

Sample Extract

Secrets

An Oxford Tale

By S D Anugyan

Prologue

Reports of a flying man over Port Meadow ricocheted all over Oxford round about eight a.m. Various joggers, dog-walkers and commuters were all calling their friends within minutes of the first sighting. A few attempted to take photographs but the clammy November mist was swirling in thick currents, and the man – if it were indeed a man – kept moving and disappearing, perhaps using the elements as a cloak with intent.

After about fifteen minutes of this cat-and-flying-mouse game, someone thought to phone the police for no reason other than that someone official should be informed. The police, understandably, didn't respond until receiving another call, the result being that it was after nine o'clock when a squad car arrived at Wolvercote, by which time a formidable, scattered crowd had gathered.

The two officers were slightly on edge, their initial humour evaporating as they penetrated deeper into the meadow. People would loom out of the cold white mist, shouting, run in various directions, on occasion point upwards, and take photographs or footage of what was nothing more than a blank canvas. The police were baffled, nobody could tell them for certain what was going on, and nothing was predictable.

Case in point when a large figure floated darkly just above them, chortled, and rose back into the cloud.

Chapter One – The Place of Last Light

By eleven o'clock a pale sun was shining feebly on the Port Meadow circus, which by now had become both quieter and larger, having grown

and calmed. Despite the presence of more police faced with the prospect of having nothing to cordon off, and various news crews – one of which was national – pointing their cameras in the air or at each other; and despite the mist having mostly dispersed, allowing glimpses of an occasionally blue sky; despite all this, there was nothing to be seen, and only stories to be heard.

Two men near the centre of the scattered, mildly amused crowd looked as if they would be more at home in a centrally heated office than an ice-hardened field of mud and grass, where the Thames pushed past busily, and livestock wandered, disinterestedly dropping their faeces for patent leather shoes to step in. The older of the two was dressed in a grey suit with a light blue tie against a navy shirt and, like his companion, wore a long black coat with the buttons undone. He scowled often as he talked, now and again glancing at his right shoe to make sure he had managed to scrape off everything in its entirety. He held his phone in one hand, tapping it forcefully, sporadically, as if willing it to ring – in which case he would probably be a lot more comfortable. He was about to take the initiative and call someone, anyone, and was actually punching in a number, when he caught sight of something in the distance and his craggy features deepened their scowl.

His companion, a young man less than half his age, also clean-shaven but with an innocence in his oval features his mentor could not possibly ever summon, took note of the change in expression; not literally, though he was the one carrying the clipboard, but inwardly and clearly enough to alert himself. He squinted in the low sun, its rays on his quiet features, collimated in the way his black suit – bought in a High Street sale the other week – absorbed the older man's brighter cloth. The subject of approbation was approaching from the south-east, presumably having crossed the canal and railway nearby, emerging new-born out of the thinning mist.

She was wearing a coat cape, like a black winter poncho, and a turquoise beret perched on top of her head. As she drew closer, homing in on the two men, short blonde hair could be discerned between the brightness of the cap and that of her ultramarine eyes, round features with a sharp nose and wry smile, masked occasionally with the white vapour of her breath. Her calf-high boots, unlike the men's footwear, seemed as ideal for pastoral perambulation as urban.

“Here's to global warming,” she announced, coming to a halt, the smile unrelenting in her eyes and on her lips, as she calmly appraised the men. “A few years ago we would have all been wrapped up to the nines.” Her voice was as young and chirpy as her features.

“Good morning, Miss Kiel,” spoke the older in a clipped manner. “How can we help you? Are you here to investigate the over-use of staples? Paper-clips perhaps...?”

“I'm Samantha Kiel.” She held out her hand briskly to the younger man, who accepted it, shaking it with gratitude.

“I'm Hamish Calder,” he said, glancing at his mentor as he withdrew his hand.

“Glad to meet you, Hamish.” Her attention transferred immediately to the other. “What do we have here, Malcolm? Anything valid in the story?”

Doctor Malcolm Golding, County Councillor, CEO of various enterprises, father of three successful students, eased his tendency for sarcasm, replacing it with his poker face.

“I highly doubt it. How could there possibly be?”

She looked towards Wolvercote, at the milling groups of professional and amateur onlookers.

“I may talk to a few in the ring,” she said, momentarily losing her smile before it returned just as quickly. “That is, if you don't mind.”

He gestured dismissively, as if his minding had anything to do with it.

“Don't poke any bears!” he allowed himself to bark as she wandered off.

“How could I?” she called back. “I'm sure you've already sedated them all!”

She had once said in private to a friend, that what she appreciated about Golding was the lack of pretence. Between them there was little of the usual politeness and masking of real motives, and certainly no charade of loyalty or support, even in public. She had found ironically, so early in her career, truth in politics courtesy of an inveterate liar. If he, in contrast, ever felt a modicum of respect for her ingenuousness, he never confided so, to anyone.

