

The Smiling Assassin

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Chapter 1

It was my first day. Across the table were Chris and Ruth, my co-researchers for the next four years. I knew them from international conferences, but it still gave me a buzz to meet them as work colleagues for the first time. The morning had been efficient but frustrating, filling out various forms for the human resources department. In the afternoon, the real work started.

Professor Jones gathered us together to exchange ‘war stories’. To us, the professor was known as ‘Pip’, a nickname he earned for joking about the ‘great expectations’ he had for a new venture. Now it was his turn to laugh. We stood in his meeting room, en-suite to his private office, on the top floor of *The Institute for Democratic Working*. Out of the window, I looked beyond Westminster Bridge to the sunlight refracting off the Thames, gently illuminating the sandy coloured stonework of the Houses of Parliament.

“Are you going to set the ball rolling?” I asked Pip.

“Me? Professor’s privilege! I get to ask, not answer, questions,” he replied.

“No way,” said Ruth boldly.

“Pip?” I asked expectantly.

He hesitated.

“I guess they must be too painful,” commented Chris, half seriously, half in jest.

He looked at each of us in turn and realised that if he did not tell us a story he would not earn our trust.

“Okay. Okay,” he said urging us to retake our seats. “You’ll remember my study of the homeless 20 years ago. Thatcher’s Britain: soaring interest rates, house repossessions running at an all time high, beggars on the street, police using Victorian vagrancy laws to ‘move on’ those who had already lost everything...”

“Ah, yes!” I remembered. “The economic miracle that saved Britain.”

Chris smiled, but Ruth looked puzzled.

“Well, there was a lad called Henry. He’d lost everything. After being made redundant, his wife left him and took his children. Then Henry lost his house and ended up on the streets where I met him. I would go down there two nights a week and we would chat. He was down, but not out. He was surprisingly philosophical about the whole thing. I could never fathom why he wasn’t angrier.

“Then, one evening, the phone rang. Henry had broken into someone’s house. The temperature was sub-zero and he couldn’t stand it on the streets. After a while, he said he felt like taking his life. I was so shocked that I didn’t know what to say. So, I just listened. He kept saying his life was over. I refused to hang up until he’d promised me he’d call the Samaritans. Eventually, he gave in and made a promise. About midnight we said goodbye and went to bed.”

I nodded to signal my understanding. Pip continued.

“Next day, I visited his patch but he was not there. I rang the police and told them what had happened, but they’d no record of any incident. I wasn’t Henry’s relative so they wouldn’t contact me. I kept going back to his patch and the police. Eventually, the body was discovered in a house by a couple returning home.”

Pip’s voice started to shake.

“My research didn’t end like yours....no complaints...no people getting upset...nobody blamed. And yet, one of my participants had committed suicide. His friends said little. One commented ‘best thing really’ and that was it. Everybody moved on without a second thought.”

Pip looked up. I saw that his eyes were growing moist and he hesitated as he tried to gather his thoughts to tell us how the experience had changed him. We shuffled in our seats, but Pip held up his hand to stop us comforting him.

“It was not his fault he lost his job,” Pip continued. “Maybe if I had done something, he would have been alive today.”

“Don’t feel bad, Pip,” said Ruth. “Of all the people he could’ve spoken to that night, he chose to speak to you.”

Pip looked up. He was puzzled.

“What?” I asked.

“I never told anyone,” he said. “I just let the police deal with it. There was an inquest, of course, but I wasn’t even called. He’d left a note. I was told my testimony was not needed.”

I sensed that he was still holding something back and with open palms asked ‘what else?’

“I’ve always berated myself for not doing more,” Pip responded. “I always felt I’d let him down.”

He went silent again, but this time Ruth stroked his arm and urged him to keep going.

“I don’t think I’ve ever looked at it the way you’ve just put it,” he said, “that he chose to spend his last night with me.”

“Maybe there wasn’t anything you could do,” I commented. “Maybe he’d made his mind up.”

Pip rubbed the corner of his eye.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said regaining his composure.

A faint smile returned to his face.

“Maybe,” said Ruth, “you were the only person he felt like talking to that night.”

The faint smile broadened into a grin.

“Thank you,” he said, nodding his head.

Ruth put her arm around him.

“I wrote about it as a footnote, but I don’t think I’ve ever discussed it with anyone,” Pip said.

“Well now you have,” said Chris.

“About fucking time,” said Ruth.

Pip chuckled.

“You know, Ruth?” Pip asked rhetorically. “Sometimes it’s the *absence* of emotion that says the most. People were so unconcerned. That’s what shocked me.”

“There’s a paper in that, surely,” she said.

Chris looked at me, expecting me to respond.

“Don’t get me started on that one!” I replied. “We’ll be here all night.”

* * *

Professor Jones had personally recruited us to *The Institute for Democratic Working*. For Ruth, there were expectations that came with family history. Descended from parents and grandparents who had trotted the globe undertaking anthropological studies, she now rocked back in her chair contemplating how to follow in their footsteps. Now in her mid 30s, Ruth was married with one child and already had a seasoned look that came from over a decade in academia. Her clothes were simple but smart. She was one of those people who could make an art form out of jeans and a T-shirt.

Chris was older, an accountant by trade he had graduated in economic theory as a student of Alec Nove (when the latter was producing his works on socialism). His youthful enthusiasm was reflected in a crisp sense of dress. Unlike Ruth, he had a groomed look. He always sported a jacket with an open neck shirt to give the impression of class with a hint of rebelliousness.

