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Death is Forever

Written by John Gardner

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DEATH IS FOREVER

John Gardner



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THE DEATHS OF *VANYA AND EAGLE*

Ford Puxley came face to face with death at exactly 4.12 p.m. on a chilly October Thursday outside the Frankfurter Hof Hotel in the heart of Frankfurt. In the last split second of his life, Puxley knew the arrival of death was his own fault.

During the iceberg centre of the Cold War, Puxley had instructed many novice spies, and his watchword was, 'Wear tradecraft like a good suit, or carry it like an American Express card. Don't leave home without it, but use it automatically. If your tradecraft sticks out like a lion in a monkey run, it will kill you.'

So, at the end, Puxley's tradecraft, or lack of it, killed him.

There was a convention beginning that week. Conventions and Trade Shows are a way of life in Frankfurt, and the locals do not care whether it is books, business machines or automobiles. Conventions and the like mean business, and the jingle of cash registers.

The lounges and lobbies were full. Once-a-year friends were being reunited; smooth businessmen, with wives or mistresses, were arriving smugly from the airport; a large aggressive woman tried to complain about her room – in execrable German, to a young man who spoke better English than the plaintiff – while bored conventioners stood in line.

Ford Puxley hardly noticed any of them, for he was in a hurry. The telephone call he had just taken in his third floor room had

been a breakthrough. He stopped only long enough to make a quick return call. Now, the sooner he got out to meet his source, the faster he would be back in his neat little house in Greenwich, with its trim garden and his young wife. He had married late and that proved to be a boon. Nowadays he did not like being away from England.

He shouldered his way through the crowd in the main lobby, and out onto the street. After the failed August 1991 coup in Moscow, the imploding of the once Evil Empire, and the outlawing of the Communist Party in what used to be the Soviet Union, his subconscious had sent all of his lifetime security habits to sleep.

He barged out onto the twilight pavement, ignored the commissioner, and waved to the trio of taxis waiting for trade. The first in line started his engine, but the Opel was faster. It was grey, splashed with mud and came scooting out from its hiding place at the end of the row; accelerating and cutting in front of the taxi which was only now starting to move slowly forward.

The whole thing was beautifully executed. The inside bumper of the Opel struck Puxley's hip, skittering him around. Then the vehicle fishtailed so that the whole rear weight of the moving car sideswiped the staggering man, throwing him into the air, crushed and dead before he even hit the pavement, scattering amazed and frightened bystanders.

In the moment before death, Puxley's mind registered several things. He realised the man near the row of taxis had raised his hand, and it was not to hail either a cab or bus. Classic. A signal to the Opel. He also took in the fact that the Opel's registration had been fouled with mud. By the time the car hit him, Puxley realised he was being flyswatted. That is what they used to call it in the old days, within the shimmering glacier of Berlin. His very last thought was how well it was being done. They were certainly experts, and he went into oblivion cursing himself and knowing exactly why this had happened to him.

They took Puxley home to England and buried him. M, who

personally went to the interment, said later that it had been a very dull little funeral. 'The widow didn't seem to be much bowed with grief,' he told Bill Tanner, his Chief of Staff. 'The sherry was undrinkable. Also, I didn't much care for the parson. He had a cold and was in an obvious hurry.' But M was, of course, more used to naval funerals, with the Royal Marine band playing a cheery march as the mourners left the cemetery, while the chaplain treated the deceased as one of his own. The cleric, he said to Tanner, could have been planting a tree. 'Not right, you know, Bill,' he muttered. 'Death is the last enemy and all that. You don't get another turn.'

In the field, Puxley's cryptonym had been *Vanya*.

Exactly one week after Puxley's dull obsequies, Libby Macintosh arrived at a pleasant, unpretentious hotel in one of the many tributaries which flow off Berlin's Kurfürstendamm.

Ms Macintosh, a lady in her late forties, had never stayed in this hotel before, though she knew the city backwards. If the authorities had taken the trouble to check up on her, they would have discovered that she had been in Berlin many times over the years, and, on this occasion, had already lived in the city for the best part of a month, though they would have been hard put to it to seek out the different addresses she had used: apart from the five alternative names.

