

The Random Face

My identity for today? Ah, yes, 'Child Protection Liaison' and my companion would be 'Literacy Strand Coordinator.' Such non jobs. Whoever did them in real life must consider themselves fortunate.

As was the mole in 'Internal Logistics'. An authentic pass. My name solid, British and in bold letters. A nondescript photograph. The stamp as it should be. And a nice lanyard to hang round my neck, I always look good in red. In the cistern of the fifth cubicle, downstairs ladies he will have placed a package containing a silenced Beretta. In the fourth cubicle, second floor ladies the same for my companion plus the CS Gas cannisters. For thirty minutes work, £50,000 then two minutes online and his gambling debts are history. It would take us thirty seconds to kill the Minister and escape. Time flies!

So... why? John Mountford is Minister for Economic Affairs; presumably those affairs have gone wrong or trespassed on someone else's affairs. Perhaps he has affairs of his own.

So... our employers? I guessed a state actor or very big corporation. I had no idea why they wanted such a public spectacle.

Time to make up and dress, one hour to departure.

Someone who liaised would be anonymous, a grey ghost that flitted between offices filing reports on the efforts of others. So I dress accordingly. Plain top, black skirt. Boring jacket. A chain necklace of silver circles. A discreet little handbag... this one with the Bird of Paradise motif. Perhaps a lucky omen for Mountford. Flat shoes – a little worn as I have to ensure that I can run...

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The public event for the public spectacle? He is hosting a Readathon (I'll look it up later) for 200 small children in the foyer of his Ministry building. And here they all were. Row after row of them file past the adult guests' queue, some in blazers, some in sweat shirts. A few in grubby T shirts and those cheap little grey trousers that went at the knee. Some can't keep up – ah look, that bitch of a teacher is wagging her finger in the face of a poor little girl who just wants to watch the pigeons. Her uniform doesn't fit, she has a dirty mark on her forehead already – she won't have a garden where she can watch birds, for God's sake. Why spoil her morning?

And it is a lovely late autumn day. The sun an orange glow in the plate glass windows of Westminster but overhead in the egg shell blue sky it is buoyant in the clear air, simply a fierce and dazzling ball daring us mortals to raise our eyes. Clear or cold? Definitely the latter. Oh, why couldn't they hurry up?

As our queue shuffles forwards I check the programme. As expected apart from 'Party Games' to celebrate childhood...blah. blah, blah.'

I wouldn't be stopping.

At last into the building. How grand: it was an atrium not a foyer with mock Grecian pillars rising to a tinted glass roof that excluded the heat of the sun. A floor of best marble – beige with dark lights- scattered with discrete wrought iron stands on which luxuriant green plants cluster then trail languidly; in the middle a fountain bubbles gently between carefully arranged stones watched over by a Heron crafted from stainless steel, standing in what is almost a jungle of greenery. A long way away a sweeping reception desk is busy with dark clad figures answering phone calls or shuffling paper.

Order emerges from chaos. A team of smartly dressed young men and women assistants appear from behind reception, march purposefully past the Heron and began to organise the children. Signs stating 'St Olafs', 'Nine Stiles' 'North County' and 'St Andrews' are conjured from nowhere and the children, with a swift pavlovian response sit cross legged behind them. More of the smartly dressed then appear pushing little trollies stacked with cardboard boxes. Ah - books! I understand now. Then men in smart overalls erect a screen in front of the children, their badges announcing 'Internal Logistics.' I wonder which one is Mr Mole.

A woman stops to talk. She has a nice smile and twinkly eyes. I could never imagine her wagging a finger at a child.

'All this is great I suppose. It's made for an interesting week and at least I didn't have to do the paper work. I suppose its payback time for the yearly funding increase'.

I murmur nothing at all.

'And do you think we can keep these books? Hope so. Haven't see you before...'

I mumble but add: 'out of county' more loudly.

'Ah well, that explains it. I'm Janet Robinson, Head of Nine Stiles and- whoops! Oscar needs to go again! Must go.'

Another figure stands beside me.

'You cannot teach a man anything--'

'—you can only help him find it in himself,' I replied.

The phrase was correct. I look at her quickly then look away. Her face was vague, ill defined, the epitome of 'no distinguishing features'. As was mine.

'You know of this guy?' she whispers.

'No. Just his job.'

'A pig. A 'shout at the staff' kind of pig. A 'treat women like shit' kind of pig. A 'he wouldn't be missed' pig. It would seem that he has offended someone more important for once.'

'I think a State. Although why here I don't know.'

