SHILLINGSTONE STATION

PART ONE

EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF EDWARD FLEET

1960

As the train lurched away with a muscular jolt from the dimly lit station, two raggedy figures barely managed to stop themselves falling into the compartment, propelled through the narrow doorway as if by a passing rugby forward.

"Watch where you're steppin', Tommy!" said the woman, turning back to glare from under a soft hat at the companion who had caught her heels. He was wearing a similar coat to hers, a dirty green waxed jacket, hanging open, and his balding head shone with perspiration.

"Sorry, my lover," he answered, peering from behind her bulky frame into the space occupied by a single passenger, a young gentleman in a dark suit sitting by the window with an open book in his hand.

"This'll do, Jessie," he went on, ushering her towards a middle seat opposite the fellow. "Put your basket up there in the rack and I'll get myself comfy here by you."

Very gradually the train picked up speed, thick clouds of smoke pushed high into the night sky above the locomotive, its steel wheels rolling ponderously over the rail-tracks heading south. Within seconds the couple had filled the space with the fetid smells of stale animal fat and cheap perfume.

Wiping a crumpled handkerchief over his brow and addressing the man who had only briefly looked up from his book to acknowledge their inelegant entry, the man coughed and then spoke.

"Evenin', sir. Sorry to disturb you like that, I'm sure. Don't you worry, sir, you'll have some peace and quiet again very soon, if that's what you're after. The wife and me won't be on for very long, will we, Jessie? Next stop, that's ours. We'll leave you in peace at Stur."

"Don't worry, that's quite alright," replied the younger man curtly, his accent noticeably more refined than the unpolished Dorsetshire burr of the old couple. Edward Fleet was not averse to company, a short to and fro of conversation was welcome enough as a rule. In fact he had shared a pleasant dialogue with a rather plain but amiable and well-proportioned woman only a little older than himself, not to mention her bar of milk chocolate, during half an hour of her company shortly after changing trains to join the Somerset & Dorset line at Bath Green Park. At this stage of his long journey from Bristol on a rickety, draughty stopping train, however, the truth was that he was no longer in the mood to be gregarious. It was late October, it had been a gloomy sort of day from the start, and the afternoon light was already fading as his taxi had swung on to the forecourt at Temple Meads what now seemed an age ago; he simply

wanted to reach his destination, to untie his shoes, loosen his tie and lie on his hotel bed with a large glass of Scotch.

There was a fragile moment of unease, the space between them filled with uncertainty. Edward sensed in the man an itch to communicate, yet for his part he could feel himself already losing interest. He tried to remember where he had left off his reading. Theatrically lifting his book, he smiled at the countryman and then looked away, back to his own reflection in the carriage window, the soft yellow glow of the electric lamps lending his face a surreal sheen. He swept his thick dark fringe back across his forehead and studied again how his left-sided parting looked oddly right-sided in the glass.

"We've been over to see the daughter and her fella."

The man, Tommy, was speaking to him again.

"And the new grandchild," chirped in his wife, who, having unbuttoned her raincoat, was now leaning back into her seat and kicking off her shoes with the ease of someone relaxing in front of the fire in her own parlour.

Basic politeness dictated that the least Edward should do was re-engage eye contact.

"That's nice," he said.

The woman returned a slightly crooked smile.

"They've got a nice little cottage by the market square in Stalbridge, they have. Since just a month ago gone. Rented elsewhere for a year or two afore that, didn't they, Tommy? You know the village, sir?"

"No. No, I don't," answered Edward with a patient smile. "I'm not from the area, as a matter of fact."

The woman's blank look seemed to demand some addendum.

"I'm a tourist, I suppose," he said.

"On your holidays, then?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"You'd like a smoke, wouldn't you, sir?" The man had pulled out a squashed packet of cigarettes from inside his coat and was offering a protruding one across the gap between the seats. It was a Woodbine, one of the foul gaspers that Edward had had the misfortune to inhale with some of the squaddies once on a training course.

"No, thank you. Very kind, I'm sure, but really, I don't."

I don't smoke shit like that, he wanted to say. *I'm a Rothmans man, filtered, naturally,* he wanted to say. *And smoke yours out there in the corridor,* he wanted to say, *with the window wide open, if you don't mind.*

Tommy struck a match, lit up his cigarette and sat back to enjoy it.

"Mild for the time o' year," he offered, exhaling harsh tobacco smoke towards the carriage ceiling. "For late October, I'd say."

Edward pretended not to hear.

"The boy's our first." It was suddenly the wife speaking again, looking up from a bunion beneath her sock.

"Is he?" enquired Edward passively after a deliberate hesitation.

