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What follows is a truthful account, as best I am able to provide it, of my role in the British deception operation, codenamed Windfall, that was mounted against the East German Intelligence Service (Stasi) in the late nineteen fifties and early sixties, and resulted in the death of the best British secret agent I ever worked with, and of the innocent woman for whom he gave his life.

A professional intelligence officer is no more immune to human feelings than the rest of mankind. What matters to him is the extent to which he is able to suppress them, whether in real time or, in my case, fifty years on. Until a couple of months ago, lying in bed at night in the remote farmstead in Brittany that is my home, listening to the honk of cattle and the bickering of hens, I resolutely fought off the accusing voices that from time to time attempted to disrupt my sleep. I was too young, I protested, I was too innocent, too naive, too junior. If you're looking for scalps, I told them, go to those grand masters of deception, George Smiley and his master, Control. It was their refined cunning, I insisted, their devious, scholarly intellects, not mine, that delivered the triumph and the anguish that was Windfall. It is only now, having been held to account by the Service to which I devoted the best years of my life, that I am driven in age and bewilderment to set down,

at whatever cost, the light and dark sides of my involvement in the affair.

How I came to be recruited to the Secret Intelligence Service in the first place – the ‘Circus’ as we Young Turks called it in those supposedly halcyon days when we were quartered, not in a grotesque fortress beside the River Thames, but in a fustian Victorian pile of red brick, built on the curve of Cambridge Circus – remains as much of a mystery to me as do the circumstances of my birth; and the more so since the two events are inseparable.

My father, whose acquaintance I barely remember, was according to my mother the wastrel son of a wealthy Anglo-French family from the English midlands, a man of rash appetites, fast-diminishing inheritance and a redeeming love of France. In the summer of 1930, he was taking the waters in the spa town of Saint-Malo on Brittany’s north coast, frequenting the casinos and *maisons closes* and generally cutting a dash. My mother, sole offspring of a long line of Breton farmers, at that time aged twenty, also happened to be in town, performing the duties of a bridesmaid at the wedding of the daughter of a wealthy cattle auctioneer. Or so she claimed. However, she is a single source, not above a little decoration when the facts were against her, and it would not at all surprise me if she came into town for less upright purposes.

After the ceremony, so her story goes, she and a fellow bridesmaid, the better for a glass or two of champagne, played truant from the reception and, still in their finery, took an evening stroll along the crowded promenade, where my father was also strolling with intent. My mother was pretty and flighty, her friend less so. A whirlwind romance followed. My mother was understandably coy about the pace of it. A second wedding was hastily arranged. I was the product. My

father, it appears, was not naturally connubial, and even in the early years of marriage contrived to be more absent than present.

But now the story takes an heroic turn. War, as we know, changes everything, and in a trice it had changed my father. Scarcely had it been declared than he was hammering on the doors of the British War Office, volunteering his services to whoever would have him. His mission, according to my mother, was to save France single-handed. If it was also to escape the ties of family, that is a heresy I was never permitted to utter in my mother's presence. The British had a newly formed Special Operations Executive, famously tasked by Winston Churchill himself with 'setting Europe ablaze'. The coastal towns of south-west Brittany were a hotbed of German submarine activity and our local town of Lorient, a former French naval base, the hottest bed of all. Five times parachuted into the Breton flatlands, my father allied himself with whatever Resistance groups he could find, caused his share of mayhem and died a gruesome death in Rennes prison at the hands of the Gestapo, leaving behind him an example of selfless dedication impossible for any son to match. His other legacy was a misplaced faith in the British public school system, which notwithstanding his dismal performance at his own British public school condemned me to the same fate.

The earliest years of my life had been passed in paradise. My mother cooked and prattled, my grandfather was severe but kindly, the farm prospered. At home we spoke Breton. At the Catholic primary school in our village, a beautiful young nun who had spent six months in Huddersfield as an au pair taught me the rudiments of the English language and, by national decree, French. In the school holidays I ran barefoot in the fields and cliffs around our farmstead, harvested buckwheat for my

mother's crêpes, tended an old sow called Fadette and played wild games with the children of the village.