'He will entrance and exit down the stairs by reception. Over to the kids, do the PR bit then back to his office. I would say we wait by the fountain and alert our mutual friend to begin the cyber-attack on their systems when he is two minutes away. You behind the greenery, I'll take the pillar.'

'They will think he has tripped and fallen in! Then the gas and to the door, straight into the Merc.'

A tubby security man walks past carrying the little pigeon girl. He is breathless and wheezing.

'Now what school do you go to? Err – don't say naughty words. You have to stay here and get a nice book not watch the birds even if you love them.'

'Security is very out of condition. Look at them all. Such nice elderly gentlemen!'

'Let's go and wash our hands!'

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We return and see Mountford standing with a film crew in front of the children who are either reading or examining their books with curiosity . Teachers hover while the assistants, security and logistics all fast walk backwards, seeking a respectful distance.

I see where to aim and imagine the red laser target light settling on his chest. My finger twitches as if against the trigger. He is wearing new shoes so he might walk a little awkwardly but the momentum of those long legs would take him forward into the fountain where my companion would finish him.

Everyone would think he had stumbled. For a few seconds no one will dare laugh or move enabling us to escape almost unhindered.

But then I look at him, something I should never do, a lingering bad habit. He is tall and wears a standard Saville Road suit; his face craggy without a smile, eyes lacking expression and dark jet-black hair shot through with grey. He could be any elite man from any country.

Now he is being interviewed. He is acting and not badly. His face alternately projects enthusiasm; satisfaction at a project well planned, executed and delivered; total seriousness and statesman like focus.

But look now as he begins to move down a row of children. This smile is real, he bends down to their level. Now he points at something in a book making the child giggle. A little boy talks fast – Mountford holds up his hands to slow him down. They laugh, give each other a high five. He turns to a teacher, in a few seconds she is smiling and blushing. I am now looking at a friendly man.

Two little girls are on their feet, waving and shouting. The teacher looks flustered but again he goes down to their level. We edge slowly towards the fountain.

‘All Headteachers to the screen please, all Headteachers - ‘ordered a tinny voice over the PR system.

‘Oh, I wonder what’s happening?’ It was Janet again. ‘Look there’s loads more boxes and a curtain, I wonder- he probably wants to check on our voting intentions. My staff are busy, why don’t you come with me. It could be fun meeting a Minister.’

Again, I mumbled nothings and my companion muttered ‘Important call.’

Mountford turns and strides to the front. He stands by the big screen holding a microphone.

'Oh, now he's going to talk to the children. I bet that'll be a disaster. Don't go, watch him fall flat on his face.' She holds our arms desperate that we should witness his humiliation. I stay calm. My companion rummages in her bag, hiding her face.

Mountford steps forward and asks the children to use their free Government book mark to keep their place in their books then pass them to their teachers. I try to only hear his voice but I find myself listening. It is pleasant, not loud but crisp and clear. The instruction is obeyed – the children sit looking expectantly, legs crossed and arms folded. Two small boys giggle.

'You must pay attention or you'll miss what comes next. 'Now he mixes firmness and kindness, a potent cocktail. They looked at him suddenly a little anxious.

'Not bad,' muttered Janet. 'Well I'd better go, if you're sure.'

She moves away. My companion calls her a crazy old bitch. We drift towards the fountain while he speaks. I still listen.

'Now children, enough reading it's party time. A Magician, a lunch and r-e-a-l-l-y nice presents. Goodies for your teachers. My treat. But first we have to find our special guest – Cinderella! She's in disguise so we must look carefully...'

A camera pans the clusters of adults then focuses on random faces that appear on the screen one after the other. The bitch teacher. 'That's not Cinders'. More random faces. Janet. 'Definitely not Cinders.' The large Security Man. 'I don't think so! That's Stan, he's had too much Christmas cake!'

The children cheer and clap. A woman's face freezes on the screen.

'There she is! Cinderella. All the way from panto land here to make our party special. It is you isn't it?'

She is dowdy and nondescript, all plain colours and no style except for a chain necklace of silver circles resting over a white blouse. Poor cow, I'm sure she will be mortified. Not much further to the Fountain.

My companion is gone.

I look again. I nod my head. The woman on the screen nods back.

'Yes Cinderella, we know it's you. So come on up to the stage!'

Was he mad? I shake my head.

'Oh yes, it is you! Isn't it children?'

They scream: 'Yes it's Cinderella!'

'Come up to the stage!'

Two of the assistants are at my side, one walks ahead. There is a microphone.

'Cinderella, how do you feel about being at our Readathon?'

