SAFE ENOUGH

And Other Stories

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bantam

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For my long-time friend Otto Penzler
whose idea this was.

FOREWORD

In the early 1990s I was fifteen years into a career in TV production, but the winds of change were blowing, and I sensed the gravy train couldn't run for ever. So what next? I hatched a vague, simmering plan to write novels, but mostly forgot about it, because day to day and month to month I was still very busy. Then, eventually, like Hemingway said of bankruptcy, the end that had been at first approaching gradually became suddenly sudden. One day I was a veteran director; the next day I was unemployed.

It was time to put the standby plan into action.

I had taught myself to read at the age of three and graduated to books without pictures at the age of four, and since then had read probably ten thousand long-form narrative works. I had forty thousand hours of television under my belt, both drama and documentary. I felt I had a decent working knowledge of popular entertainment, its rhythms

and grammars, of what big audiences want, of why they react as they do, and why some things work for them and some don't. I was familiar with what we call the agented professions. I figured that the acquiring editors at publishing houses would be similar to the commissioning producers in TV. I understood promotion and publicity. Reading was always my first and best love and I felt the mix of personal passion with wider entertainment experience would help me. I knew from hard lessons that precisely nothing in showbiz is guaranteed but, overall, I felt I had a reasonable chance of making it as a novelist. As good as anyone else, probably, and maybe better than some. I was prepared. I had looked ahead and thought hard. I felt I had it mostly figured out. I was ready to go.

I had overlooked short stories completely.

I knew what they were, obviously. I had read and enjoyed hundreds. The best of them struck me as small, intricate, perfectly formed items, like Fabergé eggs. A couple have lived on in my memory for decades and no doubt will for ever. But I had never thought of writing them. Instinctively, I didn't see the connection between long form and short form. I thought there wasn't one. I thought they were handled by totally different people. I wasn't aware that a genre author like me would be asked to try both.

I finished my first novel and fed it into the machine, where happily it was accepted and slated for publication about eighteen months in the future. I knew that if I wanted to publish a book a year, then I would have to write a book a year, so I spent that eighteen-month delay writing my second novel and most of the third. (I was following advice from an old sports coach, who told me: You can't grow

more talent, but you can make damn sure you work harder than the other guy.) All three books came in at well over a hundred thousand words each, full of, I hoped, exciting and propulsive action and suspense, but also light and shade, with quiet scenes and minor diversions – all the things that make novels such spacious and accommodating canvases, delightful first to the author, and later (again, I hoped) to the reader.

My first novel came out in the spring of 1997. Jack Reacher was introduced to the world. He was greeted as a relative success and the book was seen as the debut instalment in what might possibly become a successful series. Those verdicts prompted two immediate results – first, a movie option from Hollywood and, second, a request for a short story. I was somewhat familiar with Hollywood – my old TV company had opened a movie arm and won two Oscars first time out – but I needed a crash course in the short-story ecosystem.

I was introduced to the world of anthologies. Some were straightforward attempts by publishers to make a minor profit; some were retrospective 'best of' celebrations of recent writing, gathered from here and there and curated by specialists; some were charity ventures aiming to use donated content to raise money for worthy causes. But most were fundraisers put together by writers' organizations – Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, and so on – who would pay their bills out of the royalty income such volumes would generate (they hoped).

Naturally that income would be greater if those volumes were filled by already established superstars, but writers' organizations are there to help us all, so the norm seemed

to be a 50–50 split between big names and new names. Devoted readers would buy the anthologies because of the big names and the new names would benefit (we hoped) from the association and exposure. The final piece of information I gleaned was that for all these reasons, whoever you were, writing short stories was basically pro bono. No individual writer ever made significant money from them. This was borne out by my own subsequent experience, in which my best-performing short story has made thousands of times less than my worst-performing novel. In the long run, for me at least, that disparity turned out to be the best thing about short stories.