"Little Joseph. Our first grandchild. Lovely little lad. Sweet-natured. Not a cryer at all. Just like his mother, ain't that right, Tommy? Just like Lucy was. No bother. No

trouble, as a baby, was she, Tommy? You remember how very sweet-natured she was back along?"

The husband nodded and flicked a little ash on to the floor.

"Little Joseph's just the same. You got any family?" she prodded, looking straight into Edward's vacant eyes.

"Sorry?"

"Do you have little uns? At home somewhere?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. I have a small son."

"That's nice. A little boy, eh? Just a nipper, then? How old?"

Edward sighed without disguise and slowly opened his palm to indicate five.

"That's a nice age, isn't it, though?" she said. "I'm bettin' you spoil him, don't you? I can tell you're a proper family man, you're readin' a story there called *Mother*. Am I right?"

"Yes. In translation, sadly. It's about the Russian Revolution."

The woman looked puzzled.

"Oh," she said, with a blank smile.

Edward had never been averse to playing the intellectual superiority card. He could have added: *One of the Realists I never quite managed to finish when I was up at Cambridge*, but he had already achieved the desired effect.

"Leave the fella alone, Jessie," the husband said with a mock glare to his wife and a wink to Edward. "I'm sorry. My wife is a nosy beggar, and that's the truth. Give the fella a bit o' peace, love."

The woman, unnecessarily reprimanded in public, straightened in her seat and assumed a sulky expression. Edward was unconvinced that it wasn't an act. Ten more minutes under her interrogation and he would have found himself obliged to tell her his entire life story, never mind explaining what he was doing on the late train to Bournemouth West, holidaying alone, out of season.

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The only son of a retired Tory MP from one of the more prosperous of the English shires, Edward Fleet was a professional undercover operative, he could have told her, working on behalf of Her Majesty's Government. He had never planned on becoming a spy, he could have added, but when his ambitions to join the Royal Navy Officer corps after Cambridge reached the antennae of the watchers, and when his philosophy tutor, the heroic Arundel (*Cooperman* to his acolytes), took him to one side, bought him a pint of Guinness in the snug in the Red Lion and whispered in his ear, the idea took root. When the special visitors to the Academy praised him for his fierce intelligence, his resourcefulness, his supreme clear-sightedness under pressure, and when he was made to understand his value to the Crown as both a ranking naval officer *and* a secret agent, then flattery and his own pride blended with a sense of duty made the decision as easy as it was inevitable.

The younger Edward Fleet, the slim, twinkly-eyed, loquacious student from Marlborough, had breezed into Trinity College with breathtaking confidence, a conscientious learner, a voracious reader of German then later Russian, and yet a chap with an eye always open for the pretty girl. With a couple of good-looking pals whose

company he found amusing, he became one of the *flâneurs* of the streets around Newnham and Girton, and it took him very little time to earn a reputation as what was politely termed *a ladies' man*. Though he had been a decent athlete at school, he eschewed the sweaty, competitive masculinity of college sports and for a time developed the persona of an aesthete, *der junge Philosoph*. To attract attention he would play his favourite role as the devil's advocate. *Stalin in his time must be considered to be far less of a threat to Western civilization, whatever that might be, than Bonaparte ever was in his,* he liked to say, with the flourish of a sneer, to stir up a room. *There was more musicality in the works of Gershwin, Porter and Rodgers than anything in the entire Mozart oeuvre*. Or, flippantly, *One day the Japanese will thank the Americans for dropping an atom bomb on Hiroshima.* With some friends he joined a theatrical set, just for fun, happy to be led along by the drama students and play the joker in front of the dazzling young women.

It was in the January of his second year, at the very start of 1950, that the two émigré girls arrived, smuggled out of Soviet Latvia to be placed, at the financial cost to unknown benefactors, in the bosom of the English educational elite. Two strikingly blond sisters, Katarina and Erika, one year between them, both blisteringly intelligent, appeared together at a party for Newnham girls one frosty evening and Edward was determined within minutes of meeting them to have one, either, even both before the term was out. Katarina, the elder, was perhaps the more classically beautiful: eyes of sapphire, skin of silk, sharp symmetrical features below an angelic brow. Her English was superior too, and throughout the late winter months they became great friends, a golden couple. Separate college lives could not keep them apart for long; they walked, went together to pubs and concerts, recitals and galleries and parties, and there was nothing at all to stop them becoming furtive lovers. But Katarina had been too easy for Edward. In the summer term he ditched her for her sister as carelessly as he abandoned his winter coat and scarf.