Libby Macintosh was an American businesswoman, and it showed, from the power suit – severe, navy with white trim – to the power briefcase she seemed to guard with her honour. Certainly, it was later said, she would not let the bellboy take it, with the two Louis Vuitton suitcases, to her room.

She quietly told the concierge that she was expecting a Herr Maaster to visit her. A Herr Helmut Maaster. He should be announced and sent up the moment he arrived.

She tipped the bellboy, and called down to room service asking for coffee and gateaux which were duly sent up to her.

Herr Maaster did not materialise, and the next anyone knew of Ms Libby Macintosh was when the chambermaid called

agitatedly for the housekeeper who, in turn, sent for the Duty Manager.

In all, Ms Macintosh had resided in the hotel for around two hours. When the chambermaid went in to make up the room for the night, she found its occupant spreadeagled on the bed, clad only in black silk underwear by Victoria's Secret, available at any one of the chain store's branches spread across the United States and Europe. The somewhat chic look – for Ms Macintosh still had an excellent figure – was spoiled by the fact that she was dead.

The management was not overjoyed. No hotel is happy about death on the premises, and, rightly, they felt it was an affront. However, the business blew over, and nobody said anything about foul play.

In fact the police released Ms Macintosh's body after only two days, and the corpse was returned to the United States where it was buried – an Episcopalian service – in a small Virginia churchyard under its rightful name, Elizabeth Cearn's. Among the family mourners were two senior officers from Langley, or, to be more accurate, from the Central Intelligence Agency.

Nobody could prove anything about Ms Macintosh/Cearn's death, but there were those in forensics at Langley who had a feel for these things. They suspected an old method, long out of date, last used, they thought, in the late 1950s – the cyanide pistol.

Death by cyanide inhalation is supposed to leave no trace, but the people at Langley had performed an autopsy on the victim's brain where they found minute traces: enough to finger the method.

In the field, Elizabeth Cearn's cryptonym had been *Eagle*.

Three days after Elizabeth Cearn's burial, the two deaths were brought to the notice of Captain James Bond RN, just before he was summoned to the presence of his chief – M, as he was known to those who lived, moved and had their being in the arcane halls of the British Secret Intelligence Service.

DEATH OF CABAL

'Cabal died sometime between September 30th and October 6th, 1990.' M sat in his ultra modern chair in the chrome and glass office on the fifth floor of the anonymous building overlooking Regent's Park.

'The week of Germany's reunification,' Bill Tanner supplied in a quiet footnote kind of voice.

'Went dead, really,' M continued. 'Just closed itself down. Fragmented if you like. No orders from either us or our relations at Langley, as Ms St John already knows.'

Ms St John nodded from her seat on M's left hand. James Bond sat on the right, and Bill Tanner hovered near the window.

'And this is a concern to us now.' Bond raised his eyebrows.

M's eyes flicked towards his agent: a small flash of irritation. 'Should be obvious, Captain Bond.' His voice reflected the sharp snap of annoyance. 'You read the file this morning, and Ms St John's been dragged across the Atlantic from her hearth and home. I should've thought even a cretin could deduce that Cabal is a matter of unease.'

'I was making a statement, not a query, sir. Haven't we left things to stew for rather a long time? I mean October 1990 is two years ago.'

'A lot of things've been left too long, 007. I know that and you know it. Europe hasn't been the easiest operational continent since '90.' The Old Man was rattled, Bond thought, and when M

was perturbed it was time to batten down against a storm. M was too experienced to be easily discomfited.

M grunted, and Ms St John gave a small, supercilious laugh.

James Bond had not taken to Ms St John. She was the kind of American woman to whom the old chauvinistic centre of his nature remained allergic. Short and pert, Ms St John wore clothes which seemed to envelop her: a baggy pants suit with a checked waistcoat over a white shirt, under a loose coat which seemed too large for her small frame. Paul Stewart of New York, Bond thought. He had seen the ensemble in some women's magazine, yesterday, at the dentist's. She was, he decided, dressed more for a grouse shoot than the kind of field they would be beating. He also detected the stir of condescension in the girl's manner.