The future meant nothing to me until it struck.

At Dover, a plump lady called Murphy, cousin to my late father, detached me from my mother's hand and took me to her house in Ealing. I was eight years old. Through the train window I saw my first barrage balloons. Over supper, Mr Murphy said it would all be over in months and Mrs Murphy said it wouldn't, both of them speaking slowly and repeating themselves for my benefit. The next day Mrs Murphy took me to Selfridges and bought me a school uniform, taking care to keep the receipts. The day after that, she stood on the platform at Paddington station, and wept while I waved goodbye to her with my new school cap.

The Anglicization wished on me by my father needs little elaboration. There was a war on. Schools must put up with what they got. I was no longer Pierre but Peter. My poor English was ridiculed by my comrades, my Breton-accented French by my beleaguered teachers. Our little village of Les Deux Eglises, I was informed almost casually, had been overrun by Germans. My mother's letters arrived, if at all, in brown envelopes with British stamps and London postmarks. It was only years later that I was able to imagine through whose brave hands they must have passed. Holidays were a blur of boys' camps and proxy parents. Redbrick preparatory schools turned into granite-grey public schools, but the curriculum stayed the same: the same margarine, the same homilies on patriotism and Empire, the same random violence, careless cruelty and unappeased, unaddressed sexual desire. One spring evening in 1944, shortly before the D-Day landings, the headmaster called me to his study and told me that my father had died a soldier's death, and that

I should be proud of him. For security reasons, no further explanation was available.

I was sixteen when, at the end of a particularly tedious summer term, I returned to peacetime Brittany a half-grown English misfit. My grandfather had died. A new companion named Monsieur Emile was sharing my mother's bed. I did not care for Monsieur Emile. One half of Fadette had been given to the Germans, the other to the Resistance. In flight from the contradictions of my childhood and fuelled by a sense of filial obligation, I stowed away on a train to Marseilles and, adding a year to my age, attempted to enlist in the French Foreign Legion. My quixotic venture came to a summary end when the Legion, making a rare concession to my mother's entreaties on the grounds that I was not foreign but French, released me back into captivity, this time to the London suburb of Shoreditch, where my father's unlikely stepbrother Markus ran a trading company importing precious furs and carpets from the Soviet Union – except he always called it Russia – and had offered to teach me the trade.

Uncle Markus remains another unsolved mystery in my life. I do not know to this day whether his offer of employment was in some way inspired by my later masters. When I asked him how my father had died, he shook his head in disapproval – not of my father, but of the crassness of my question. Sometimes I wonder whether it is possible to be born secret, in the way people are born rich, or tall, or musical. Markus was not mean, or tight, or unkind. He was just secret. He was middle-European, his name was Collins. I never learned what it was before that. He spoke accented English very fast, but I never learned what his mother tongue was. He called me Pierre. He had a lady friend named Dolly who ran a

hat shop in Wapping and collected him from the door of the warehouse on Friday afternoons. But I never knew where they went for their weekends, whether they were married to each other, or to other people. Dolly had a Bernie in her life, but I never knew whether Bernie was her husband, her son or her brother, because Dolly was born secret too.

And I don't know even in retrospect whether the Collins Trans-Siberian Fur & Fine Carpet Company was a bona fide trading house, or a cover company set up for the purpose of intelligence gathering. Later, when I tried to find out, I met a blank wall. I knew that every time Uncle Markus was preparing to visit a trade fair, whether in Kiev, Perm or Irkutsk, he trembled a lot; and that when he came back, he drank a lot. And that in the days leading up to a trade fair, a well-spoken Englishman called Jack would swing by, charm the secretaries, pop his head round the door to the sorting room and call 'hullo, Peter, all well with you?' – never Pierre – then take Markus out to a good lunch somewhere. And after lunch, Markus would come back to his office and lock the door.

