

Tehran's Old Ghosts

A short story set during the Iranian Revolution in 1978. Eight westerners find themselves trapped in their hotel. Little do they realise that the trouble on the streets is the least of their problems. A far older danger has been awakened by the death and violence.

Word count 15,400 Or about 52 novel length pages.

□

Late August nineteen seventy eight, in Tehran and the temperature was just beginning to nudge above ninety degrees in the shade. The hotel was air conditioned of course, but most of the sites he had to visit, were just shells of buildings still under construction. They might never be completed of course, if the current troubles in Iran didn't settle down.

"I told everyone this crap would happen." Said Kris.

Harrison H Thistle had only ever had drivers and a company car before; the armed bodyguard was relatively new. There had been some large demonstrations against the government in May, with a few threats made against foreign companies. The result had been Kris, a personal bodyguard with a South African accent. Having someone with him all day was still a novelty, so Harrison tolerated the regular rants about what was wrong with the world in general and Iran in particular. In truth, he was also a little scared of Kris.

"It's him of course, the Ayatollah Khomeini." Said Kris. "Nice as pie when all the journalists go to see him, butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. That old man is pulling the strings though, stirring things up against the Shah."

Harrison felt sorry for his driver, even though he didn't recognise him. He was a young man, probably with a family relying on his wages. The man might agree with Kris, or be one of the young who looked upon the Ayatollah as a messiah. You couldn't tell who supported who, so the sensible thing was to be neutral and try to ignore the demonstrations.

"I'm sure things will settle down soon." Said Harrison.

"Someone should shoot him." Said Kris. "Then all this nonsense would come to an end."

"And you would be out of a job Kris. No more political talk it's not fair on our poor driver. He'll have to live here, long after we've all gone home."

"Fine, you're the boss.... He probably doesn't speak a word of English anyway."

The young man smiled at him in the rear view mirror, almost saying 'thank you.' He'd speak passable English and perhaps a little French of course. EVO Engineering didn't hire drivers who only spoke Persian.

"Not another diversion." Said Kris.

"Enough, let's do the rest of the journey without a commentary." Said Harrison.

"You're the boss."

He was and he realised he should have quietened his bodyguard down, three months earlier. Not that he'd ever want to replace the South African ex-soldier; he was too good at what he did. There had been an incident with an angry mob, in the Sangan region. Kris hadn't even drawn his weapon, though he'd made sure the crowd could see it, hanging under his left armpit. Kris had faced down at least eight angry men, without getting anyone hurt. No, Harrison wasn't about to replace his annoying bodyguard.

"More soldiers every day." Said the driver. "I know a way, but it's through quite narrow streets. Is that alright?"

Kris went quiet and sullen, as he looked at the army checkpoint which was causing a jam at a major intersection. His input might have been nice, but Harrison trusted the knowledge of the local driver. "I'm tired and want a shower and dinner back at the hotel." Said Harrison. "Drive anywhere you want to make that happen."

There did seem to be more demonstrations every day, more hold ups getting away from the hotel and back to it at night. The threats against foreigners had become actual attacks in some places. To Harrison, the most worrying thing was the way the police had slowly begun to look like soldiers. Gone were the old ornate, reassuring uniforms and in were military fatigues, body armour and serious looking weapons. No matter what the press might be saying, he didn't think the trouble on the streets was going to end soon, if ever.

"I see what you mean by narrow."

They were going down an alley at speed. So narrow that he doubted if there was room to open the car's doors. Not that he wanted to get out; all roads away from the main roads were considered too dangerous to be used by westerners.

"Watch out." Said Kris.

Kris actually had his hand on his gun, as they saw two men standing right where the alley came back out into a main road. It was a classic trap, the kind Harrison had been taught to avoid. A risk management company had spent three days in the Hotel, advising everyone on how to stay safe.

"No matter what.... Don't stop." Said Harrison.

"I won't boss." Said the driver.

It looked like a very unfair game of chicken, as their heavy car hurtled towards the two men, the driver's hand holding down the car horn. The men might be well armed though and they might have friends in the buildings either side. There had been rumours of attacks with grenade launchers near the airport.

"Move you fools!" Said Harrison.

They did, stepping back through an open door, as the car left the alley and slewed onto the main road. Their driver was actually grinning, as they narrowly missed a parked van and carried on up the road.

"I told you I'd get you there.... And in time for dinner... Look." Said the driver.

His hotel rose above the buildings in the distance, the four star Wilkinson Hotel. Ten floors with a helipad on the roof and bullet proof windows. The Wilkinson was where all western expats tended to stay, as long as they could afford it of course. Harrison was lucky, EVO picked up all his bills, including air fares for his regular trips home to London.

"Thank you, can I book you for tomorrow?" He asked the driver.

"They've got me on the airport runs. Not good for our faces to be seen too much in the same places, so they move us around. I'm sure they'll give you someone just as good."

Harrison doubted it, but he had no control over which driver he had each day. They rotated the local drivers around to lessen the chance of them being recognised or followed home. Driving round westerners was no longer the safe cushy job it had once been.

"More soldiers, always more soldiers." Said the driver.

"These are police, you can tell by their arm bands." Said Kris.

They all looked the same to Harrison, men in body armour carrying assault rifles. There were more of them than there had been that morning and two new concrete barriers. The barriers were there to stop anyone from driving a truck into the hotel lobby. No one wanted to use the word terrorist yet, but the government seemed determined to keep the hotel safe.

"Is it a start at nine in the morning Boss ?" Asked Kris.

"Yes, we're heading east tomorrow, out to Pardis."

The driver opened his door for him to get out and then drove off. Kris actually ran over to where a staff bus was waiting. His bodyguard lived in a rented house with another four South African ex-soldiers. Harrison could never decide if that had to be the safest house in Tehran, or the most dangerous.

"Home sweet home from home." He muttered.

No one stopped him or even seemed to take any notice of him, as he walked through the open front door of the hotel. He was known, one of the few westerners brave enough, or stupid enough to still be using the Wilkinson Hotel. There were currently eight westerners left, only seven if Stainton had decided to fly home. All of them given rooms on the 9th floor.

"Good evening Nathan. Any messages for me ?" He asked.

Nathan Rinella was the manager of the Wilkinson and he tended to look after the reception desk in the evenings. Nathan was a Londoner with a local wife, which had to bring its own problems. Nathan seemed to have a permanent scowl on his face.

"Just a message in the book.... 14.15 – David West will call you about 8, tonight."

"Are there just seven of us now ? Did Stainton's wife get him to go home ?"

Poor Nathan, the scowl deepened. It had to be hard running a hotel in what was fast becoming a war zone and of course, bad for business.

"Yes, he checked out just after lunch." Said Nathan. "There is another matter we need....."

He didn't find out about the other matter. A very agitated customer began to shout at Nathan in Persian, so Harrison headed for the elevators. His room wasn't that brilliant, but it had a shower and a change of clothing. He spotted Rachel Stott sat at the rear of the lounge and she spotted him. Her hand began to move, waving him in her direction.

"Oh Harrison, did you hear the news ?" She asked.

When he'd become the internal auditor for EVO, things had been very different. Tehran had been a playground for the rich and famous and nearly all the westerners in the hotel had been men. Now the local situation looked depressing to say the least, but there were women among the eight remaining expats. Two women and six men, five now Stainton had gone. Rachel was a sales executive for a major car company, sent to sell British made cars to the wealthy locals.

"No, Nathan was interrupted. What happened ?" He asked.

"Bijan was found dead today.... Murdered according to the police."

"But.... He was with us, in Gary's room until about two this morning."

He hugged Rachel; it seemed the right thing to do. Harrison had never strayed, never given Janet any cause to worry that he might have an affair. He did enjoy hugging Rachel though, perhaps a little too much.

"What happened to him Rachel ?" He asked.

"No one really knows, the police are hinting at something brutal though. Just about everyone has been interviewed."

Poor Bijan, he had been almost one of their gang. It always seemed to be him bringing them wine and nibbles in the early hours. He'd even joined in with a few of their daft games.

"I need a shower....Where are we meeting tonight ? Is it my room ?" He asked.

"No it's Adam's room tonight, we can talk then. I think the police will want to see you too."

"I'm not hard to find.... See you tonight."

For some reason he kissed her on the forehead, before realising that was a mistake. She was attractive and likely to be feeling a little lonely. He knew that he was beginning to really miss the Sunday morning unhurried intimacy with Janet. If only human libido had an on off switch. Harrison pressed the up button on the elevator and waited. The hotel lobby looked quieter than usual, even the business people from other Arab states were moving out. So far both the government and the demonstrators had treated the foreigners in the hotel with respect, but he wondered how long that would last. The elevator arrived and he had it to himself, for the journey up to the 9th floor.

"I do hope poor Bijan wasn't punished for being our friend." He muttered to himself.

