Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Not Single Spies

Written by Robin Duval

Published by Matador

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

NOT SINGLE SPIES

A NOVEL

ROBIN DUVAL



Copyright © 2015 Robin Duval

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

Matador
9 Priory Business Park
Kibworth Beauchamp
Leicestershire LE8 0RX, UK
Tel: (+44) 116 279 2299
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk/matador

ISBN 978 1784622 985

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
Typeset in Aldine by Troubador Publishing Ltd

Matador is an imprint of Troubador Publishing Ltd

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C013604
FSC
www.fsc.org

To Polly, Sophie, Daisy and Matty

When sorrows come, they come not single spies
But in battalions.

Hamlet, 1602

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Five tables lined up in a row, like some ghostly convoy of death. No flood of shadowless white light. Just a wan procession of perforated steel surfaces, scrubbed and stainless, faintly gleaming in the blue radiance of a watching sensor on the wall.

Furthest from the door and detached from the rest, a sixth table. Upon it a white plastic body bag, zipped up the middle, unmistakably corpse-shaped.

Somewhere, far away, a voice talking into a telephone.

The room itself: silent.

Silent as the grave.

The Land Rover driving along the coast road had seen better days. Its khaki wings were battered and mud-spattered, its canvas roof patched and discoloured. Temporary red trade plates hung from the front and rear. It was travelling – in the half light of the dawn – without headlights or even sidelights.

Far away on the horizon, the sun was beginning to splinter the surface of the sea. For a few minutes the scene was a Rothko canvas: a slab of burnt orange, imperceptibly brightening, with the inky purple darkness of the English Channel below. The only movement was the inaudible lapping of tiny waves against the shoreline.

The Land Rover turned inland down a minor road. Buildings began to appear on either side. Shortly after it passed a thirty mile per hour speed restriction sign, a traffic camera flashed at it and it slowed sharply. A mile or so further on, as it

approached a dark complex of low buildings, it slowed further to barely walking pace, crossed a wide concourse, eased up a side alley and parked in the deepest shadows.

Five people climbed out. They were young-looking and slimly built, dressed as if for a demonstration in balaclavas and anoraks. The driver was the last to pull her woollen mask down and a whisper of blonde hair escaped across her eyes. She scrambled up onto the cab of the vehicle and threw a black bin bag over a CCTV camera bolted to the wall. Then she led the group down the alley to an open space near the rear of the largest building. She stopped at a green *Hospital Fire Assembly Point* sign with a double metal door beside it which – with no apparent effort at all – she prised open with the tips of her fingers. Three young men followed her through while the fourth stayed on watch in the alley.

As soon as she was inside she pulled an iPad mini from her pocket and a map of the layout of the building instantaneously appeared on it. She nodded towards a corridor to the left. The group broke into a brisk jog. They crossed an empty reception area – dimly lit by the same faint blue universal glow as the rest of the building – and down another corridor to another set of double doors. The woman pushed them open and walked in.

They had arrived at the mortuary.

One member of the group unzipped the cadaver on the table. Another – a small man in glasses – examined the face in the beam of a pen-light and nodded. The zip was pulled back up and the three men started to lift the body – but its rigor mortis took them by surprise and they struggled to get it past the corridor of tables. They re-formed in pairs on either side, falling into step like military pall-bearers, and retraced their course back through the building and out to the alleyway.

The waiting fourth man hurried to close up behind them. The fire doors crashed together with a sudden, shocking

clangour. Immediately, an alarm began to whoop and then another further away and a third.

The body bearers had broken into a shuffling run and were halfway up the alley to the waiting Land Rover. The rear flaps of the vehicle were still tied together and, when one of the team let go of the bag to unloosen them, the cadaver tumbled to the ground, and its head rebounded on the tarmac like a leather basketball. In a few moments of panic, they grappled the body bag into the well of the Land Rover and clambered in after it… and accelerated away in a shower of flying gravel just as three uniformed men came dashing across the concourse towards them.

Other people began to arrive. A man in a white coat sprinted up the alley waving his arms and shouting. A woman raced down a flight of steps from the main entrance and began to issue instructions. Someone found a red trade plate lying in the road near the concourse exit. Calls were made on mobiles.

As the Land Rover crashed through the gears towards the east, a second smaller vehicle quietly emerged from the car park behind the complex. It waited a few seconds. Then slipped away unnoticed in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER 2

Bryn's mind, as he drove up the M1 this misty morning, was on Oliver Cromwell.