When Bill Tanner had introduced them in his office less than thirty minutes ago, she had given him a curt 'Hi,' and a hand-shake to match, while the pearl-grey eyes appraised him as if to say that all men were inferior, but some were more inferior than others. Bond had the distinct impression that, as far as Ms St John was concerned, he fell definitely into the latter category.

M continued to talk. 'If you've read everything, you'll know that Cabal was, without any doubt, our most successful network running out of the old DDR, out of East Germany before the great thaw.'

Bond nodded. At the height of its success, Cabal had sported over thirty active agents, including two deep penetrations within the old KGB headquarters at Karlshorst. Cabal had probed and listened, fed disinformation, and carefully lifted at least three solid defectors from within the ranks of KGB, the now defunct Stasi of ill renown, and the HVA – the *Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung*, the former East German Foreign Intelligence Agency.

Cabal had run every kind of operation in the book, from dangles to false flags, deceptions and even the odd honeytrap. Its history was the history of the Cold War, and its weapons had been classic to that time – the meat and drink of all the famous

espionage novelists. If the CIA and the British SIS had their way, every member of Cabal would have been loaded with medals. Now nobody could be found. Not a single agent could have the Congressional Medal of Honor or the CBE pinned to his or her chest.

'Disappeared in a puff of smoke,' M continued, 'and when the original case officers went after them they both wound up dead. One outside an hotel in Frankfurt, the other inside an hotel in Berlin. You've read the details.'

'And both dispatched by outmoded means, sir.' Bond looked at the ceiling, as though talking to himself.

'Everything's outmoded now.' M sounded tired, as though the end of the Cold War had brought new horrors into his fiefdom. 'Everything, including a whole network vanishing in broad daylight.'

'Could someone be trying to send us a message?'

'Such as?' M remained seated, with his head bowed, as though in meditation, accepting the input of others and cycling it through his mind to find answers by magic which only he possessed.

'The old ways. Antiquated methods for what the Russians used to call wet work. Using old cold warrior weapons. Flyswatting and the cyanide pistol. Flyswatting went out with the ark: too expensive; and as for the cyanide pistol, well, we all know they threw that out after one operation.'

'Yes. Certainly it could be a message.' M gave a Buddha-like bob of the head. 'We, the Ancients, are still among you, that kind of thing, eh? But what about motive?'

'Revenge, sir?' Bond tempted, as though trying to draw his old chief.

M shrugged sadly, commenting that there was certainly plenty of that going on in Eastern Europe these days. 'One of the reasons we must keep active. The Joint Intelligence Committee's adamant that our Service will be required to remain fully operational in Europe for a minimum of ten years. One of the reasons Cabal was so important. Together with our American

brothers, we had listed new targets for them: political, economic, paramilitary, terrorist.'

In some ways, Bond thought, it must be like the situation directly after World War II, when the various secret agencies had their work cut out sniffing around for Nazis hiding in the woodpile of freedom. Now they looked for diehard Communists: people anxious to see the discredited regime regain its lost credibility. Men and women whose lives had been dedicated to the Marxist-Leninist cause: persons now without rank, authority or political estate, who craved for a return to the norm in which they had believed down all their years. There was a lot of talk about underground Marxist terrorist groups; and the reorganisation of secret cadres ready to infiltrate fledgling democracies.

'The two of you'll have to get out there and follow in the footsteps of poor old Puxley and Ms Macintosh . . .'

'Cearns, sir.' Ms St John seemed to come out of a daydream. It was possibly the jet lag. 'Liz Cearns. She was an old colleague and friend.'

'Yes, Cearns.' M looked at the young woman, his gaze bleak. 'Just as Ford Puxley was an old friend and colleague of ours, Ms St John. Your service does not have the monopoly on grief.'

'Then it should make us all more determined, sir.' She bit the words out, as though holding back a geyser of anger.

'Oh, I think we're determined enough already. Hope you're not too emotionally involved, Ms St John. Doesn't do to go off into the cold woods with anger and sentiment leading the way. Going into the labyrinth and plucking out what's left of Cabal's going to need cool, dispassionate minds.'