I first met Professor Jones in Berlin giving a paper on governance dynamics. Dedicated to his career and never married, his fame grew when he chewed up Jeremy Paxton on Newsnight for being rude to a cabinet minister. He had a preference for ‘action research’ and skirted with the line that divides political activism from academic integrity. It had paid dividends, however, and secured the admiration of some Liberal Democrat politicians. In the decade that followed, he had built an enviable network of contacts on the fringes of Westminster. When they entered parliament, it bore fruit and he suddenly found himself asked to establish an institute with money from an unknown benefactor.

Pip took a few minutes to recover, and then reminded us that we all had our own war stories to tell. Ruth needed no encouragement to go first.

“There was this black man in our group, called John. I’d set up several groups and we met every two weeks. This group had six people. Aside John, there was a married couple, a woman called Maria, and two of her friends. I felt that we’d got to know each other quite well. The barriers

seemed to be coming down. Then, Maria unexpectedly talked about HIV, particularly the hysteria in the press.”

“Hysteria?” asked Chris.

“It was the early 90s, love, lots of rubbish being printed,” Ruth added. “Maria was complaining about this, about how backward people’s attitudes were to working with people who have HIV. John suddenly interrupted her and said his partner had HIV.”

“Oh!” interjected Chris.

“Indeed!” responded Ruth. “The group went silent. Nobody spoke but I was determined not to intervene. The married couple suddenly got up and walked out. Maria tried to stop them, but the husband glared at her. ‘My wife’s pregnant’, he said. And with that, they both left the room. I can still picture the bewildered look on John’s face. We knew he was gay so that wasn’t the issue. His admission about HIV changed everything.”

“It’s always there, even when we can’t see it,” commented Chris.

“What is?” I asked.

“Emotion. It’s hidden in people’s minds, but it’s always there. Incidents like this make it visible.”

“If he’d said ‘*I’m HIV positive*’, I could’ve understood their reactions a bit better,” I commented.

“Exactly,” said Ruth. “His partner was dying, not him.”

“What happened after?” enquired Chris.

“It ended the research,” said Ruth. “The group never met again because the married couple refused to attend more meetings. When executives got wind, they insisted on knowing what we had talked about. We’d made a commitment to confidentiality. I refused to break it so they disbanded all the groups saying they couldn’t have their staff upset by a researcher. Six months of careful work ended in an instant.”

“There was nothing you could do, Ruth,” I comforted.

Ruth looked pensive.

“Was there?” asked Pip.

“John lost his job,” she replied.

We all reacted as though we had been punched.

“For many months I could not believe what I had seen,” Ruth continued. “It seemed so innocuous to me. Within that group I thought we were friends, but then over something that seemed so minor, the group destroyed itself. I still wonder what happened, whether there was something I missed.”

“How did the university take it?”

“I submitted a report and there was an investigation of sorts. It affected my career. The company withdrew not just from that project, but other projects as well. I sometimes wondered if I should have proactively defended John, or talked to the directors. I was disgusted at the way they behaved. Totally. John could have – should have – sued them. I was told by one of his friends that he nursed his partner until he died. I don’t know what happened to him after that.”

“Not an easy situation,” interjected Pip.

“On one level,” Ruth continued with some vigour, “I had to stay out and let the organisation deal with it in their own way. I was there to observe.”

She hesitated, clearly wondering whether she should say what she was about to say. I caught her eye and nodded.

“Inside I was so *angry*,” she continued. “John trusted them. In return, they rejected him. Just imagine if we treated someone’s spouse like that if they had cancer....”

“It’s fear,” I interrupted. “The pregnant woman would not take the risk. I’m not defending her, just understanding her. She was carrying a child. In her mind any risk, any risk at all, was too great.”

“Ignorance!” exclaimed Pip.

Ruth ignored him and looked at me.

“Yes, Paul!” retorted Ruth. “It was fear. You’re right.”

Then she turned her attention to Pip.

“You ever had a newborn, Pip?” she said.

“No,” he replied, humbled.

“You call the doctor for the slightest snuffle first time around,” Ruth continued. “We installed one of those breathing monitor thingies. Supposed to keep parents calm.”

Even the memory left her looking shaken.

“If the baby stops breathing,” she continued. “The monitor beeps. It went off twice. We couldn’t cope. Even now, I remember the choking sensation! It would have killed me, never mind the baby!”

Ruth paused. I’d had a similar experience and shared my memory.

“Something happens when kids are born,” I started. “I remember entering the living room and seeing my wife, Kera, holding our baby. There were tears running down her face. I asked ‘what’s wrong’ and before the words had left my mouth, there were tears in my eyes. I don’t know how to describe it. You have to experience this to understand it. Bit like having your first orgasm...”

My throwaway remark triggered laughter.

“Now, I’ve had one of those,” laughed Pip.

“Just one?” Ruth quipped.

Pip pointed his finger at Ruth as if to shoot her.

“Two?” she asked with a cheeky grin.

“Come, come, you two!” said Chris, intervening to keep the peace.

“Comfort break,” announced Pip, “I think we’ve heard enough of Ruth.”

Chris told us a story of Kevin and Luke, two research participants who ended up having a fight. At first the situation appeared to be rooted in Kevin winning a promotion that Luke really wanted. When Chris dug deeper, however, he found that managers had conspired to keep Luke away from a woman with whom he was developing a close relationship, even though he was probably a better candidate for the job. Chris was holding a group session discussing obstacles to advancement.

Kevin, in a moment of bravado, cracked a 'joke' that Luke might progress more quickly if he stopped 'porking the office slag'. Within seconds they were fighting. Chris later found out that Luke had married 'the office slag' in secret and not invited any of his work colleagues.

