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Real Tigers

Written by Mick Herron

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Real Tigers

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JOHN MURRAY

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To Eleanor

I

LIKE MOST FORMS OF corruption, it began with men in suits.

A weekday morning on the edge of the City; damp, dark, foggy, not yet five. In the nearby towers, some of which reached upwards of twenty storeys, random windows were lit, making haphazard patterns in the glass-and-steel grids, and some of those lights meant early-bird bankers were at their desks, getting a jump on the markets, but most were a sign that the other City workers were on the job, the ones who wore overalls and whose pre-dawn tasks involved vacuuming, polishing, emptying bins. Paul Lowell's sympathies were with the latter. You either cleaned up other people's messes or you didn't – and that was the class system for you, right there.

He glanced at the road below. Eighteen metres was a fair distance, viewed vertically. Dropping to his haunches he felt the relevant muscles crunch and cheap fabric strain unpleasantly across his thighs. His suit was too small. Lowell had figured it was stretchy enough that this wouldn't matter, but in the event he felt constricted by it, and graced with none of the power he might have imagined it bestowing.

Or maybe he was just getting fat.

Lowell was on a platform, which probably wasn't the correct architectural term for it, above an arch through which ran

London Wall, the dual-lane thoroughfare reaching from St Martin's Le Grand to Moorgate. Above him was another tower block, part of a pair set at an angle to each other, and housing one of the world's leading investment banks as well as one of its most famous pizza chains. A hundred yards away, on a grassy knoll by the side of the road to which it had lent its name, ran a chunk of the Roman wall which had once encircled the City, still standing centuries after its builders had given up their ghosts. A symbol, it occurred to Lowell now. Some things endured, survived changing attitudes, and it was worth fighting to preserve what remained of them. Why he was here, in a nutshell.

Shrugging his rucksack free he placed it between his knees, drew a zip and unpacked its contents. In an hour or so traffic would build, heading into the City or points east, a quantity of it passing through the arch on which he perched, and all those cars, taxis, buses and bikes would have no choice but to bear witness. And in their wake would come the inevitable: the news crews, the cameras, carrying his message to the nation.

All he wanted was his voice to be heard. After years of being denied his rights he was ready to fight, and like others before him, had chosen a particular mode in which to do so. This was how traditions were born. He didn't for a moment think anything he achieved today would make a major difference, but others in his position would see, and learn, and maybe act. Someday, that difference would be made.

There was movement, and he turned to see a figure hoisting itself onto the far end of the platform, having scaled the building from the street below as Lowell had done ten minutes earlier. It took a second for recognition to sink in, but as soon as it did he felt a thump of excitement, as if he were twelve again. Because this was what every twelve-year-old wanted

to see, he thought, as he watched the newcomer approach. This was the stuff young boys' dreams were made of.

Tall, broad and purposeful, Batman strode towards him through damp ribbons of fog.

'Hey,' Lowell called. 'Nice one.'

He looked down at his own costume. Spider-Man was hardly age-appropriate, but it wasn't like anyone would be offering style points: making the evening news was the aim, and superhero suits ticked the right media boxes. It had worked before and would work again. So he was the Amazing Spider-Man, and the comrade he was meeting for the first time now, with whom all arrangements had been made anonymously through a message board, was Batman, and the pair would be a dynamic duo for one morning only, and blaze through newscasts for the rest of the week. One hand on the roll of canvas he'd unpacked, Lowell levered himself to his feet and extended the other, because this too was part of an ancient narrative: men meeting and greeting, and bonding in a common cause.

Ignoring Spider-Man's outstretched hand, Batman punched him in the face.

Lowell fell backwards as the world span out of control: lit-up office windows spiralled like stars, and all the air left his body as it hit damp brickwork. But already his mind had slipped into work-gear, and he rolled sideways, away from the edge, as Batman's foot stamped down hard, just missing his elbow. He needed to be upright, because nobody ever won a fight from a prone position, and he concentrated on this for the next two seconds instead of wondering why Batman was kicking the shit out of him, and his focus almost paid off because he'd made it to his knees before he was punched in the head again. Blood soaked through Lowell's Spider-Man mask. He tried to speak. A formless gurgle was all he could manage.