Ms St John opened her mouth, then seemed to think better of it. M treated her to one of his embracing, avuncular smiles, warm as a Spring morning. 'Come,' he said, his voice following up on the smile. 'Let's get down to work. Play at being Sherlock Holmes for a while. Let's go through what information we have, and then deduce what went wrong for Ford Puxley and Elizabeth Cearns. *Vanya* and *Eagle*. That way lies more safety for you.'

He rose and, uncharacteristically, removed his dark blue blazer with the anchored buttons, pulling back his shirtsleeves, like a man about to sit in at a round of high-stakes poker. 'Roll up our sleeves, what? Get down to it.' He turned to Tanner, asking him to organise coffee and sandwiches. 'It's going to be a long night, I fear. Might as well make ourselves comfortable. Get out of that coat, Ms . . . I refuse to go on calling you Ms St John. What do people call you, Elizabeth, isn't it?'

While Ms St John did not actually thaw, she visibly relaxed, slipping out of the voluminous coat to display that, even clothed in the tweedy pants suit, she possessed a body of neat feminine proportions. 'Friends,' she said, smiling for the first time, 'call me Easy.'

M did not even return the smile, and Bond felt his eyes crease into a twinkle.

'My initials,' she nodded. 'Elizabeth Zara. Ee Zee. By the age of fourteen I was the best arm-wrestler in my school. You know what kids are like?'

'Indeed, yes.' Bond took his cue from M and suppressed the laugh, drawing his chair closer to M's desk.

When Bill Tanner returned with the sandwiches and coffee, the trio looked like conspirators, hunched over the desk, their faces drawn into shadow outside the circle of light falling from the angled lamp which provided the only illumination in the room. M had switched off the overhead lights so they could more easily concentrate on the papers he had before them.

For over six hours they carefully put together the jigsaw of *Vanya's* and *Eagle's* last days.

From the final week in September until their deaths, within a week of each other, the two case officers had kept in constant touch: both with each other and their home base, which was a joint facility in rural Oxfordshire, separated from, but run under the auspices of, a small Royal Air Force Communications base hard by the village of Bloxham, a stone's throw from Banbury,

famous for the nursery rhyme 'Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross'.

Using electronic wizardry, in the shape of short-wave transceivers, little bigger than credit cards, but crammed with smart boards operating on a fixed frequency, every telephone call, and each report to *Moonshine* – the home base – had been monitored. The transcripts now filled a loose-leaved book almost three inches thick.

It was like reading a secret diary; or the vigilant correspondence of a pair of clandestine lovers. *Vanya* and *Eagle* knew each other's handwriting backwards. Single words spoken over insecure telephones could be transcribed as clear instructions or intelligence, while sentences of a dozen words were stuffed with volumes of information. They had their own shorthand, and their knowledge of Cabal's topography – its safe houses, letter boxes, and personal signals – was encyclopaedic.

Both of the officers had covered all the ground they had worked with Cabal in the past. They followed each other through the well-known haunts at Hamburg, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Munich and Berlin.

On two occasions they had slipped, separately, into Switzerland, meeting at an old safe house in Zurich where they left the minute transceivers on send while they talked.

Bond knew the place well, and as he read the transcript of the conversations, he could see the view from the window, out over the Sechseläuten Platz to the lake, with its toy pleasure steamers coming and going. He remembered, from years before, eating dinner with an agent in a small warm café near the lake, and later, in that same safe house, briefing the man who went directly from the affluence of Switzerland to his death behind the Iron Curtain. The agent had died because of incorrect information Bond had been told to give him, and 007's conscience had been scarred with the memory.

Now, as they read and discussed, other details were surfacing. Of the original thirty members of Cabal, only ten remained

alive. Six had died from natural causes, six were irretrievably missing, presumed dead, and eight – *Vanya* and *Eagle* had discovered – had been killed in accidents which could not have been mischances.