So, thus informed, with two-and-a-bit novels written and one so far published, I supplied a short story to a crime-fiction anthology. Then someone else asked, and then another someone else, and so on, until I was writing five or six a year. Or ten. Sometimes more, probably. Each time I had to make a basic binary decision – whether to write a Reacher story or a non-Reacher.

I mixed it up from the beginning. Using Reacher had advantages – a pre-supplied character and structure, an established voice and grammar, a chance to use ideas or plot fragments not durable enough for a novel, and so on.

But the non-Reacher stories were the real delight for me. The volume you're reading now is the editor's pick of them. For me the joy was stepping out and trying something different every time. Something new. Period, place, nationality, personality – everything. It was liberating. And fun. What made it even better was a conviction my deep-down subconscious was getting totally wrong. As mentioned, none of these stories made any money.

Therefore, my box-office-trained subconscious said, no one was reading them. No audience, no money. That's show business.

The illusion that no one was watching was the best thing ever. It made the stakes non-existent. I tried anything I wanted. Some were failures, but others really caught the voice I had in my head. I was happy with them. Although I'm not sure I ever really learned to write them. Not well. Fabergé eggs they ain't. There's a mysterious short-story thing the great writers do. I never figured it out. Mine are very, very, very short novels. But none the worse for it. They have beginnings and middles and ends. Something surprising happens. Or is revealed.

What they show me now is the undeniable flow and energy not only created by pastures new and no one watching, but also – in retrospect – created by the absence of a subliminal sense on the writer's part that there's much, much more to come. That there is a boulder to be rolled up the hill. There's no caution about parcelling stuff out. No need to save anything for Chapter 17. It's all right there, right now, racing through with abandon, often written in one take at one sitting. Like I said, it was fun.

Lee Child
Colorado
2024

The Bodyguard

Like everything else, the world of bodyguarding is split between the real and the phony. Phony bodyguards are just glorified drivers, big men in suits chosen for their size and shape and appearance, not paid very much, not very useful when push comes to shove. Real bodyguards are technicians, thinkers, trained men with experience. They can be small, as long as they can think and endure. As long as they can be useful, when the time comes.

I am a real bodyguard.

Or at least, I was.

I was trained in one of those secret army regiments where close personal protection is part of the curriculum. I plied that trade among many others for a long time, all over the world. I am a medium-sized man, lean, fast, full of stamina. Not quite a marathon runner, but nothing like a weightlifter. I left the army after fifteen years of service and took jobs through an agency run by a friend. Most of the work was in South and Central America. Most of the engagements were short.

I got into it right when the business was going crazy.

Kidnapping for ransom was becoming a national sport in most of the South American nations. If you were rich or politically connected, you were automatically a target. I worked for British and American corporate clients. They had managers and executives in places like Panama and Brazil and Colombia. Those people were considered infinitely rich and infinitely connected. Rich, because their employers were likely to bail them out, and those corporations were capitalized in the hundreds of billions. Connected, because ultimately the Western governments would get involved. There was no greater sense of connection than a bad guy knowing he could sit in a jungle clearing somewhere and be heard in 10 Downing Street or the White House.

But I never lost a client. I was a good technician, and I had good clients. All of them knew the stakes. They worked with me. They were biddable and obedient. They wanted to do their two years in the heat and get back alive to their head offices and their promotions. They kept their heads down, didn't go out at night, didn't really go anywhere except their offices and their job sites. All transport was at high speed in protected vehicles, by varied routes, and at unpredictable times. My clients never complained. Because they were working, they tended to accept a rough equivalent of military discipline. It was all relatively easy, for a while.

Then I went private.

The money was better. The work was worse. I learned to stay away from people who wanted a bodyguard purely as a status symbol. There were plenty of those. They made me miserable, because ultimately there wasn't much for

me to do. Too many times I ended up running errands while my skills eroded. I learned to stay away from people who weren't in genuine need, too. London is a dangerous town and New York is worse, but nobody truly needs a bodyguard in either place. Again, not much to do. Boring, and corrosive. I freely admit that my own risk addiction drove my decisions.

Including my decision to work for Anna.