And then he was being dragged towards the edge of the platform.

He shrieked, because it was clear what would happen next. Batman was hauling him by the shoulders, and he couldn't break free – the man's hands felt moulded from steel. He kicked out and hit the canvas lump, which rolled towards the edge, unravelling as it went. He swung an arm for Batman's crotch, but hit muscle-hard thigh instead. And then he was hanging in space, the only thing keeping him aloft the caped crusader's grip.

For a moment they were locked in near-embrace, Batman rigidly upright, Spider-Man dangling, as if posing for a cover illustration.

'For pity's sake,' Spider-Man whispered.

Batman dropped him.

The canvas roll hit the road before Paul Lowell did but wasn't a roll by then, having unwound itself along the tarmac to become a strip of carpet instead of the banner he'd intended it to be. In foot-high letters, its hand-painted battle cry, A FAIR DEAL FOR FATHERS, blurred as the wet ground soaked into the fabric, along with a certain quantity of Lowell's blood, but remained a gratifyingly newsworthy image, and would feature in many a broadcast before the day was out.

Paul Lowell didn't see any of them, though.

As for Batman, he was long gone.

Part One

False Friends

2

On a night hot as hell in the borough of Finsbury a door opens and a woman steps into a yard. Not the front street – this is Slough House, and the front door of Slough House famously never opens, never closes – but a yard that sees little natural light, and whose walls are consequently fuzzy with mildew. The odour is of neglect, whose constituent humours, with a little effort, can be made out to be food and fats from the takeaway, and stale cigarettes, and long-dried puddles, and something rising from the drain that gurgles in a corner and is best not investigated closely. It is not yet dark – it's the violet hour – but already the yard is shadowy with night. The woman doesn't pause there. There's nothing to see.

But supposing she were herself observed – supposing the slight draught that brushes past as she closes the door were not a longed-for breeze of the type that August seems to have abjured, but a wandering spirit in search of a resting place – then the moment before the door is firmly closed might be one in which an opportunity is briefly open. Quick as a sunbeam in it slips, and because spirits, especially wandering spirits, are no slouches, what follows would happen in the time it takes a bat to blink; a lightning survey of this half-forgotten and wholly ignored annexe; this 'administrative oubliette', as it was once dubbed, of the intelligence service.

Our spirit flies up the stairs, no other option presenting itself, and as it ascends notes the contours marked on the staircase walls; a ragged brown scurf-mark, like the outline of an unfinished continent, indicating the height to which damp has risen; a wavy scribble that might almost be taken, in the gloom, for the licking of flames. A fanciful notion, but one reinforced by the heat and the general air of oppression that smothers the house, as if someone – something – were exerting a malign influence over those in his, its, thrall.

On the first landing, two office doors. Choosing at random, our spirit finds itself in an untidy, shabby office; one with a pair of desks on which sit a pair of computers, their monitors' stand-by lights quietly blinking in the dark. Spillages here have gone so long unmopped they've evolved into stains, and stains so long ignored they've been absorbed into the colour scheme. Everything is yellow or grey, and either broken or mended. A printer, jammed into a space not quite large enough, boasts a jagged crack across its lid, and the paper lantern masking one of the overhead bulbs – the other has no shade – is torn, and hangs at an angle. The dirty mug on one desk is missing its handle. The dirty glass on the other is chipped. The lip-ring on its rim is a Goth's kiss; a sneer in grease.

No place then, this, for a wandering spirit: ours sniffs, but not audibly, before disappearing then reappearing in this floor's companion office, and then in the pair on the next floor up, and then on the landing of the floor above that, the better to contrive a view of the building as a whole . . . Which is not, it turns out, a favourable one. These rooms which seem empty are in fact teeming; they froth with frustration, and not a little bile; they roil with the agony of enforced inertia. Only one among them – the one with the classiest computer kit – seems relatively unscathed by the torment of eternal boredom; and only one other – the smaller of the pair on

this top landing – shows any sign of efficient industry. The rest hum with the repetitive churning of meaningless tasks; of work that's been found for idle hands, and seemingly consists of the processing of reams of information, raw data barely distinguishable from a mess of scattered alphabets, seasoned with random numbers. As if the admin tasks of some recording demon had been upsourced and visited upon the occupants here; converted into mundane chores they are expected, endlessly, ceaselessly, to perform, failing which they will be cast into even remoter darknesses – damned if they do and damned if they don't. The only reason for the absence of a sign requiring entrants to abandon all hope is that, as every office worker knows, it's not the hope that kills you.