The ten Cabal agents remaining in Europe had left some traces, and together *Vanya* and *Eagle* followed trails which went, by turns, hot and cold. On telephones, and at their two meetings in Switzerland, they spoke of the agents only by their exotic work names, *Crystal*, *Ariel*, *Caliban*, *Cobweb*, *Orphan*, *Tester*, *Sulphur*, *Puck*, *Mab* and *Dodger*. These names, which were folded into the conversations, had to be cross-referenced in M's office in order to finger the true identities, and, if this were not difficult enough, there was a set of street names used on some of the transcribed telephone conversations.

At one point the tenacious Puxley came very close to *Caliban*, while Elizabeth Cearns reported having had sight of, and then losing, *Sulphur*.

But the real action came almost as the two case officers met their deaths. Only minutes before Puxley was swatted by the Opel outside the Frankfurter Hof, he took a telephone call in his hotel room.

'Is that Dan?' asked the pick-up. The voice was male and heavily accented, said the notation by the transcriber.

'Which Dan do you want?' The sudden excitement and adrenalin rush was almost tangible in the words lying cold on the page.

'Dan Broome. Mr Dan Broome from Magic Mountain Software.'

'Speaking.'

'It's Ulrich, Ulrich Voss.'

There in the darkened office, M cross-referenced what they already knew, the caller was using the identification code of Oscar Vomberg, in straight Cabalspeak, *Mab*. The sequence – 'Dan . . . Dan Broome . . . of Magic Mountain Software' – was distinctive. 'Only Vomberg would have used that sequence,' M

said quietly. 'Which means that, if it is not Vomberg – and our voice print people swear it is – then it's someone using a sequence culled from Oscar, who's a pretty shrewd old scientist. Worked with the East Germans on drugs – mind control, that kind of thing.'

Back on the page, Ulrich Voss, who was really Oscar Vomberg – *Mab* to any inhabitants of Cabal – asked to meet Dan Broome urgently. He gave the name and address of a notorious local clip joint and brothel, *Der Mönch*, The Monk. Then added, 'To see *Sulphur*.'

The transcript went on to show Puxley's fast call to *Moonshine*. 'For the insurance,' M said. 'That's how fastidious Ford Puxley was. In case his little piece of electronics had not done the job with the incoming call, he wanted home base to know what was happening. "Contact with *Mab*," he had said, quickly giving the time and place, then adding, "Meeting *Sulphur* now at *Der Mönch*".'

So, with that final report, Ford Puxley, aka *Vanya*, dashed down from his room, threw tradecraft to the wind and went out to his death from the Opel car in twilit Frankfurt.

The transcripts showed a similar series of events leading up to the death of Ms Elizabeth Cearns, aka Libby Macintosh, aka *Eagle*.

Following the second meeting with *Vanya* in Switzerland, it was decided that she should go back to Berlin, where she already claimed to have had sight of *Sulphur*. 'Now *Sulphur*, as you will see from the charts,' M pointed out, 'is, in reality, a Bulgarian. She joined Cabal in 1979 when she was only eighteen years old. KGB had recruited her from the Bulgarian service – the old and ruthless DS, the Dajnavia Sigurnost. She worked at Karlshorst as a liaison officer between KGB and DS. We bought and paid for her,' he gave a tiny smile, 'I should say the American Service bought and paid for her, in 1982. She was fabulous. Hated the Russians, loathed her own people – or at least the then controlling faction of her people. She gave us more than anyone.'

Very bright, a quick study as they say. The Americans even got her out for two weeks for a crash course. I believe your people, Easy, used the term "A Class Act". I gather that's high praise.'

'The highest.'

'Mmmm. Well, if you read this passage you'll see that your Ms Cearns considered that, should *Sulphur* surface, she would do so in only the best places. Puxley and Cearns decided that Cearns should show herself at the Kempf.'

The Kempf is Berlin's fabled Bristol Hotel Kempinski. It has been said the fate and future of Germany has always been decided at the Kempinski.

'And her real name?' Bond's eyes narrowed as he leaned across the desk to peer at the Classified lists of Cabal's assets.

'Praxi,' M said quietly, 'Praxi Simeon.'

'A pretty name, Praxi,' Bond muttered.