Evenings had become a fixed ritual. There was no ban on going out in the evening, but the local police did discourage it. After a shower and a change, Harrison had dinner in the hotel restaurant, before calling his wife. The restaurant was almost empty, the non-western guests moving out or moving to other hotels. It was a warning of course, the first gentle alarm bell, telling him to get the hell out of Iran.

"I'm sorry sir, tonight's menu is rather limited....I hope you understand."

Another young man, who looked much like poor dead Bijan. Was he worried about ending up the same way ?

"I do understand. Luckily I will eat just about anything."

Harrison spoke perfect Persian of course, the result of his mother seeing the advantage of her son speaking at least six modern languages. He was fluent in Persian, French and Arabic. That was why EVO had appointed him as head of internal audit. Harrison finished his meal and returned to his room, just in time to receive the call from his boss, David West.

"I know you want to come home, I'd want out if I was in your shoes." Said David.

"We had a murder here today, one of the waiters who was friendly towards westerners."

"Christ ! Do you think he was deliberately targeted ?"

"I haven't heard the details yet." Said Harrison. "I've had enough of Iran David, enough of driving around road blocks, enough of needing an armed bodyguard. Bring me home."

David went quiet on him, just the usual crackles filling the line. His boss was head of finance at EVO and was famed for being oily and manipulative. Two or three minutes of crackles, on a very expensive international call.

"Is it money Harrison ? I know you want to move. I've just looked at a few of our little rainy day accounts and I can find you a few more thousand. I haven't anyone else to send and at the end of the day.... You are head of internal audit."

They both knew that Iran was finished, but didn't want to say it over the phone. None of their construction sites were going to be completed, so penalty clauses would come into effect. Completion bonds and various insurances would then come into play, all worth close to two billion. Only he understood it all, which gave him leverage.

"Twice what I'm getting now David. My driver had to actually drive straight at two dubious looking characters today."

"I'm so sorry Harrison, but you know how much money is involved in what you're doing. Did your driver hit these people ?"

"No, but it was close." Said Harrison.

“Three times what you get now and I’ll find the money for a decent completion bonus when you get back. Enough to buy a new house and get out of the place your wife hates. Just promise me you’ll dig in and stay in Tehran until the job is finished.”

Money was what it had all been about. He had audit staff in London he could have sent, but the extra peril pay was intended to get them out of the awful flat in Brentford. They’d begun to know their neighbours very well, because of the regular water leaks. And the lack of decent sound proofing.

“If we can hear the people above us shagging.” Janet had said. “You can be sure the couple below can hear us.”

So he’d arrived in Iran to earn enough money to move house and now he was stuck with the gig. Too late to get any staff out from London, they were terrified from watching the BBC news every night.

“Fine I’ll stay until the bitter end.” He told David.

“Good, where are going next ?”

“The shopping centre in Pardis that will never be opened.”

“Good, do you need another bodyguard ?”

“No, the authorities know my schedule and there are usually a few heavily armed police wherever I go, all looking suitably menacing. To be honest David, it’s back here at the hotel, where we all feel nervous.”

“Why’s that ?”

“We feel like fish in a very small barrel.”

~ ~

The call to Janet had covered the same ground, with her accepting that the extra cash was worth the risk, at least for now. They did share an obsession with getting out of the dreadful flat they currently lived in.

“If we’re planning on starting a family.... We need to move.” She’d told him.

Men tended to get their career in order and then drift through life, or at least that was what he’d done. Women were the ones with lists of goals and two children was high up on Janet’s list. Tehran wasn’t that terrifying, or at least it wasn’t yet that terrifying.

“Think of the stories I’ll have to tell all the grandchildren.” He muttered.

“Ahh, finally going crazy I see.” Said Cliff Read.

They were both stood outside the door to Adam’s room, neither of them knocking. Cliff was a corporate lawyer, who refused to talk about his Iranian clients, even when he was drunk. Harrison thumped on the door, which was opened by Rachel.

“I’m glad you’re both here.... We have news.” She said.

There didn’t seem to have been any logic to the way the hotel had allocated rooms. Some had been given quite small rooms, like Harrison’s. Other had been given small suites and Adam had really done well, being given what looked like some kind of presidential suite. There was even a small kitchen.

“Now I remember why your room is my favourite place to have our nightly get togethers.” Said Cliff.

Harrison sat on one of the three sofas, nicely arranged around a central low table. Rachel joined him, pushing a glass of something long and cold into his hand.

“Thank God the Shah hasn’t made Iran a dry state.” She said.

“Amen to that.” He replied.

Her leg was up hard against his, her left breast pushing against his arm. Then there were her wonderful hazel eyes, promising so much. No one had commented on their habit of trying to share the same personal space, or the occasional private whispers. The others had probably assumed they

were sleeping together. He was tempted and no one in London was ever likely to find out. Where was the harm in it ?

“So what did happen to Bijan ?” He asked. “The police haven’t talked to me yet.”

“They might not bother, as you were out all day.” Said Gary Litvak.

Gary worked as a sales rep, for a large UK arms manufacturer. He wasn’t anyone’s natural kind of friend, but there were only seven westerners now in the Wilkinson Hotel. Plus Gary had hours of interesting stories about a lot of the crazy places he’d visited.

“Adam will tell you, he gets all the details right.” Said Ruth Page.

Ruth was an oddity, no one knew why the wife of a Norwegian diplomat was a long term resident on the 9th floor. She looked to be in her late 40s and had never explained why she was there and being mostly British, the group had been too polite to ask.

“It was brutal, ripped to pieces from what I heard.” Said Victor Tull.

“Oh, no spoilers Victor.” Said Ruth. “Leave the story to Adam.”

Just about all their group were thirty somethings or forty somethings. Those seemed to be the ages when people had enough experience to be useful abroad, but lacked the seniority to delegate the globetrotting to someone else. Victor was the exception, being an active seventy something financier. He was in Iran to finalise a few oil deals, which looked to be going sour. Adam appeared out of the kitchen, carrying two bottles of red wine.

“Ahh, Harrison..... You’re the last to hear the ghastly details.” He said.

“Tell him, stop teasing.” Said Rachel.

Adam didn’t ever seem to fuss, but everyone quickly had a drink and nibbles were placed on the table. Adam was the celebrity of their group. He was a freelance feature journalist for quite a few of the well-known Sunday papers and he’d presented a few documentaries on the BBC. He was currently working on a back story piece for the Iranian troubles, who had stirred up who. It made him their expert on just about everything, and he seemed to love being their guru. He sat himself opposite Harrison, like Homer preparing to tell the tale of the Odyssey.

“I know a few of the senior police.” Said Adam. “Officially they’re running with the idea that Bijan was killed by a jealous lover. You did realise he preferred the company of other men ?”

“Oh Adam, of course we all did.” Said Ruth. “A lovely young man and I will miss him.”

Harrison didn’t really examine people the way some did and he’d had no idea about Bijan’s sexual preferences. He wasn’t really worried about that sort of thing, but it was certainly a good motive for murder. Iran under the Shah turned a blind eye to a lot of things, but not that. Maybe Bijan had been killed to shut him up ?

“Was he ripped apart ?” Asked Victor. “One of the cleaners told me the police left a terrible mess where his body was found.”

“Yes, he was torn apart by an unknown weapon.” Said Adam. “The first pathologist’s report talked about claws, so the police told him to re-write it.”

“Can they do that ?” Asked Gary. “Just order the guy to do it again, like homework.”

“Don’t be silly Gary.... This is Iran.” Said Rachel. “Of course they can do that.”

“Ripped apart so quickly that he actually died of shock.” Said Adam. “My contact said they had to shovel up the remains into three medical refuse sacks.”

“No, no, too much detail.” Said Ruth. “Let’s drink and play monopoly, or one of the other games. Not the Ouija board though, but anything else.”

“Personally, I think the idea of a jealous lover is nonsense.” Said Adam.

It was what he did, why he was so good for factual TV programmes. Just the right emphasis on certain words, just the right volume to his voice. They had to know Adam's theory, so Harrison decided to be the one to ask. After he'd drunk some of his long cool drink of course and cuddled up closer to Rachel.

"Come on Adam, we all know you'll explode if no one asks. Why do you think someone killed poor Bijan?"

"Not a someone Harrison.... A thing killed him, a very dangerous thing."

"Nothing too graphic Adam, not while we're eating." Said Cliff.

Adam was on a roll now and they all loved his stories. The man had written books on the history of Islam, some even used in schools. Yes, he was probably adding a little fiction; a little seasoning to his stories, but that just made them more fun.

"I'm talking about these lands before Islam, a time of far older Gods and religions." Said Adam.

"Right back to the days when this country was called Persia. The Khwarazmian Empire to be exact, which ended in about the year twelve hundred and thirty."

There was a knock on the door, as Nathan himself delivered their selection of hot nibbles and a few more bottles of drink. Adam didn't seem to mind the interruption, nibbling on a slice of pizza, as he continued.

