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...

The Good Assassin

Written by Paul Vidich

Published by No Exit Press

All text is copyright © of the author

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

THE GOOD ASSASSIN

PAUL VIDICH



NO EXIT PRESS

First published in 2017 by No Exit Press,
an imprint of Oldcastle Books Ltd,
PO Box 394, Harpenden,
Herts, AL5 1XJ, UK
noexit.co.uk
@noexitpress

© Paul Vidich 2017

The right of Paul Vidich to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of the publishers.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN
978-0-85730-110-9 (paperback)
978-0-85730-112-3 (ePub)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Avocet Typeset, Somerton, Somerset TA11 6RT
in Minion Pro

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

For Joe and Arturo, with love

‘Blessed are the dead
that the rain falls on’

– F. Scott Fitzgerald
The Great Gatsby

PART I

1

WASHINGTON DC, 1958

It was all set in motion over lunch at Harvey's when the director made a casual request that caught George Mueller off guard. The request came out of nowhere in the midst of the director's rambling on about the unfortunate state of affairs in Cuba. Mueller thought it an odd, but harmless favor, and it didn't require anything of him that he wasn't willing to freely give – but still it was unexpected.

'Toby Graham is a good man and good men are hard to keep. They get tired, or fed up with the goddamned bureaucracy we've become, or squeamish about the work, or they want a bigger house. They move on. We think he is leaving us. I want to know what's on his mind.'

It was noon. Mueller remembered the time well. The restaurant was empty at that hour and the director, who arrived early to the office, had taken to lunching before the place filled with a boisterous crowd of eavesdropping Capitol Hill staffers.

The director had drained his second gin martini right after the first.

Mueller had come down by train from New Haven for their annual lunch, which had started the year he left the Agency, and now five years on had devolved into a quaint ritual. Mueller didn't allow himself to look interested when the request came. He didn't want to give the director the satisfaction of seeing truth in his prediction that Mueller would become bored teaching privileged undergraduates, so he let the director make his case at length. Mueller listened indifferently and his expression had the flat affect of a judge at trial. The director held the last olive in his snaggletooth and withdrew the flagged toothpick, which he stuck in the warm French bread neither of them had touched. He slid an oyster into his mouth. He wore a slate blue suit with crimson pocket square and matching bow tie. He was older, but his effort to dress fashionably was young, and smart rimless spectacles rested on his thick nose. His gray hair had thinned and whatever he'd lost on his head now erupted from his eyebrows. The director shifted the conversation, as he was wont to do, to the unrelated topic of college teaching, going on at length on his theory of pedagogy.

'And that too,' the director said suddenly, 'is why I asked you here. You know how a man can change. Even the best of us miss the signs, and then when we see them we don't know whether to promote the change or contain it.'

Mueller didn't find the director's remark surprising. It was just like him to be vague and Mueller didn't take the trouble to respond.

'It's a small assignment,' the director said. 'A small favor. Probably a week of your time. You'll get paid well. I can be

generous with people on the outside, and I'm sure you can use the extra income. Nothing dangerous or scandalous,' he assured Mueller.

'What's on Graham's mind?' the director repeated laconically. The emphasis implied by the repetition belied the casual tone of his voice. 'That's what I want to know. What's he thinking?'

'Thinking?'

'Is he happy? You know him, don't you?'

Mueller did know Graham. They'd been undergraduates together, where they met racing sculls, matched against each other on the Thames and the Connecticut River, beginning as rivals and remaining that way through the war, and then as colleagues in Vienna in '48. The director had their file and would know their history.

'I need someone I can trust,' the director said. 'Someone he will trust. Not an insider. Friends?'

'Friendly enough to grab a drink after work.'

'You still on the wagon?'

Mueller hated that phrase. What wagon? And why was being on the wagon synonymous with being sober? He was inclined to challenge the director on his choice of speech, but he knew wisdom in the English language lay in the simile, so he casually repeated, 'Still on the wagon.' He lifted his half-finished Coca Cola to prove his claim. 'Wine occasionally.'

