pocket. Never go anywhere without a hat, they’d drummed into us, best disguise in the world; change a man’s appearance in a flash. If you’re in danger, get into a loo somewhere, reverse the raincoat and put on the hat, pull it down. Works a treat, they’d said. It was true.

I worked my way towards my flat. Long before I got there I was aware of the shadow. It’s easy to follow someone who isn’t expecting it, but impossible if the target is already alert. The shadow was good, very light-footed; he didn’t seem to want to engage. So I turned the corner and waited in one of those large doorways that used to have a door that opened. It had been closed for years. The shadow eased around the corner and stopped dead.

“In here,” I said from my vantage point.

“Oh hell,” said a young voice, “failed again.”

He had that unfinished look about him; I wondered whether he had to shave every day. He wasn’t wearing a hat.

I pulled him into the doorway by the lapels of his elegant overcoat. I patted him down, but of course he wasn’t armed, he was just a messenger.

“Give me the message,” I said.

The shadow gulped; “Yes, sir, it’s ‘Go to the north end of Leather Lane at ten tomorrow’.

“That’s it?”

“Yes, sir, please don’t tell them you caught me; they warned me, but I thought I could pull it off.”

He had that frightfully upper class accent that only gets acquired from a good family and either Eton or Harrow. I looked at him. He reminded me of someone, someone beautiful and who had gone to the very best schools. I decided to take the plunge.

“Did your mother go to Cheltenham Ladies College?”

He pulled away from me.

“How did you..?”

It was all he had to say. I knew now that he must be Penny’s son. Penny had married James when he was merely the eldest son, but his father was now dead, so Penny was the Duchess of Taunton, the most beautiful Duchess in the Land, they said.

Now I felt bad that I’d lifted his wallet and replaced it with the duty bundle we all carried for just this purpose. I sighed.

“Look in your inside pocket.”

He did so and pulled out the cheap plastic thing that had the same bulk as a wallet. He stared at it. "But this.."

He stopped. When he looked at me, I was opening his wallet and looking at the paperwork. He appeared to be Rupert Huish, which was about right, I thought. He'd be a Viscount like his father was when I first met him, but it would be foolish to advertise his title, someone might think he had money. Those of us who followed such things knew that, like so many landed nobility, they were broke and nothing much remained of the vast estates. The massive castle would by now be in the hands of the National Trust or something like that. Of course, I recalled, Penny had money, so perhaps that's what had clinched the deal.

I knew more about Penny than anyone other than James. And Penny knew what I did. I'd kissed her once and we'd had an on-again, off-again lunch date. I liked her and I'm sure she liked me. But, well, she moved in rather elevated circles now.

"Look, Rupert, I don't know who you're working for, and frankly I'd rather not know. Tell your people you need more training."

He looked glum. "Not much good at anything, couldn't even pass RCB."

So they'd tried to get him into Sandhurst, had they? Someone must have pulled strings to get him into one of those low level intelligence outfits that just seemed to grow out of nothing.

I looked at him and smiled. I patted my pockets and found a card. "Give me a ring, Rupert, and remember me to your parents."

He stood there holding my rather tattered card, looking the worse for wear. I left him standing there in his beautiful overcoat. I bet the label inside said 'Huntsman'.

There are small hotels in London that are used for various intelligence purposes, The Sienna Hotel knew me and provided a room.

"Rather short notice sir, there are a few more stairs than usual."

The next morning I set off for Leather Lane. It's a remarkable little street with a permanent street market. You can get anything there, either on display, or if you're known on the street, almost anything else. I heard a story about some University Don who came regularly for his opium, which he smoked in a hookah, or something that looked like one. If anyone in the College knew, they certainly never did anything about it.

It's such fun watching the nefarious deals in progress that you tend to forget that you're standing virtually next door to the heart of the Legal profession in London. The Old Bailey is only a couple of hundred yards away.

As I stood at the end of the market a taxi drew up. A door opened alongside me. I got in. There was a woman in the far corner wearing a hat with a veil. But the perfume was still the same, that musky scent that she had worn all those years ago at the Bank in Oxford. It was Penny, of course. Behind the veil she was, if possible, more beautiful than ever.

"Hallo, Jonathan," she said, "It's been too long. Remember those lunches at the Randolph?"

Why would she bring that up? We had never been lovers and I liked James a lot. She must want something; she didn't need to beat about the bush.

"Oh," she said, blushing, "I know that look; you're expecting the worst, aren't you?"

"You know me well," I said.

"Rupert tells me you could have killed him last night and instead you gave him his wallet back. He's so young, Jonathan, he needs all the help he can get."

"Is that it, you want me to find him a job?"

There was silence.

“If only it was that simple,” she muttered.

She put a hand on my arm. “We heard a whisper about you, you’re in trouble, someone very high up is gunning for you. James and I wanted to do something.” She stopped, biting her lip. I could have kissed her right there and then.

“We called in a few favours; all we can do for you is to send you to a shop off Bond Street. I was told to give you this map.” She put a folded piece of paper in my hand.

“They’ll know about you there,” she said.

There was a strained silence. Then she leant forward and kissed me full on the lips.

“Go now; give my love to Victoria when you next see her.”

It wasn’t until much later that I realised that she had put a strange emphasis on the word ‘next’. And by that time I was in a street off Bond Street looking at a shop with a sign over the front door that read ‘The Future Shop’.

It was indeed a small street and I wondered whether anyone without directions would ever find it. Anyway, I thought, what’s to lose? I went into a room filled with interesting modern gadgets. There were several strange-looking coffee machines with Italian names, which seemed strange since coffee was such a foreign beverage in England. A bell rang somewhere in another room. A tall and distinguished looking man dressed in a formal outfit appeared. I thought for a moment I must be in Harrods.

“You will be Mr Hare, sir,” he said, “We were expecting you. Please come this way, sir.”

And with that we went through a door that closed after us with an ominous click.

“Please take a seat, sir and look through these brochures,” he said. There was now a different tone, harder and more to the point.

The brochures described a number of different places, apparently holiday locales, except that they were not boasting colourfully about the beaches and resort facilities. There were notes about currency transfer, security, and transport arrangements. I found one that looked better than the others.

“Very good, sir; it has no reciprocal arrangements, of course, and the locals know a good thing when they see it.”

I said, “Please send a telegram to this address, saying ‘Na8’.”

Victoria would know that I was not coming home and was in a difficult position.

He nodded and left the room. Before the door closed I saw a rack of electronic equipment that would have looked good inside an airport control tower. He came back with a stainless steel bowl and a set of needles.

“You’ll need protection against the local diseases, sir, please take off your jacket and roll up your sleeves.”

It was all happening too quickly, but I knew I’d better get out of the way, chop chop. The jabs were administered efficiently. When the third needle was being withdrawn from my arm, I realised that the man was looking at me in a peculiar manner. It was the last thing I remembered.

When I woke up, a fan was whirling above me and a breeze was flowing in through a louvered window. There were strange scents on the breeze. When I looked out of the window, there were palm trees and in the distance a deep blue ocean. I felt fine. I got up and walked around. Everything worked. There was a telegram on the table. I opened it.

It read ‘Qa1+!’ I smiled. Victoria was safe at home and understood.