"Genghis Khan had an agreement with the Khwarazmian Empire, they thought they were safe." He said. "Silly to trust Genghis Khan, as they would soon find out. A minor grievance used as an excuse, Genghis sent his armies into Persia."

"I always thought his Mongol hordes only ravaged Asia and China." Said Gary.

"No, he carved a bloody trail through much of what we now call Europe." Said Adam. "Some even think his tomb is somewhere in Bulgaria, though no one has ever found it."

"Imagine the riches he must have been buried with." Said Nathan.

No one was surprised that Nathan had remained and was helping himself to their food. It had become a bit of a tradition, for the waiter to join in with their games and tall stories.

"Yes indeed, all those treasures taken when his army sacked Peking." Said Adam. "And Persia of course, he completely destroyed the Khwarazmian Empire. About one and a quarter million Persians were slaughtered. It was the way Genghis carried out his own particular method of warfare. Over a quarter of the population were killed."

"Truly dreadful." Said Rachel. "Though I don't think Genghis came back from the dead and killed poor Bijan."

A general chuckle, which gave everyone a chance to fill their glasses. Adam was used to such interruptions and never seemed angry or upset by them. Probably another reason why he was so good at being a TV presenter.

"Sorry Adam, please carry on." Said Ruth.

"Yes, I feel a Twilight Zone moment approaching." Added Victor.

"Just pass me another slice of pizza and we're friends again." Said Adam. "There is a local belief, almost a superstition. Mothers tell their children not to play anywhere near the area around the hotel. I'm sure Nathan must have heard of it?"

"Hey, my head office wouldn't like me to encourage such talk."

"We're cool, you know us." Said Rachel. "We'd never tell anyone."

Poor Nathan, he was in a spot and Rachel was giving him the full hazel eyed stare.

“Fine, yes there is talk about ghosts choosing to remain near the old graves.” Said Nathan. “Mothers do still tell stories about the spirits drawn towards the deaths of so many. Angels of Death they’re called, though only by the ignorant and uneducated.”

“Don’t insult well-meaning mothers Nathan.” Said Adam. “There was a legendary Arab traveller and scholar called Ibn Fadlan. He visited the wild men of the North, the Vikings. He thought the Viking Valkyries and the Persian Angels of Death were the same supernatural beings. Drawn by the death and destruction of war, taking the worthy souls to....Wherever worthy souls went.”

“Do these Angels of Death have a proper name ?” Asked Gary.

“Not as far as I know.” Said Adam. “We’re talking about spirits of some kind, phantoms which have been around since humans didn’t have words to order and describe what they saw. There are paintings of supernatural phantoms on cave walls in Sulawesi, in Indonesia. They are thousands of years old.”

“Nathan mentioned old graves.” Said Harrison.

“A superstition, nothing more.” Said Nathan.

“Oh dear, your head office obviously taught you well.” Said Adam. “There is a vast mass grave here, for hundreds of thousands of those killed by Genghis Khan. Deep down below our feet of course, but the graves are still there.”

“Crap !” Said Victor.

“Yes, Crap seems a good reaction.” Said Adam. “I believe these phantoms have been woken up, or perhaps pulled back from wherever they go to. It’s the trouble on the streets and the deaths... It all looks so much like another war is coming to this area. One of them ripped Bijan apart, or maybe several of them.”

“Yeah, great story Adam, nine out of ten.” Said Ruth.

“I believe him.” Said Harrison.

“There have been other deaths in the hotel, several over the years, all members of staff.” Said Adam.

“Ask Nathan, if you can get him to be honest. Ask him about the two Armenian sisters.”

Nathan didn’t need to say a word, his expression told them everything, as he left the room, slamming the door as he left.

“Wow, what happened to the Armenian sisters ?” Asked Cliff.

“You did tell me not to be too graphic.” Said Adam. “Let’s just say they ended up in a far worse condition than Bijan.”

“Christ ! I’m going to pester my people to get me out of here.” Said Victor.

“What do we do Adam, you’re the guy with all the local knowledge ?” Asked Ruth.

“I honestly have no idea, though I suggest doing nothing even slightly warlike.”

~ ~

It’s surprising how quickly the terrible becomes normal, or at least it was surprising to Harrison. A week went by with his driver being changed every day. More and more armed soldiers guarding the main roads, some in armoured cars. There was something almost comforting about the numerous checkpoints and hold ups. They were doing it all to keep people safe.

He settled into a routine of heading back to the hotel no later than three in the afternoon, to make sure he was back in time for dinner and the regular calls to and from London. For the first time he heard protesters shouting insults at him, purely for looking western.

“Don’t be too upset boss, every western face is American to them.” Said the driver. “Most Iranians still have a soft spot for the British.”

Kris merely smiled and watched the sides of the roads. Heavy police presence or not, his bodyguard had been far more intense lately. There were rumours about the Shah declaring martial law on Friday and that was only two days away. The streets might calm down, but Harrison doubted it. "There will be full blown war by the weekend, a revolution."

Adam had told them all the previous evening. Not for the first time his driver was shouting at the police manning the checkpoint.

"I have a foreign VIP, who is already late for a meeting."

It worked, it always did. Both sides seemed to realise that Iran was finished without foreign investment. So far, everyone was making sure the foreigners were kept safe and allowed to go about their business.

"You should move to Joburg and drive a cab." Kris told the driver. "You'd make a fortune."

"I doubt it.... Wrong colour boss."

The police moved aside and let them through, a cop on a motorcycle giving them an escort right back to the Wilkinson Hotel. There were now two armoured cars on the paved area in front of the doors. People adapted though, often worryingly quickly. Kris went off to get the staff bus, while Harrison walked past the massive army presence. All so normal now, he even knew the names of a few of the officers. Another part of the routine, was asking Nathan for any mail or messages.

"We've been warned that the phones might go out on Friday, maybe even tomorrow. Sorry, it's something the hotel can't do anything about." Said Nathan. "I recommend that if you need to call London, that you do it tonight."

"Thank you, I will. Any mail?"

There was a letter from the foreign office, delivered by hand by someone from the local embassy. There were two pages which only told him the same things he already knew. Flowered up in diplomatic language of course, but telling him all hell might well break loose on Friday. It appeared Her Majesty's Government, was advising him to leave and could no longer guarantee his safety.

"When could they?" He muttered.

"Everyone got one, including Victor. I always thought he was a yank." Said Rachel.

She was good at sneaking up on him, when he was feeling tired and hungry.

"Born there, now a fully signed up UK citizen.... He told me when he was drunk."

"When is Victor sober?" She asked.

Unkind but not unfair, they'd all noticed that Victor was probably an alcoholic. His own business though and as he seemed the wealthiest out of them all, he obviously worked well while under the influence.

"Might be the last decent meal in the restaurant." He said. "Will you join me for dinner tonight? At a proper dinner time I mean, about ten?"

There was that smile again and those twinkling hazel eyes. He was leading her on, or she was encouraging him. Either way, it had to either happen that night, or not at all.

"Can we miss the usual night with the gang?" She asked. "Surely we'll be hunted down and flayed alive or something."

He kissed her, but did it slowly and very gently. His closed lips touched hers, looking for a reaction. Her lips opened slightly and few about two seconds, the kiss was open mouthed.

"Fine, but you have to do it properly." She said. "Bang on my door just before ten and take me to dinner. I even expect flowers, maybe chocolates too."

"I can do that." He said.

"Really? How?"

"I have no idea, but I'll find a way."

Harrison knew what he intended to do, it just sounded a bit unromantic. Going out of the hotel without his guard was unthinkable, the police might well stop him. He bribed a young cop, to go out and buy a decent bunch of flowers and a large box of Black Magic chocolates.

"Biggest they had." The cop told him.

Harrison had no idea why the young cop had decided that big was good and huge was better, but he had the gifts Rachel had asked for. She'd soon have enough Black Magic chocolates to last her through until Christmas.

~ ~

The call from David West had been treated as the last conversation they were likely to have for some time. There were matters concerning his own personal insurances to sort out and what money needed to go to Janet.... If the worst happened.

"You'll be fine Harrison, you wait and see. It'll all blow over."

"I read a book once, one of those motivational things." He'd told David. "It said that no matter how big the problem, you should always believe everything was going to be fine."

"Sounds a good plan."

"Yep, even if you're off to the hospital to be tested for something really nasty.... After all David, you're always going to be right about everything being fine... Apart from just that one time when it isn't."

"Crap, you've got a weird sense of humour."

"It's a weird situation over here David, very weird."

The call home had been bleaker, with Janet crying at one point. There was no chance of simply going to the airport now. There might well be seats available to somewhere, for a price, but he'd promised to see the job through until the end.

"We need the cash and..... You wait and see, everything will be fine." He'd told her.

Or if it wasn't fine, he'd only be wrong just the once.

"I love you Mr Thistle and the stupid surname you've lumbered me with."

