

It's every bit as difficult to pick a spy out of a crowd as you would expect. Take that woman across the road, the one in the black coat and red scarf, the one who's let three buses come and go in the last ten minutes. Is she one of us? She's certainly staring at this building with an intensity that suggests something beyond idle curiosity. If she is one of us, why doesn't she just cross the road and come in like anybody else? I suppose it might be first-day nerves, or she could be a visitor – a lawyer, a police officer, a civil servant – although they usually carry a briefcase or folder for their papers, and they tend to have a compliant, institutionalised look about them that's worryingly absent in her.

This woman is the reason there's no collective noun for spies, if she even is a spy, which I'm beginning to doubt. The problem is there's no single distinguishing characteristic shared by everyone who works here, other than an ability to pass unnoticed as we go about our business. 'An order of monks', 'a murmur of nuns' – the best ones speak directly to the core of a group identity, but if that core is unknowable by design then you're left clutching at straws. Ideally it would be something allusive and ambiguous, as in 'a congregation of alligators', or a term that introduces itself as one thing but is secretly another, like 'a circle of friends', which sounds warm and fuzzy unless you're on the outside trying to get in. I

suppose that's true of every group. Our power lies in the ability to close ranks and exclude. Groups are all well and good if you're on the inside, but if you're not, if you're out there on your own, don't take it as a threat if I point out that it's only a matter of time before a murder of crows turns in your direction.

She's still there. In normal times I wouldn't give it a second thought. A woman stands looking at a government building – it's hardly enough to bring the police running. But these aren't normal times. I don't want you to get the wrong impression. At this very moment over 535 intelligence operations – a new record – are being run out of this building, both in the UK and overseas, targeting Islamist terrorists, foreign spies, people smugglers, Kremlin apparatchiks, government whistleblowers, Republicans and Loyalists, rogue scientists, a handful of journalists, two MPs and one member of the royal family (not the one you think). The Chinese have recently upgraded their assessment of the combined UK global intelligence capability from 'moderate' to 'significant'. We consistently hit our recruitment targets, staff retention is at an all-time high, projections suggest a small budget surplus and we have already disrupted seven attacks on UK soil this year. Whichever way you look at it, this is an organisation at the top of its game.

Having said all that, having said all that . . .

She's still there, you know. Another bus has come and gone but she's still there.

The thing is, and I'll state it plainly, we are temporarily carrying an unacceptable level of risk arising from one or two significant errors of judgement. I wish it wasn't so. We'll get through it, as we always do, but you'll have to bear with me if I'm a little jittery until that particular case is behind us. It's going to be fine, it really is. I can't imagine why I worried for a moment that a woman at a bus stop might pose any sort of threat to us. In any case, it looks like

she's moving on. Thank goodness for that. I don't want to go on about it but there's something about her I really don't like. Call it instinct, call it experience, call it what you want. I'm just thrilled she's not coming in here.

She's coming in here.



But who is she coming to see? She's using the visitors' entrance so she's not a member of staff. Security will keep her busy for a good ten minutes. There's two men loitering in the lobby. I would ignore them – it looks as though they're on their way out rather than expecting a visitor – until I hear one of them say:

'I'm not supposed to tell you any of this.'

They're not words you ever want to hear in this place. Secrets are secrets for a reason.

'Go on,' says the other one.

'First day of the course, this is what they do. Someone hands you a screwdriver and says you've got twenty minutes. You're pushed into a pitch-black room. You think: is the screwdriver a weapon? You wave it around, heart racing, can't see or hear anything. Eventually you calm down. You feel your way around the walls, then cross the room with your arms outstretched. There's stuff on the floor. Wood, screws. Those little plastic things. It's a piece of flat-pack furniture. Alright, you think – this is the task: I've got to assemble a piece of furniture in the dark. There's even a sheet of paper, probably the instructions or something.'

'Why's that there?'

'A joke, I suppose. They like a joke. Anyway, you get to work, feeling for the holes and making a guess about what goes where, working as fast as you can. Then the lights go on—'

‘What is it?’

‘A bed.’

‘A bed?’ says the other one.

‘Well, barely a bed, seeing as how you did such a bad job. Half the slats are missing, it’s got three legs, headboard’s upside down. This is the kicker, though. Do you know what they tell you then? As an incentive to do better next time?’

‘Oh, I know. That’s clever. For the rest of the course, it’s *your* bed.’

‘Worse than that,’ he says. ‘It’s your *instructor’s* bed.’

Let’s move on.



Italics not mine. I should make this clear. Italics theirs. Italics always theirs. Think of me as a pane of glass, nothing more. I might choose where to look, I’ll give you that. But what happens out there, the way the world is, that’s nothing to do with me. Got it?



