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A Game That Must be Lost

Written by Alan Hunt

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A GAME THAT MUST BE LOST

ALAN HUNT



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For my family

AUTHOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The staff and their families (past and present) of the British High Commission in Singapore are innocent of the behaviour ascribed to the characters in this novel. So, too, are the inhabitants of Singapore and neighbouring countries, members of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and indeed all real-life individuals whose fictional counterparts are depicted here. For the sake of verisimilitude, the invented world they inhabit bears some relationship to that of early 2005. But the actions are imagined and any similarity of the characters to real persons, alive or dead, is unintentional.

I am indebted to Meredith Hunt, Charlotte Hunt and Victoria Leyman Hunt for their invaluable input when this book was in draft. Any inaccuracies or infelicities that remain are entirely my responsibility.

ACH August 2015

Philaster: *Oh, but thou dost not know*
What 'tis to die.

Bellario: *Yes, I do know, my lord:*
'Tis less than to be born; a lasting sleep;
A quiet resting from all jealousy,
A thing we all pursue. I know, besides,
It is but giving over of a game
That must be lost.

Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Philaster*, Act III Scene I

OPENING MOVES

CHAPTER 1

Their guns were pointed at his head, and their faces hidden by gorilla masks like the one he'd worn to Kirsty's party.

He tried to speak, but his mouth remained clamped shut. He raised his arms in surrender, simultaneously becoming aware that a brass band outside the window was playing the National Anthem. He walked to the window, the attackers miraculously melting away, and looked out on to a fairy-tale land of castles and mountains, where children gathered flowers and newborn lambs leapt and played in the green fields. *I must climb through the window*, he thought, but his legs would not budge.

"It's time," said a voice behind him. He turned to see there was now only one gorilla in the room, which was suddenly his office: there were the maps on the wall, there his desk and neatly stacked in tray, and there his computer. On the screen he saw his own blood-stained body lying in a jungle clearing. In the foreground a young woman in fatigues spoke into a handheld microphone. Was it Kirsty? The answer was somewhere here in the room.

It's only a dream, he thought, but his eyes refused to open. He turned back to the gorilla. It had put down its gun and was lying on the floor with a second gorilla he had not previously noticed. They were fondling each other and kissing through their masks in such a lewd manner he felt his loins stir in envy. He snatched up the gun with a snarl of triumph.

"Now you can't stop me from speaking!" he shouted.

The first gorilla ripped off its mask and said, derisively: "You just don't get it, Andrew, do you?"

He saw it was Elena and screamed.

* * *

He lay on his back, sweating, still tense, for a minute or more. Then he began to relax. Beside him, Birgit lay naked, face down, motionless apart from the slightest of movements from her breathing, her hand resting idly along the inside of his upper leg.

He lifted Birgit's arm and slid his body silently sideways and out of the bed. He lit a cigarette and stood, unclothed, before the open window of the hut. Dawn was not far off. Through the mosquito screen the outline of the palm trees along the beach was just discernible against the dark sky. There was no breeze. Nothing moved. The only sound was that of the waves breaking unevenly against the shore.

The dream had been about retribution. It was not the first, nor would it be the last; he would never be free of Elena. But why had he suddenly thought of Kirsty? Whatever they had shared was finished thirty years or more ago, but the thought of her provoked in him a hopeless yearning. He swore softly to himself and pulled back the mosquito screen to flick his cigarette stub through the window.

Birgit stirred and turned on to her back. He drew back the sheets and knelt beside her. Sliding his hand beneath her waist, he turned her towards him and leant down to kiss the side of her neck at the point where her short-cropped, blonde hair curled below her ear. She murmured something and opened lazy eyes. *"Ach, Scheisse,* Andrew," she said, in mock irritation, as she extended her long legs in anticipatory pleasure. *"Bist du noch nicht satt?"*

"We're going to have to head back early," he said, "We'd better make the most of what time we've got."

Birgit considered him for a moment, as though weighing the significance of what he had just said. *"Du bist der Boss,"* she said at last, pulling him down on to her.

CHAPTER 2

The telephone of Mary Bennett, the Personal Assistant to the British High Commissioner in Singapore, rang as she was about to run out for a sandwich.

The High Commissioner was away travelling. Mary had hoped for a quiet couple of days to catch up on her emails, but Adam White had irrupted into her office the day before, full of apologies and with a series of urgent instructions to set up meetings and dinner for an unexpected ministerial visitor from London. There was no administrative support in the office, because Adam's secretary was absent, yet again – it seemed to Mary only a few weeks since Sophie had been off in Koh Samui with Susan and Siew Ling. Somehow, between them, Adam and Mary had cobbled together a programme.