When it was my turn, I retold a story about Helen. It had been my first major study of workplace culture. The organisation prided itself on the way its staff were 'open and honest' in dealing with people. My academic liaison had been a woman called Brenda. We seemed to get on well, but I detected that there were issues between her and some of her staff. At first there was nothing concrete, just a whispers, hints and rumours.

"But when I told Helen I was having a meal with Brenda," I explained. "Helen said 'be sure to give Brenda my *hate!*'"

Everyone nodded.

"Well, I had to follow that up, didn't I?"

Everyone nodded again.

"So, I gave it a few days thought. I asked Helen if she'd like to explain this 'hate' to me after work at the pub. She agreed. Somehow this got back to Brenda. Before I knew it, Brenda had me in a room and accused me of 'unprofessional and unethical conduct'. When I asked what the problem was, she accused me of 'inappropriate' behaviour, asking women for drinks. I protested, of course, because it was ludicrous and hypocritical. The situation deteriorated quickly. I had to withdraw."

"They were fighting over you?" asked Ruth suggestively.

"I did wonder," I responded, "but I think there was another reason. I had picked up vibes that Brenda had been accused of bullying staff. She once sent an e-mail to someone in the company claiming another woman was 'clearly insane'. One of the directors had to intervene to stop a court case for defamation. Perhaps it was Helen. There's something Brenda wanted to stop me hearing. I wondered if it was this."

"But you'd already heard about it?" prompted Pip.

“Yes. Funny isn’t it?” I answered.

“So much for ‘open and honest’,” interjected Pip.

Chris nodded, then shook his head in disbelief.

“But why suggest *sexually* inappropriate behaviour?” asked Ruth.

“Cheap shot, I reckon,” I replied.

“But it worked,” Chris added tellingly.

“It nearly always works,” said Ruth, “if you are accusing a man.”

To my surprise I found myself staring into Ruth’s eyes. And she mine. I gave her a small smile.

Her remark was perceptive but I wondered in the back of my mind if her insight had come from personal experience.

“Notice a pattern, anyone?” said Pip, bringing the group back together.

“Emotion?” said Ruth.

“Yes. But more than that,” added Pip.

My brain swirled into action.

“Secrets?” I volunteered.

“Sort of,” hinted Pip.

“Secrets about sexual identity,” contributed Chris.

“Well, yes,” said Pip, “all of these things. Put them together.”

Like a bunch of six year olds being asked to remember the French word for ‘pants’ we sat there like a row of lemons.

Pip put us out of our misery quickly.

“The moment each of you started to find out something interesting, the moment you touched on an issue of genuine importance, the rug was pulled. No further discussion.”

“It’s so frustrating!” exclaimed Chris.

“Don’t be so surprised,” responded Pip. “They have to ‘protect’ their own – can’t have researchers coming in and uncovering truths that no one wants to hear. That would never do.”

We all laughed at his sardonic comment.

“Now, that’s interesting,” I chirped, gathering my thoughts. “We all got attacked...”

“...and came through it,” intervened Pip. “That’s why you are here, Paul.”

I thought for a moment.

“The ‘outsider’ took the blame for what upset the ‘insiders’,” I remarked.

“Yes,” said Chris. “They didn’t blame each other afterwards in my case either.”

“The same happened to me,” said Ruth.

“That’s right,” added Pip. “Nothing you can do about it.”

On the face of it, researchers have an easy time. We organise our own hours, study whatever interests us, and are rarely accountable to anyone except journal editors. But in this room we learnt something important. Through our work we touch people in the most sensitive places and have to deal with the consequences. On rare occasions, there is an almost spiritual experience as members come face to face with the horror of what humans do to each other and start to talk about it. A more normal reaction, however, is that we unwittingly witness or trigger pain. A person confronting prejudice, with all the distortions and platitudes obscuring the view wiped away, is definitely the hardest thing to manage in a research situation.

In those moments, research is not just difficult, it is also dangerous. As anthropologists, we had all come to view humans as pack animals. Even if well-liked, researchers are outsiders. When a member of the pack is hurt, it turns on the outsider. We’d all experienced this in one way or another and tried to deal with the anger our presence triggered. It is in these moments, however, that knowledge is born. These are the moments we wait for. It is this, I suspect, that keeps us going and drives our curiosity to witness the unknown. As Pip summed up the stories we had each told, he flattered us.

“Few people get through what you’ve been through and come out better researchers. That’s what impressed me. You were angry, but you understood the hurt of everyone involved, including

your own sense of hurt. But you remained engaged and didn't let bitterness stop your search for knowledge. Those are rare qualities. That's why I want you here."

Each of us thanked him in a different way, a nod of the head, a quiet 'thank you', a smile. Flattery from Professor Jones was a once in a lifetime experience. Well worth the wait.

"Over the next four years," he continued, "that energy and curiosity will keep us going."

His words sounded ominous.

"Now, let's get to the pub!"

Chapter 2

With a few pints inside him, Pip's reserve started to slip.

"You," Pip emphasised, "will be an important group of researchers. We're going to produce new work. Generations of entrepreneurs will benefit. No holds barred. We'll build things up from brass tacks."

I felt a moment of cynicism at the grandness of his words. Who were we to have such pretensions? I need not have worried as Pip brought us to earth with a crash.

"I've hand picked you for this project. I tell you now that you'll probably make enemies!"

Pip looked us in the eye and held our gaze.

"They will not, I guarantee you, be able to interfere with your work. You'll answer only to me and yourselves. I give you my word. Nobody is going to get the push, no matter what happens during this project."

To hear these words was like listening to the lilting melody of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune*, but I wondered whether he had the capacity to deliver such a guarantee.