'Campus life has been good for you. I don't trust men who won't drink with me.'

Mueller had heard the director use the line before. It was one of those repetitions that came unconsciously, and if you knew the person long enough you knew it was a tic that came out like a prejudice, but now the director's words lacked his usual cheerful mocking tone. He seemed preoccupied.

'We need to know what's on his mind,' the director said again. 'You're familiar with his type of work.'

Mueller didn't need an explanation, for these things were known among the men who shared the fraternity of intelligence. To ask a question was to suggest a suspicion. Trust was the fragile bond that held them together. Agents did things that made them useful in the field, but memories were dangerous with men who left, retired, or were forced out. Details of covert operations. Compromising reports of unfortunate mistakes. The truth beneath plausible denials. Agents stuck together, but that was not who Mueller was. He had stayed away from his old colleagues except for his annual lunch with the director.

'We can't erase a man's memory, but we can judge his loyalty.' The director looked at Mueller and an evanescent smile broke through his grim visage. 'He may want to take time off. Like you. He's been working hard.'

The director lowered his voice as two Capitol Hill staffers walked by, and he leaned toward Mueller, close enough for Mueller to smell the cloying alcohol. His cheeks had a rosy, happy blush. Mueller thought the director had aged in the intervening year – gained weight, eyes dimmed, lost his smugness – worn down by the bitter rivalries among temperamental politicians who called him to confess before closed-door congressional hearings.

'You will work with the FBI's man in Havana. Frank Pryce.'

The director pushed a file toward Mueller, and Mueller didn't push it back, which was a mistake. When he saw the yellow-stamped 'top secret' and 'eyes only' he found himself uncomfortably reluctant to give them up. An old adrenaline conspired against his hesitation.

'We've gotten over the rivalries,' the director said. 'That soap

opera doesn't play well with the White House. We won the turf war so now we can be magnanimous. They can be useful here. If there is a success they can take credit and we won't have to dirty our hands.'

The file before Mueller described Pryce's discovery – suspicion, the director amended when he saw Mueller raise an eyebrow.

'Pryce believes the arms embargo against Batista has been breached. Weapons are getting through. There has been a lot of self-righteous chest-beating on Capitol Hill that we put guns in the hands of a dictator who turned them on his citizens. Congress and the press whine that our State Department's noble intentions with the embargo came too late, offered too little. That we're coddling a tyrant.' The director smiled. 'Our public outrage against dictators we secretly prop up is one of our glorious hypocrisies.' He licked the last drop of gin from his glass. 'Pryce thinks it's Graham.'

The director looked at Mueller. 'Pryce won't give his sources. The mob? Hotel wiretaps?' The director arched an eyebrow. 'I want to know what Pryce knows. I want to know what he thinks is going on.' He nodded. 'You try and find out.'

He popped the last olive in his mouth. 'We can't be ostriches about this. Has Graham become a risk? Has he gone around the embargo on his own? We hire good men and give them latitude. It goes without saying that Graham shouldn't know we are asking questions.'

Mueller tolerated the director's continued presumption that he'd take the assignment, and he knew that each time he didn't object he compromised his ability to decline.

'Pryce will have the details. He knows what we want. Batista's people are in the dark.'

Disdain and scorn rose in the director's voice when he mentioned the Cuban dictator by name. 'Abjectly corrupt. A fat worthless head of state. God knows how we pick our allies.'

Mueller didn't agree to the assignment at their lunch, but his silence was confederate to the director's request. He knew one week was an impossibly optimistic estimate of the time he'd be in Cuba, but the idea that he would escape campus lethargy had tart appeal. His sabbatical was upon him, but he'd lost interest in his research on the puns and paradoxes in *Hamlet*, a lively but binocularly narrow topic, and he was out of sorts with his life. He had arrived at New Haven and was disappointed by the petty academic squabbling, and in his first year he had found that he had time on his hands, was prone to being morose, and longed for the clarity of his old job. He poured his deep ambivalence about the conduct of the Cold War spy game, and how it sacrificed good men for abstract principles, into two paperback novels that were transparently autobiographical, thinking it was a way to make a little money. Teaching and his writing had been a retirement that appealed to his solitary personality, but in time he saw himself as his ex-colleagues saw him, a middle-aged man who belonged to that tragic class of spy prematurely removed from the game – for whom academic life thickened the waist and atrophied instincts. A chess master suddenly withdrawn from a championship match to a rural Connecticut life.