Erika was more abrasive, elusive, not quite such a romantic cliché. She had hot sparks deep in her soul where Katarina had only sugared strawberries and custard. She affected a taste for little café-crème cigars, which he found amusing. She liked to provoke an argument with him, a sparky bout of verbal swordplay, which he found arousing. She despised Tchaikovsky as much as he revered him, she adored Beethoven with a passion equal to his conviction that the German's music was predictable and therefore drab in its composition. She was a follower of contemporary American cinema whereas he found it low-brow. He tried to convince her of the value of Italian renaissance art but she had little time for Catholicism in any guise. And so it went on. What brought them together, he supposed, was a shared sense of the absurd, a mutual physical attraction and a love of all things English. To him, Cambridge was the apogee of the civilised English way; to Erika, a Latvian girl with a mind full of questions, fleeing the locked society imposed by diktat from Moscow, England, with its freedoms and opportunities, with its fresh green lawns, with its tea and crumpets and its effortless good manners, with its cultured, dignified architecture seemingly bathed in permanent sunshine, this slice of England was to her simply the promised land.

Edward found that sex with Erika, a more defiant, wilful creature, was more rewarding, more intense. And it was the younger sister that, to no-one's surprise, he married in 1954, and although Katarina had since moved on, for she had men hovering

over her like bees around summer lavender, her relations with her new brother-in-law were not quite so cordial ever again.

Edward Fleet's double life, working both for Her Majesty's Navy and quietly but rather more frequently these days for an indistinct section of the SIS, was no secret to his wife. Following his officer training he had served three months in the Mediterranean and then briefly on a patrol of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf before they found him a small office in the Admiralty and an even smaller one in a draughty prefab in Portsmouth's naval dockyard. Exceptionally for a recruit of his age he was allowed on to the margins of strategic planning. From time to time he was absorbed into the secret world and became a ghost. He reported for training camps in Scotland, on the Suffolk coast, in the port city of Copenhagen. His instructions came predominantly from a quietly spoken intellectual of a man called Johnston, a fleshy Scot, dressed like a badly made bed but with eyes of ice and an intensity of stare to stop a clock. Edward listened to Johnston's wisdom with respect - he was indeed a man of substance who deserved it - but part of him guessed that although the Scot spoke the lines, they had been written for him in Cambridge by Cooper Arundel. Sometimes as he watched his lips move and the spittle fly from his mouth he heard only the soft West Country accented words of his mentor, and in his imagination, the Trinity clock-tower bell peeling in the background.

And what had been overwhelming at first, memorising lists of addresses, alphabetically ordered names, catalogues of codes (the absolute minimum to be ever written down), routes to safe houses, numbers of left luggage lockers, all was now second nature. He had his methods of communication, his tradecraft, his hiding places, his escape routes, his hardware, his protection, his instincts honed. He had been taught how to observe, how to act when being observed, how to draw attention and how to be inconspicuous, how to listen and how to make people listen to him. Johnston had issued him with ammunition and two firearms: a lightweight Browning for operations and an old army stock Webley Mark IV as an emergency back-up, which he had decided to grease up liberally, wrap in tight rolls of thick plastic tape and bury under the roots of a beech tree which shaded the headstone of his mother's grave in a quiet corner of Highgate cemetery.

Erika had been cleared by a security vetting team shortly before their marriage, his mission to undermine Soviet intelligence chiming perfectly with her unforgiving hatred of Russia. Whereas Katarina had suppressed her bitter memories of Latvia, a woman greedily breathing in the sweet air of the west in denial of her pain, Erika never let the fire burn itself out, her desire for revenge in check, cloaked, controlled but never extinct. Her father, Andris, the owner of a fish processing plant in Riga which had functioned satisfactorily throughout the war, even during the Nazi Occupation, had been forced to hand over operations in 1947 to a Soviet management committee. He had no option but to cooperate, but, fatally for him as it turned out, he was persuaded to join a secret resistance movement. Thousands of like-minded men and women were rounded up in the spring of 1949 and put on to goods trains bound for Siberia. Erika had never seen her father since the morning of his arrest when he had been ripped from his bed-sheets before sunrise. Her mother remained in Riga, a broken woman, aging visibly from one day to the next until she became shrunken and hollow and snowy-haired years before her time.

With regard to her new husband's role Erika was afforded only the broadest of brushstrokes with absolutely no fine detail, which suited everybody concerned. Post-war life in London was hard but she knew how lucky she was to be there. Although Edward's Russian was functional she helped him from time to time with technical papers. She did a little private teaching, bits and pieces of writing, mostly polemics on Baltic affairs for the émigré community, but ever since the first day of February 1955, Edward understood that the true centre of her life was a son. Andris Henry Fleet, born three weeks prematurely shortly after midnight at Charing Cross Hospital, Agar Street, WC1, was her focus, her flame, her very heart from that day on.

