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# **A Delicate Truth**

Written by John le Carré

Published by Viking

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*A Delicate Truth*

JOHN LE CARRÉ

VIKING

*an imprint of*

PENGUIN BOOKS

VIKING

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3  
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia  
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,

Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand  
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,  
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

First published 2013

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Set in 12.25/15 pt Dante MT Std

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-670-92279-6

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



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For VJC

No winter shall abate the spring's increase

Donne

If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out.

Oscar Wilde

## I.

On the second floor of a characterless hotel in the British Crown Colony of Gibraltar, a lithe, agile man in his late fifties restlessly paced his bedroom. His very British features, though pleasant and plainly honourable, indicated a choleric nature brought to the limit of its endurance. A distraught lecturer, you might have thought, observing the bookish forward lean and loping stride and the errant forelock of salt-and-pepper hair that repeatedly had to be disciplined with jerky back-handed shoves of the bony wrist. Certainly it would not have occurred to many people, even in their most fanciful dreams, that he was a middle-ranking British civil servant, hauled from his desk in one of the more prosaic departments of Her Majesty's Foreign and Commonwealth Office to be dispatched on a top-secret mission of acute sensitivity.

His assumed first name, as he insisted on repeating to himself, sometimes half aloud, was Paul and his second – not exactly hard to remember – was Anderson. If he turned on the television set it said *Welcome, Mr Paul Anderson. Why not enjoy a complimentary pre-dinner aperitif in our Lord Nelson's Snug!* The exclamation mark in place of the more appropriate question mark was a source of constant annoyance to the pedant in him. He was wearing the hotel's bathrobe of white towelling and he had been wearing it ever since his incarceration, except when vainly trying to sleep or, once only, slinking upstairs at an unsociable hour to eat alone in a rooftop brasserie washed with the fumes of chlorine from a third-floor swimming pool across the road. Like much else in the room, the bathrobe, too short

for his long legs, reeked of stale cigarette smoke and lavender air freshener.

As he paced, he determinedly acted out his feelings to himself without the restraints customary in his official life, his features one moment cramped in honest perplexity, the next glowering in the full-length mirror that was screwed to the tartan wallpaper. Here and there he spoke to himself by way of relief or exhortation. Also half aloud? What was the difference when you were banged up in an empty room with nobody to listen to you but a colour-tinted photograph of our dear young Queen on a brown horse?

On a plastic-topped table lay the remnants of a club sandwich that he had pronounced dead on arrival, and an abandoned bottle of warm Coca-Cola. Though it came hard to him, he had permitted himself no alcohol since he had taken possession of the room. The bed, which he had learned to detest as no other, was large enough for six, but he had only to stretch out on it for his back to give him hell. A radiant crimson counterpane of imitation silk lay over it, and on the counterpane an innocent-looking cellphone which he had been assured was modified to the highest state of encryption and, though he was of little faith in such matters, he could only suppose it was. Each time he passed it, his gaze fixed on it with a mixture of reproach, longing and frustration.

*I regret to inform you, Paul, that you will be totally incommunicado, save for operational purposes, throughout your mission, the laborious South African voice of Elliot, his self-designated field commander, is warning him. Should an unfortunate crisis afflict your fine family during your absence they will pass their concerns to your office's welfare department, whereupon contact with you will be made. Do I make myself clear, Paul?*

You do, Elliot, little by little you do.

Reaching the overlarge picture window at the further end of

the room, he scowled upward through the grimy net curtains at Gibraltar's legendary Rock which, sallow, wrinkled and remote, scowled back at him like an angry dowager. Yet again, out of habit and impatience, he examined his alien wristwatch and compared it with the green numerals on the radio clock beside the bed. The watch was of battered steel with a black dial, a replacement for the gold Cartier presented to him on their twenty-fifth by his beloved wife on the strength of an inheritance from one of her many deceased aunts.