“Who is she?” asked his protégé, watching her disappear into the dispersed crowd, already exchanging remarks cheerfully to those nearby.

“*She* is a royal pain in the arse.”

Having allowed his customary sarcasm to resettle, he started to walk away briskly from the scene, Hamish Calder skipping at first in order to catch up.

“She is the independent councillor for Titchley. Towards Witney. She carries the popular vote easily from the herd in her area, and has used her meagre position on regular occasions to intrude into aspects of local affairs that do not concern her. She began her ludicrous campaign by examining the costs to local government through over-use of stationery supplies. Put it all together, she argued, the tax payer was forking out a considerable amount due to inefficiency. Bah!” If Dr Golding was the sort of man to spit, he would have done so. Instead his breath poured from him in savage intermittent bursts as from a steam train. “It was all stuff-and-nonsense, designed solely to gain public attention, but she used that platform to propel herself into areas that could not possibly concern her, specifically an investigation into a different type of resource, that of information.

“She's been campaigning for greater transparency, even questioning the parameters of military secrecy. An incident like this – ridiculous as it will appear to the eyes of the world – is precisely her sort of thing. Right now she will be asking, 'What information is available, and how is it being distributed to the public?'. Damn nuisance, that's what she is.”

“All this for a joke,” Calder ventured, daringly, glancing at Golding.

“It will be a joke by the time we've finished,” the other growled. “And so will she.”

Meanwhile Samantha chatted in a relaxed manner with several of the news people, most of whom she knew. Her opinion was not really valued, and her presence appeared casual, so rather than interview her they were happy to divulge any information they had, which was little. A few had photographs on their phones, given by members of the public – with fees assured for any used – but there were no clear images, Samantha saw, only dark uncertain shapes wrapped in white curtains of mist, occasionally a glimpse of what could be a face with grey hair or could be more mist, or a shoe, or the photographer's thumb.

“We can't use any of these,” admitted one newshound with a degree of sadness, “except ironically.”

Witnesses were more clear. Several had testified to the experience, that a man had been flying in the mist, swooping down then away again. A few had heard him laugh.

Samantha spoke to some, who had stayed in hope of further enlightenment, or simply to avoid going to work for the rest of the morning. The police by now had all gone.

The witnesses had little to add to the blurry photographs other than sincerity: they knew what they had experienced, and there was a totality, a wholeness, in their accounts that no camera or evidence could rival. Samantha was convinced.

She was leaving, however, when two men approached, one of whom she recognised as a resident from Titchley, one of her supporters.

“Jack, were you here?” she smiled. “That would be a coup for your club. It was flying, and it was definitely unidentified.”

“I wasn't here,” said Jack, looking around warily from under his grey woolly hat. He was, at thirty plus years, older than Samantha but always looked up to her. “You know that by the time this lot are finished...” – indicating the news groups – “...it will be just a blimp, like the 1996 incident. I wasn't here,” he repeated, “but Billy here was.”

Billy was about seventeen, looking at Samantha with the alacrity of youth underneath his anorak hood. “I was on my way to college,” Billy explained. “I called Jack after taking this.”

He handed her his phone, much more expensive than hers.

The picture was very clear. She was speechless momentarily. The men

were as subdued as ever, but pleased with her reaction.

“Have you shown anyone else this?” she eventually asked.

“Those jerks?” Jack protested. “No. And Billy knows better.”

“Can you send me the picture? I promise not to distribute it.”

He hesitated for a moment.

“Sure. Do you have bluetooth?”

“I don't know.” She fumbled for her phone.

“Let me see.” He took it from her, punched some buttons. “Yes.” He handed it to Billy. “I've activated it.”

“We don't use the mobile network for sensitive information,” he explained while Billy did his thing. “Short-range is fine. We're not *completely* paranoid.” There was a little smile, then he returned to his serious self. “You saw something, in the picture, didn't you?”

It was her turn to hesitate. She didn't know what she was getting into, who to involve. She decided partial disclosure would be best.

“You can see in that pocket an Oxford library card.”

Jack glanced at the picture again when returning her phone.

“Not clear enough for a name,” he said. “So this means...?”

“Whoever is flying around Port Meadow at dawn, mocking the powers-that-be, is an Oxford resident. It's not much to go on, but it's something.”

They had exchanged enough, Samantha thought as she headed back to her car, a connection had been furthered even if she had held a bit back. For amongst the chaos of mist and clothing, jutting out of the flying clown's pocket was not just a library card, but something else with numbers on it. She recognised the code. There were a few digits obscured, but she might be able to pin down the complete number with a bit of research.