I'm still not allowed to mention her second name. It was in my contract, and my contract binds me until I die. I heard about the opening through a friend of a friend. I was flown to Paris for the interview. Anna turned out to be twenty-two years old, unbelievably pretty, dark, slender, mysterious. First surprise, she conducted the interview herself. Mostly in a situation like that the father handles things. Like hiring a bodyguard is the same kind of undertaking as buying a Mercedes convertible for a birthday present. Or arranging riding lessons.

But Anna was different.

She was rich in her own right. She had an inheritance from a separate branch of the family. I think she was actually richer than her old man, who was plenty rich to start with. The mother was rich, too. Separate money again. They were Brazilian. The father was a businessman and a politician. The mother was a local TV star. It was a triple whammy. Oceans of cash, connections, Brazil.

I should have walked away.

But I didn't. I suppose I wanted the challenge. And Anna was captivating. Not that a close personal relationship would have been appropriate. She was a client and I was close to twice her age. But from the first moments I knew

she would be fun to be around. The interview went well. She took my formal qualifications for granted. I have scars and medals and commendations. I had never lost a client. Anything else, she wouldn't have been talking to me, of course. She asked about my worldview, my opinions, my tastes, my preferences. She was interested in compatibility issues. Clearly she had employed bodyguards before.

She asked how much freedom I would give her.

She said she did charity work in Brazil. Human rights, poverty relief, the usual kind of thing. Hours and days of travel in the slums and the outlying jungle. I told her about my previous South American clients. The corporate guys, the oil men, the minerals people. I told her that the less they did, the safer they got. I described their normal day. Home, car, office, car, home.

She said no to that.

She said, 'We need to find a balance.'

Her native language was Portuguese, and her English was good but lightly accented. She sounded even better than she looked, which was spectacular. She wasn't one of those rich girls who dresses down. No ripped jeans for her. For the interview she was wearing a pair of plain black pants and a white shirt. Both garments looked new, and I was sure both came from an exclusive Paris boutique.

I said, 'Pick a number. I can keep you a hundred per cent safe by keeping you here in your apartment twenty-four-seven, or you can be a hundred per cent unsafe by walking around Rio on your own all day.'

'Seventy-five per cent safe,' she said. Then she shook her head. 'No, eighty.'

I knew what she was saying. She was scared, but she wanted a life. She was unrealistic.

I said, 'Eighty per cent means you live Monday through Thursday and die on Friday.'

She went quiet.

'You're a prime target,' I said. 'You're rich, your mom is rich, your dad is rich, and he's a politician. You'll be the best target in Brazil. And kidnapping is a messy business. It usually fails. It's usually the same thing as murder, just delayed by a little. Sometimes delayed by not very much.'

She said nothing.

'And it's sometimes very unpleasant,' I said. 'Panic, stress, desperation. You wouldn't be kept in a gilded cage. You'd be in a jungle hut with a bunch of thugs.'

'I don't want a gilded cage,' she said. 'And you'll be there.'

I knew what she was saying. She was twenty-two years old.

'We'll do our best,' I said.

She hired me there and then. Paid me an advance on a very generous salary and asked me to make a list of what I needed. Guns, clothes, cars. I didn't ask for anything. I thought I had what I needed.

I thought I knew what I was doing.

A week later we were in Brazil. We flew first class all the way, Paris to London, London to Miami, Miami to Rio. My choice of route. Indirect and unpredictable. Thirteen hours in the air, five in airport lounges. She was a pleasant companion, and a cooperative client. I had a friend pick us up in Rio. Anna had budget to spare, so I decided to use a

separate driver at all times. That way, I would get more chance to concentrate. I used a Russian guy I had met in Mexico. He was the finest defensive driver I had ever seen. Russians are great with cars. They have to be. Moscow was the only place worse than Rio for mayhem.