But hang on a minute! *Paul hasn't got a bloody wife!* Paul Anderson has no wife, no daughter. Paul Anderson's a bloody hermit!

'Can't have you wearing *that*, Paul darling, can we now?' a motherly woman his own age is saying to him a lifetime ago in the red-brick suburban villa near Heathrow airport where she and her sisterly colleague are dressing him for the part. 'Not with those nice initials engraved on it, can we? You'd have to say you'd nicked it off of somebody married, wouldn't you, Paul?'

Sharing the joke, determined as ever to be a good chap by his own lights, he looks on while she writes *Paul* on an adhesive label and locks his gold watch away in a cash box with his wedding ring for what she calls *the duration*.

\*

How in God's name did I ever get to end up in this hellhole in the first place?

Did I jump or was I pushed? Or was it a bit of both?

Describe, please, in a few well-chosen circuits of the room, the precise circumstances of your unlikely journey from blessed monotony to solitary confinement on a British colonial rock.

\*

'So how's your poor dear wife?' asks the not-quite-superannuated ice queen of Personnel Department, now grandly rechristened



Human Resources for no reason known to man, having summoned him without a word of explanation to her lofty bower on a Friday evening when all good citizens are hurrying home. The two are old adversaries. If they have anything at all in common, it is the feeling that there are so few of them left.

‘Thank you, Audrey, not poor at all, I am pleased to say,’ he replies, with the determined levity he affects for such life-threatening encounters. ‘Dear but not poor. She remains in full remission. And you? In the pink of health, I trust?’

‘So she’s leavable,’ Audrey suggests, ignoring this kindly enquiry.

‘My hat no! In what sense?’ – determinedly keeping up the jolly banter.

‘In this sense: would four super-secret days abroad in a salubrious climate, just *possibly* running to five, be of any interest to you?’

‘They could be of considerable possible interest, thank you, Audrey, as it happens. Our grown-up daughter is living with us at the moment, so the timing could scarcely be better, given that she happens to be a *medical doctor*,’ he can’t resist adding in his pride, but Audrey remains unimpressed by his daughter’s accomplishment.

‘I don’t know what it’s about and I don’t have to,’ she says, answering a question that he hasn’t put to her. ‘There’s a dynamic young junior minister called Quinn upstairs whom you may have heard of. He’d like to see you immediately. He’s a new broom, in case word hasn’t reached you in the far wastes of Logistical Contingencies, recently acquired from Defence – hardly a recommendation but there you are.’

What on earth’s she on about? Of *course* such news has reached him. He reads his newspapers, doesn’t he? He watches *Newsnight*. Fergus Quinn, MP, Fergie to the world, is a Scottish brawler, a self-styled *bête intellectuelle* of the New Labour

stable. On television he is vocal, belligerent and alarming. Moreover, he prides himself on being the people's scourge of Whitehall's bureaucracy – a commendable virtue viewed from afar, but scarcely reassuring if you happen to be a Whitehall bureaucrat.

'You mean *now*, this minute, Audrey?'

'That is what I understand him to mean by *immediately*.'

The ministerial anteroom is empty, its staff long departed. The ministerial mahogany door, solid as iron, stands ajar. Knock and wait? Or knock and push? He does a little of both, hears: 'Don't just stand there. Come on in, and close the door behind you.' He enters.

The dynamic young minister's bulk is squeezed into a midnight-blue dinner jacket. He is poised with a cellphone to his ear before a marble fireplace stuffed with red paper foil for flames. As on television, so in the flesh, he is stocky and thick-necked with close-cropped ginger hair and quick, greedy eyes set in a pugilist's face.

Behind him rises a twelve-foot portrait of an eighteenth-century Empire-builder in tights. For a mischievous moment brought on by tension, the comparison between the two such different men is irresistible. Though Quinn strenuously purports to be a man of the people, both have the pout of privileged discontent. Both have their body weight on one leg and the other knee cocked. Is the dynamic young minister about to launch a punitive raid on the hated French? Will he, in the name of New Labour, berate the folly of the howling mob? He does neither, but with a gritty 'Call you later, Brad' for his cellphone, stomps to the door, locks it and swings round.