"I love you too."

He passed the mirror in the bathroom after the call, surprised to see his own red eyes and tears dampening his cheeks.

"I know what I need." He muttered. "I need Rachel and a night of fun and maybe...."

Maybe, still only maybe. It might be no strings fun to him, but Rachel was single. Did she think it might go further than a few hot and steamy nights in Tehran ?

"Get ready and take it a step at a time." He muttered at his reflection in the mirror.

~ ~

He'd put on the suit he'd packed for special occasions. The likelihood of getting laid for the first time in months felt like a special occasion. A few minutes before ten, flowers and chocolates in hand, Harrison noticed flashes of light coming through the bathroom window. He clambered around his bed, opening the curtains.

"Christ ! It's really happening." He muttered.

Gunfire in the distance, a lot of it judging by the number of flashes. No sound to go with it, the windows at The Wilkinson were designed to keep outside noise to a minimum. There was the occasional brighter burst of light, though he had no idea what kind of weapon was being used. It was surreal to see the constant flashes, yet to not hear even the faintest sound.

Most of the action seemed to be coming from the direction of Danesh, a good four or five miles away. Harrison put his gifts for Rachel on the bed and leant on the window, trying to see further to the West.

"That was too close."

A flash much closer than Danesh, a big one. His fingertips against the windows felt it, the slight tremor as the concussion hit the glass. A grenade launcher maybe ? There were constant rumours about the demonstrators being well armed. They'd seen a burnt out police armoured car one evening, on the way back to the hotel.

"Dinner." He muttered. "If the world is about to end, I'll face it with a full stomach."

Just after ten by the time he left his room and walked towards Rachel's room. It was rare for any of them to be wandering around the corridors at such an hour. Normally he'd have been with the rest of them, getting drunk in someone's room and playing yet another game of Monopoly.

"Later Gary..... Look, I don't want to go in there looking ravished."

Just down the corridor, it was a miracle they hadn't seen him. Gary and Ruth, his right hand right up between her legs. She was objecting, but giggling and making no attempt to move away.

"Promise to come to my room tonight." Said Gary.

"I will, don't I always ?.... Stop, you'll mess up my dress."

Someone opened the door and they went into Adam's room. Jeez ! Gary and Ruth were at it, he'd never suspected it and still found it hard to believe. He'd seen it with his own eyes though, Gary trying to give Ruth an internal examination in a public corridor.

"Wow, wait until Rachel hears about this." He muttered.

It crossed his mind that maybe that was why Ruth was staying in their hotel. As the wife of a diplomat, she could be staying in the relative safety of the Norwegian Embassy. He'd seen Ruth's husband once or twice, a serious looking man in a pin stripe suit and brogues.

"Poor bastard."

He thumped hard on Rachel's door and held out the flowers as it opened.

"You found some flowers." Said Rachel. "You are a miracle worker."

"And these."

He handed her the truly enormous box of chocolates, which seemed to please her.

"Wow, that is some box of chocolates."

"Biggest they had."

Her face lit up, it looked like the young cop had been right to get the biggest box in the shop. Their lips touched again, just before she ran off to fetch a vase for the flowers.

"I keep matchbooks in this, but it's intended for flowers."

Her collection of dusty matchbooks went into a drawer. He watched her use the bathroom tap to fill the vase, before arranging the flowers in it.

"I have I got a story to tell you." He said.

"You mean the fighting to the south ? I've been watching it for a while and it's spreading to the west of the city."

"No, not that. Guess who I saw at it in the corridor ?"

"I'm useless at guessing, tell me ?"

"Gary and Ruth."

"No... Never !"

"Honest, he had his hands all over her."

"Wow, maybe that's why she lives in this four star shithole."

“That’s exactly what I thought.”

~ ~

Apart from a lack of much choice, the restaurant carried on serving food, just as it had every day he’d been living there. Normality helped and Harrison could understand why the band had carried on playing, as the Titanic had sunk beneath the waves. There were few guests eating there that night, probably less than a dozen, all non-westerners apart from Rachel and himself. A buyer for a department store in Pakistan was eating alone. Harrison recognised him and exchanged a brief nod.

“Are we mad to still be here ?” Asked Rachel.

“Probably, but it’s too late to get off the ride now.” He said. “They’ve locked the security bars in place and we’re on our way to the top of the rollercoaster.”

She laughed at him, while picking at her food.

“Are you ever serious ?” She asked.

“I try my best not to be... Otherwise I might start screaming and never stop.”

They saw it in each other, the terrified and vulnerable person wishing they were somewhere else.

Almost anywhere else, apart from Iran. He put his hand out towards hers and she held it.

“You do realise I’m happily married ?” He asked.

“Of course, you mention Janet quite a lot. Is that your way of politely saying we’ll only ever be friends ?”

Was it ? He was still torn, especially after seeing Gary pawing at Ruth. It had all looked so.... Sordid. It was those wonderful hazel eyes which made the decision for him. He wanted to see them looking up at him, as Rachel moaned with pleasure.

“I was about to say that we’re both just playing with our food.” He said. “Will you come to my room and spend the night Rachel ?”

“Of course I will, you idiot.”

Harrison signed the bill, after assuring a worried looking waiter that the food had been perfect. On an impulse he ordered an entire bowl of profiteroles to take with them and a bottle of champagne. He wasn’t usually spontaneous... In fact he was never that spontaneous. It had to be the threat of war and the wonderful way Rachel was smiling at him.

“I never knew you could be so crazy.”

Said Rachel, juggling the bowl of profiteroles and her room key.

“Neither did I..... Eat, drink and shag like bunnies... for tomorrow.....”

“No, no, nothing serious or dark tonight.”

Rachel undid her dress and stepped out of it, the instant they were alone in her room.

“I do like the idea of fucking like bunnies though.” She said.

~ ~

He’d seen the pupils dilate in those wonderful eyes of hers, as they’d made love for about the fifth or sixth time. He’d felt like a horny teenager again, being ready and able to make love all night. It was probably the result of the tensions outside and wanting to sleep with her for quite some time. Harrison felt like a new man, as he left his room and took the elevator to the ground floor lobby. “There will be no car today I’m afraid.” Said Nathan. “No Kris either, the army are guarding the district where the foreign workers live.”

A foreign workers district ? Harrison had never realised there was such a place. He’d always imagined Kris went home to house in a fairly nondescript part of the city.

“Is Kris alright ? Do you know ?” He asked.

Nathan usually looked as though someone had just kicked his puppy, but he managed to look even more upset and concerned.

"They're all fine for now Harrison, the army will do what they can."

The hotel manager came around to his side of the counter, leaning close enough to almost whisper.

"I am worried about the hotel. It started at about six this morning, all our phone lines will only call numbers in Iran and the army have forbidden anyone to leave. We're all trapped here now, staff and guests."

"I think we all guessed this was coming Nathan. Sooner than I thought though."

"There is an army Major going around talking to everyone, trying to reassure people."

"That won't take him long ! I saw less than a dozen eating in the restaurant last night."

Poor Nathan, the captain of the Titanic must have had pretty much the same look on his face, as he realised his large and expensive ship, was actually going to sink.

"I suppose we will be alright for food ?" Asked Harrison.

"Yes, this trouble was foreseen and planned for." Said Nathan. "Mainly tins and dried food of course, but we also have several large freezers in the basement. Also, as you've noticed, we have very few paying guests in the Hotel. We have enough food to feed everyone for years."

There was just one piece of mail waiting for him. A letter from the British Embassy, once again suggesting that he left Iran, as quickly as possible. Harrison never did meet the Iranian army Major, but one of the young soldiers by the door was quite chatty. Speaking fluent Persian helped of course.

"We're setting up tents at the rear of the hotel." The soldier told him. "Our sergeant said we should prepare to be here for a while."

"How long ?"

The young man had simply shrugged at him. He also told him that their phones might work some days but not others, though he couldn't say why. That was the trouble with wars, no one seemed sure about anything. Adam was lurking by the front doors, glaring at the soldiers.

"They won't even let me out and I've been visiting Iran for years." He said.

"One of the soldiers said our phones might work tomorrow, or they might not."

"A shambles a bloody shambles !" Yelled Adam. "I'm freelance Harrison and if I don't call in my copy, I don't get paid. Biggest story in the world going on around us and I can't tell anyone."

Adam wandered off, bending the ear of yet another of the army officers. It would do him no good of course, they were simply obeying orders.

~ ~

Harrison didn't want to go and look for Rachel. It looked a bit needy and they had arranged to go to Victor's room that night, for the usual get together. There would be a get together of course, no one could leave the hotel. Trapped there for their own protection.

"I'm sorry Mr Baig, I'm not allowed to check you out. The road to the airport simply isn't safe anymore.... Yes I know you can see gunfire from your room.... That is why no one may leave the hotel."

So it went on, with yet another guest wanting to leave. Always the non-westerners, feeling the rules didn't apply to them. Nathan had been told to keep everyone in the hotel though and he was determined to do so.