Jack claimed to be a broker in fine sable, but I know now that what he really dealt in was intelligence, because when Markus announced that his doctor wouldn't allow him to do fairs any more, Jack suggested I come to lunch with him instead, and took me to the Travellers Club in Pall Mall, and asked me whether I would have preferred life in the Legion, and if I was serious about any of my girlfriends, and why I had fled my public school considering I'd been captain of boxing, and whether I had ever thought of doing something useful for my country, by which he meant England, because if I felt I'd missed out on the war on account of my age, this was my chance to catch up. He mentioned my father once only, over lunch, in terms so casual that I might have

supposed the topic could equally well have slipped his memory altogether:

‘Oh, and concerning your much revered late papa. Strictly off the record, and I never said this. All right by you?’

‘Yes.’

‘He was a very brave chap indeed, and did a bloody good job for his country. Both his countries. Enough said?’

‘If you say so.’

‘So here’s to him.’

Here’s to him, I agreed, and we drank a silent toast.

At an elegant country house in Hampshire, Jack and his colleague Sandy, and an efficient girl called Emily, whom I immediately fell in love with, gave me the short course in clearing a dead letter box in mid-town Kiev – actually a chunk of loose masonry in the wall of an old tobacco kiosk – of which they had a replica set up in the orangery. And how to read the safety signal that would tell me it was all right to clear it – in this case a piece of tattered green ribbon tied to a railing. And how afterwards to indicate that I had cleared the letter box, by tossing an empty Russian cigarette packet into a litter bin next to a bus shelter.

‘And maybe, Peter, when you apply for your Russian visa, better to use your French passport rather than your Brit version,’ he suggested breezily, and reminded me that Uncle Markus had an affiliate company in Paris. ‘And Emily’s off-limits, by the way,’ he added, in case I was thinking otherwise, which I was.

And that was my first run, my first ever assignment for what I later came to know as the Circus, and my first vision of myself as a secret warrior in my dead father’s image. I can no longer enumerate the other runs I made over the next couple of years, a good half-dozen at least, to Leningrad, Gdansk and

Sofia, then to Leipzig and Dresden, and all of them, so far as I ever knew, uneventful, if you took away the business of gearing yourself up, then gearing yourself down again afterwards.

Over long weekends in another country house with another beautiful garden, I added other tricks to my repertoire, such as counter-surveillance and brushing up against strangers in a crowd to make a furtive hand-over. Somewhere in the middle of these antics, in a coy ceremony conducted in a safe flat in South Audley Street, I was allowed to take possession of my father's gallantry medals, one French, one English, and the citations that explained them. Why the delay? I might have asked. But by then I had learned not to.

It was not until I started visiting East Germany that tubby, bespectacled, permanently worried George Smiley wandered into my life one Sunday afternoon in West Sussex, where I was being debriefed, not by Jack any more but by a rugged fellow called Jim, of Czech extraction and around my age, whose surname, when he was finally allowed to have one, turned out to be Prideaux. I mention him because later he too played a substantial part in my career.

Smiley didn't say much at my debriefing, just sat and listened and occasionally peered owlishly at me through his thick-rimmed spectacles. But when it was over he suggested we take a turn in the garden, which seemed endless and had a park attached to it. We talked, we sat on a bench, strolled, sat again, kept talking. My dear mother – was she alive and well? She's fine, thank you, George. A bit dotty, but fine. Then my father – had I kept his medals? I said my mother polished them every Sunday, which was true. I didn't mention that she sometimes hung them on me and wept. But, unlike Jack, he never asked me about my girls. He must have thought there was safety in numbers.

And when I recall that conversation now, I can't help thinking that, consciously or not, he was offering himself as the father figure he later became. But perhaps the feeling was in me, and not in him. The fact remains that, when he finally popped the question, I had a feeling of coming home, even though my home was across the Channel in Brittany.