Adam had left early on Friday morning to meet the Minister at Changi airport, leaving Mary to finalise the arrangements for the dinner that night. It had proved complicated and time-consuming telephoning around Singapore and pinning down the guests' acceptances, but she had just about tied up the final loose end.

Mary smiled at the recollection of Adam climbing hurriedly into the Rolls Royce, like a schoolboy late for class, his tie askew, his short, dark, hair still plastered to his forehead from his morning shower. He was the loveliest of men, his Glaswegian candour and good humour unspoilt by his years in the Foreign Office. Who knew what might have happened had he not already

been committed to Alison? *But, then, who cares about that now?* she reminded herself.

Mary picked up the telephone. "High Commissioner's office," she said.

It was Muzafar. "Hello, my darling Mary," he said. She felt an uncontrollable surge in the pit of her stomach at the sound of his voice.

"Muzafar," she said. "What is it? Can't you make it tonight?" She cursed herself for asking such a pathetic question.

"No, my darling, of course I shall be there," he said. "But I shall be a little later than we agreed. Maybe around eight-forty-five or so – is that alright?"

"Of course, Muzafar," she said, relief flooding through her.

Siew Ling released the electronic lock to let Mary out of the secure area with a broad smile and the cheery greeting, "Have a most enjoyable and nutritious lunchtime break, Miss Bennett."

Mary negotiated a series of concrete barriers before finally emerging into the stifling midday heat of Tanglin Road. She hated the security and doubted its effectiveness. Since the discovery of the Jemaah Islamiyah plot to attack western diplomatic missions in Singapore, no embassy dared remain unprotected, but Mary herself was fatalistic about the risk. Nine-Eleven and Bali had demonstrated that nowhere in the world was safe.

Sitting in the air-conditioned cool of the Tanglin Shopping Centre, with a salad baguette and an orange juice, Mary went through the motions of reading the *Straits Times*. The lead story was about heightened tension in Indonesia following fatal clashes between Christian and Moslem groups in Sulawesi. But Mary could not concentrate on the news; she was thinking about Muzafar, as she did now virtually every waking hour of the day.

They had met shortly before Christmas at a British Council lecture ('Shakespeare's 'star-crossed lovers"). She had been immediately attracted by his youthful, dark-eyed intensity, and

had been surprised and gratified that he should seem interested in her too. His first question had made her laugh.

"What work is your husband doing in Singapore?" he had asked politely.

"I'm not married," she said. "I work at the High Commission."

"I am truly astonished," he said. "Why is a beautiful woman like you not married?"

She blushed violently at his absurdly exaggerated compliment. "I was engaged once," she said. "My fiancé died."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," he said. There was an awkward silence. *Why did I have to* say *that*, she thought? It had been over ten years since Matt had driven his motorbike into the side of a taxi in a desperate attempt to avoid a child who had run into the road. Ten years during which she had seen her two younger sisters, like most of her friends, marry and have children, while she remained stuck in a self-imposed emotional limbo.

Meeting Muzafar had shaken Mary out of what she saw now was a kind of extended depression. During their early meetings they did little more than talk – about poetry, about their respective families and about his ambitions for the future. Mary tried to persuade Muzafar to come to the High Commission to play tennis, but he was too shy. Instead they met early in the morning, two or three times a week, to run together in the Botanical Gardens. On their third outing he had kissed her, tentatively, as they stood in the early morning light, hidden in the tropical rainforest. She could still taste the salt of his sweat on her lips. The first time they made love properly, at Mary's house, he had held her gently in his arms for a full five minutes, telling her over and over again how wonderful she was, that she was like a rose, a beautiful English rose, a flower too delicate for him to touch lest he crush her with his clumsy love-making. By the time he did, at last, kiss her lightly on the breast, she exploded with a ferocity of sexual desire of which she had never dreamed herself capable.

It was a hopeless relationship. He was younger than her,

employed as a clerk by a local ship's chandler – and he was a Moslem. Not that this worried Mary, who had abandoned all religious belief the day her fiancé was killed. But it worried Muzafar.

"My family will not understand," he said sadly, as they lay together in Mary's bed one evening. "They expect me to marry a nice Malay girl and live according to the teachings of the Koran." He turned on his side and traced a pattern across her milky skin with his lean, brown fingers until he reached the pink of her nipple.

She shivered now, as she sipped her juice, at the memory of that moment. Perhaps it was the impossibility of it all which made him so desirable. She did not care. She adored him. She would do anything for him.