Two floors up, around the other side of the building, the side facing the Thames. A sign on the door: Media and Communications. This one’s a team meeting of some kind.

‘How many likes did we get for the post last night?’ says the senior officer.

This lot are a good bet because they invite all sorts of people into the building, including journalists, and I wonder if the woman in the red scarf is a journalist. She’s got that hungry, burrowing look about her.

‘Just over four thousand – a new record. Instagram loves nothing more than letters from children wanting to be spies.’

‘We should get the crayons out, start writing them ourselves,’ he says. ‘What are we doing next?’

‘Another one in the Pathways Into Intelligence series. I’m thinking: single mum, left school at fifteen, saw an ad in the local paper, it’s a really supportive environment, look what I’ve ended up doing.’

‘Jan’s been pestering me to get involved,’ he says. ‘If you need a photo of your single mum, I mean. One of those moody anonymous ones on the bridge.’

‘Please God,’ says someone else. ‘Not the bridge again. What is it about spies and bridges?’

‘Cold War spy swaps?’

‘Wasn’t it Waterloo Bridge where that bloke got jabbed with a poisoned umbrella?’

‘Perhaps a bridge is a kind of no man’s land,’ says yet another, they’re all getting involved now. ‘Symbolically, I mean. Suggestive of passing from one state to another, in the way that a spy moves between countries, between identities, between missions, between loyalties even, I suppose, although it might be an etymological stretch, between—’

Alright, that’s enough of that. It doesn’t sound like they’re expecting a visitor. Perhaps it’s time to go upstairs.



‘The fact remains, Sir William, that a complaint has been made from within your organisation, by one of your own officers. We are taking it seriously. We urge you to take it seriously too.’

Two men, no more than five years between them. Suits, of course.

‘An *anonymous* complaint.’

‘Your point being?’

‘That the complainant’s wish to remain anonymous raises questions about their credibility,’ says Sir William.

‘I’m surprised to hear a spy chief express such an opinion.’

‘Our sources are not anonymous, Julian. We know exactly who they are. We just don’t tell you. It’s quite different.’

We’re on the top floor, where Sir William Rentoul, the Head of the Service, has his office, along with the rest of the senior leadership team. The official line is that high-level foreign visitors are impressed by the views from up here, and in an organisation dedicated to the application of unseen pressure, that line holds considerable sway. Less frequently mentioned is the report from the Explosive Ordnance Engineering Department at the Ministry of Defence that refers to the ‘absorbent quality’ of staff on lower floors.

‘Nonetheless you must appreciate that some people may prefer to speak from the shadows,’ says Julian. ‘The new system allows for precisely this – it allows for an internal complainant who fears repercussions to choose anonymity.’

‘There would be no repercussions. We welcome whistleblowers.’

‘Nobody welcomes whistleblowers, Sir William. That’s the point of whistleblowers. Look, it has been a long-standing wish of the Intelligence and Security Committee that your officers should be able to contact us directly if they wish to raise a concern. The journey to this point has been lengthier and more arduous than any one of us anticipated, but we have arrived, as has our very first complaint.’

‘Julian—’

‘This entire journey will have been utterly pointless if we do not treat that complaint seriously.’

‘I am not suggesting that we ignore anything,’ says Sir William. ‘I am simply introducing the possibility that this complaint may be intended to make mischief. Now, we in the intelligence community

have vast experience in the assessment of unsourced information. It's what we do, day in, day out. With the greatest of respect, I worry that your Committee is not qualified to look into this.'

'Surely you're not suggesting that you mark your own homework.'

'Julian, your Committee is made up of politicians. Together you have an important oversight role, yes, but you have no experience of running investigations.'

'The Committee itself would not carry out the investigation.'

'Please elaborate.'

'May I ask Aphra to join us?'



Still wearing the red scarf, the woman from the bus stop stands in the open doorway for a moment longer than is necessary, amid the bright piney yellows and oranges of Sir William's outer office. It's not reluctance or hesitation. She tilts forward, dips her nose into the gloom that awaits her as though into a wine glass, breathes deeply of oak, of tobacco, of whisky notes, of the deep dark tannins that come together when serious men say serious things. I don't see her hazel eyes closing but I see them snap open. A long, thin face with one of those strong chin-mouth combinations, pushing outwards, like the beginning of a muzzle, like a telescope.

'Aphra, please, do come and join us,' says Julian Redruth, although it's not his place to invite a guest into someone else's office. He knows it too. It's what they call a micro-aggression. 'May I introduce you to Sir William, the Head of the Service?'

She steps forward, her hand extended.

'It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir William.'

No surname either, from the pair of them. Why not drop the 'sir'

too, high-five the man? Sir William Rentoul shakes her hand. It's all information to him. Sir William's an old agent handler, he knows when to assert and when to absorb.