Anna had her own apartment. I had been expecting a gated place in the suburbs, but she lived right in town. A good thing, in a way. One street entrance, a doorman, a concierge, plenty of eyes on visitors even before the elevator bank. The apartment door was steel and it had three locks and a TV entryphone. I like TV entryphones a lot better than peepholes. Peepholes are very bad ideas. A guy can wait in the corridor and as soon as the lens goes dark he can fire a large-calibre handgun right through it, into your eye, into your brain, out the back of your skull, into your client if she happens to be standing behind you.

So, a good situation. My Russian friend parked in the garage under the building and we took the elevator straight up and got inside and locked all three locks and settled in. I had a room between Anna's and the door. I'm a light sleeper. All was well.

All stayed well for less than twenty-four hours.

Jet lag going west wakes you up early. We were both up at seven. Anna wanted breakfast out. Then she planned to go shopping. I hesitated. The first decision sets the tone. But I was her bodyguard, not her jailer. So I agreed. Breakfast, and shopping.

Breakfast was OK. We went to a hotel, for a long, slow meal in the dining room. The place was full of bodyguards. Some were real, some were phony. Some were at separate tables, some were eating with their clients. I ate with Anna.

Fruit, coffee, croissants. She ate more than I did. She was full of energy and raring to go.

It all went wrong with the shopping.

Later I realized my Russian friend had sold me out. Because usually the first day is the easiest. Who even knows you're in town? But my guy must have made a well-timed phone call. Anna and I came out of a store and our car wasn't on the kerb. Anna was carrying her own packages. I had made clear that she would from the start. I'm a bodyguard, not a porter, and I need my hands free. I glanced left and saw nothing. I glanced right and saw four guys with guns.

The guys were close to us and the guns were small automatics, black, new, still dewy with oil. The guys were small, fast, wiry. The street was busy. Crowds behind me, crowds behind the four guys. Traffic on my left, the store doorway on my right. Certain collateral damage if I pulled out my own gun and started firing. Protracted handgun engagements always produce a lot of stray bullets. Innocent casualties would have been high.

And I would have lost, anyway.

Winning four-on-one gun battles is strictly for the movies. My job was to keep Anna alive, even if it was just for another day. Or another hour. The guys moved in and took my gun and stripped Anna of her packages and pinned her arms. A white car pulled up on cue and we were forced inside. Anna first, then me. We were sandwiched on the back seat between two guys who shoved guns in our ribs. Another guy in the front seat twisted around and pointed another gun at us. The driver took off fast. Within a minute we were deep into a tangle of side streets.

I had been wrong about the jungle hut. We were taken to an abandoned office building inside the city limits. It was built of brick and painted a dusty white. I had been right about the thugs. The building teemed with them. There was a whole gang. At least forty of them. They were dirty and uncouth and most of them were leering openly at Anna. I hoped they weren't going to separate us.

They separated us immediately. I was thrown in a cell that had once been an office. There was a heavy iron grille over the window and a big lock on the door. A bed, and a bucket. That was all. The bed was a hospital cot made of metal tubes. The bucket was empty, but it hadn't been empty for long. It smelled. I was put in handcuffs with my arms pinned behind my back. My ankles were shackled and I was dumped on the floor. I was left alone for three hours.

Then the nightmare started.

The lock rattled and the door opened and a guy came in. He looked like the boss. Tall, dark, a wide, unsmiling mouth full of gold teeth. He kicked me twice in the ribs and explained that this was a political kidnapping. Some financial gain was expected as a bonus, but the real aim was to use Anna as leverage against her politician father to get a government inquiry stopped. She was the ace up their sleeve. I was expendable. I would be killed within a few hours. Nothing personal, the guy said. Then he said I would be killed in a way that his men would find entertaining. They were bored, and he owed them a diversion. He was planning to let them decide the exact manner of my demise.

Then I was left alone again.

*

Much later I learned that Anna was locked in a similar room two floors away. She was not in handcuffs or ankle shackles. She was free to move around, as befitted her elevated status. Her furniture was basically the same as mine. An iron hospital bed, but no bucket. She had a proper bathroom. And a table, and a chair. She was going to be fed. She was valuable to them.

And she was brave.