"..... Americans causing all the trouble."

He heard Mr Baig's wife say. It was a common sentiment among the angry guests from the other Arab nations and Islamic countries. Harrison accepted there might be some justice in what they were

saying, but they were now all in it together, all prisoners in a luxury four star hotel, with an Olympic size indoor pool. As prisons went, it was fairly nice one.

"I heard gunfire." Someone said.

Harrison was bored anyway, so he walked towards the main doors. They opened every few minutes, to allow worried looking soldiers to wander in and out. Some were carrying what looked like ammunition boxes. No sound of gunfire though, even when he stood very close to the door.

"Please go back into the hotel lobby."

He obeyed the soldier, which was a good thing. It meant he heard Ruth screaming and saw Nathan trying to comfort her. There was a lot of agitation fairly quickly. Soldiers looking confused, while the police began to use the Persian word for murder quite a lot.

یکش آدم Murder, began to be shouted by a few of the hotel staff.

Harrison wasn't a man who liked situations requiring nosiness and sharp elbows. He wasn't normally one for gossip, or putting his nose where it wasn't wanted. He knew Ruth though, she was one of his group of friends. He actually jostled a policeman slightly, to get closer to her.

"What happened ? Who was murdered ?" He asked.

"I don't know..... So much blood."

"One of the cleaning staff, using the lockers in the basement." Said Nathan. "A terrible business."

At one time Harrison would never have connected two police officers talking to Gary, at the other side of the lobby. Now that had meaning. Why use the basement to meet though ? They both had nice rooms, but he knew some people liked the thrill of sex in places where there was a chance of discovery. Like getting felt up in corridors.

"No discussing this matter, or you will be arrested."

A middle aged member of the police with a lot of emblems on his uniform, was pushing him away.

Nathan too, it seemed neither of them was going to be allowed to talk to Ruth. There'd be a political angle for the Iranians too, a diplomat's wife getting a little strange sex with a UK arms dealer.

"Was the cleaner killed in the same way as Bijan ?" He asked Nathan.

"I don't know, I didn't see her body. Ruth said the woman had been ripped apart, barely recognisable as a person anymore."

"Did she see anyone down there ?"

Nathan just shrugged and there wasn't going to be a chance to talk to Ruth. She was currently surrounded by at least five or six senior members of the Tehran police. The body was taken out through the kitchens he found out later, quickly loaded into a military ambulance. Whatever had happened to the cleaner, the authorities didn't want anyone looking at her body.

~ ~

Friday and the soldiers were talking about the Shah finally declaring martial law. The TVs in the hotel still worked, but only showed the happy smiling announcers from Iranian state TV. For any genuine news, Harrison was relying on making friendships among the soldiers.

"Tanks are entering the city." One whispered to him. "No one wants to kill our own people."

The police were muttering about major demonstrations and that there had already been several civilian deaths. All that before Harrison had properly woken up after breakfast.

"It's like we're inside a snow globe." Nathan had told him. "A war going on outside, yet we're isolated from it all. I've yet to hear a single gunshot and as for the TV news....."

Military helicopters were the only sounds of war heard inside the insulating structure of the Wilkinson Hotel. Most helicopters were dots in the distant, but occasionally one would thunder past the hotel, causing the windows to vibrate with the noise.

"The problem with being in a nice cosy snow globe." Said Harrison. "Is that someone may decide to give it a good hard shake."

"You have a strange sense of humour my friend."

"Someone else recently told me that."

The morning drifted on, the only bright spot had been mid-morning coffee with Rachel. They were deliberately trying not to be in each other's company twenty four hours a day, but they were now sharing a bed at night.

"Women have been killed by tanks..... Here in Tehran."

He heard one of the waiters say to another, though they went quiet when he asked for details. It looked bad, yet the TV news just showed happy looking soldiers, saying the troubles were under control.

Just after lunch and Harrison was back by the main desk, chatting to Nathan. A large helicopter landed outside the hotel. Not where helicopters were supposed to land, it put down between the armoured cars in front of the doors. The noise of its rotors filled the lobby with almost unbearable noise, for a good two minutes.

"Another general come to tell us everything is fine."

Said Nathan, once the helicopter's blades had stopped whirring. A group of men in strange uniforms left the helicopters. Most of them looked like marines, but dressed in uniforms he'd never seen before. A tall thin man was in front of them, stomping into the hotel and heading straight for the front desk.

"Arvid, good to see you." Said Nathan.

Arvid Trolle husband of Ruth and a Norwegian diplomat who seemed to have far more power than his lowly position implied. Victor insisted that Arvid was a spy, but Victor thought just about everyone was a spy. Harrison had only seen him twice, in all the weeks he'd been living in the Wilkinson. Arvid was carrying a Harrods bag of all things, stuffed with cream coloured envelopes.

"I have letters from various embassies and consulates, which I was asked to deliver." Said Arvid.

"Can I leave them with you?"

"Yes of course."

"Have you had any trouble outside your embassy?" Asked Harrison.

"No, I don't think most Iranians know where Norway even is. So far at least, we've not seen a single demonstrator outside. I have a feeling that won't last."

Arvid didn't look as though he'd been sleeping well. Dark lines around his eyes and a gaze that avoided eye contact. At that moment Harrison realised that Arvid hadn't known about Ruth and Gary. Poor bastard, the police report must have turned his life upside down.

"The soldiers tell us some of what is going on outside." Said Nathan. "It's knowing what to believe. Are there really tanks attacking demonstrators in the city?"

"Oh yes and there have been civilian deaths..... How is Ruth after the.....Death of that poor cleaner?"

"We don't know." Said Harrison. "The police have kept her in her room since it happened."

"Really?!"

Arvid was in indignant diplomat mode in an instant.

"They even have an officer sat outside her door at night, sometimes two." Said Nathan.

"Preposterous ! Is she still in the same room on the 9th floor?"

"Yes."

"I'll soon get this nonsense sorted out."

Off he stomped and Harrison briefly wished he'd been born a Norwegian. Nathan began to put the envelopes in pigeon holes for the few rooms still being occupied by paying guests. He dropped one of the cream coloured envelopes on the desk in front of Harrison.

'Private and Confidential – Only to be opened by Harrison H Thistle.'

Had been written on it, in a female hand, by someone with perfect handwriting. His own always looked as though a spider had fallen into an inkwell, before crawling over the page.

"Are you going to open it?" Asked Rachel.

She had that gift, for appearing unnoticed, in a busy public space.

"I know what it says.... I can guess what all the letters say." He replied.

Nathan handed an envelope to Rachel, which she didn't open.

"Ok, tell me what's in mine?" She asked.

"It'll be full of diplomatic gobble-de-gook and at least two pages long." He said. "All of it will boil down to Her Majesty's Government recommending that you remain in the hotel, under the protection of the Shah's soldiers. Just until the trouble dies down of course."

Cream paper inside cream envelopes, the embassy's expensive stock of stationery. Rachel read the two typed pages and gave him a slight bow.

"Spot on, now read yours."

"It'll be the same."

She gave him a look which threatened trouble, so he opened his envelope. Two typed pages saying exactly what he'd predicted, but using twenty words where one would have done.

"Not fair, you have a handwritten note in yours." She said.

"Just to say they've had contact with my employers in London. It appears that EVO Engineering are also recommending that I stay put until things settle down."

"I don't think the army would let you leave anyway." Said Nathan.

"I have a view to the south from my room." Said Rachel. "We can see what's going on from there."

Of course they never did watch the helicopters circling the demonstrators. They were too busy enjoying each other's bodies, until it was time for dinner.

~

~

Ruth left on the helicopter and Gary wasn't at their usual get together that night.

"I never had a clue until I heard Arvid shouting at him." Said Cliff.

"No, I don't think any of us knew." Rachel had lied.

It had gone badly, with Arvid screaming insults at Gary, while getting his wife ready to leave the hotel. Gary hadn't replied or defended himself during the entire piece of unpleasantness. Ruth hadn't even shouted a goodbye to any of them, before climbing into the helicopter.

"She'll be safer in the embassy." Said Rachel. "Though I'll miss having another woman in the group to talk to."

"You can talk to us about anything." Said Victor.

"What do you take to relieve period pain Victor?"

"You're a bad girl Rachel, but point taken."

"Now, we'll never find out what she might have seen." Said Harrison

"I think she saw far too much of Gary." Said Cliff.

A rare joke from Cliff, which they all laughed at out of politeness. Gary joined them quite late, still clutching half a bottle of vodka. It appeared they were having their 78th game of Monopoly, someone had kept a list. The Ouija board had come out twenty seven times, but not recently. No

one would admit it, but he was sure they were all scared about what it might tell them. About one in the morning he left, Rachel waiting a few minutes before joining him in his room.

“Do you think they know ? I’m sure they must have noticed something.” He asked.