* * *

The baby was awake. He had been crying for twenty minutes or so before Patrick finally gave up and dragged himself out of bed. Buffy grumbled slightly and tried to shift her position. Well over eight months into pregnancy, her options were severely constrained. "Will you go, love?" she said before lapsing back into sleep, but he was almost out of the room by that time.

It was gone six. The poor little beggar was hungry. Patrick fed and changed him. Then he sat looking out of the window at the unfashionable end of a cold, damp Streatham Common while he held his son to his chest, encouraging him with gentle pats on the back to disgorge the pocket of wind which was stubbornly refusing to come out. "Come on, Jamie," he said, holding the baby up before him. "A nice big burp for Daddy." Finally it came, with an improbably loud, belching sound, and Patrick laid the baby back into his cot with an exhausted laugh.

He made tea and took it back to bed. Buffy propped herself up on the pillows with a sigh which could equally well have been

an expression of domesticated contentment or of impatience at her prolonged confinement.

"Thank heaven you're home," she said. "I've been going mad."

It's not exactly been a picnic for me, he thought. With the bulk of the Foreign Office emergency consular staff diverted to help victims of the Asian tsunami, he had just spent three weeks having to deal, virtually single-handed, with the aftermath of a dance hall fire in the Dominican Republic which had killed fifty-seven people, many of them British. Co-ordinating the activities of the forensic experts, managing the expectations and emotions of the bereaved families and battling with the local authorities over a myriad bureaucratic procedures had sucked him dry of physical and spiritual energy. (Then there had been the business with the American Airlines stewardess. Would he never learn?) Thank heaven, indeed, that he was home. And, with a bit of luck, he could spin out production of his final report long enough to see the baby born and then claim his paternity leave.

"No more travelling for a bit, sweetheart," he said, snuggling up close to Buffy. "Not if I can help it."

They had ten minutes of quiet before Jamie began to cry again.

* * *

"So it's not working out for you, then?"

Turning from the kitchen window of her parents' house in Pinner, Alison Webster considered her mother's face. It was still undeniably beautiful, but it was showing signs of sagging. She wondered whether Ruth had deliberately chosen such an offensive formulation for her question or whether these things came naturally to her, much as a lioness unthinkingly rips the throat out of a wildebeest or a zebra.

"We're just taking a short break from each other, that's all,"

Alison replied, sitting down at the kitchen table and nursing a mug of coffee between her hands.

But the truth was that things were not working out. She loved Adam as much as she could ever love anyone, but her life had changed so absolutely over the last year that she desperately needed time and distance to take stock.

"You'll need a mat for that," said her mother, handing Alison a coaster to protect the table top, which glistened brightly, in common with every exposed surface in the kitchen. Ruth sat down, carefully holding a bone china cup and saucer. "You drink too much coffee," she went on. "Tea is far better for you."

Alison did not respond, but sat sipping her coffee. After a while, her mother said, "I knew he wouldn't marry you."

"That was my decision," said Alison.

"And very convenient for him it was, too," said Ruth. Alison knew that, in reality, her mother would have been even unhappier if she and Adam *had* been married. Ruth and Alison had fought about her relationship with Adam so many times. What, Ruth argued, could an impoverished diplomat – and , what was worse, a lapsed Roman Catholic – possibly offer the only daughter of a well-to-do Jewish family with her own successful career in law?

Never in a million years had Alison believed that Adam would propose to her. When he had done so, she knew it was in a moment of special vulnerability, so she had agreed in the first place only to move in with him. Six months of living together in his sparsely furnished flat off Archway had been a confusing blend of joy and domestic chaos. Given more time, they might have settled into an acceptable routine, but the sudden move to Singapore had proved a mistake.

She had tried to make it work. The heat and humidity had knocked her sideways on arrival, but she had not let this deter her from making a real effort. She had worked with disabled children. She had signed up with local clubs for archery and judo classes. She even allowed Adam to talk her into taking up tennis, although

she was singularly useless at sports. But her unhappiness became worse. She missed her family. She missed her friends. And, more than she had expected, she missed her job.

It had been Alison's bad luck that her law firm was not represented in Singapore. There was no shortage of demand there for advice on British tax law, but the partners had recently decided to concentrate their immediate efforts overseas on Europe and the United States. Why, Alison wondered, had she not tried to get a job with another law firm, one with an office in Singapore? Was it because she was reluctant to burn her boats? Why else was she now planning to talk to Richard?

"Please, mother," said Alison. "Can't you give it a rest? I'm just visiting, okay? I haven't left him or anything."