'You think so?' from Easy who wrinkled her nose as though she found the name distasteful.

'And there you go.' M flicked over several pages of transcripts, then tapped down on a page with his index finger. 'The incoming calls to *Eagle* at the Bristol Kempinski.'

The first few were direct communications with *Moonshine*, and included a sobering conversation in which the *Moonshine* controller broke the news of *Vanya's* death. There were several other *en clair* talks between *Moonshine* and *Eagle*, also between *Eagle* and *Duster*, who was, M explained, Liz Cearns' direct controller at Langley.

'Martin de Rosso,' Easy said. 'He's my controller also, as far as this is concerned. What happens next, sir?'

'Day before *Eagle's* death.' M flicked at another page. There was an incoming call at 3.26 p.m. Liz Cearns picked up:

'Hello?'

'Can I speak to Gilda?' Female, the note said, speaking German with slight accent.

'You want Gilda?'

'Gilda von Glocke.'

'Yes, who is that?'

'Ilse. Ilse Schwen.'

'I'm sorry, do you represent a company?'

'Yes. We *have* met, Frau von Glocke. I work for Herr Maaster. Maaster Designs. You remember?'

'Yes, I vaguely remember you. I'm sorry. But, yes, I am very anxious to speak with Herr Maaster.'

'And he wishes to see you, but he has a very full schedule. He doesn't want to come to the Kempfi. You know what he's like, Frau von Glocke . . .'

'Yes. Where would he like to meet?'

'He says tomorrow afternoon. Around three at the Hotel Braun.' She gave the address.

'I'll be there. Tell him to ask for me at the desk.'

'Nice to speak with you again, Frau von Glocke.'

'And the sequence is right?' Bond asked.

'Everything's right. The voice analysts say it's definitely *Sulphur*, that is, Praxi Simeon. The Maaster Designs business was the identifier. The entire sequence is correct.'

'And Herr Maaster was . . . ?'

'There is no Herr Maaster. For a face-to-face *Sulphur* would choose a place. It was always left to her. She has a great nose for the safest place. The Hotel Braun is nondescript. *Eagle* called it in, and informed *Moonshine* as soon as she had moved.'

'And her transceiver?' Bond asked. 'It wasn't on when she . . .'

'Two calls. Both to the United States,' M pointed to the log. 'Then it was as though she just switched it off. Something she would not do under normal circumstances.'

'A lover?'

'It had crossed everybody's mind, but there's nothing to back it up.'

'Her lover lived in DC,' Easy supplied. She had been very silent during the past few minutes. 'Unless she had met someone . . . No, that's not in character. Liz was the most faithful of women.'

'Yet someone clobbered her with a cyanide pistol, and she was

in the room dressed only in her underwear.' Bond bit his bottom lip. 'No sign of a struggle. Nothing odd.'

M shook his head. 'Teaser, isn't it? Well, you'll both have to go out there and find out exactly what happened.' He pushed his chair back. 'Before tonight's out I want you to memorise everything. Agents' cryptos, their street names, all the sequences, the word codes, the body language, the safe houses, letter boxes, street meets. Everything.'

'That's an awful lot . . .' Easy began.

'I know,' M said coldly. 'I know it's asking an awful lot, Easy, but that's life in our business. As far as we can tell, there are ten former Cabal agents out there, and two of them – Oscar Vomberg, *Mab*; and Praxi Simeon, *Sulphur* – might be tainted goods. We've done the necessary. Put the ads in the local papers; broadcast on the correct frequencies at the right times; published in a couple of magazines Cabal used to contact. You, James, are the new *Vanya*, while you, Easy, must assume *Eagle's* mantle. We'll all stay here for the night and work with you, but I want the pair of you on flights to Berlin no later than tomorrow night.'

'Back-up, sir?' Bond asked. He already felt that strange mixture of excitement and fear fluttering and firing in his belly.

'I want both of you to learn, and then think, deduce, try and find the answer to the puzzle of your predecessors' deaths. Up to it, are you?'

Bond gave a grim nod, while Easy swallowed before saying 'Yes,' though the word stuck for a second in her throat.