He suspected his hero's career might be a useful demonstration of his proposition that history – for the most part – was little better than an arbitrary series of accidents.

For example, eight years before the English Civil War broke out, Cromwell planned to emigrate to Connecticut but was not allowed to do so. He was still thinking about it in 1640 and would probably have sailed, had Parliament not sided with him against the King. Instead it rebelled and Cromwell rose to become Lord Protector. When he died in 1658 he was the mightiest man in England.

So… what if Cromwell *had* taken ship to New England?

After all, there was nothing inevitable about a rebellion at precisely that time. In a different set of circumstances, Parliament could well have backed down – and postponed the day of reckoning. But would its cause have prevailed without its most effective field general and leader? Might the English have had to sort the whole problem out generations later with a revolution bloodier than the French?

And what about Cromwell himself? Might seventeenth-century America – led by the charismatic and revolutionary Oliver – might it have risen against its distant King a hundred years *earlier*? And would the capital of the most powerful country in the world now be called Cromwell, DC?

No… that was going too far.

Bryn was a popular historian. By which he meant he'd put conventional academic life behind him and opened up instead a promising vein of newspaper and magazine articles. His speciality was "alternative history": what might have happened if chance had played a different hand or other choices had been made. Indeed, in the early days, his approach had been quite lucrative. There'd even been a possibility of a series on television. Most likely tucked away with the great unwatched – the New Discovery Channel, H2, BBC Five – but with who knows what possibilities for spin-offs and syndication?

And then things started going wrong. Old colleagues characterised his method as populist and unprofessional. There had been an unbylined "editorial" attack in – of all papers – the liberal *Guardian* branding him a "postmodern fantasist" and his method a "parlour game"; calling for the restoration of traditional academic values. The flow of commissions dried to a trickle.

On top of that, since troubles never come singly, there'd been that major setback with his computer. A few weeks before, all his work had been deleted and his online bank account somehow stripped of every last penny. Of course, it could have happened to anybody. Why should anyone have a reason for targeting him personally? Some jealous professor with a sideline in cybercrime, punishing him for his academic sins… ?

At all events it became obvious, beneath the courtesies, that the bank's fraud department actually suspected him of being complicit – that he had passed on his security details recklessly or else, though they never suggested it in terms, as a deliberate act. They declined "at this moment in time" to restore the missing income and he was out of funds as well as out of work. His agent, Jean, was signally unhelpful ("perhaps we should let the dust settle a little, darling").

In all these circumstances, the offer from America had been a lifesaver.

He'd found it difficult initially to take seriously. He'd even suspected it of being a scam. It came into his computer about a week after the hacking disaster, bypassing Jean, and was from a magazine he'd never heard of and an editor whose name – he thought – was an undergrad joke. Yet when he checked out the website it was impressive enough, with articles in previous editions from writers who'd worked at Princeton, Berkeley and Stanford, all top-ranking history schools. And Mr Peabody's email – to be fair – was perfectly correct and formal, if a tiny bit unusual:

Dear Mr Williams
We are planning a special edition of History Tomorrow surveying great civil war battles and we are looking for a British contribution. Knowing your interest, we would like to commission from you five thousand words at two dollars a word on a battle of your choice. Please email agreement by return.
Yours faithfully
Dutton Peabody
Editor-in-Chief, History Tomorrow

If the money had not been so extraordinary, he might have passed the whole thing on to Jean immediately, with little expectation of a useful outcome. But he was intrigued by the ambiguous way the email was worded. Was Peabody hoping for a piece on Shiloh or Gettysburg about which Bryn (whose expertise as a "serious" academic had been the *American* Civil War) had once published a well-received account? Or would something English suit the case? He decided to play along for another email or two…

Dear Mr Peabody
How about Naseby (1645)?
Yours sincerely
Bryn Williams (MA UCL)

Hi Bryn
No problem.
Dutton

Now it really was getting interesting. He had in fact never been to Naseby. He knew very little about the *English* Civil War. And here was Peabody offering him a free ride (more than that: an exceptionally well-paid ride) into one of the more commercially attractive periods of English history. If the man was serious, perhaps he should become so too.

Dear Dutton
Naseby's the English Civil War. You're OK with that?
Best wishes
Bryn

Sure thing.
No problem.
DP

Okay… one last question then.

