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Written by Charles Cumming

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CHARLES CUMMING

A Spy By Nature

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1

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Author's Note

Were the events of this story entirely true, they would inevitably breach clauses in The Official Secrets Act. Nevertheless, members of the intelligence community both in London and in the United States may find that they catch their reflection in the account which follows.

– C.C.
London, 2001

I remember, in fact, the Lebanese woman I knew at Berkshire College saying to me, after I told her how much I loved her: 'I'll always tell you the truth, unless of course I'm lying to you.'

Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*

PART ONE

1995

If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives.

—Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*

ONE

An Exploratory Conversation

The door leading into the building is plain and unadorned, save for one highly polished handle. No sign outside saying FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE, no hint of top brass. There is a small ivory bell on the right-hand side, and I push it. The door, thicker and heavier than it appears, is opened by a fit-looking man of retirement age, a uniformed policeman on his last assignment.

‘Good afternoon, sir.’

‘Good afternoon. I have an interview with Mr Lucas at two o’clock.’

‘The name, sir?’

‘Alec Milius.’

‘Yes, sir.’

This almost condescending. I have to sign my name in a book and then he hands me a security dog tag on a silver chain, which I slip into the hip pocket of my suit trousers.

‘Just take a seat beyond the stairs. Someone will be down to see you in a moment.’

The wide, high-ceilinged hall beyond the reception area exudes all the splendour of imperial England. A vast panelled mirror dominates the far side of the room, flanked by oil

portraits of grey-eyed, long-dead diplomats. Its soot-flecked glass reflects the bottom of a broad staircase, which drops down in right angles from an unseen upper storey, splitting left and right at ground level. Arranged around a varnished table beneath the mirror are two burgundy leather sofas, one of which is more or less completely occupied by an overweight, lonely-looking man in his late twenties. Carefully, he reads and rereads the same page of the same section of *The Times*, crossing and uncrossing his legs as his bowels swim in caffeine and nerves. I sit down on the sofa opposite his.

Five minutes pass.

On the table the fat man has laid down a strip of passport photographs, little colour squares of himself in a suit, probably taken in a booth at Waterloo station sometime early this morning. A copy of *The Daily Telegraph* lies folded and unread beside the photographs. Bland non-stories govern its front page: IRA hints at new ceasefire; rail sell-off will go ahead; 56 per cent of British policemen want to keep their traditional bobbies' helmets. I catch the fat man looking at me, a quick spot-check glance between rivals. Then he looks away, shamed. His skin is drained of ultraviolet, a grey flannel face raised on nerd books and *Panorama*. Black oily Oxbridge hair.

'Mr Milius?'

A young woman has appeared on the staircase wearing a neat red suit. She is unflustered, professional, demure. As I stand up, Fat Man eyes me with wounded suspicion, like someone on his lunch break cut in line at the bank.

'If you'd like to come with me. Mr Lucas will see you now.'

This is where it begins. Following three steps behind her, garbling platitudes, adrenaline surging, her smooth calves lead me up out of the hall. More oil paintings line the ornate staircase.

Running a bit late today. Oh, that's okay. Did you find us all right? Yes.

‘Mr Lucas is just in here.’

Prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.

A firm handshake. Late thirties. I had expected someone older. Christ, his eyes are blue. I’ve never seen a blue like that. Lucas is dense boned and tanned, absurdly handsome in an old-fashioned way. He is in the process of growing a moustache, which undercuts the residual menace in his face. There are black tufts sprouting on his upper lip, cut-rate Errol Flynn.

He offers me a drink, an invitation seconded by the woman in red, who seems almost offended when I refuse.

‘Are you sure?’ she says, as if I have broken with sacred tradition. Never accept tea or coffee at an interview. They’ll see your hand shaking when you drink it.

‘Absolutely, yes.’

She withdraws and Lucas and I go into a large, sparsely furnished room nearby. He has not yet stopped looking at me, not out of laziness or rudeness but purely because he is a man entirely at ease when it comes to staring at people. He’s very good at it.

He says, ‘Thank you for coming today.’

And I say, ‘It’s a pleasure. Thank you for inviting me. It’s a great privilege to be here.’

There are two armchairs in the room, upholstered in the same burgundy leather as the sofas downstairs. A large bay window looks out over the tree-lined Mall, feeding weak, broken sunlight into the room. Lucas has a broad oak desk covered in neat piles of paper and a framed black-and-white photograph of a woman whom I take to be his wife.

‘Have a seat.’