'I'm not -'

'Oh- yes- you -are!' Every kid is shouting, there is a wall of noise. And now I have an escort of small children, reaching round the legs of the assistants to touch me and pull me forwards. A little girl with a large pig tail darts in front of me and walks backwards shouting: 'You're real! I always knew you were real!'

I feel sick.

'All in a good cause Madame, don't worry. He's a very nice man really. Just gets a bad press from the red tops.' The assistant smiles.

I am stood with 200 pairs of shining little eyes devouring me. The adults stand laughing, so glad they escaped. Mountford tells the story of Cinderella to the children. He is smiling, I sense mostly to himself. His voice is expressive while his hands shape objects: first the slipper, then the coach. Curling his fingers in and out – the mice?

What does he want me to do? Put on a shoe? Marry a Prince? No, I am to give a prize to a very brave Headmistress. I watch as the curtain is pulled back. The children emit a loud 'hiss' as they suck air into astonished lungs...

It is a bald-headed man dressed in a black leotard. With one hand he pulls on his handlebar moustache stretching the hair for several feet. The atrium erupts with laughter. Then the other hand comes from behind his back holding a large saw. He flexes it; he touches the blade with his thumb and shouts 'ouch'. He jumps to one side.

There is a large cabinet on a stand. Janet's head is at one end, her sensible shoes at the other.

At one end of the atrium waiters place plates of sandwiches and cakes onto tables while the assistants are busy sorting gaily wrapped boxes. Other waiters are serving lunch to the teachers – salmon, salad and what looks like a good wine. The bitch teacher downs her glass in one then waves it at the waiter for a refill.

The children in front of me are as still and silent as statues. Mountford brings them to life.

'This is 'Magico The Magician'. He is going to saw Mrs Robinson, the Headteacher in half!

Janet's feet wriggle frantically.

The children cheer.

But I think we should let her go free and saw Cinderella in half.'

'No!' The noise buffets me backwards.

'Are you sure it should be the Headmistress?

'Yes!'

I think it should be Cinders!'

'No!'

'Oh let me out please!' cries Janet

Mountford giggles, I think like a child.

The waiters are passing drinks to the sound crew. One offers me a glass of wine and whispers in my ear: 'Don't worry, I'm really from the Magic Circle. It's all under control.'

My mouth falls open. As Magico does the trick, Mountford stands beside me. He switches of the microphone.

'And what do you do?' He looks at my badge. 'No better job than protecting kids. If I had my way anyone who harmed a child would face the death penalty, just can't get the PM to agree. Anyway, thanks for this- your reaction at first was priceless. Shaking your head was a great touch. Nothing like audience participation. You have wine – now Wild Salmon or Scottish Silverside rare beef salad?'

A waiter is hovering. I mutter salmon and a plate appears. I drink the wine. It is refilled immediately. My voice returns then a question breaks free from somewhere deep in my mind and bursts into the open.

'Why are you doing this?'

'National Schools Literacy Week of course. Each Ministry has to put on an event.'

'Each Minister will use junior staff. You – all this - is way beyond mere PR.'

He scowls. The smile dies as does his eyes.

'Are you Press? Or that bloody Guido Fawkes Website? Because if you are I will put you in the gutter myself.'

'I am accredited. Check my badge again.'

He does so and relaxes.

'I'll deny it and sue if you repeat this to anyone. The media calls me the mad dog of British politics – rabid, not house trained and vicious. Inside here', he taps his chest, '- there is something else, something my colleagues are unaware of. I never had much of a childhood and my wife can't...well lets say we've not been blessed. All 'this': talking to children; giving them a nice book and a nicer present; making them laugh; watching their faces; giving them a good lunch which many don't have is as important to me as international finance. But I'm also being selfish because I love it as well! Circumstances prevent me doing 'this' very often so I seize every opportunity to keep in touch with that something else – a love of children and childhood!'

He taps his chest again and I picture red blood flowing from the wound onto his suit.

The curtain is drawn as the trick reaches its climax. We are badly compromised so the client will have to be refunded – but only for a delay. I will give Janet her bottle of champagne or whatever and slip away. You can't legislate for the bizarre.

I am hungry so juggle plate of salmon and wine glass successfully to one hand, then the other and back again. Two hands in use. So where is my bag? I put it on the box behind me. Oh please-

I turn quickly. It is gone. My heart thuds and I turn icy cold.

Wandering away from the stage back to her place is the little pigeon girl with my bag, her fingers tracing the outline of the Bird of Paradise. They finish their journey then begin to fumble with the clasp.

John Munson