"You've a year to collect data," he continued, "two years analysing, then a further year just telling the world, writing papers and books. Good budget for conferences. Give me your best, and I'll give you mine."

He grew louder. Such funding arrangements were rare. He had told me about this by letter but hearing it in person made it seem more real.

"When we get there, we'll need to keep a daily record of experiences. Each Friday, we'll meet up. Hand over your electronic journals for transcription. We've got an assistant for that."

From his bag he produced gadgets for each of us and placed them in our hands.

"These are digiphones," he explained. "You can use them as mobile phones or digital voice recorders."

Chris grew excited as he examined the device in his hands.

"Latest stuff," he said with an air of knowledge.

“See the flash memory card in the top?” asked Pip. “It stores up to 24 hours of audio. Use it each day to record your thoughts. Describe what happens then reflect on it. You can use them to call or text each other. The lines are secure.”

“Is this the kind of stuff used by intelligence people?” enquired Chris.

Pip nodded confirmation.

“Make sense of what you record,” Pip continued. “Each Friday, exchange the flash card with the assistant and get a new one. They’ll give you a transcript of your previous week’s musings. On Fridays, read through the transcript, add reflections. Work it up. Let your thoughts run. Be different. Be original. In mid-afternoon, we’ll discuss progress.”

“Then what?” asked Chris.

“Then we get drunk,” laughed Pip.

I’d never seen this side of Pip before. It was unlike my previous experiences. Such enthusiasm in a university would be most unseemly. Pip, however, had done his homework. We would create a database about contemporary working life, a group anthropology the like of which had not been tried before. Thirteen months from now, we would withdraw from the field and embark on intensive analysis. Then we would prepare briefings and reports for politicians, business leaders and academics. Unusually, each of us had a contract to produce two books. The only constraint was that we should contribute to knowledge on ‘social enterprise’, the government’s latest fad.

The intensity of Pip’s voice increased for the climax of his pep talk.

“Ethnography,” he explained, “is the most challenging way to study. But it’s also the way to get beyond lies and evasions. Your nerves and emotions get pulled from pillar to post. You will probably be treated like a guest, then a celebrity, then increasingly like a skivvy. You may end up being treated like a schoolchild or a traitor!”

Everyone smiled at each other. Pip’s description summed up the experience pretty well.

“There is a difference this time. I have a contact on the board. He understands ethnography. Make no mistake, this is not a project without danger, but you’ll get more support than you’ve ever had before.”

“You’re not there as employees. You’re there as researchers. Seek out truths. Show up contradictions, and reveal the secrets of organisation. Paint it real. Paint it raw. Paint it in vivid colours. Get beyond the rhetoric. Listen well. Remain sceptical.”

Nobody around the table was a beginner but these words did affect me. One of the selection criteria, I later learnt, had been to screen out potential recruits whose doctoral research had passed without incident. If we have not already stoked people’s emotions and found ways to cope with their reactions, we would not have been sitting here listening to Pip.

Pip had a phrase to describe the way ethnographers come to be seen by those they study – he said they eventually see us as ‘smiling assassins’. Every organisation has mystery and conflict buried in the vaults of its own history – a complex social web of interlocking truths, half-truths and untruths that maintain the status quo. Ethnographers wait patiently for these stories to unfold, for participants to treat them as a trusted group member. When they do, secret stories get told. Eventually, one will be repeated to the ‘wrong’ person, or the ‘wrong’ question will be asked about one of the stories. At that point, the friendly researcher turns into the smiling assassin.

“You’ve all experienced this before,” said Pip. “Take what I say seriously. Ethnographers get killed.”

Like a well-known beer, we reach parts that other researchers don’t reach. One covert Hell’s Angels’ researcher went native and was killed in a fight; another living with addicts was left in a coma after a drink was spiked; Pip himself had been beaten and thrown into a police cell after Britain’s finest mistook him for a beggar. His paper describing the experience (“The Sociology of Policing Beggars”) elevated him to celebrity status amongst his peers. Even if this new project failed, Pip’s lasting fame inside and outside academia was assured.

The menace we faced, Pip explained, came from the very success of the organisation we were studying. High profile organisations are the most competitive, the most likely to break the law and cover up their activities, the most likely to hide their operations with a thick veneer of rhetoric about ‘professionalism’ and ‘service to the customer’. Part of our job is to separate the wheat from the chaff, identify the genuine achievers from the creative accountants. Primarily, our goal is to understand how societies and the people within them develop.

Pip had used his contact to secure Ruth a covert position assisting the Head of the Marketing. Chris had a covert job working on policy development. In the meantime, Pip and I would enter openly. I would engage in research with the policy and marketing departments. That way, I could keep in touch with Ruth and Chris. Pip had less time, but still agreed to shadow board meetings and public relations activities. Overt research was risky enough. Covert research was both operationally and ethically more dangerous.

“Next Friday,” he concluded, “I’ll explain some details. One month from today, you will enter the International Enterprise Council to observe their work. The IEC is the leading European agency based in the UK promoting social enterprise. Our job is to understand every aspect of its work, culture and operation. I want you to understand it inside out, top to bottom!”

He gave us 30 days to prepare.

Chapter 3

“Daddeeeeeee!” came the cry as I opened the front door.

Amy and Tom charged down the hall and thumped into me. As I clutched one child under each arm, Kera came out of the kitchen.

“Hi, Paul!” she said with a furtive look. “Glad you could make it.”

I was later than either of us had expected.

“Sorry, love. Pip wanted to do a team thing at the pub...”

Kera smiled ironically. For the previous six years I had been my own boss, not just in the sense of being able to control my own schedule, but also by being able to escape the demands of work colleagues.

“You sure you want to do this?” she asked.