I drop down low into the leather, my back to the window. There is a coffee table in front of me, an ashtray, and a closed red file. Lucas occupies the chair opposite mine. As he sits down, he reaches into the pocket of his jacket for a

pen, retrieving a blue Mont Blanc. I watch him, freeing the trapped flaps of my jacket and bringing them back across my chest. The little physical tics that precede an interview.

‘Milius. It’s an unusual name.’

‘Yes.’

‘Your father, he was from the Eastern bloc?’

‘His father. Not mine. Came over from Lithuania in 1940. My family have lived in Britain ever since.’

Lucas writes something down on a brown clipboard braced between his thighs.

‘I see. Why don’t we begin by talking about your present job. The CEBDO. That’s not something I’ve heard much about.’

All job interviews are lies. They begin with the résumé, a sheet of word-processed fictions. About halfway down mine, just below the name and address, Philip Lucas has read the following sentence:

I have been employed as a Marketing Consultant at the Central European Business Development Organization (CEBDO) for the past eleven months.

Elsewhere, lower down, are myriad falsehoods: periods of work experience on national newspapers (‘Could you do some photocopying please?’); a season as a waiter at a leading Genevan hotel; eight weeks at a London law firm; the inevitable charity work.

The truth is that CEBDO is run out of a small, cramped garage in a mews off Edgware Road. The kitchen doubles for a toilet; if somebody has a crap, no one can make a cup of tea for ten minutes. There are five of us: Nik (the boss), Henry, Russell, myself, and Anna. It’s very simple. We sit on the

phone all day talking to businessmen in central – and now eastern – Europe. I try to persuade them to part with large sums of money, in return for which we promise to place an advertisement for their operation in a publication known as the *Central European Business Review*. This, I tell my clients, is a quarterly magazine that enjoys a global circulation of four hundred thousand copies, ‘distributed free around the world.’ Working purely on commission I can make anything from two to three hundred pounds a week, sometimes more, peddling this story. Nik, I estimate, makes seven or eight times that amount. His only overheads, apart from telephone calls and electricity, are printing costs. These are paid to his brother-in-law who desktop publishes five hundred copies of the *Central European Business Review* four times a year. These he posts to a few selected embassies across Europe and to all the clients who have placed advertisements in the magazine. Any spares, he throws in the bin.

On paper, it’s legal.

I look Lucas directly in the eye.

‘The CEBDO is a fledgling organization that advises new businesses in central – and now eastern – Europe about the perils and pitfalls of the free market.’

He taps his jaw with the bulbous fountain pen.

‘And it’s entirely funded by private individuals? There’s no grant from the EC?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Who runs it?’

‘Nikolas Jarolmek. A Pole. His family have lived in Britain since the war.’

‘And how did you get the job?’

‘Through the *Guardian*. I responded to an advertisement.’

‘Against how many other candidates?’

‘I couldn’t say. I was told about a hundred and fifty.’

‘Could you describe an average day at the office?’

‘Broadly speaking, I act in an advisory capacity, either by speaking to people on the telephone and answering any questions they may have about setting up in business in the UK or by writing letters in response to written queries. I’m also responsible for editing our quarterly magazine, the *Central European Business Review*. That lists a number of crucial contact organizations that might prove useful to small businesses that are just starting out. It also gives details of tax arrangements in this country, language schools, that kind of thing.’

‘I see. It would be helpful if you could send me a copy.’

‘Of course.’

To explain why I am here.

The interview was set up on the recommendation of a man I barely know, a retired diplomat named Michael Hawkes. Six weeks ago I was staying at my mother’s house in Somerset for the weekend, and he came to dinner. He was, she informed me, an old university friend of my father’s.

Until that night I had never met Hawkes, had never heard my mother mention his name. She said that he had spent a lot of time with her and Dad when they were first married in the 1960s. But when the Foreign Office posted him to Moscow, the three of them had lost touch. All this was before I was born.

Hawkes retired from the Diplomatic Service earlier this year to take up a directorship at a British oil company called Abnex. I don’t know how Mum tracked down his phone number, but he showed up for dinner alone, no wife, on the stroke of eight o’clock.

