

The Chess Board

Chapter 1

England. 16 December 2008

‘My self-esteem is not based on anyone else’s opinion of me.’

I shout with joyous defiance. I get that now. The traffic on the M4 whizzes busily past my westward-bound Mercedes, oblivious to my loud voice resonating inside the car. On this wet cold Tuesday, faint clouds of misty condensation puff above the dashing rows of vehicles, hurrying anonymously to be somewhere in the morning air, so much more fervent than on the sleepy highways of the Queensland Darling Downs, my home for the past many months.

The rented Merc is not a status statement, more a reflection of a performance requirement and availability.

I glance at my scrawled name, Spencer Avery, on the car rental agreement which I have tossed on the passenger seat. At one time, I would have been annoyed that my name and title hadn’t been neatly typed – or that the document hadn’t always have been carefully filed in the glove box. I’m so much more relaxed now as my powerful car coasts steadily onwards past Swindon and towards Bristol. Winter has stripped every tree branch; they all stand frozen; silent mournful fingers pleading to the heavens. I sense my lips curling into a smile. My zany humour has returned – I can look at the dreariness of the scene and feel the funny side – as I visualise those trees as statted sentinels, patiently waiting to be *re-leaved* by the next change of shift; to spring.

‘Don’t snow,’ they are saying – and I agree. I have grown to love a less chilling type of atmosphere. The meanings behind that thought maintain my grin, as the cruise control carries me along in the obedient lines of vehicles; impressively conforming – zombie-like. My head tilts back in a spontaneous chortle. How different the world appears. I get it. That old social con is so transparent to me now.

The dashboard display glows on two degrees Celsius – the outside temperature. It was 32° and bright sparkling sunshine when I left the Darling Downs on Friday and a humid 35° when the big jumbo lifted off into blue skies from Brisbane on Sunday – hard to leave the perfect summer but I needed to come back to Britain. I have another type of warmth coursing through my veins – with a need to share and to move on.

The dormant fields around me flash past my speeding windows – bleak; brownish-grey and grey-green, imitating the forbidding sky. I’m heading for the M5 and then down into Somerset to see my parents. I wonder what my welcome will be like. I have so much to tell them. Will they recognise the new me?

Huge signs flag the exit: Weston-Super-Mare, Bridgwater, Taunton. I’ll be turning off at Taunton and along the A358 to home, nestling in the vale.

I visualise my mother, arms outstretched, hustling me ‘into ki’chen’ with Dad standing back as fathers do. Mum laying her plate of fresh-cooked scones on a carefully-prepared table. ‘Ave one, Spencer. Special made for you. With home-made s’rawbrey jam and clo’ed cream. Your favouri’e.’

Home. It will be good to be back in the comfortable certainty of the old red-stone house; its thick walls, tiled roof and roaring hearth warding off both the cold and any threats against the family peace. I had thought I might never see this place again or feel once more the sincerity of my mother’s love. My

father's too – Mr Avery, 'draper to the communi'y' – less demonstrative perhaps but every bit as caring.

Will they understand what I have seen and lived through? I feel like an astronaut returning from space. How much do I want to tell them? They are happy in their simple village routine. What did Thomas Gray write?

*Let not ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys and destiny obscure,
Nor Grandeur hear with disdainful smile,
The short and simple annals of the poor.*

Ah, there is my more recent Cambridge heritage showing through now. And that is a whole other melting pot of images that I will need to address soon enough. For the moment, I savour the language of the old Pembroke College poet, so appropriate for my home – not exactly poor but certainly a homely lifestyle. I appreciate Gray – for his way with words but also because he was one of the few professors with the perverse self-esteem to reject an offer of poet laureate.

It says something about his sense of identity.

I tune the car radio into BBC Somerset and the accent of my childhood flows out. 'Anagram of Rose Stem – one word? C'mon all you ou' there. Wha' is i'?' The words make me feel as if I have never been away and yet I have been so out of touch. 'Somerse', of course. Wha' has bin happening in the world today?'

I know I am grinning as I listen to the prattle – friendly and a bit nutty.

Apart from a sad catalogue of winter traffic accidents, the news is about people in Yeovil buying Christmas food parcels for the homeless; someone has been convicted of a terrorism attack on Glasgow Airport; the US consumer price index is falling and a bailout of American car-makers is a molar-gnashing concession as the world faces a financial crisis.