I grimaced, but inside I was sure.

“Okay, kids, who wants a game of tickle-monster before bed?” I asked.

Amy and Tom jumped up and down shouting ‘me, me, me!’ We made our way up the stairs. Walking into the master bedroom was always a sensual experience. Kera took great pride in maintaining a wondrous array of pictures, scented candles and ornaments. We nicknamed our bedroom ‘the nest’ because she had adorned it with driftwood, beads and prisms that carefully refracted the sunlight onto the ceiling, as well as exotic posters that evoked the essence of female beauty. The room drew us together night after night, year after year, a private retreat from the harshness of life.

Tickle-monster was one of my kids’ favourite games. They had to take turns to sit on my legs while I asked questions. If they got a question wrong, the tickle monster chased them off the bed. Tom went first.

“How do you spell.....happy?” I asked.

My youngest, despite a talent for reading, was not a good speller. Even small words were a challenge.

“H.....a.....p.....”

Tom hesitated, wondering whether there was another ‘p’. He pursed his lips to indicate a ‘p’ sound and I gave a gentle nod.

“Daddy!” shouted Amy. “You’re helping him.”

“You’re much better at spelling. He needs a bit of help,” I retorted.

Amy’s limited sense of justice complicated my goal. I wanted to give them both my attention, but Amy was extremely competitive.

“p.....y”, completed Tom.

“That’s great,” I said. “How about.....sensitive?”

Tom started to think. I winked at Amy and she smiled.

“S.....e.....n.....s.....e”

At the sound of the ‘e’ I tickled him as he scrambled away frantically. He lay panting as our cat Ruby strode into the room to investigate the fuss. She rubbed herself up against him, purring.

“Okay, Rubes, you look after the little squirt!” announced Amy as she jumped onto my legs.

“Less of the rudeness, Amy,” I said. “Something more difficult for you...”

After five attempts, I gave up trying to find a word she could not spell. Her gift for language both pleased and scared me. Having a first rate brain did not necessarily make life easy. It gave you choices, but also separated you from the crowd and made you a target.

“Okay, then, missy. Can you divide 35 by 4?”

“Daddy!” she yelled. “That’s not fair.”

“How many goes have you had?” I asked, casting a glance at her brother patiently stroking Ruby.

“Stick to the rules,” she said.

“Especially when they favour you,” I retorted.

Her face screwed up in mock anger, but her brain swung into action.

“It’s just under nine,” she said.

“Not close enough,” I replied as my hands edged towards her sides.

“It would be good enough for him....,” she said pointing at Tom.

“That’s different and you know it!” I said with a smile.

She started her recalculations.

“8 point.....,” I could see her grimacing with the mental struggle.

“7?” finally came the answer.

No sooner did she get the question wrong than I tickled Amy under her arms until she fled. This ended the first part of our bedtime routine. After that, there was a story. Next, they brushed their teeth and settled under their covers so that Kera and I could tickle their backs. Lastly, we kissed them goodnight and turned out the light.

* * *

Our household is full of life. To outsiders it looks sickeningly happy but behind closed doors there are plenty of arguments. All of us have strong minds and this leads to many differences that we debate with vigour. Amy has her pride, as do I, while Tom and Kera specialise in finding sore spots in our egos to restore a balance of power. From the inside, our family life is vibrant, not enjoyable in a tweetie-pie kind of way, but replete with interactions that create enduring bonds and a treasure trove of memories.

The longest Kera and I have been apart in 20 years is one week. I enjoy academic conferences, and she sometimes frequents legal gatherings, but the power of the nest draws us together. She is as sensual as the décor she buys to adorn our house so there is no shortage of excitement in our private lives. At the same time, she is not particularly fond of spectacle. She appreciates people in quiet and sincere ways rather than gushing public displays of affection. It is easy to miss her capacity to love unless you are in her inner circle.

I descended the stairs as the microwave pinged.

“I’m going to miss you cooking for me,” she said.

“It’s going to be different,” I admitted.

For the last few years, my lifestyle has enabled me to take on the majority of child and house care. I'm not a natural househusband, but have adapted after a fashion, and Kera has taken on more work. Originally a stenographer, she retrained successfully as a lawyer. She is now famed for her command of precedents and authorities – something gained over a decade listening to cases every day.

I wanted to continue lecturing and writing, but the government's decision to ramp up university fees changed the situation. With two kids, we looked into the future and saw a huge bill looming. Reluctantly, I started seeking consultancy contracts and when Pip found out he snapped me up. The pay is good and the contract is only for 4 years. That suits me fine. In the meantime, life inside the home has to take on a new shape.

“Pip says he wants us to get drunk on Friday!” I commented.

“It's going to be 'one of those' jobs then?”

“Yeah, I think so, love,” I sighed.

Neither of us are comfortable socialites. ‘Come join the party’ workplaces usually have a negative impact on our life. While we maintain separate circles of work friends, both of us prefer to make excuses mid-evening and get back to the nest. We prefer quiet cuddles to drunken table dances.

“This isn't going to be easy,” I initiated. “Pip was very directive, not at all what I expected. Our work will be scrutinised by a parliamentary group.”

“Just keep coming home to me – I'll prevent you becoming a 'suit'”, Kera replied.

“At least between these four walls,” I said with a glint in my eye.

She stroked my hand as we sat drinking coffee.

“You're all smoky, Paul!” she said.

“Yeah, I know. It was a real boozer. Real ale, no food.”

“What a delight,” Kera quipped.

We smiled at each other.

“We’ve got to make this work, love.”

“Whatever it takes,” she replied.

“I get a strange feeling,” I confided to Kera.

“That’s just because you’re sitting next to me....”