“Of course they know, we don’t hide it as well as Ruth and Gary. Victor actually asked me yesterday, right in the middle of the lobby.”

“Crap !”

She kissed him gently on the lips, while her hands undid the belt on his trousers.

“Don’t worry, no one in London will ever know.” She said.

~ ~

The next morning started well, with Rachel waking him for early morning sex. He was still enjoying the afterglow, when she began to moan about the soap and shampoo he had in his bathroom.

“How can you use the stuff the hotel provides, it’s total crap.” She yelled from the bathroom.

“Sorry. I guess it’s a guy thing. We’ll use any old soap.”

“Well I’m fed up with it ! I’m going to my room for something decent.”

“Fine, take my room key.”

“No need, I’ll leave the door ajar and run there and back.”

He saw her in bare feet, with just his dressing gown wrapped round her. Supposing she was seen ? Before he could object she was gone and he was still feeling sleepy after their early morning exertions.

“I quite like the hotel shampoo.”

He muttered, before falling into a deep sleep. He woke and was surprised to see the bedside clock saying it was just after nine. Still, there wasn’t much to get up for. Just another day in their four star luxury snow globe.

“Why didn’t you wake me ?” He called. “We can still go downstairs for breakfast.”

No answer and when he got out of bed, the door to his room was still slightly ajar. He opened it and as he’d thought, she’d hung the do not disturb sign on the handle. Well, if she was still coming back, she could bang on the door. He removed the sign and closed the door.

“Mind like a butterfly.” He muttered. “She’s probably giving herself a pedicure.”

Full blown panic set in, when he saw her clothes were still in the bathroom, neatly folded up on a chair. Her panties were hung over the back of the chair, ready to go on after she’d dried herself. Maybe the police had taken her off for questioning ? He had no idea why they would, but there had to be a rational explanation for her vanishing. She had plenty of other clothes of course.

“Don’t get in a panic you idiot... Get dressed and knock on her door.”

He did it quickly, pulling on his dirty clothes from the night before. No shower, not even a comb through his hair. He walked at a crisp pace, stopping outside the door to her room. It was ever so slightly ajar. Such a small gap that he had to push the door to be certain.

“Did you decide your room was nicer than mine ?” He called.

The door slowly swung open, revealing the gown she’d borrowed, folded up on a chair. Good, she hadn’t been waylaid by something ghastly on the way to her room. He closed her room door.

“Are you still dressing ?” He asked. “Is it alright to come in ?”

He’d seen her naked and had spent a long time tasting her most intimate female area. He still felt the need to get permission though, before moving further into her room. He looked around, seeing her room key on the coffee table. She had to still be there... Or locked out.

“Rachel... I’m worried now.”

She was still in the shower cubicle, or the blood would have spread. His mind had played tricks then though, making it hard to decide what he'd noticed first and when he'd begun to scream. Most of the blood had drained away, but she still seemed to be sat in about an inch of her own congealed blood. Her back had been ripped into by claws of some kind, he could see the ragged deep grooves. "No, not Rachel..... Why Rachel?" He yelled.

Her left leg was just a bone below her knee, the flesh pulled back and shredded. He felt her shoulder, just about the only part of her not covered in blood. Still slightly warm, but well below normal body heat. Her head was facing into the corner, showing him nothing but her beautiful long hair. It took effort to turn her head, something seemed to be sticking her face to the tiles.

"Oh no, no..... NO !!" He screamed.

He didn't stop screaming, as he saw her face was gone. They'd taken those beautiful hazel eyes, leaving nothing but bone and sinew where her face had been. No sound, but he saw something before his mind fled into the safety of unconsciousness. A vaguely female shape made of nothing but grey mist.

~ ~

Harrison must have passed out with the shock of finding Rachel's ruined body. He remembered screaming and then he was aware of a man taking his pulse.

"I'm just an army doctor. Torn flesh and bruised muscles I know how to treat, but this man needs his mind healing. Who wouldn't after what he's seen? He needs a hospital."

"He's our main suspect in the death of Miss Stott, perhaps the others too. He's staying here."

Two men arguing about him, as he drifted slowly out of unconsciousness. He was in his own room, undressed and lying in the bed he'd recently shared with Rachel. Two men in uniform were beside his bed, with two soldiers guarding the door.

"What time is it?" He asked.

The man closest to the bed had to be the army doctor. He leant over the bed, shining a penlight into his eyes.

"You've been unconscious for four hours, it's now early afternoon. You had us worried."

"There are questions to be answered." Said the policeman.

"Only after he's had a chance to properly wake up."

"I don't mind." Said Harrison. "I didn't see anyone or anything in her room. She was already dead when I found her."

"Why do you say anything?" Asked the policeman.

"No! I insist that you at least allow Mr Thistle to shower and get dressed."

Harrison noticed it then, the traces of blood along the edges of his fingernails. He'd been wiped over before being put to bed, but they hadn't been thorough. His heart began to beat faster, as he noticed specks of blood near his left elbow.

"Are you alright?" Asked the doctor.

"I need to get her blood off me."

The sheet had a few specks of blood on it, as he threw it back and began to climb out of bed. They'd left him in just his underwear, but his boxer shorts had specks of red too. How, he'd been fully clothed while in her room? They'd have stripped him of course, before sending his clothes off as evidence. He probably had a lazy policeman to blame for the spots of blood on his underwear.

"Get the hotel to change the bed while he showers."

It looked the like the policeman might refuse the doctor's request. He did eventually nod at one of the soldiers near the door. Obviously not a soldier, just a policeman in full riot gear.

“Tell the hotel manager to get someone up here to change the bed.... Now !” He barked.

Harrison dug through his drawers of clothing, noticing the hiking gear he’d brought with him the first time he’d arrived in Tehran. Jeans and T shirts, even a pair of walking boots. He had intended to walk every weekend, perhaps take in a few of the famous ruins from the Persian days. The troubles had arrived and he’d only ever worn the clothing once. It seemed appropriate to wear his jeans though, rather than the suits he wore for work.

Harrison Thistle felt like a new man when he came out of the bathroom. There was still the pain of a headache across his temples, but nothing he couldn’t tolerate. As he looked into the room a memory surfaced. The vague shape of a woman, rushing out of Rachel’s room.

“If you’re feeling better ? We really do need to talk.”

The army doctor had gone, as had the guards, though they were probably sat outside his door. Two younger uniformed officers had joined the senior man. All men of course, he hadn’t seen a single woman in uniform. He knew there were women in the Shah’s military and police, but he had never seen any of them. Harrison joined the police officers, sitting around the table where he often finished off his site reports.

“Ask your questions. What do you want to know ?”

“Just tell us everything about that night and the next morning.”

They took notes of course, as he told them the truth about his last night with Rachel. He told them everything, just leaving out the intimate details about their sexual activities. He didn’t tell them about seeing the vague outline of a woman. He’d been in shock, still holding Rachel’s body in his blood soaked arms. There had been a vague grey shape in the bathroom doorway, which seemed to run towards the hallway. Probably just his imagination and anyway; what could the police do against ghosts and phantoms ?

“So you saw no one in Miss Stott’s room ?”

“No one, they must have left before I got there.”

“Why then, did you use the term anything ?”

“Shock I suppose, after seeing those claw marks.”

The police pathologist would probably say a weapon of some kind had been used, but Harrison knew what he’d seen. He was also beginning to believe in the Angels of Death, which Adam had told them all about, while playing Monopoly and getting drunk.

~ ~

Harrison had slept too much during the day, his body clock was all over the place. He’d have wandered around the hotel, perhaps found a night porter to talk to. The police were sat outside his door though, two of them with large and serious looking assault rifles. He wasn’t under arrest of course, just being kept in his room for his own safety.

“Someone senior will talk to you in the morning.” He’d been told.

He paced a bit, before remembering a few classic books Janet had pushed into his suitcase at Christmas. One he’d already read several times when he’d been younger and knew it might improve his mood. Three Men In A Boat by Jerome K. Jerome had cheered up troops in the Boer War and it had helped calm him down before his accountancy exams. It relaxed him so much, that fell asleep on a hard backed chair, the book falling to the floor.

A scream woke him, or at least he thought it was a scream. His mind performed that confusing trick, of mixing the sound into his dream. Harrison was suddenly fully awake, but with no definite idea why. Until he heard the second scream. The loud deep scream of a man in pain. The bedside clock told him it was three thirty three in the morning.

"I should just sit here and ignore it." He muttered.

Harrison picked up the book, throwing it onto the bed. There were armed police outside his door, surely they could deal with just about anything ? He wasn't brave, just curious.

"Oh Christ ! Not again."

He'd opened the door slightly, expecting to see two police officers, dealing with whoever had screamed. One of them was dead though, his light green fatigues ripped apart. Blood was everywhere beginning to form a bright red pool in front of his door. Why him ? Couldn't the phantoms find someone else to drive insane ?