The kitchen door opened and Alison's father appeared from the garden, where he had been planting spring bulbs. "Do I smell coffee?" he said.

"Harry, for God's sake, get those bloody boots off before you come in here," said Alison's mother. Her father complied with a conspiratorial grin to Alison and padded to the kitchen table in his socks.

"Here, I'll get you a coffee," said Alison.

"Good. Then I'll leave the pair of you to it," said Ruth. She gave Alison a look which managed to convey a poisonous combination of irritation and self-satisfaction. "If you're staying any length of time, I'll need to do a proper supermarket shop."

When she was gone, Alison and her father sat companionably at the kitchen table, drinking their coffee. The tension invariably created by her mother's presence had miraculously dissipated.

"Was she giving you a hard time?" asked her father.

"No more than usual," said Alison. "She seems incapable of thinking well of anything I do."

"She worries about you," said her father. "She just can't say it properly."

"You're too soft," said Alison. "Why didn't you walk out on her years ago?"

Harry Webster's face momentarily betrayed a hint of infinite sadness, as though this thought were one to which he was not a complete stranger. Then he smiled and shook his head. "Marriage isn't like that, Ali," he said. "There's so much that binds people together, you know."

They sat for a while in silence. Finally, Alison said, "Daddy, what am I going to do?"

"You love him, don't you?" said her father.

"Yes, of course I do."

"Then you must talk to him."

"That's easier said than done," said Alison. "He works so hard and he has so much responsibility. His boss is always travelling somewhere, leaving him to handle really difficult problems. I hardly ever see him."

"Then write him a letter. Write to him from here."

Alison laughed, despite herself. "Daddy, you've been reading too much Jane Austen," she said. "People just don't do that sort of thing any more."

"Write him a letter anyway," said her father. "Even if you don't send it, just writing it will help you sort things out in your own head."

Alison smiled at her father. "You're quite wise for an old fuddy-duddy, you know that?" she said. "I hope you're looking after yourself properly." This was not an idle remark. Both Alison's parents had aged subtly in the last year, and she detected signs of chronic tiredness in her father.

"Don't worry about me, Ali," he said. "Let's just try to get you properly sorted out."

* * *

The man standing, smoking a cigarette, in the corner of the gardens of the Sheraton Media Hotel in Jakarta, was very satisfied with his appearance. He might have been a businessman, possibly

a sugar broker or a banker. He wore a dark tropical suit, a white shirt and a red and gold silk tie, which could have been bought on a recent visit to Thailand. His black shoes gleamed in the moonlight, courtesy of the shoeshine boy who plied his trade just outside the hotel entrance. The man knew himself to be handsome. His dark skin was smooth, his features neat, and his black hair hung thick around the collar and fell boyishly across his forehead.

The man pitched the cigarette end into the darkness, glanced casually at his watch and took out his mobile phone. With his back to the hotel lights he dialled a number and waited.

The phone was answered after three rings.

"It's me," he said. "We missed our chance this week, but I'm hoping for another very soon. I'll call you tomorrow."

He terminated the call and dialled a different number. "Can you speak?" he said. "Good, listen. I need more warning this time… Yes, I'm sure it's difficult, but you'll find a way."

The man switched off the phone and removed the sim card, which he stuffed into an empty cigarette packet. He strolled slowly back towards the hotel, tossing the cigarette packet absent-mindedly into the nearest waste basket. He would dispose of the handset at the airport.

CHAPTER 3

Someone died, who might have lived, because Adam White went for a drink on Friday night in the Long Bar at Raffles Hotel. He went there on a whim. He could have – he *should* have – gone straight home from the airport: he was exhausted enough. But Ali was away visiting her parents, and he badly felt the need to relax in company. So he decided he would have a beer. Just one beer.

And why the Long Bar? He might have asked the driver to wait, and had his drink at the airport. Or he could have gone to the penthouse bar at the Ritz Carlton, to gaze over his beer at the illuminated skyline of the Central Business District, a sight to rival Manhattan or downtown Los Angeles. He could have taken in some late night jazz at the Esplanade, or lost himself in a less fashionable venue in Chinatown or Little India. If he had wanted crowds, he could have mingled with the tourists at Boat Quay. But, for some reason he could not later explain, he told the driver to drop him off at Raffles.

A majestic bearded Indian in white uniform and turban whipped open the door of the Rolls Royce and greeted him with smiling courtesy, tactfully concealing his surprise that it was not the invariably immaculate High Commissioner who alighted from the highly polished car, but his slightly dishevelled Head of Chancery.

Even at this point, Adam might have chosen the first place he encountered, namely the Bar and Billiard Room, where according