'Please, have a seat,' he says. 'A Scot. Where are you from, Aphra?'  
'North of Edinburgh.'

'I understand you're an investigator. Does that mean that you were once a police officer?'

'I was an academic.'

'Oh,' he says, raising his eyebrows towards Julian Redruth to underline his surprise, his amused delight, as though he has been handed an unexpected present. 'An *academic*. What's your area?'

'Formerly, medieval history.'

'Bring us up to the present day, would you?'

'Whatever the Intelligence and Security Committee requires me to look into.'

'Such as?'

'The history of Chinese interference, the impact of new security legislation on employment law, agency expenditure.'

'As a historian—' says Julian Redruth.

'As *an* historian, surely,' says Sir William Rentoul.

'Aphra has been trained in the close study of written texts,' says Julian Redruth. 'With your permission, she will read the file that pertains to the anonymous complaint and summarise the case history, identify gaps and assumptions, interview witnesses, draw conclusions, suggest—'

'Interview witnesses? You slipped that one in there. Many witnesses to interview, are there, in the field of medieval history?' Sir William smiles with a warmth intended to singe their grasping fingers. 'What does that require?' he says. 'A tarot deck? A Ouija board?'

Julian Redruth, formerly a Lancashire village GP, exhales audibly. This relationship between the intelligence agencies and his

oversight committee of MPs, assembled weekly up the road in the Palace of Westminster, is one characterised, at least in his experience, by obfuscation, cordiality, delay, opacity and aggression, the latter brought out on special occasions like something lifted carefully from a wooden case and shown to visitors. Put it this way: Julian Redruth never feels that he is on the winning side. He has certainly never achieved the highest purpose for which his committee was established, which is to catch the spies red-handed. The most he has managed is to arrive on the scene in time to detect the toxic whiff of something that has recently moved on. As a result, his reports are marked increasingly by such phrases as 'the Committee was disappointed to learn' and 'it is a matter of some regret' and 'despite numerous requests for'. This language is proof of his failure. No one cares about his regret or his disappointment. Julian Redruth intends to step down from Parliament at the next election and so has a little under a year to make his mark. This goes some way to explain that jiggle in his left foot. He believes, I suspect, that in this anonymous complaint, in this investigator of his, he has found a wedge with which to—

'Aphra has considerable expertise not just in assessing material but in evaluating the origin of that material,' says Julian Redruth. 'What ulterior motives may be at work, what bias, what unseen pressures have nudged the operation in question one way or the other. You yourself may find a fresh perspective illuminating. Aphra's ability to understand sources will allow—'

Sir William has had enough.

'You have led us, Julian, in your solidly competent way, to a *diagnosis* of the problem,' he says.

Call that a micro-aggression, I'll show you a micro-aggression. Sir William's smile is fast and discreet, a marker that will allow him to retrieve and feast upon this moment once he's seen off the immediate threat.

‘These words,’ Sir William continues, ‘these words we bandy around: “investigate”, “source”. For those of us who inhabit the secret world’ – hands open expansively, regretfully – ‘these terms have a different meaning. With the greatest will in the world, Aphra, what you are is a *researcher*, not an investigator. A researcher looks backwards. But an investigator looks all around, even into the future. One activity is passive, the other is active. An investigator considers risk, resource, mitigation, contagion. Live threats mutate and spread in a way that those from the Middle Ages cannot. Think of the difference between studying a dinosaur fossil and the monster itself as it rears before you. As for sources . . .’

Again, that regret. My vocation is my yoke, he seems to say.

‘In our world, a source is a creature with complex and competing motives,’ says Sir William, ‘not a dusty tome summoned from the archives with one of your little pink slips.’

‘They’re not pink,’ she says.

‘I stand corrected.’

Gracious to the end, he is, for surely this is the—

‘*Sola fide*,’ she says.

‘Excuse me?’ says Sir William Rentoul.

‘Luther’s rallying cry,’ she says, ‘expressed in his ninety-five theses that may or may not have been nailed to a church door in Wittenberg. The church said that ordinary people couldn’t understand the Bible. The church said that it was too complex for the uninitiated. They insisted upon a doctrine of sacerdotalism, according to which priests were required to act as intermediaries between God and humankind.’

She leans forward.

‘A lot of people *investigate*, Sir William. A lot of people collect information discreetly and assess its reliability. To be honest with you, a lot of people run sources, although they might not call it that. There’s really no need to pretend that you alone have that power.’

Sir William looks at her. To engage in debate with this quarrelsome woman would be to concede something he is not prepared to concede.

‘Let me speak directly to God,’ she says.

‘But my dear,’ says Sir William Rentoul. ‘You already are.’