'We were wondering, you see,' he said in a faraway voice, 'whether you'd ever considered signing up with us on a more regular basis? People who have worked on the outside for us don't always fit well on the inside. But in your case, we think you might. We don't pay a lot, and careers tend to be interrupted. But we do feel it's an important job, as long as one cares about the end, and not too much about the means.'

My farmstead at Les Deux Eglises consists of one straight-backed nineteenth-century granite *manoir* of no distinction, one tumbledown barn with a stone cross on its gable, remnants of fortifications from forgotten wars, an ancient stone well, now unused but formerly requisitioned by Resistance fighters to hide their weapons from the Nazi occupier, an equally ancient outdoor baking oven, a cider press, obsolete, and fifty hectares of indifferent pasture descending to cliff land and the sea's edge. The place has been in the family's possession for four generations. I am the fifth. It is neither a noble nor a profitable acquisition. To my right, as I look out of my living-room window, I have the knobbly spire of a nineteenth-century church; and to my left, a white stand-alone chapel, thatched. Between them, they have endowed the village with its name. In Les Deux Eglises, as in all of Brittany, we are Catholic or we are nothing. I am nothing.

To reach our farmstead from the town of Lorient, you first drive for half an hour or so along the southern coast road, which in winter is lined with skinny poplar trees, passing on your way west chunks of Hitler's Atlantic Wall which, being unremovable, are fast acquiring the status of a latter-day Stonehenge. After thirty kilometres or so, you start to watch

out for a pizza restaurant grandly named Odyssée on your left and soon after it on your right a reeking junkyard where the misnomered Honoré, a drunken vagabond whom my mother always cautioned me to avoid, and known locally as the poison dwarf, peddles bric-à-brac, old car tyres and manure. On reaching a battered sign saying *Delassus*, this being my mother's family name, you turn up a pitted track, braking hard as you go over the potholes or, if you are Monsieur Denis the postman, weaving deftly between them at full speed: which was what he was doing this sunny morning in early autumn, to the indignation of the chickens in the courtyard and the sublime indifference of Amoureuse, my beloved Irish setter, who was far too occupied grooming her latest litter to give her attention to mere human affairs.

As for me, from the moment Monsieur Denis – alias le Général, thanks to his great height and supposed resemblance to President de Gaulle – had unwound himself from his yellow van and started towards the front steps, I knew at one glance that the letter he was grasping in his spindly hand was from the Circus.

I wasn't alarmed at first, just quietly amused. Some things about a British secret service never change. One of them is an obsessive anxiety about what sort of stationery to use for its overt correspondence. Not too official or formal looking: that would be bad for cover. The envelope not see-through, so preferably lined. Stark white is too visible: go for a tint, just nothing amorous. A dull blue, a hint of grey, both are acceptable. This one was pale grey.

Next question: do we type the address, do we handwrite it? For answer, consider as always the needs of the man in

John le Carré

the field, in this case, me: Peter Guillam, ex-member, out to grass and grateful for it. Long-time resident in rural France. Attends no veterans' reunions. No listed significant others. Draws full pension and therefore torturable. Conclusion: in a remote Breton hamlet where foreigners are a rarity, a typed, semi-formal-looking grey envelope with a British stamp could raise local eyebrows, so go for handwritten. Now for the hard bit. The Office, or whatever the Circus calls itself these days, can't resist a security classification, even if it's only *Private*. Maybe add a *Personal* for extra force? *Private & Personal, addressee only?* Too heavy. Stick to *Private*. Or better, as in this case, *Personnel*.

1 Artillery Buildings
London, SE14

My dear Guillam,

We haven't met, but allow me to introduce myself. I am business affairs manager at your old firm, with responsibility for both current and historical cases. A matter in which you appear to have played a significant role some years back has unexpectedly raised its head, and I have no option but to ask you to make yourself available in London as soon as possible to assist us in preparing a response.