'They tell me you're a *seasoned member of the Service*, that right?' he says accusingly, in his carefully nurtured Glaswegian accent, after a head-to-toe inspection that seems to confirm his

worst fears. ‘Cool head, whatever that means. Twenty years of *kicking around in foreign parts*, according to Human Resources. *Soul of discretion, not easily rattled*. That’s quite a write-up. Not that I necessarily believe what I’m told around here.’

‘They’re very kind,’ he replies.

‘And you’re grounded. Confined to barracks. Out to grass. Your wife’s health has kept you back, is that correct, please?’

‘But only as of the last few years, Minister’ – less than grateful for *out to grass* – ‘and for the moment I’m quite at liberty to travel, I’m happy to say.’

‘And your present job is –? Remind me, please.’

He is about to do so, emphasizing his many indispensable responsibilities, but the minister impatiently cuts him short:

‘All right. Here’s my question. Have you had any direct experience of secret intelligence work? You *personally*,’ he warns, as if there is another you who is less personal.

‘Direct in what sense would that be, Minister?’

‘Cloak-and-dagger stuff, what d’you think?’

‘Only as a consumer, alas. An occasional one. Of the product. Not of the means of obtaining it, if that’s your question, Minister.’

‘Not even when you were kicking around in those foreign parts that nobody has had the grace to itemize for me?’

‘Alas, one’s overseas postings tended to be largely economic, commercial or consular,’ he explains, resorting to the linguistic archaisms he affects whenever he feels threatened. ‘Obviously, from time to time, one had access to the odd secret report – none of it high level, I hasten to say. That, I’m afraid, is the long and short of it.’

But the minister appears momentarily encouraged by this lack of conspiratorial experience, for a smile of something like complacency flits across his broad features.

‘But you’re a safe pair of hands, right? Untried maybe, but safe, for all that.’

‘Well, one likes to think so’ – diffidently.

‘CT ever come your way?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Counter-terrorism, man! Has it come your way or not?’ – spoken as to an idiot.

‘I fear not, Minister.’

‘But you *care*? Yes?’

‘About what exactly, Minister?’ – as helpfully as he may.

‘The well-being of our nation, for Christ’s sake! The safety of our people, wheresoever they may be. Our core values in times of adversity. All right, our *heritage*, if you like’ – using the word like an anti-Tory swipe. ‘You’re not some limp-wristed closet liberal harbouring secret thoughts about terrorists’ right to blow the fucking world to pieces, for example.’

‘No, Minister, I think I may safely say I am not,’ he mumbles.

But the minister, far from sharing his embarrassment, compounds it:

‘So then. If I were to tell you that the extremely delicate assignment I have in mind for you involves depriving the terrorist enemy of the means to launch a premeditated assault on our homeland, you would *not* immediately walk away, I take it?’

‘To the contrary. I should be – well –’

‘You should be *what*?’

‘Gratified. Privileged. Proud, in fact. But somewhat surprised, obviously.’

‘Surprised by *what*, pray?’ – like a man insulted.

‘Well, not mine to enquire, Minister, but why me? I’m sure the Office has its fair share of people with the type of experience you’re looking for.’

Fergus Quinn, man of the people, swings away to the bay window and, with his chin thrust aggressively forward over his evening tie, and the tie’s fixing awkwardly protruding from the cushions of flesh at the back of his neck, contemplates the

golden gravel of Horse Guards Parade in the evening sunlight.

‘If I were *further* to tell you that for the remainder of your natural life you will not by word or deed or any other means reveal the fact that a certain counter-terror operation was so much as *considered*, let alone executed’ – casting round indignantly for a way out of the verbal labyrinth he has talked himself into – ‘does that turn you *on* or *off*?’