Dutton
Would expenses be additional to the fee?
Bryn

Sure. Would a straight grand cover it?

Wow.

Mr Peabody
If you don't mind I'll copy this to my agent who'll be in touch.
Bryn Williams

Even after he'd forwarded the thread to Jean, he still expected her to respond with one of her blunt dismissals ("I get stuff like this all the time, darling, it's bullshit, they don't have the finance, they never pay, don't waste your time"). But no dismissal came.

Instead, after a few days, he received an email informing him it was a done deal ("And by the way I've renegotiated the price so my fee is on top of it. Don't you love the Americans?"). He badly needed the cash, more so now than ever. He persuaded Jean to give him an expenses advance – reluctantly conceded – choked down any lingering reservations about the magazine's credibility, and cleared the decks for a fine new programme of research and travel.

So here he was at last, half an hour from Naseby battlefield and driving through a countryside which reminded him of New England, America. Similar names, similar topography. A few miles to his west was Sulgrave Manor, George Washington's family seat, with – a similar distance to the east – Huntingdon, the birthplace of Oliver Cromwell himself. Soon he would be driving past Althorp where the Spencers – descendants of Charles II – still lived and where the tomb of Princess Diana – wife of yet another royal Charles – sat in medieval state on an island in the middle of a lake. But of course this was Northamptonshire, the dead centre of England where all roads crossed and the great, defining battle of English history was fought three and a half centuries ago.

Cromwell had always been a hero of his – ever since as a schoolboy he had discovered that he had the same ancestral surname as his own. Mere, modest *Williams*. Because the Great Oliver was descended from the sister of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief minister. She had married a Welshman called Morgan Williams but subsequent generations had adopted the

more illustrious handle – at least until the restoration of Charles II, when the family prudently reverted to Williams again.

What's in a name indeed…

He was now entering the village of Cold Ashby, a couple of miles short of Naseby. His iPhone buzzed with a text alert and he glanced down at the screen. Brief and to the point: *dont email or call leave it to me*

He did not recognise the sender details. But the tone and content left little room for doubt. Dearest Agnete.

It was raining, just as it had been in June 1645. The approaching Parliamentary army had followed this identical route but the road then had quickly deteriorated to a sticky porridge of mud and stone. The horse-drawn supplies and heavy artillery wagons fell behind, even the infantry found it hard going, and it was Cromwell's mounted troopers who reached Cold Ashby first and promptly billeted themselves on the local peasantry – while the general registered with satisfaction the open, cavalry-friendly fields to the north between him and the King's army.

He had been trying to get hold of Agnete for a week. He'd kept her informed about his movements, including his plan to visit Naseby – but received nothing in return apart from a *where's that* text the previous day. Was she even in England? It would be nice to be told.

The light English drizzle had set in for the day. He carried on into Naseby village. It was more like a dormitory suburb now, serving Northampton or Rugby perhaps, with sprawling new-build bungalows and even a CAMRA-approved pub on the main street.

He found a parking space and picked up the iPhone and tapped in a reply: *but where are you*

Then when he tried to send it, the process aborted and a red and white exclamation mark flashed up on his screen. He thumbed back to retrieve the original text but it had completely

disappeared from his phone. He went to his "Favorites" list and tried to speed dial Agnete's normal mobile. No response. Just dead silence and a peculiar hollow resonance.

dont email or call

Darling Agnete… he would do as she instructed, leave it to her, think of other things…

He drove on, trying to focus on the article he would have to write. Perhaps he could make something of the proximity of Althorp and Diana – his American readers would like that. The Spencer family's demotic origins, for instance – the clue (again) was in the name. The first of their line had rendered himself useful to William the Conqueror as his steward – his "Dispenser" in Norman French – and then built the family fortune through hard work, a slice of the action, and good connections. Very American.

Meantime another hard worker was doing the exact same job for the King of Scotland. *His* descendant married a princess and created a new dynasty: the Steward became Stewart. The name persisted in this form until Mary Queen of Scots – while she was briefly Queen of France – amended it to "Stuart" to break the French court's tedious habit of mispronouncing the "w" as if it was a "v".

And then it all came together with Charles II, two of whose illegitimate children were the ancestors of Diana Spencer. With the consequence that her son would be the first descendant of that prolific monarch to mount the English throne – uniting at last the whole legion of royal stewards in a single individual.

It seemed to Bryn that his article was half-written already.