As soon as the door locked she started looking for a weapon. The chair was a possibility. Or she could smash the bathroom sink and use a jagged shard of porcelain as a knife. But she wanted something better. She looked at the bed. It was bolted together from iron tubes, flattened and flanged at the ends. The mattress was a thin thing covered with striped ticking. She hauled it off and dumped it on the floor. The bed had a base of metal mesh suspended between two long tubes. The long tubes had a single bolt through each end.

If she could get one free she would have a spear six feet six inches long. But the bed frame was painted and the bolts were jammed solid. She tried to turn them with her fingers, but it was hopeless. The room was hot and she had a sheen of sweat on her skin and her fingers just slipped. She put the mattress back and turned her attention to the table.

The table had four legs and a veneered top about three feet square. Surrounding it was a short bracing skirt. Upside down it would have looked like a very shallow box. The legs were bolted on to small angled metal braces that were fixed to the skirt. The bolts were cheap steel, a little brassy in colour. The nuts were wingnuts. They could be

turned easily by hand. She unfastened one leg and hid the nut and the bolt. Left the leg where it was, propped up and vertical.

Then she sat on the bed and waited.

After an hour she heard footsteps in the corridor. Heard the lock turn. A man stepped into the room, carrying a tray of food. He was young. Presumably low man on the totem pole, confined to kitchen duties. He had a gun on his hip. A black automatic pistol, big and boxy and brand new.

Anna stood up and said, 'Put the tray on the bed. I think there's something wrong with the table.'

The young man lowered the tray on to the mattress. Anna asked, 'Where's my friend?'

'What friend?'

'My bodyguard.'

'In his room,' the guy said. 'But not for long. Pretty soon he'll be downstairs and we'll be having some fun with him.'

'What kind of fun?'

'I'm not sure. But I'm sure it'll be something pretty imaginative.'

'A game?'

'Not exactly. We're going to kill him.'

'Why?'

'Because we don't need him.'

Anna said nothing.

The boy said, 'What's wrong with the table?'

'One of the legs is loose.'

'Which one?'

'This one,' Anna said, and whipped the leg out. She swung it like a baseball bat and caught the guy square in the face with it. The edge of the corner hit him on the

bridge of the nose and punched a shard of bone backwards into his brain pan. He was dead before he hit the floor. Anna took the gun off his hip and stepped over his body and walked to the door.

The gun said *Glock* on the side. There was no safety mechanism on it. Anna hooked her finger around the trigger and stepped out to the corridor. *Downstairs*, the boy had said. She found a staircase and went down and kept on going.

By that point they had dragged me to a large ground-floor room. A conference hall, maybe, once upon a time. There were thirty-nine people in it. There was a small raised stage with two chairs on it. The boss man was in one of them. They put me in the other. Then they all started discussing something in Portuguese. How to kill me, I presumed. How to maximize their entertainment. Halfway through, a door opened in the back of the room. Anna stepped in, swinging a large handgun from side to side in front of her. Reaction was immediate. Thirty-eight men pulled out weapons of their own and pointed them at her.

But the boss man didn't. Instead he yelled an urgent warning. I didn't speak his language, but I knew what he was saying. He was saying, *Don't shoot her! We need her alive! She's valuable to us!* The thirty-eight guys lowered their guns and watched as Anna moved through them. She reached the stage. The boss man smiled.

'You've got seventeen shells in that gun,' he said. 'There are thirty-nine of us here. You can't shoot us all.'

Anna nodded.

‘I know,’ she said. Then she turned the gun on herself and pressed it into her chest. ‘But I can shoot myself.’

After that, it was easy. She made them unlock my cuffs and my chains. I took a gun from the nearest guy and we backed out of the room. And we got away with it. Not by threatening to shoot our pursuers, but by Anna threatening to shoot herself, with me backing her up. Five minutes later we were in a taxi. Thirty minutes later we were home.

A day later I quit the bodyguarding business. Because I took it as a sign. A guy who needs to be rescued by his client has no future, except as a phony.