Mueller had stood back from campus life, as he had learned to do in the field, but being an outsider – essential for a spy – made it hard to be a civilian. He'd been appalled to discover that he'd exchanged the rank hypocrisy of Agency work for petulant campus politics.

'I'm happy where I am,' he said to the director. They stood on the sidewalk outside Harvey's. 'I don't have the time for this.'

'If he is your friend,' he said, 'you should do this. Lockwood made your arrangements.'

They parted quietly. The sun was high. Its lurid glare scorched the street. They walked in opposite directions into the sparse population out in Washington's oppressive humidity. Mueller was lanky and handsome, but nondescript in a gray suit, and boyish even in his robust middle age. He felt no urgency in life and no zeal, at least not any longer, and all this gave him a blandness that didn't draw the stranger's eye as he strolled to Union Station.

*

Mueller met CIA Inspector General Lockwood a week later in the Rockefeller Center offices of *Holiday* magazine. Lockwood knew the editor, an old OSS colleague who'd agreed to hire Mueller to write an article on Havana's night life so he'd have a cover story.

It was a lunch meeting in a private dining room on the thirty-eighth floor that looked north to Central Park. Throughout the one hour Mueller's eyes drifted to the panoramic view of that great rectangle of landscape design wedged between Fifth Avenue's Beaux Arts mansions and Central Park West's gothic co-ops. *A shoebox of greenery,* he thought. Mueller looked for the metaphor in things. The right image, he told his students, was an aid to unreliable memory.

'George?' Lockwood said. 'You're distracted. We need your full attention if you're going to be a success here.'

Mueller took his eyes off the canopy of trees. 'Thinking about Graham.'

Mueller had met Lockwood when he was division chief

positioned for a senior leadership role in the Agency, and then he contracted polio during a trip to Asia on Agency business that left him paralyzed from the waist down. He was a protégé of the director, who accommodated his handicap and made him inspector general, a fittingly senior staff job and suitable for a man confined to a wheelchair, but a dead end. Mueller had been impressed by Lockwood's stoic dignity. Not once had he seen the man angry, resentful, or depressed. He was the same lanky WASP with his spit of unruly blond hair he brushed from his forehead, but all of him was now compressed into a black mechanical chassis he wheeled around with gloved hands.

'You were talking about the FBI,' Mueller said, looking at Lockwood, who was opposite him at the dining table laid with serviettes, silverware, bone china, and a flower centerpiece. Mueller met Lockwood's skeptical gaze with a benign smile. Though he disapproved of the FBI's aggressive tactics, and their altogether too heartfelt policing, he had it in him, he said, to cooperate. Dignity, formality, self-restraint. Gifts he allowed himself to believe he had. 'I can work with them. We're all mature here.'

Mueller knew that Lockwood performed liaison work with the FBI through the president's Foreign Intelligence Agency Board, and he was the architect of a rapprochement between the CIA and the FBI. How had he put it on their way up the elevator? 'Intelligence has to be divorced from police work otherwise a Gestapo is created. We are separate but we cooperate. We've got the president yelling he wants someone to tell him what the hell is going on in Cuba. There are people from all over the place, different agencies, different interests, including the FBI, telling him different things, so this is all about that.'

This? Mueller had asked.

'The FBI is in Havana bugging hotel rooms where the mob stays – Lansky and Stassi and Trafficante. Taped conversations that the FBI makes into transcripts. They don't know that we know, and they don't know that we've discovered through our own channels that they think we may be responsible for those weapons. You can't imagine the shit storm in the White House if the director of the FBI walked into the Oval Office with secret recordings that showed one of our assets was ignoring the State Department embargo. We are staying close to the FBI. Friends close, enemies closer, right, George?'