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Edward Fleet allowed himself a smile of self-satisfaction. As far as he could tell his wife had everything that she needed. The boy was five years old and still seemed to take all of her attention. A second child had not been seriously considered. The woman could not share her love of their son with another. Not yet, anyway. She had little enough left for her husband as it was. Edward had seen this before in marriages: colleagues, friends of his whose wedding-day passions faded to the stale bread of drudgery when a child arrived. He still loved Erika, though their arguments, once a source of energy, a friction to light a spark, were becoming more surly and left only sullen, cold silences. No matter. He had made plans, he knew plenty of people who could introduce him to beautiful women, and his time in Denmark hadn't been taken up entirely with matters operational. He still knew how to set a girl's heart aflutter. He still kept a full address book out of sight, but not out of service.

The train had crossed the dark flat water of a river and was gradually coming to a rickety halt. The couple opposite, mercifully quiet for the past five minutes, were already standing to fasten their coats. Edward watched their reflected movements in the window, ostensibly peering into the darkness as the sparse street lights of the town began to give definition to houses, a garage, the shadows of a goods yard, a squat brick signal box. Sturminster Newton, he managed to read. The wife straightened her hat and fiddled with the strands of grey hair that protruded from beneath it while the husband lifted down the wicker basket from the rack. The contents were covered with a red and white gingham teacloth: fruit and vegetables, a cake perhaps, or something more sinister, Edward wondered in amusement.

"Goodbye," said the woman, refreshing the crooked smile. "You be havin' a nice holiday, won't you."

"This is our stop," added the man redundantly.

"Well, goodbye to both of you," offered Edward, turning his head towards them and adding a little half salute.

"Good evenin', sir," said the man, edging towards the compartment's outer door, placing his large leathery hand on the handle in anticipation. "Enjoy the rest o' your journey, now, won't you. Safe landin's."

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The train sat at the platform for two or three minutes, its engine hissing like an ill-tempered cobra, doors being slammed shut, whistles being blown, several passengers coming and going. Edward Fleet had opened the compartment window as far down as it would go for a moment to let the cool air drift into the fug. Outside hung the smell of burning coal. He had watched the grandparents waddle off into the distance until they were out of sight, and he had studied the figures waiting to board. He could hear a group laughing loudly, settling into the compartment behind his: two young couples, he had noticed them skylarking on the platform, as if they had been drinking. Outside in the corridor nobody passed by, nobody appeared at his door to disturb him; he had the impression that the next compartment up ahead was empty. There was another shrill whistle from outside, he raised the window, another door banged shut somewhere down the line, and the tired beast once again flexed its muscles to haul the coaches, reluctantly it seemed, out of the station's patchy yellow light and onwards into the night.

Relieved to be sitting alone, Edward considered his features reflected in the window once again: he really did have the most perfectly noble nose. He straightened his tie and slipped the novel into a slim black attaché case half concealed between his body and the wall panel of the carriage. He had had enough of reading for the moment. The lighting in the compartment was poor and his eyes had grown weary from the strain. He rubbed them with his smooth, bent knuckles.

Suddenly the door from the corridor slid open with a harsh clack.

"Hello there. These seats aren't reserved or anything, are they?"

Edward refocused his eyes to take in a tall man in a dark grey business suit, about his own age, facing him from inside the door, an inquisitive smile on his thin, angular face.

"No. No, be my guest."

Where had this chap come from? He was smartly dressed, had short fair hair, an athletic gait, and Edward had seen nobody like him on the platform at the previous station. Had he decided to change seats, change compartments part way through his journey?

"I don't believe there are any reserved seats at all on this train," he added.

"Righto. Thanks," said the man, stepping briskly into the space between the banquettes. He was carrying a small matt black leather suitcase which, before taking the seat across from Edward that the countrywoman had vacated, he placed in the luggage rack above Edward's head, adjacent to his fellow traveller's caramel-coloured ELF-monogrammed valise.

"You're a businessman, like me, I suppose?" asked the man abruptly. Edward wanted a conversation with the newcomer no more than he had desired engagement with the grandparents.

"Yes, I am," he answered curtly, taking in the man's clothes and shoes in the same parabolic glance.

"Livingstone," said the man. "Fine china and glassware. Pleased to meet you."

He offered his hand across the diagonal divide. Edward coughed to clear his throat.

"Likewise, I'm sure. Fitzgerald," he lied. "Edwin Fitzgerald. Insurance."