This is the local Somerset news channel but it has such a ring of familiarity. My mind is back in the Queensland bush in prescient discussions; a prophetic hint of what might now be unfolding on the world scene. What an adventure has enveloped me over these past few months – wrapped in the

strands of the mysterious chain of events that had their genesis years before – and played out on the fascinating palette of Australian social priorities. But I was such a different person back then...

Melbourne, Australia. 17 April 2008

‘Dr Spencer Avery, sir?’ the chauffeur enquired of me with butleresque politeness. I gave a half-smiling nod as the appropriate response.

Tullamarine airport was bustling; faces alive, alert, thirsty for the next challenge. How wise Toby had been to suggest this sabbatical opportunity.

I would show them – esteemed lecturer arriving from the old country. I felt appropriately valued and important.

How bright the colours had seemed as the plane came in to land. This was my first impression of Australia. The greens were greener and the reds redder. An optical illusion or the visual promise of a new beginning?

Young men with loose-limbed gaits, clad in orderly dark suits. A silver-haired man in pin-stripes stood easily at a baggage carousel beside a laughing family in Polynesian shirts. An electrician and his apprentice, in navy work clothes and boots, grinned as they left the area carrying their tools. Business people, workers, holidayers.

I flicked my casual shirt collar and dusted a hair from my blue jacket. Everything about my dress was quality from the brown Italian shoes to the patrician way I had learned to carry myself – lessons absorbed well.

I had arrived and it felt good.

Outside, the scent of eucalyptus. After the chilly departure from a late London winter, the balmy breeze and blue skies made for a welcoming embrace.

I was the epitome of a young English gentleman breathing the Australian air and walking elegantly to the waiting limousine. This would indeed be the start of a new chapter, a catalyst to even more promise in the years ahead, as I approached the decade of my thirties.

But alas, I didn’t understand that the board on which my future would play out had been laid in place long before, not least...

Kiev, USSR. 15 October 1971

She turned again to look at the vanishing aircraft but it had disappeared into the pale Ukrainian sky.

Silently she mouthed her goodbye, ‘*Dosvedanya*’.

What would her six-year-old know of the finality of separation? To him, he was off on a holiday to Australia with Aunt Nina – but Olga knew what it really was. Farewell.

Her Pyotr had gone – only the pain remained; even harder than the funeral of her husband. She panted gently to breathe.

No moisture left for tears. Very slowly her heartbeat steadied and the sharp sadness soothed into a dull oppressive ache.

The cold Friday breeze rolled fragile autumn leaves across the roadway as she left the terminal building.

The soldier, solemn, inscrutable, watched her lonely walk to the car. He held the door open for her. The red pennant on the bonnet fluttered lamely.

She took her seat in the back of the vehicle and, with her grief, moved off to the future she had to serve.

Chapter 2

London, 20 April 2008

Muted city lights glistened over the dark ripples of the Thames. Nocturnal traffic scuttled along famous streets and across river bridges, unaware of the clandestine conversation happening high above. Behind a fifth-floor window, three figures stared out over that peaceful nightscape.

‘Sidorov is indeed dead then, confirmed by Moscow? Suicide or murder?’ The first raised his dark eyebrow in question.

‘My guess is murder, bullet to the head – the end result is the same. It was four months ago. Hushed up by the FSB,’ the second replied.

‘Mmm.’ The third stroked his chin, as he absorbed the information. ‘The current agents in the new Russian Federal Security are just as callous as their KGB predecessors.’ He paused. ‘So only one still remains. Is the plan now fully in place for Australia?’

‘*Our* plan is, but possible enemy moves are less predictable,’ the second affirmed.

‘Any whispers that we are on to them?’ The first man turned from the view, in question.

‘My word is they are too sure of themselves to worry. Cocky bastards.’ The second replied in a mocking tone. ‘But they have the name. That’s what we know at present. We are monitoring. We don’t know exactly which groups are following the trail.’

‘Will we warn the Aussies?’ the first asked

A sly grin framed the second’s reply. ‘The less they know the better, don’t you think?’

‘Fine, Old Fruit. Let’s stay alert.’ A half-chortle shook the first’s shoulders.

‘Agreed,’ replied Old Fruit, the second. ‘But we want to know of chatter from anywhere.’

They both looked toward the third man for his confirmation.

‘Okay.’ The third man’s slow nod signalled his support. He flicked a wisp of grey hair from his forehead and absently rubbed the wrinkled brow. ‘Okay.’

Let the Australians deal with the distracters as per normal. We can be there quietly for the coup de grâce. This is too big to let anyone get the jump on us.'

A river-ship's horn trumpeted faintly from a colourful barge of discoing partyers, as the three figures chinked glasses in a toast.