'A bunch of spleeny dog-hearted farts.' This from the editor.

Mueller turned to the man seated prominently at the head of the table. He almost laughed. As the one not drinking, Mueller was aware of the volume consumed by the other two. Mueller wondered how the editor would do anything productive when he got back to his desk. He had heard the man's voice deepen with alcohol and then his humor had thickened too. He was a corpulent man, with thinning hair and piercing blue eyes. Lockwood had given Mueller background on the editor during the elevator ride. He was part of the original OSS contingent who'd come over to the Agency and chafed at the new rules. He became fed up with the growing bureaucracy and was deeply ambivalent about the conduct of the Cold War, and he'd left after the Korean Armistice, taking with him his resentments, his drinking, his opinions, which he offered freely as an editor – and he had his targets. He despised the head of the FBI and denounced him as an incontinent paranoid. England was another target for his readers: 'Crumbling cold water castles not fit to sleep in.'

The editor looked at Mueller. 'I read your book. The writing is tolerable. Good enough for us. I'm looking for color on that

worm of an island that sits below the Florida Keys.' The editor said he needed a new angle. 'Everyone says it's dangerous, but our readers want to visit and they need to believe it's safe. They want a week in the Caribbean away from humdrum lives – to gamble, to drink, and to watch erotic floor shows – the taste of scandal they don't get at home.'

The editor winked at Mueller. He added sternly, 'I don't want a police report with body counts. Advertisers won't pay for that. Don't invent anything, of course, but you don't have to harp on the bombings. Isn't that guy Castro stuck in the mountains?'

The editor rang the waiter's bell. Lunch was over. He finished the conversation with a suggestion. 'Hemingway is there in Finca Vigía. Find out what he thinks of Castro. He's a man dedicated to his art and has an equivalent dedication to everything he does, his fishing, his drinking, and he's a serious guy who is horrified by the shoddy, the fraudulent, the sentimental, the haphazard, the immoral. So, he is a man of strong opinions and he must have an opinion on Castro. Put the question to him. I'll double your word rate if you get a quote out of him.'

*

Within the week George Mueller found himself aboard PAN AM Flight 29 with two reporter's notebooks, a letter of introduction, and the ambiguous comfort of a return trip ticket traveling to that season's war zone. Toby Graham was in Mueller's mind when Idlewild Airport sank beneath the airplane, and he was still in his thoughts hours later when the stewardess nodded at his empty glass. 'Last call.' She pointed out the window. 'The Sierra Maestra.' She took a moment to chat and guessed he was a lawyer, which he was not. She pegged his age at forty, which

was close, and she thought he was married, which was half right. Divorced years before. 'The Tropic of Cancer is there,' she said. 'We are a tropical country, but there it is alpine.' She pointed to the east at the deep green toupee of hunched peaks penetrating the low cloud cover.

Mueller looked down. A vast savanna opened up below the plane and the overriding impression was of a linear order imposed on the land by dirt roads and barbed-wire fences formed into rectangles of pastureland. Geometry imposed on the land was broken where ancient flows gave meandering course to streams that fed a larger river. And then a change in air pressure and he knew their descent to Havana had begun.

The stewardess took his empty glass. Yes, she had come on to him, but when he showed little interest, she walked away and his thoughts returned to Toby Graham. For all his hours of contemplation during the flight, Mueller had no better insight in the stubborn question the director had raised. Graham was a man shaped by espionage. He'd made an early reputation turning ex-Nazis and sending them back into East Germany. Some of them survived long enough to provide intelligence on Soviet military installations, but most were promptly caught and executed. Graham took to the practice of spying. He drew diagrams, planned covert operations, seemed to live in a continuous state of emergency, planted in their cold office in West Berlin most days for ten or twelve hours, or running off to Tempelhof Airport. He jogged in the morning. Drank in bars until late. Mueller saw these surface details in his mind's eye like a photograph that didn't open up – revealing little of the inner man.