It's knowing it's the hope that kills you that kills you.

These rooms, our wandering spirit has said, but there remains one still unvisited – the larger of the pair on this top floor, which, while shrouded in darkness, is not in fact empty. If our spirit had ears, it would hardly need press one to the door to ascertain this, for the noise emanating from within isn't shy: it is loud and rumbly and might plausibly come from a barnyard animal. And our spirit trembles slightly, in an almost-perfect imitation of a human experiencing distress, and before that noise, part snore part belch part growl, quite fades away, has descended through Slough House again; past the abysmal offices on the second and first floors; down the final stretch of stairs which is all the property boasts of ground level, wedged as it is between Chinese restaurant and jack-of-all-trades newsagent's; and out into the mildewed airless yard just as time reasserts itself, erasing our wandering spirit like a windscreen wiper sweeps away an insect, and so suddenly that it leaves a little *pop* behind it, but of such a small, polite nature that the woman doesn't notice. Instead, she tugs on the door – making sure it's closed, though she's half-convinced she's performed

this action already – and then, with that same efficient industry she lends to her top-floor office, makes her way from the yard into the lane and round onto Aldersgate Street, where she turns left, and has barely walked five yards before a sound startles her: not a *pop*, not a bang, nor even an explosive belch of the sort Jackson Lamb specialises in, but her very own name, wrapped in a voice from another lifetime, *Cath*—

'—erine?'

Who goes there? she thought. Friend or foe?

As if such distinctions mattered.

'Catherine Standish?'

And this time came the tremor of recognition, and for a moment she was mentally squinting, though her face remained unlined. She was trying to locate a memory that shimmered behind frosted glass. And then it cleared, and the glass she was looking through was the bottom of a tumbler, empty now, but filmy with residue.

'Sean Donovan,' she said.

'You remember.'

'Yes. Of course I do.'

Because he was not a forgettable man, being tall and broad shouldered, with a nose that had been broken a time or two – an even number, he'd once joked, else it would look even more crooked – and if his hair, streaked with iron now, was longer than she recalled, it was still barely more than a bullet-cut. As for his eyes, they remained blue, because how could they not, but even in this fading evening she could see that tonight they were the stormy blue of his darker moments, and not the shade of a September sky. And tall and broad, which she'd already marked off, twice her size easily, and they must look a pair standing here in the violet hour; him with warrior written all over him, and her in a

dress buttoned to the neck, with lace at the sleeves, and buckles on her shoes.

Since it had to be addressed, she said, 'I hadn't realised you were . . .'

'Out?'

She nodded.

'A year ago. Thirteen months.' The voice, too, was not one to be forgotten: its touch of the Irish. She had never been to Ireland, but sometimes, listening to him, her head would fill with soft green images.

Being a drunk had helped, of course.

'I could give you the figure in days,' he added.

'It must have been hard.'

'Oh, you have no idea,' he said. 'You literally have no idea.'

For that, she had no reply.

They were standing still, and this was not good tradecraft. Even Catherine Standish, never a joe, knew that much.

He read this in her posture. 'You were heading that direction?'

Pointing towards the Old Street junction.

'Yes.'

'I'll walk with you if I may.'

Which is what he did, exactly as if this were what it appeared to be; a chance encounter on a summer's evening, as light began to fade at the edges; one old friend (if that was what they had been) stumbling upon another, and wanting to prolong the moment. In another age, thought Catherine, and perhaps even in some corners of this one, he would have taken her arm as they walked, which would have been sweet, and a little corny, but mostly would have been a lie. Because Catherine Standish – never a joe – knew this much too: that chance encounters might happen in some places, to some people, but they never happened here, to spooks.

★