Waiting for her at the edge of the meadow was a bright yellow Smartcar, surrounded and dominated by larger and grimmer cars and vans. Walton Well Lane was usually only this busy at weekends. She unlocked, reached into the glove box for her filofax and spread it open on the roof. Returning to the photograph on her phone, she wrote out the visible digits on a blank page and played with alternatives for the missing numbers. Satisfied, she made a call, looking at the gaunt black limbs of a dead tree, spread out over milk-glass pools of water.

“Margaret? It's Samantha Kiel here. How are you? Yes, me too. Listen. I need to track down a permit holder. I wouldn't ask if it weren't important. Thank you, yes. There are two numbers missing but we may have enough to go on.” She read out the numbers then waited. A crow rasped overhead. Otherwise, but for the sporadic rushing of passing trains on the nearby line, all was very quiet. The phone became alive again. “Really? That's *brilliant*.” She scribbled quickly. “Thank you. No, I didn't hear it from you, and we didn't have this phonecall.”

She was in luck. Most of the feasible numbers were discontinued or yet

to be issued. There was only one person whose details were valid. She made another call.

“Beverly? Yeah it's me. I'll be even later. Council stuff. Three-ish at the latest? I'll text.”

The drive into town was straightforward and took only ten minutes, there being neither commuters nor school-runs to contend with. She parked in St Giles and made her way to Cornmarket Street. The street she was looking for was at the north end and ran due east. It was tiny, almost an alleyway. Still, she mused, weaving through the mass mayhem of pedestrians, it was central and a prime location. Whoever this person was, whatever he did, he was more than fortunate despite whatever disability he had, at least in the eyes of the world.

It was an old building, as much of central Oxford was, though she didn't care one way or the other. Now an apartment complex, it was on her left as she neared the end of the cobbled street. The door, with frosted glass, a white frame and intercom, was the only modernity on the building's facade, or even in the vicinity were it not for the odd vehicle rumbling by on the stones. It was also open, thanks to several boxes of cleaning fluid, of which more were on the pavement. The janitor had obviously had a delivery. Samantha could hear movements from further down the corridor. Pausing only to read and confirm her target's name on the intercom list, she slipped inside and went straight up the rickety wooden stairs as quietly as she could. It was curious, she thought, that a disabled person would have a first floor apartment, but it did imply that he was mobile to some extent. “Mobile enough to fly?” she wondered in a moment's clarity at the absurdity of her quest, but idle thoughts were rarely, if ever, sufficient to dissuade her from her path.

There were three apartments on the dimly lit first floor, one on her immediate right as she reached the landing, one straight ahead and the last, to which she was headed, half-way along, past the next flight of stairs. Her boots knocking on the wooden floor were the only sound as she approached.

The door was nondescript faded navy blue, with the number displayed in tall black digits and a button for the bell. She could hear classical music from within. She added chimes to the soundscape when she pressed the button. The music's volume diminished slightly then slow, light footsteps could be discerned headed in her direction. She quickly reached for her phone, retrieved the picture and had it ready when the door opened.

It was a man in his late sixties, slightly shorter than her five foot six, thin and frail, with neatly groomed grey beard and hair. His soft brown eyes twinkled at her through round rim-less spectacles.

“Mr Kaplan? Mr Simon Kaplan?”

“Yes?” he smiled courteously.

“I'm Samantha Kiel. You don't know me but...I've just come from Port Meadow and...”

She had been hoping for a reaction, but there was none.

“I... Please. Look.” She showed him the picture. He peered at it but still without a visible response. “The number on the badge,” she insisted. “That is yours, is it not?”

“It's only a partial number,” he blinked. “What is this concerning?” She was put out by his lack of emotion, his blank ingenuous gaze.

“Look, Mr Kaplan, this photograph was taken this morning of a man purportedly flying.” She was whispering earnestly, not wishing neighbours to overhear.

“Oh, yes. I heard it on the news,” he chuckled. “Extraordinary what pranks children get up to these days.” His eyes widened. “You think I... Look.” He opened the door wider to reveal a large room with numerous books lining the walls, some old furniture and a kitchenette on the other side. “This is the extent of my world. I can hardly get downstairs without the use of my stick. I have food delivered, and get help once a week. How can I possibly be capable of an endeavour as extreme as these silly rumours suggest? If that is my badge, and you have no evidence it is, I have no idea how someone got hold of it to place it on a kite or whatever this nonsense is about. Good day.”

He was closing the door when Samantha, her heartbeat suddenly rising, yelled out, “I want to know the truth about aliens!”

The door stopped. There was silence. Mr Kaplan leaned forward, looking down the corridor for signs of life, then smiled, standing back, holding the door wide open.

“Come in please, Ms Kiel.”

End of 'Secrets' sample

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