There were other guests there that night, bankers and insurance brokers in bulletproof tweeds, but Hawkes was a thing apart. He had a blue silk cravat slung around his neck

like a noose and a pair of velvet loafers embroidered on the toe with an elaborate coat of arms. There was nothing ostentatiously debonair about any of this, nothing vain; it just looked as if he hadn't taken them off in twenty years. He was wearing a washed-out blue shirt with fraying collar and cuffs and stained silver cuff links that looked as though they had been in his family since the Opium Wars. In short, we got on. We sat next to each other at dinner and talked for close on three hours about everything from politics to infidelity. Three days after the party my mother told me that she had spotted Hawkes in her local supermarket, stocking up on Stolichnaya and tomato juice. Almost immediately, like a task, he asked her if I had ever thought of 'going in for the Foreign Office.' My mother said that she didn't know.

'Ask him to give me a ring if he's interested.'

So on the telephone that night my mother did what mothers are supposed to do.

'You remember Michael, who came to dinner?'

'Yes,' I said, stubbing out a cigarette.

'He likes you. Thinks you should try out for the Foreign Office.'

'He does?'

'What an opportunity, Alec. To serve Queen and Country.'

I nearly laughed at this, but checked it out of respect for her old-fashioned convictions.

'Mum,' I said, 'an ambassador is an honest man sent abroad to lie for the good of his country.'

She sounded impressed.

'Who said that?'

'I don't know.'

'Anyway, Michael says to give him a ring if you're interested. I've got the number. Fetch a pen.'

I tried to stop her. I didn't like the idea of her putting shape on my life, but she was insistent.

'Not everyone gets a chance like this. You're twenty-four now. You've only got that small amount of money your father left you in his Paris account. It's time you started thinking about a career and stopped working for that crooked Pole.'

I argued with her a little more, just enough to convince myself that if I went ahead it would be of my own volition and not because of some parental arrangement. Then, two days later, I rang Hawkes.

It was shortly after nine o'clock in the morning. He answered after one ring, the voice crisp and alert.

'Michael. It's Alec Milius.'

'Hello.'

'About the conversation you had with my mother.'

'Yes.'

'In the supermarket.'

'You want to go ahead?'

'If that's possible. Yes.'

His manner was strangely abrupt. No friendly chat, no excess fat.

'I'll talk to one of my colleagues. They'll be in touch.'

'Good. Thanks.'

Three days later a letter arrived in a plain white envelope marked PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

No. 46A——Terrace

London SW1

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

Dear Mr Milius,

It has been suggested to me that you might be interested to have a discussion with us about fast-stream appointments in government service in the

field of foreign affairs which occasionally arise in addition to those covered by the Open Competition to the Diplomatic Service. This office has a responsibility for recruitment to such appointments.

If you would like to take this possibility further, I should be grateful if you would please complete the enclosed form and return it to me. Provided that there is an appointment for which you appear potentially suitable, I shall then invite you to an exploratory conversation at this office. Your travel expenses will be refunded at the rate of a standard return rail fare plus tube fares.

I should stress that your acceptance of this invitation will not commit you in any way, nor will it affect your candidature for any government appointments for which you may apply or have applied. As this letter is personal to you, I should be grateful if you could respect its confidentiality.

Yours sincerely,

Philip Lucas

Recruitment Liaison Office

Enclosed was a standard-issue, four-page application form: name and address, education, brief employment history, and so on. I completed it within twenty-four hours – replete with lies – and sent it back to Lucas. He replied by return post, inviting me to the meeting.

I have spoken to Hawkes only once in the intervening period.

Yesterday afternoon I was becoming edgy about what the interview would entail. I wanted to find out what to expect, what to prepare, what to say. So I queued outside a Praed Street phone box for ten minutes, far enough away from the

CEBDO office not to risk being seen by Nik. None of them know that I am here today.

Again Hawkes answered on the first ring. Again his manner was curt and to the point. Acting as if people were listening in on the line.

'I feel as if I'm going into this thing with my trousers down,' I told him. 'I know nothing about what's going on.'

He sniffed what may have been a laugh and replied, 'Don't worry about it. Everything will become clear when you get there.'

'So there's nothing you can tell me? Nothing I need to prepare for?'

'Nothing at all, Alec. Just be yourself. It will all make sense later on.'

How much of this Lucas knows, I do not know. I simply give him edited highlights from the dinner and a few sketchy impressions of Hawkes's character. Nothing permanent. Nothing of any significance.

In truth, we do not talk about him for long. The subject soon runs dry. Lucas moves on to my father and, after that, spends a quarter of an hour questioning me about my school years, dredging up the forgotten paraphernalia of my youth. He notes down all my answers, scratching away with the Mont Blanc, nodding imperceptibly at given points in the conversation.

Building a file on a man.