“Well, yes,” I smiled. “But I mean the job,” I said.

I hesitated as I gathered my thoughts. In my mind, I assembled microscopic details about Pip’s behaviour that troubled me. His voice was not as I remembered it. His style of taking was more engaged and triumphant that I could remember. Perhaps it was the sense of achievement that he had got this particular project going. At the same time, I wondered where the reflective intellectual I knew had gone. Where had this emotionally charged man had come from? He had the urgency of a man with a mission. Contract work was different - I understood that - but there was something else I could not fathom.

I turned to Kera in an attempt to explain my feelings.

“He was very much ‘do this’, ‘do that’. He’s planned Friday’s closely with schedules and tasks. It is almost like he’s planning a military operation!” I joked.

“Concerned enough to keep two journals?” Kera asked.

“Now that’s an idea,” I mused.

“You need a place to capture thoughts like these,” Kera added.

Already I was sceptical. This is my trademark. My kids tell me that I smile a lot and come across as a happy person. Certainly, I can see why people think me an optimist. But beneath the surface is a fiercely private part of me, a place where I debate with myself and closest friends about ‘life’. What is it really about? What is really going on? I share my most private thoughts with Kera. Sometimes my musings drive her crazy, but at other times she recognises this as the quality that sets me apart, the trait and gives me the dangerous edge she finds attractive.

And so the idea for two journals was born. The first, recorded on Pip’s digiphone, would be the public record, submitted weekly for transcription. The second, in the form of private e-mails to

Kera, would be compiled by her and saved to a USB stick that she would carry in her purse at all times. I would place copies in an encrypted file to ensure we had backup. When I withdrew from the field, I would compare the public and private transcripts and unravel the contradictions between them. Academically, that would add considerable rigour. As a career move, it might prove disastrous.

* * *

I grew up in the south of England, in a place called Worthing. It is surrounded by hills to the north, and coastline to the south and offered up many adventures to an engaging young man. How would I describe myself? Well, my mother says that I look quirky. In my youth, I was athletic, and it was partly through my sporting prowess that I met Kera, herself a keen basketball player. Early adulthood was fairly typical. Study eventually took over from sports and when Kera's father invited me to work for his family business, I took the opportunity. After a decade, I was rewarded with a 25% stake in the firm.

At thirty-five, a trust fund established by my grandparents matured. The proceeds were modest but sufficient to buy me time to study. I sold my share of the family business to the workforce and used the proceeds to support a programme of research. By my 40th birthday, I had completed my doctorate and developed a reputation for expertise in workplace democracy. It was not a difficult choice to accept the job with Pip.

For the first week, Pip asked us to gather background information about the International Enterprise Council. We pulled information from Companies House and an on-line database. Like many organisations of its kind, it was nominally independent, established as a Company Limited by Guarantee. In practice, its future depended on delivering services and information to the UK Government and EU commissioners.

Pip gave us a list of executives. As well as doing Internet searches, we used a database of news sources to find out their political and business activities.

“Look at this,” I said to Chris.

“You found something?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I answered. “Look at all these directors. It reads like a section of Who’s Who.”

Chris thumbed down the list. One of Pip’s political friends, The Right Honourable Peter Yates MP, was the chairman of the board.

“That must be the board member he spoke about,” I said. “The one who will give us support if we run into problems.”

Chris nodded.

Further down the page, we found a cabinet minister from the Thatcher government, two well-known but reclusive philanthropists, a former Labour council leader, and a BBC journalist.

“Unusual bunch to direct this enterprise,” commented Chris.

“Not really,” I replied. “Peter Yates comes from a commercial background, and these two here,” I said, pointing to the former cabinet minister and one of the philanthropists, “have spent time both in business and academia. The rest are good for their social networks.”

“So what’s unusual?” prompted Chris.

“It’s this!” I said, pulling out the files generated from Internet searches.

“These are the searches where I cross-referenced each executive over the last 3 years. Look how many pages came out!”

There was anything from 50 to 200 news stories about each director. Clearly they had been active in the field for some years and left a trail of activity behind them.

“So what’s the big deal?” asked Chris.

“Now look at these two,” I said.

“One big, one small,” said Chris. “What’s the meaning of that?”

“This file here is on Jamie White, the first CEO of IEC,” I said. “It’s huge – more than three times bigger than the largest file on any of the directors. I would expect that. They’d want someone with extensive experience.”

It was not this, however, that fired my curiosity.

“Now look at this second file,” I said looking Chris keenly in the eye.

“Not much there,” said Chris.

“Exactly. Have a read while I make us tea.”

“Thanks,” said Chris. “I’d prefer coffee.”

Off I went to the canteen to give Chris some space. Perhaps I was taking a risk sharing my thoughts with Chris so quickly, but I wanted to assess his reaction. The first file was on Jamie White. He was a well-know figure who had picked up awards en route to becoming one of the most talked about entrepreneurs of the decade. I’d met him a couple of times at conferences and social events. The second file was on Paul Stevens, the CEO recently appointed to take over from Jamie. Paul was a mystery to me. I’d heard of him once or twice in magazines, but where had he been on the social circuit? I wondered why such a person would be given such a high profile job. What had he been doing all those years?

Ruth wandered into the kitchen just as the kettle boiled.

“Can I make you something?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said. “I need a break too. How’s it coming?”

“Just working something up with Chris about Paul Stevens and Jamie White.”

“Interesting!” said Ruth.

I hesitated for a moment wondering if she was being sarcastic.

“I’ve been looking at their marketing plans. Jamie White’s name is all over them. He was very active.”