I am authorized to offer you reimbursement for your travel arrangements (economy class) and a London-weighted *per diem* of £130 for as long as your presence is required.

Since we appear to have no telephone number for you, kindly feel free to call Tania at the number above and reverse the charges, or if you have email, at the email address below. Without wishing to inconvenience

you, I have to stress that the matter is of some urgency. Allow me in closing to draw your attention to Paragraph 14 of your termination agreement.

Yours sincerely,
A. Butterfield
(LA to CS)

P.S. Kindly remember to bring your passport with you when you present yourself at Reception. AB

For 'LA to CS' read *Legal Adviser to Chief of Service*. For 'Paragraph 14' read *lifelong duty to attend, should Circus needs dictate*. And for 'allow me to remind you' read *just remember who pays your pension*. And I don't have email. And why doesn't he date his letter: security?

Catherine is down in the orchard with her nine-year-old daughter Isabelle, playing with a pair of vicious young goats we recently had wished on us. She is a slight woman with a broad Breton face and slow brown eyes that measure you without expression. If she stretches out her arms, the goats leap into them and little Isabelle, who pleases herself in her own ways, puts her hands together and spins round on her heel in private delight. But Catherine, muscular though she is, must be careful to catch her goats one at a time, because if they're allowed to jump at her together they can knock her flat. Isabelle ignores me. Eye contact bothers her.

In the field behind them, deaf Yves the occasional labourer is bent double cutting cabbages. With his right hand he slices the stems, with his left he tosses them into a cart, but the angle of his arched back never changes. He is watched by an old grey horse called Artemis, another of Catherine's foundlings. A couple of years back we took in a stray ostrich who

had broken loose from a neighbouring farm. When Catherine alerted the farmer, he said keep him, he's too old. The ostrich expired gracefully and we gave him a state funeral.

'You wish something, Pierre?' Catherine demands.

'Got to go away for a few days, I'm afraid,' I reply.

'To Paris?' Catherine does not approve of me going to Paris.

'To London,' I reply. And because even in retirement I need a cover story: 'Someone's died.'

'Someone you love?'

'Not any more,' I reply, with a firmness that takes me by surprise.

'Then it is not important. You leave tonight?'

'Tomorrow. I'll take the early flight from Rennes.'

Time was, the Circus had only to whistle and I would race to Rennes for a plane. Not today.

You have to have grown to spy's estate in the old Circus to understand the aversion that came over me as, at four o'clock the following afternoon, I paid off my cab and started up the concrete catwalk to the Service's shockingly ostentatious new headquarters. You had to be me in the prime of my spying life, returning dog-weary from some godforsaken outpost of empire – the Soviet empire most likely, or some member of it. You've come straight from London airport by bus, then by tube to Cambridge Circus. The Production team is waiting to debrief you. You climb five scruffy steps to the doorway of the Victorian eyesore that we variously call HO, the Office or just the Circus. And you're home.

Forget the fights you've been having with Production or Requirements or Admin. They're just family quarrels between field and base. The janitor in his box wishes you good morning with a knowing 'welcome back, Mr Guillam' and asks you

whether you'd like to check your suitcase. And you say thanks Mac, or Bill, or whoever's on duty that day, and never mind showing him your pass. You're smiling and you're not sure why. In front of you stand the three cranky old lifts that you've hated since the day you joined – except that two of them are stuck upstairs, and the third is Control's own, so don't even think about it. And anyway you'd rather lose yourself in the labyrinth of corridors and dead ends that is the physical embodiment of the world you've chosen to live in, with its worm-eaten wooden staircases, chipped fire extinguishers, fish-eye mirrors and the stinks of stale fag smoke, Nescafé and deodorant.

And now this monstrosity. This Welcome to Spyland Beside the Thames.