"Stay in your room ! There's..... something here."

The other policeman, his rifle up against his shoulder. A brave man, many would have simply run.

"What is it, what happened ?" Asked Harrison.

For the first time he noticed it, another body further along the corridor, creating its own crimson pool of blood. The policeman didn't answer him. Instead he aimed his rifle towards the elevators and fired, his weapon set for full automatic. The noise was deafening, as dozens of high powered rounds, slammed into the area around the elevators. There was nothing there though, nothing to fire at.

"Now, now I see you." He muttered.

An outline of a woman, now more white than grey. Not like mist, more light and diaphanous than any fog or mist he'd ever seen. Quite indistinct, but the definite body shape of a woman. She turned towards him, her eyes looking straight at him. Those eyes ! Pure white, like the blind eyes of something truly ancient. Her gaze went back to the soldier, as he fired at her again.

"Run you fool, bullets won't kill it." Harrison yelled.

It had to be one of the legendary Angels of Death. The bullets didn't harm it, passing right through to tear lumps out of the walls. He wanted to look away as the phantom used her claws on the policeman, yet he had to watch. Hands that looked so nebulous, yet they ripped lumps out of the policeman, making him scream in pain. About a minutes was all it took, maybe less, to turn the young policeman, into a bloody heap on the ground. She looked at him next, approaching to within a few feet.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death."

He muttered, over and over, as the creature lifted her right hand above his head. Harrison had never been a practising Catholic, the words just came back to him, memories from his childhood. He waited and waited for the end, but the claws didn't rip into him.

"Up there, don't use the elevator." Someone was shouting.

The sound of running feet and the Angel of Death was gone. Why spare him ? Harrison didn't want more questions he couldn't answer, more suspicion and being locked in his room for days. He had no idea where to go, but knew he had to get off the 9th floor. Lots of feet now, all the sound coming from the stairs. Harrison ran to the nearest room and the door was slightly open. Gary's room of all people, home wrecker and arms dealer. Still, beggars can't be choosers, he entered the room and closed the door.

"... Get a medical team up here and look for Thistle..."

He heard from the hallway, as he closed the door. There might be door to door checks, but for a while at least, the police would be busy with the bodies. Harrison relaxed a little, pouring himself a glass of scotch from Gary's never ending supply of the good stuff.

Gary's room was one of the larger ones, even a small balcony to use, if there hadn't been a violent revolution going on outside. It took Harrison half an hour and a little nosiness to find what was left of Gary Litvak, UK citizen and sellers of weapons. Harrison thought he might have a few sample in his

room, maybe a fully loaded pistol. Not to fight the phantoms of course, but to intimidate anyone he might meet, while breaking out of the hotel. He had to escape, he realised that now.

“He was a weird guy, but he didn’t deserve this.” He mumbled.

Gary was in the second bedroom, which he had used as a dressing room. A bundle of bloody flesh on the floor, but his face was still recognisable. The pool of blood looked congealed, so Harrison felt Gary’s face. Cold he’d been dead for a long time, probably killed not long after Rachel. The hotel was in chaos, all their routines turned upside down. It was no wonder that no one had missed Gary.

“Did you have a gun Gary ? We all thought you did.”

Several good quality sample cases in a wardrobe, all filled with brochure for everything from tiny automatic pistols, right through to rocket propelled grenades. It was hard to take guns abroad of course, there had already been a spate of airline hijacks. Gary had often boasted about knowing people at the embassy though and not just the British Embassy. Harrison found the wicked looking gun, underneath yet another pile of brochures. It took him ten minutes to work out how to eject the bullets and put them back. He now had a loaded gun and felt much more confident about getting out of the hotel.

~ ~

There had been no door to door enquiries, no curious police officer wondering why Gary hadn’t been seen all day. That worried Harrison, someone should have been thumping on the door, even if just a cleaner. At about nine in the evening, he decided to put his plan into action. It wasn’t much of a plan, but it was better than the other two dozen that seemed suicidal. He opened the door and looked out along the corridor. Nothing, no bodies, no police, no group of angry residents..... Nothing. It was a relief, but strange.

“Over there.....”

He heard someone shouting, but the voice was very faint, as were the following sounds of gunfire. Harrison closed the door and sat on the floor, his back against the door. It was obviously hell outside in the Wilkinson, trying to leave looked likely to be extremely dangerous. The hotel was now a deadly snow globe and there were huge advantages to getting out of it. There was space outside, places to hide, maybe even friendly British loving locals. Above all there probably wouldn’t be vicious Angels of Death, wanting to rip him apart.

“You have to do this.” He told himself.

He left the hotel room, hugging the wall and heading for the elevators. Not heading for the ground floor lobby, his plan meant leaving the hotel from the 2nd floor. He’d based his whole plan on exploring the hotel one rainy Sunday afternoon and a daft conversation with Victor.

“Look, you could jump onto the annexe roof from here.”

You could, there was even a fire door to do just that. The annexe was for functions, built in a separate block to keep the noise away from the main building. Harrison had no idea how to get off the annexe roof though. He might well be in for a drop from the roof of the function suite.

“Oh Cliff, you were a genuine friend.”

The body by the elevator was in the usual condition, which no longer shocked him, or made him want to throw up. Harrison was getting used to the sight of blood and glistening viscera. Cliff’s face had gone, but he recognised the golfing trousers. No one else but Cliff would have worn the multi coloured monstrosities.

The elevator doors were full of bullet holes, but they still opened when it answered his press on the down button. Harrison stepped in and pressed the 2nd floor button. The music still played in the elevator, the usual mindless pap you only seem to hear in hotels and supermarkets. Worryingly the

sound of automatic weapons being fired, penetrated past the walls of the elevator and the awful music.

"It is going to be alright Harrison.... It'll all be fine." He told himself.

Unless this was the day he was wrong about that of course. The doors opened with a clatter and a voice to say he'd arrived at the second floor. Just in case it hadn't given away his position, it then loudly announces that the doors were closing. Harrison turned off the safety catch and held the gun in his right hand. No sounds of anyone coming to get him, just the muffled sound of gunfire.

Another unrecognisable body in the corridor, which led to the emergency door. A woman in a dress, with the hotel's logo embroidered tastefully on the front. Not a cleaner or a maid, far too well dressed. Probably someone in the office who he'd never met and now never would.

"What ? What do you want from me ?" He yelled.

He thought he'd heard a voice calling his name, a female voice. It wasn't his mind playing tricks, he was certain of it. The question kept returning, why hadn't the Angel of Death killed him ?

The instructions on the emergency door were simple and repeated in at least four languages. When he slammed both hands against the red painted bar, alarms began to go off, loud alarms. There was a short ladder to the roof of the function suite, but he jumped and rolled, running as he came back onto his feet.

"Thank you snowy." He muttered.

Harrison had gone through parachute training years before, but the training had stuck, lodged into the skills which were now automatic. An old guy who made no claims about his past had trained them all. Some of the other recruits had hinted at snowy once being in the SAS, though he himself never talked about his past. Harrison came to a halt, halfway across the roof.

"Fuck ! Is that why ?"

Victor had suspected everyone of being a spy and he'd been right, in a very minor way. Harrison had been recruited straight out of college, mainly because of his language skills. All the training, all the preparation had been pointless, for his one and only mission.

"Anna and her daughter." He mumbled.

A simple mission, which were carried out by casual agents of MI6, far more often than the public realised. Harrison had made a big thing to all his friends, about wanting to visit East Germany to buy a camera you couldn't buy in the west.

"Zeiss Jena lenses, best in the world." He told anyone who'd listen.

It hadn't been as he'd imagined, the real world of espionage rarely was. As a westerner with hard currency to spend, he had no trouble entering East Berlin. He even bought the camera, from a dealer who told him that he sold dozens to people just like him. His real reason to go to East Berlin had been Anna and her daughter, a five year old called Emma. He'd accompanied them, with his own genuine passport and her fake one. It had worked and the entire mission had taken less than a day. As far as he knew Anna and her daughter were still alive and well, somewhere in the west.

"I had a panic attack !" He'd told his handler afterwards. "Anna had to drag me up the street."

MI6 had never activated him again, not even called him to see if he was alive. Not that he wanted them to, he just wasn't suited to that kind of life. He had extracted Anna and her daughter from the east though, right from under the noses of the odious Stasi.

"It can't be that.... All those dead police. Some must have done far braver things."

It seemed unfair, but he was alive and they were dead. Harrison looked back and saw something moving near the open emergency door. It swung closed, making a sharp clang. He ran towards the edge of the roof, easily spotting the ladder to get down to the ground.

“Section 8 report..... Section 8, please acknowledge.”

He was only a few yards from the tent village, setup to house the growing number of soldiers. No sign of movement though, just a radio asking for someone to answer the call. Where all the soldiers dead too ? No, someone picked up the call, he could hear them talking.