“Yeah, I know him,” I said. “He’s a relaxed guy, really knows his stuff. Can’t think why he’d leave.”

Ruth looked up sharply. I’d said something that grabbed her attention. She took a moment to gather her thoughts, wondering whether to ask me something.

“That’s what I find strange too,” she said finally. “Paul Stevens has been in place nearly six months and he’s not contributed anything of substance. What’s he there for?”

“Maybe they want someone who’s less hands on?” I queried.

“Maybe...” she said, scanning my reaction to see what else I would give up.

“But you’ve got doubts, right?”

“Right,” she said with assurance.

“Maybe they wanted someone less able?” I asked, ever the sceptic.

It was my turn to scrutinise her to see what she would give away.

Ruth smiled to herself, then lifted her eyes to mine and nodded.

“You going to raise this with Pip?” I asked.

“Not yet,” she said rubbing her nose. “I’ll just make a note of my thoughts.”

She patted her pocket to indicate the presence of the digiphone.

“Typhoo or Gold Blend?” I asked.

“Is that all we’ve got?” she answered, disappointed at the frugal offerings.

I opened the cupboard to show her it was bare.

“I’ll bring some real coffee next week,” she responded. “Give me the dishwater for now. You think they’d have a coffee machine, wouldn’t you?”

“Gordon Brown’s cost cutting,” I jested.

She smiled at the remark. With cups in hand, we returned to the office and resumed our work.

Chris saw me approach and started to prod the papers in front of him repeatedly.

“Not quite like our Jamie, is he?” I said, giving him his coffee.

“Not at all. I’d say these were press releases written by a hired consultant, not a journalist,” answered Chris.

“Precisely!” I replied. “Where did this guy come from?”

When I looked at the news stories about the IEC’s directors, their evident concern to promote social enterprise was everywhere, not just in the content of the news reports but also in the energy and frequency of their activities. Paul Stevens, on the other hand, came from nowhere to claim the

top job. A barrage of news stories appeared after Jamie resigned but there was no history, no track record of work in the field. It was as if someone had orchestrated his rapid rise to the top.

* * *

On Friday afternoon, Pip gathered us together for our first weekly debrief. Ruth presented a verbal summary of marketing operations. Chris gave a semi-formal presentation of policy issues. My report updated everyone on the interest groups that funded the organisation, their backgrounds and relationships to each other. As the afternoon drew to a close, I asked the question that had been building in everyone's mind for days.

“Who's Paul Stevens, Pip?”

Pip acknowledged the question but took his time preparing a response.

“Officially, you will be conducting this research to understand the culture and work of the IEC, not its individuals!”

“And unofficially?” asked Ruth.

Pip hesitated again as he juggled which confidences to keep and which to break.

“I've heard some rumours, but it is not appropriate for me to tell you these,” he responded.

Chris looked across to Ruth and myself with an expression of incredulity.

“What sort of a crap answer is that?” he asked.

“The only answer I can give,” Pip responded.

“You're part of this group?” Chris asked with the tone that was quite challenging.

“I'm responsible for ensuring this group produces quality research. Gossip and hearsay is not the way to research Paul Stevens.”

“Who're you to say that?” asked Ruth. “Gossip and rumour are crucial to understand how people manipulate impressions of others. You know that as well as anyone here, Pip,” she said with a surprising amount of impatience.

I watched carefully as Ruth and Chris cross-examined Pip about Paul Stevens. Their qualms had been aroused the moment I showed them the results of my searches. Paul Stevens was linked with

Ken Stark, the former Tory minister, but none of the other directors. Jamie White, on the other hand, was linked with everybody except Ken Stark. Suddenly, thoughts started to explode all around my mind and I looked away to focus. I could hear the noise of their conversation in the background, but I was momentarily lost in my own world.

I stood up to ensure the others noticed my presence.

“Pip!” I said sharply. “Why are we doing this research?”

He held my gaze but I would not look away.

“Paul. I want you to discover this for yourself,” he said firmly.

I looked at Chris and Ruth and gestured with my palms not to react.

“We know what you can’t or won’t tell us. What *can* you tell us?”

Pip let out a long breath.

“Listen. Listen,” he started. “This research project is exactly as I described it to you. You are going in there to learn about the workplace culture, the goals and impacts of their work. That much does not change.”

“But there’s more, isn’t there?” I proposed.

“Yes. Yes. Look! This is isn’t just any government organisation!” said Pip, his voice beginning to break.

“Tell us something we don’t know,” said Ruth.

Pip exhaled again.

“The social enterprise movement has been growing rapidly around the world for nearly 10 years now.”

We all nodded.

“The IEC is the flagship of that movement in the UK, and a key player in Europe. Jamie White was extremely able and effective. Before he left, he had the ear of finance ministers all around the world. They’ve been sending representatives to meetings at Oxford to discuss global strategies on economic change.”

“Who’s worried?” I asked.

“Who’s not worried!” replied Pip. “The banks and stock exchanges are starting to wonder if they might one day lose control of the money markets. Powerful groups of politicians are forming to discuss how to stop the social enterprise sector taking over responsibilities currently handled by local authorities or their own departments.”

“But this is nothing new. Why are they so worried now?”

“Jamie White’s been working for years on radical proposals.”

“Statutory law allowing workers to take over the running of their own workplaces?” I posed.

“Precisely! You remember the 1980s when Thatcher gave people the right to buy their own homes? She also changed the law so that unions were accountable to their members?”

Chris and I nodded, but Ruth looked less comfortable.