Under the scrutiny of dour men and women in tracksuits, I present myself at the armoured-glass welcome desk and watch my British passport being snapped up by a sliding metal tray. The face behind the glass is a woman's. The absurd emphases and electronic voice are Essex Man's:

'Kindly place *all* keys, mobile phones, cash, *wrist* watches, writing instruments and any *other* metal objects you may have about you *in* the box on the table *to* your left, retain the *white* tag identifying your box, then duly proceed *shoes* in hand *through* the door marked Visitors.'

My passport returns. Duly proceeding, I am frisked with a ping-pong bat by a merry girl of about fourteen, then radiated in an upended glass coffin. Having returned the shoes to my feet and tied the laces – somehow a far more humiliating procedure than taking them off – I am escorted to an unmarked lift by the merry girl, who asks me if I've had a nice day. I haven't. Or a nice night either, if she wants to know, which she doesn't. Thanks to A. Butterfield's letter I had slept worse than I have slept in a decade, but I can't tell her that

either. I'm a field animal, or was. My natural habitat was spying's open spaces. What I'm discovering in my so-called mature years is that a Dear John letter coming out of the blue from the Circus in its new incarnation demanding my immediate presence in London sets me off on a night-time journey of the soul.

We have reached what feels like the top floor, but nothing says so. In the world I once inhabited, its biggest secrets were always on the top floor. My youthful escort has a bunch of ribbons round her neck with electronic tabs on them. She opens an unmarked door, I enter, she closes it on me. I try the handle. It doesn't budge. I've been locked up a few times in my life, but always by the opposition. There are no windows, just childish paintings of flowers and houses. The work of A. Butterfield's offspring? Or the graffiti of former inmates?

And where has all the noise gone? The silence gets worse the longer I listen. No jolly chatter of typewriters, no unanswered telephones ringing off the hook, no clapped-out file trolley rattling its way like a milkman's float over the bare-board corridors, no furious male roar of *stop that bloody whistling!* Somewhere along the road between Cambridge Circus and the Embankment, something has died, and it isn't just the squeak of trolleys.

I perch my backside on a steel and leather chair. I thumb a grimy copy of *Private Eye* and wonder which of us has lost our sense of humour. I get up, try the door again and sit down on a different chair. By now I have decided that A. Butterfield is making an in-depth study of my body language. Well, if he is, good luck to him, because by the time the door flies open and a short-haired, agile woman of forty-odd wearing a business suit sweeps in and says in a class-free sanitized accent, 'Oh. Hi, Peter, great. I'm Laura, want to come in now?' I must

have relived in quick order every misfire and disaster I'd been involved in over a lifetime of licensed skulduggery.

We troop across an empty corridor and enter a white, hygienic office with sealed windows. A fresh-faced, bespectacled, English public schoolboy of indefinable age in shirt and braces bounces out from behind a table and seizes my hand.

'Peter! Gosh! You look positively *jaunty!* And half your age! You travelled well? Coffee? Tea? *Honestly* not? Really, really good of you to come. A *huge* help. You've met Laura? Of course you have. *So* sorry to have kept you waiting in there. A call from on high. All well now. Have a pew.'

All this to confiding squeezes of the eyes for extra intimacy as he guides me to an upright naughty chair with arms for a long stay. Then sits himself back the other side of the table, which is stacked with old-looking Circus files flagged in the colours of all nations. Then sets his shirt-sleeved elbows between them where I can't see, and links his hands in a cat's cradle under his chin.

'I'm *Bunny*, by the by,' he announces. 'Bloody silly name, but it's followed me around since infancy and I can't get rid of it. Probably the reason I ended up in *this* place, come to think of it. You can't very well strut your stuff in the High Court of Justice with everyone running after you yelling "Bunny, Bunny", can you?'

Is this his usual patter? Is this how your average middle-aged Secret Service lawyer speaks these days? Now racy, now one foot in the past? My ear for contemporary English is shaky, but judging by Laura's expression as she takes her place next to him, yes, it is. Seated, she is feral, ready to pounce. Signet ring on middle finger of right hand. Her daddy's? Or a coded signal about sexual preference? I'd been out of England too long.