Luck was with him for once, as he quietly walked between the tents. Gun in hand, he vanished into the woods at the back of the Wilkinson. He had to think of a direction to walk and thought of Kris. An entire rented villa full of South African mercenaries. If he wasn't safe there, he might as well go back to the hotel. Three, maybe four miles through the middle of a revolution, but it seemed the only option he had. He knew the rough direction and remembered the address.

“What the fuck could go wrong ?” He muttered, laughing at his own bad joke.

As he came out of the trees and onto a main highway, the sound of gunfire was too close for comfort. The revolution was in full swing, flashes lit up the night sky for miles. About half a mile away, an entire four storey building was on fire. Normally such a sight would have been accompanied by the constant wail of sirens. Not now though, the building would burn down to the ground. There was an alley opposite him, a long straight alley and he appeared to be the only person on the street. Harrison ran across the road and carried on running into the alley.

~ ~

He kept the ten floor tower of the Wilkinson behind him, using it to keep him going in the right direction. There were roads to cross though and every one of them came with its own horrors. Civilian dead in large numbers, some riddled with bullets. Women and children too, some looking as though they'd been shot while running away. The dead children affected him badly, causing him to stop and throw up in exposed locations. Not that his stomach had much left in it to throw up.

“This is a worse hell than the hotel.” He muttered.

The noise of the vehicles warned him about the approaching soldiers. There was something about the shouting which told him the noise was the Iranian army and not many civilians owned large armoured vehicles. He hid just inside the open door of an already wrecked house, watching the patrol go past. They all looked so young and scared.

Just two blocks away he found dead young men in the same uniforms, wiped out by the people's revolution, their bodies left to rot on the street. Not quite left in peace though. Harrison heard a door open and hid as best he could, crouched behind a dumpster.

“Bastards !” Shouted the old lady.

She looked so tiny and frail, yet she'd just kicked one of the dead soldiers. She kicked him hard again, right in the centre of his ribs. She moved on, kicking another dead young soldier. Seemingly satisfied with her efforts, she slowly walked back into her house and closed the door. A small act of rebellion in a very nasty war. Something came back to Harrison, an incident with Anna and her daughter.

Emma had become trapped in barbed wire, panicking and getting herself completely tangled up.

He'd calmed the child, slowly and carefully freeing her, right in front of a guard post. He still had a few deep scars in his hands from that wire. Had that been it ? The incident that made him in some way worthy ? Not worthy enough for his soul to be taken to paradise, or wherever the phantoms took it, but worthy enough not to be ripped apart ?

“Over here, I saw him.”

Crap ! A man with wild eyes pointing at him and shouting. They'd think he was American of course, all people with western feature were thought to be Americans. There was the sound of running feet, two of them his. Harrison ran through several gardens, clambering over fences and trampling

people's price plants. He was fit, thanks to a lot of hiking and walking in Wales and Cumbria. Soon there was only one face still clambering over fences behind him, the wild man with his glaring eyes. "You're going to die."

Yeah, yeah, he'd heard many similar shouts while being driven through and around Tehran. He doubted if the gaunt wild man was a match for the Angels of Death and he'd survived their attentions. Harrison climbed over a six foot fences and hid in the bushes just the other side.

"Crazy guy, you fucked with the wrong man tonight." He mumbled.

As that terrible hate filled face appeared over the top of the fence, Harrison aimed his gun and fired. He saw a hole appear in the man's forehead, as his would be attacker fell backwards. There was a temptation to cheer, but he resisted it. His gunshot was just one among thousands that night, but someone might come to investigate. Harrison ran between the houses and found a road leading towards the Wilkinson. He could still see its ten storeys, the helipad lights flashing their welcome. "It's hell, but out here is worse." He muttered.

~ ~

Harrison came back to the hotel from a slightly different angle, but still from the side where the army had built their village of tents. Distant gunfire gave the impression of activity, but not a solitary soldier moved among the tents. Dawn was just arriving, providing enough light to see the numerous pools of blood, but no bodies. Someone had written on the side of a tent, probably in their own blood.

'They're killing everyone.'

A warning ? Probably just a dying statement by one of the young soldiers. A machine gun fired somewhere distant and then left silence again, as he walked between the tents. Blood and the occasional piece of torn flesh, but no bodies. No climbing up ladders to get to the emergency door, he walked towards the main entrance to the Wilkinson. Harrison dropped the gun as he walked, realising it would be useless against them. The Angels of Death, the phantoms, the creatures who had served the very oldest of Gods. They couldn't be killed by the weapons of man.

"Wilkinson unit please respond."

The radio made him jump. A hand held radio, left beside a pool of blood.

"Respond please."

Harrison ignored it and carried on round to the front of the hotel. There was a wrecked armoured car in front of where the hotel doors had once stood. It appeared that someone had tried to fight back. The blackened marks of an explosion and no doors left to walk through. Large sections of wall had gone too, leaving the entrance lobby open to the outside world. The air conditioning system was valiantly trying to cool all the air in Tehran and failing. It was slightly cooler in the lobby though, the humidity more tolerable. Blood and destruction everywhere, though it was the monument in the centre of the lobby, which claimed all his attention.

"Christ..... Poor Nathan." He muttered.

It had to be a monument, that was the only way it made any sense at all. All the bodies had been scooped up into a heap, which almost touched the ceiling high above him. Not a perfect construction, bloody corpses were obviously a difficult material to build with. Part of the pyramid of bodies had collapsed slightly, but the monument was still very impressive. Right at the front of it, spread-eagled and ripped apart, was the body of Nathan Rinella. His eyes had been taken, but his face still looked straight at where the hotel doors had once stood.

Somewhere deep inside him a race memory reacted to the monument, much in the way everyone instinctively fears spiders and loud noises. Harrison knew without being told that the monument

built from the dead was important to the phantoms. They were there of course, doing their trick of hiding in the beams of sunlight.

“Why ? Why all this ?” Harrison yelled. “And why spare me ?”

Movement at the back of the lobby, but just the hint of an arm, a leg, the side of a head before it vanished into a shadow. Lots of them now, using the Wilkinson as some form of ancient temple. Calling his name again, all of them calling out to him. Quiet voices like leaves rustling in the wind, all calling out his name.

“I just don’t..... Understand.” He mumbled.

As he turned she was there, close enough to touch without moving. An old face, barely recognisable as human, but they probably weren’t human. Harrison had expected them to have wings, but there were none. Arms with claws instead of hands and those dreadful white eyes. He didn’t feel threatened as she moved towards him. Definitely a she, from her general body shape and the breasts. Old though, he picked up an impression of immense age, too long to even comprehend.

“Talk to me..... Tell me why ?” He asked.

Her head was level with his as she moved forward. For a moment he thought she might be about to kiss him on the lips. The Angel of Death moved slowly through him though and for a second or two, they shared the same space. He now understood. An offer had been made to him, of a sort. A choice offered for some time in the future. She was still there, watching him with those terrible pure white eyes.

“Do you understand ?” She asked.

A beautiful voice now, loud enough to easily hear. They were all there now, no longer existing as fragments in the shadows. Strangely beautiful creatures, dancing around the monument they’d constructed. It appeared that even the unworthy, were treated with respect.

“Yes, I do.”

Harrison had run away from a lot in his life. Away from commitment, away from anything even mildly threatening. Janet was the only person he hadn’t run from. And her of course, the child he’d saved all that time ago. Emma wrapped up in the wire.... He hadn’t run then.

“Time to stop running.” He mumbled.

He walked out of the hotel lobby, as the phantoms set their monument on fire. No one would bother to try and save the Wilkinson, the people of Tehran were occupied with their revolution. Harrison turned before leaving the hotel and the monument of flesh was already an inferno. Good, no evidence left of the horror that had occurred there. Nothing for him to be asked awkward questions about, if he survived to reach somewhere safe.

Harrison H Thistle, British citizen and internal auditor for EVO, walked calmly along the centre of the main highway into the city. It was early morning and already becoming hot and sticky. He wasn’t scared though, because he now understood.

“Not everything of course, no one ever understands everything.” He mumbled.

He didn’t look back, though he did hear the noises from the hotel for a while, as it burned down. Crackling and the occasional small explosion, as the flames found a gas cylinder, or something similar. There was the smell of burning too, as the morning breeze drifted from the right direction. He understood now, obvious really. Of course they hadn’t dragged his soul away to their place for the worthy. He was only thirty five, with perhaps another fifty years ahead of him, for future brave deeds and acts of heroism.

“Not that I ever intend to set foot out of Britain again, ever.”

When his life did come to an end, she would come for him, for his soul. Then the choice would be his, to go with her to that place, or not. Harrison looked at the smoke rising in the centre of Tehran and hoped she wouldn't need to come for him too soon.

~ ~

~The End~

© Ed Cowling - June 2018

I did my usual research to set this story against the background of the Iranian Revolution. It is a work of fiction though and the Wilkinson and all those who resided there, are totally fictional.