“Jamie’s been winning support for these principles in the workplace. First, a law would be passed to enfranchise employees under company, charity and co-operative law. They would all be able to act as governors. Any person with more than one year’s service would have a statutory right to participation in governance. Secondly, a new regulation would be passed allowing the workforce to propose a vote on ownership. A simple majority at the AGM would require directors to reregister a private company as a Community Interest Company. This would prevent asset stripping or sales of a company without the workforce’s consent.”

“Big business won’t allow this!” shouted Ruth.

“If Thatcher could get housing stock, and Blair schools, out of public control, why can’t Jamie get private companies away from investor control?” replied Pip

“Precisely!” I said.

“So Jamie White was pushed?” said Chris.

Pip paused.

“I am not going to tell you what leads you should and shouldn’t follow,” he replied.

“But you’re not going to stop us researching anything we think’s relevant?” I retorted.

Pip held his silence.

“There’s been a coup,” I said. “This Paul Stevens is there to ensure the IEC doesn’t upset other interests.”

“Come on, Paul, you’re too bright to make guesses. We don’t know exactly why he’s there,” said Pip. “Officially, he’s been appointed to sort out corruption. His remit is, according to board members, to ensure the organisation is squeaky clean.”

“Then where’s Jamie gone?” I asked.

“What d’you mean?” asked Pip.

“On 24th March, Jamie resigns. Before then, nothing about Paul Stevens in any news reports.”

I waved the file I had prepared in front of the group.

“Then suddenly a stream of press releases establishes his name in all the right circles,” I continued. “Within two months he’s installed. Jamie spent 10 years building his reputation. Suddenly, he disappears completely from the newspapers. This isn’t guesswork, Pip.”

“He’s probably just lying low,” said Pip.

Everyone in the room burst into laughter at this suggestion.

“Now, Pip, you’re too bright to believe that!” Ruth retorted with considerable sarcasm.

Pip’s head dropped as he experienced being hoist with his own petard.

“This research was planned in advance of his resignation,” replied Pip. “The funding was secured when he was in post. So he got sacked. We can’t help that. We have to take it in our stride.”

“Pip,” retorted Chris. “The leading global opinion former on workplace democracy is mysteriously removed from a quango promoting just that, a few months before the Institute of Democratic Working starts a 4 year project to research its work, and you say we must ‘take it in our stride’. It changes everything!”

“It changes nothing!” shouted Pip. “You go into the organisation. You learn about it. You’re top researchers so you’ll diligently and ruthlessly report the truths that you find.”

“Is that an order?” protested Chris.

“Pip?” I asked calmly.

“Yes, what is it Paul?” he replied.

“If they can get to Jamie, they can get to us.”

Chris and Ruth suddenly twigged why I was pressing Pip on this matter and started to exchange concerns.

“So, what do you suggest? Wind up this project!” he said facetiously.

I looked at Ruth and Chris but they carried on talking.

“None of us are suggesting that. But if we are walking into a bear’s pit, we’d like to know as much as possible. We understand the risks about rumour and gossip. We all record it. We all reflect on it. We all come to a better understanding of the alternative possibilities, then we follow those leads that we agree are most fruitful. Now what do you know?”

“That’s just it, Paul,” he said holding my gaze. “I know little more than you. We’ll find out much more when we enter the organisation. I don’t want us going outside our remit.”

“Stuff our remit!” said Ruth. “This is *anthropology*, not some packaged neat hypothesis we’re testing. We’re in the bear’s pit whether we want to be there or not. The only difference is that this time we’ve discovered in advance!”

Pip sighed.

“Any of you want to pull out?” he asked.

There was silence.

“Okay. Get your things, get me drunk and I’ll tell you what I know!”

* * *

When I eventually opened the door to Kera, her face had the aura of Queen Victoria. She spared me the ritual punch line, but her manner was decidedly frosty.

“Welcome home, stranger!” she said pointedly.

“You wouldn’t want to hear it even if I wanted to tell you,” I responded.

“Get out of those smoky clothes, take a bath, and then maybe I’ll talk to you.”

I took her hand and held it.

“I’d like that,” I said, kissing it gently.

“Don’t think you can get around me that easily....”

In my slightly drunken state, I rose to the challenge.

“At least you want me to get around you,” I said, with a smile.

“I’d like you to get home in time to put the kids to bed,” she said, deflecting me. “They’re always asking ‘where’s Dad? Why’s he never home any more?’ I never realised how much they depended on you. Now, piss off up stairs and come down smelling nicer.”

I obeyed. She was entitled to be irritated after my tardiness. Thirty minutes later, I was washed, relaxed and in the kitchen making two cups of redbush tea. With drinks in hand, clothed in my dressing-gown, I opened the door to the living room and my eyes grew wide as my nostrils were filled with the aroma of scented candles. Kera lay outstretched on the sofa wearing only the briefest bra and panties.

“I hope you are naked under that,” she said.

“All I can say is that I’m wearing less than you,” I replied as I put the cups of tea on the table.

She stood up, the glint in her eye rapidly returning. Even in her middle years, she was still as statuesque as the day I met her.

“Not a word,” she said, “and shut the door behind you.”

“I don’t deserve y.....”

“No you don’t, but I deserve you. Now, not a word,” she said again as she pressed her lips firmly onto mine. Having secured my silence, she pushed me against the wall.

My tired mind and weary body was awakened by energy deep within me, a spark that Kera always had the power to ignite. I closed my eyes and experienced her with my senses; the soft hue of her flesh as her stomach brushed against mine; the curves of her body as my hand slowly moved down the nape of her back. I lifted her up and felt her legs wrap around me and, as my fervour was

fuelled in equal measure by the shortness of her breath and the smell of her skin, our shadows danced silently on the walls, silhouettes moving in an elegant and erotic dance as we released our passions and revelled in our lust for each other.