Meaningless small talk, led by Bunny. His children adore

Brittany, both are girls. Laura has been to Normandy, but not Brittany. She doesn't say who with.

'But you're Brittany born, Peter!' Bunny protests suddenly, out of nowhere. 'We should be calling you Pierre!'

Peter's fine, I say.

'So what we *have*, Peter, bluntly, is a bit of a serious *legal porridge* to sort out,' Bunny resumes at a slower, louder pace, having spotted my new hearing aids peeking out of my white locks. 'Not a *crisis* yet, but active, and I'm afraid rather *volatile*. And we very much need your help.'

To which I reply that I'm only too happy to oblige in any way I can, Bunny, and it's nice to think one can still be of use after all these years.

'Obviously I'm here to protect the *Service*. That's my job,' Bunny goes on, as if I haven't spoken. 'And *you're* here as a private individual, an ex-member admittedly, long and happily retired, I am sure, but what I *can't* guarantee is that *your* interests and *our* interests are going to coincide at every turn.' Eyes to slits. Rictal grin. 'So what I'm saying to you *is*, Peter: for all that we respect you enormously for all the splendid things you have done for the Office in days of yore, this *is* the *Office*. And you are *you*, and *I* am a lethal lawyer. How's Catherine?'

'Fine, thank you. Why do you ask?'

Because I haven't listed her. To put the wind up me. To tell me the gloves are off. And what big eyes the *Service* has.

'We wondered whether she should be added to the rather long list of your significant others,' Bunny explains. 'Service regulations and so forth.'

'Catherine is my tenant. She's the daughter and granddaughter of previous tenants. I choose to live on the premises, and insofar as it's your business, I've never slept with her and I don't intend to. Does that cover it?'

'Admirably, thank you.'

My first lie, ably told. Now go for the swift deflection: 'Sounds to me as if I need a lawyer of my own,' I suggest.

'Premature, and you can't afford one. Not at today's prices. We have you down as married, then unmarried. Are both correct?'

'They are.'

'All within the one calendar year. I'm impressed.'

'Thank you.'

Are we joking? Or provoking? I'm suspecting the second.

'A youthful folly?' Bunny suggests, in the same courteous tone of enquiry.

'A misunderstanding,' I reply. 'Any more questions?'

But Bunny does not give way easily, and wishes me to know it. 'I mean, so who by – the child? Whose was it? The father?' – still in the same glossy voice.

I affect to ponder. 'Do you know, I don't think I ever thought to ask her,' I reply. And while he's still meditating on this: 'Since we're talking about who does what to whom, maybe you'll tell me what Laura's doing here,' I suggest.

'Laura is *History*,' Bunny replies sonorously.

History as an expressionless woman with short hair, brown eyes and no make-up. And nobody smiling any more, except me.

'So what's on the charge sheet, Bunny?' I ask cheerfully, now that we're getting to close quarters. 'Setting fire to the Queen's dockyards?'

'Oh come, *charge sheet* is going it a bit, Peter!' Bunny protests, just as cheerfully. 'Things to resolve, that's all. Let me ask you just *one* question ahead of the rest of the field. May I?' – squeeze of the eyes. 'Operation *Windfall*. How was it mounted, who drove it, where did it go so wrong, and what was your part in it?'

Does an easing of the soul take place when you realize your worst expectations have been fulfilled? Not in my case.

‘Windfall, Bunny, did you say?’

‘Windfall’ – louder, in case he hasn’t reached my deaf aids.

Keep it slow. Remember you’re of an age. Memory not your strong point these days. Take your time.

‘Now Windfall was *what* exactly, Bunny? Give me a pointer. What sort of date are we looking at?’

‘Early sixties, broadly. Today.’

‘An operation, you say?’

‘Covert. Called Windfall.’

‘Against what target?’

Laura, coming in from the blind side: ‘Soviet & Satellite. Directed against East German Intelligence. Otherwise known as the *Stasi*’ – bellowing for my benefit.