‘Minister, if you consider me the right man, I shall be happy to accept the assignment, whatever it may be. And you have my solemn assurance of permanent and absolute discretion,’ he insists, colouring up a bit in his irritation at having his loyalty hauled out and examined before his own eyes.

Shoulders hunched in the best Churchillian mode, Quinn remains framed at the bay window, as if waiting impatiently for the photographers to finish their work.

‘There are certain *bridges* that have to be negotiated,’ he announces severely to his own reflection. ‘There’s a certain *green light* that has to be given by some fairly crucial people up and down the road there’ – butting his bullish head in the direction of Downing Street. ‘When we get it – if we do and not until – you’ll be informed. Thereafter, and for such time as I deem appropriate, you will be my eyes and ears on the ground. No sweetening the pill, you understand? None of your Foreign Office obfuscation or persiflage. Not on *my* watch, thank you. You’ll give it me *straight*, exactly the way you see it. The cool view, through the eyes of the old pro which I am to believe you to be. Are you hearing me?’

‘Perfectly, Minister. I hear you and I understand exactly what you are saying’ – his own voice, speaking to him from a distant cloud.

‘Have you got any *Pauls* in your family?’

‘I’m sorry, Minister?’

‘Jesus Christ! It’s a simple enough question, isn’t it? Is any

man in your family named *Paul*? Yes or no. Brother, father, what do I know?’

‘None. Not a Paul in sight, I’m afraid.’

‘And no *Paulines*? The female version. *Paulette*, or whatever?’

‘Definitely none.’

‘How about *Anderson*? No Andersons around at all? Maiden name, Anderson?’

‘Again, not to my knowledge, Minister.’

‘And you’re in reasonable nick. Physically. A stiff walk over rugged terrain isn’t going to cause you to go faint at the knees in the manner that certain others around here might be afflicted?’

‘I walk energetically. And I’m a keen gardener’ – from the same distant cloud.

‘Wait for a call from a man named Elliot. Elliot will be your first indication.’

‘And would Elliot be his surname or given name, I wonder?’ he hears himself enquire soothingly, as if of a maniac.

‘How the fuck should I know? He’s operating in total secrecy under the aegis of an organization best known as Ethical Outcomes. New boys on the block, and up there with the best in the field, I’m assured on expert advice.’

‘Forgive me, Minister. What field would that be, exactly?’

‘Private defence contractors. Where’ve you been? Name of the game these days. War’s gone corporate, in case you haven’t noticed. Standing professional armies are a bust. Top-heavy, under-equipped, one brigadier for every dozen boots on the ground, and cost a mint. Try a couple of years at Defence if you don’t believe me.’

‘Oh I do, Minister’ – startled by this wholesale dismissal of British arms, but anxious to humour the man nonetheless.

‘You’re trying to flog your house. Right? Harrow or somewhere.’

‘Harrow is correct’ – now past surprise – ‘North Harrow.’

‘Cash problems?’

‘Oh no, far from it, I’m thankful to say!’ he exclaims, grateful to be returned if only momentarily to earth. ‘I have a little bit of my own, and my wife has come into a modest inheritance which includes a country property. We plan to sell our present house while the market holds, and live small until we make the move.’

‘Elliot will say he wants to buy your house in Harrow. He won’t say he’s from Ethical or anywhere else. He’s seen the ads in the estate agent’s window or wherever, looked it over from the outside, likes it, but there are issues he needs to discuss. He’ll suggest a place and time to meet. You’re to go along with whatever he proposes. That’s the way these people work. Any further questions?’

Has he asked any?

‘Meantime, you play totally normal man. Not a word to anyone. Not here in the Office, not at home. Is that clearly understood?’

Not understood. Not from Adam. But a wholehearted, mystified ‘yes’ to all of it, and no very clear memory of how he got home that night, after a restorative Friday-evening visit to his Pall Mall club.