Stasi? Stasi? Give me a moment. Ah yes, the Stasi.

‘With what aim, Laura?’ I ask, having got it all together.

‘Mount a deception, mislead the enemy, protect a vital source. Penetrate Moscow Centre with the purpose of identifying the perceived traitor or traitors inside Circus ranks.’ And changing gear to downright plaintive: ‘Only we have absolutely *zilch* files on it any more. Just a bunch of cross-references to files that have vanished into thin air. Like missing, believed stolen.’

‘Windfall, Windfall,’ I repeat, shaking my head and smiling the way old men do, even if they’re not quite as old as other people may think they are. ‘Sorry, Laura. Just doesn’t ring a bell, I’m afraid.’

‘Not even a distant chime?’ – Bunny.

‘Not a one, alas. Total blank’ – fighting off images of my youthful self in the garb of a pizza-delivery boy, bent over the handlebars of my learner’s motorbike as I rush a special order

of late-night files from Circus headquarters to Somewhere in London.

‘And just in case I didn’t mention it, or you didn’t hear it,’ Bunny is saying, in his blandest voice. ‘It’s our understanding that Operation Windfall involved your friend and colleague Alec Leamas, who you may *just* remember got himself shot dead at the Berlin Wall while hastening to the assistance of his girlfriend Elizabeth Gold, who’d been shot dead at the Berlin Wall already. But perhaps you’ve forgotten that too?’

‘Of course I bloody haven’t,’ I snap. And only then, by way of explanation: ‘You were asking me about Windfall, not about Alec. And the answer’s no. I don’t remember it. Never heard of it. Sorry.’

In any interrogation, denial is the tipping point. Never mind the courtesies that went before. From the moment of denial, things are never going to be the same. At the secret-policeman level, denial is likely to provoke instant reprisal, not least because the average secret policeman is more stupid than his subject. The sophisticated interrogator, on the other hand, finding the door slammed in his face, does not immediately try to kick it in. He prefers to regroup and advance on his target from a different angle. And to judge by Bunny’s contented smile, that’s what he is sizing up to do now.

‘So, Peter.’ His voice for the hard of hearing, despite my assurances: ‘Setting the issue of Operation Windfall aside for a moment, would you mind awfully if Laura and I asked you a few *background questions* regarding the more general issue?’

‘Which is what?’

‘Individual accountability. The old problem of where *obedience* to superior orders *stops*, and responsibility for one’s individual actions begins. Follow me?’

‘Barely.’

‘You’re in the field. Head Office has given you the green light, but not everything goes to plan. Innocent blood is shed. You, or a colleague close to you, are perceived to have exceeded orders. Have you ever thought of a situation like that?’

‘No.’

Either he’s forgotten I can’t hear, or he’s decided that I can.

‘And you can’t think, you personally, purely in the abstract, of how such a stressful situation might arise? Looking back over the many tight corners you must have found yourself in during a long operational career?’

‘No. I can’t. Sorry about that.’

‘Not one single moment where you felt you’d exceeded Head Office orders, started something you couldn’t stop? Put your own feelings, needs – *appetites* even – above the call of duty, perhaps? With dire consequences that you might not have intended or foreseen?’

‘Well, that would get me a reprimand from Head Office, wouldn’t it? Or a recall to London. Or in a really severe case, the door,’ I suggest, giving him my disciplinary frown.

‘Try going a bit wider than that, Peter. I’m suggesting there could be aggrieved third parties out there. Ordinary people from the outside world who – in consequence of something you’ve done – in error, in the heat of the moment or when the flesh is a bit weak, let’s say – suffered collateral damage. People who might decide, *years later*, maybe a generation later, that they’ve got a pretty juicy legal case against this Service. Either by way of damages or, if that doesn’t stick, a private prosecution for manslaughter or worse. Against the Service at large, or’ – eyebrows shooting up in fake surprise – ‘a named former member of it. You’ve never considered *that* as a