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Never Send Flowers

Written by John Gardner

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NEVER SEND FLOWERS

John Gardner



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Lay her i' the earth;
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring!

Hamlet, William Shakespeare

1

WEEK OF THE ASSASSINS

Father Paolo Di Sio had been annoyed from the moment His Holiness had made his wishes clear. Di Sio had even argued with the Supreme Pontiff, not an unusual occurrence, for, as the Pope had been known to remark, 'I seem to be a constant thorn in the side of my senior secretary.'

Indeed, Father Di Sio was exceptionally anxious, and this was the final reason that only a very few members of His Holiness' entourage knew of the change of plan. For one day – in fact for slightly less than fifteen hours – the Pope would leave his lakeside summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, and travel back into the boiling cauldron that was Rome in the month of August.

The cause of Paolo Di Sio's annoyance was a combination of his devotion to the Pope and his feeling that the journey was quite unnecessary. After all, the General could quite easily have come to Castel Gandolfo for the audience. Instead, His Holiness would be put under needless strain, and all for the sake of a military man whose ego would undoubtedly be greatly enlarged by the fact that the Pope had honoured him with a private audience at the Vatican, in the dog days of summer.

His Holiness viewed the matter somewhat differently. Generale Claudio Carrousso was not simply a military man, for in the past year the General had become arguably the most famous soldier in the world – except for General Norman Schwarzkopf.

Carrousso had served with great bravery during the Gulf War,

gallantly leading one of Italy's squadrons of Tornadoes on dangerous low-level attacks against Iraqi targets.

On his return from the Gulf, the General had requested a year's sabbatical during which he wrote the book that was eventually to make him a household name: *The Use of Air Power for Peace*.

While the title was hardly the stuff of the bestseller lists, Carrousso's talent as an author was immediately apparent to military scholars and laymen alike. His style was a subtle cross between Tom Clancy and John le Carré, and book reviewers were quick to point out that he had done the impossible by bridging the gap between the dust-dry stuff of strategy, and the fast, grabbing pace of a technothriller. Six months after its appearance in the original Italian, *The Use of Air Power for Peace* had been translated and published in eleven languages, and was topping the non-fiction lists in as many countries.

His Holiness recognized the General as a mover and shaker for world peace, and, as such, felt that the military man should be openly acknowledged by the Church as an exceptional power for good in this wicked world.

So it was, that, despite the scoldings of advisers, the Supreme Pontiff made the journey into Rome on a hot August morning, and met for a full hour with Generale Claudio Carrousso in the private Papal apartments in the Vatican.

It was a little after two-thirty in the afternoon, that the General emerged from a private door in the heart of Vatican City, and joined his ADC and a Vatican security officer.

Purposely, the General's party had been led from a side door into the warren of streets behind St Peter's, where only specifically authorized vehicles were allowed along the narrow road. Though the roar of Rome's normal snarl of traffic could be clearly heard as they waited for the General's car, they could have been in a different city, and at a different period of history. Within the walls of the Vatican, as Carrousso said, time seemed to stand still. So, as they waited in this strange time warp, the

General spoke, in an awed voice, of the saintliness of the Pope, and his surprising knowledge of military matters.

The small group only vaguely heard the popping sound of the motor scooter, though the General himself glanced up and saw the slightly amusing sight of a nun, in full habit, approaching, sitting straight-backed on a puttering scooter, followed, at what seemed to be a respectful distance, by his own official car.

The General picked up his briefcase, looking past the nun towards his car with the red and blue pennants fluttering in the sun. For him, this had been a great and memorable experience.

Only the Vatican security officer stood frozen with a sudden concern, staring at the nun. Very few religious societies for women still wore the full-length black habits of their order, and the man realized just how much of an anachronism this figure really was, dressed in a style which had long disappeared as outmoded.

As his brain processed the information, he saw, with a sudden horror, that the nun on a motor scooter was certainly not what she seemed. Her robes were of the kind only seen nowadays in historical movies, or on actresses playing medieval nuns on the stage.

None of them saw the nun's face, though the security officer cried out a warning, just as the scooter came abreast of the three men. The nun swivelled on the small saddle, the wicked snout of a machine pistol poking, almost invisible, from the folds of her habit.

Later, the forensic specialists would identify the weapon as a standard 9 mm Uzi machine pistol, but by then it mattered little to the General. The nun fired three short, accurate, and deadly bursts, proving that she was a marks-woman of great skill. The Uzi was fitted with some kind of noise-reduction system, so that its soft ripping noise was almost drowned by the popping of the motor scooter. By the time she had disappeared, the General lay dead, and his two companions writhed in agony from neatly placed flesh wounds, their blood soaking the pavement.

There was no doubt that the General had been the principal target, for it was no accident that his ADC and the Vatican security officer had simply been immobilized, and not mortally wounded. In all, the killing of Generale Claudio Carrousso had been immaculately planned, and expertly carried out.

The newspapers, naturally, had a field day. MURDER IN THE VATICAN and GENERAL ASSASSINATED, screamed from the front pages, while experts on terrorism named at least three possible pro-Iraqi terrorist groups as the most natural perpetrators.

The second assassination took place on the following day, in London.

The Honourable Archie Shaw MP was one of the country's favourite politicians, a possible reason why he had never attained any truly powerful government appointment. Certainly he was a member of the present prime minister's Cabinet, but only as Minister for the Arts, a job which kept him well clear of making life or death decisions for either his country's, or party's, home and foreign policies.

None the less, Archie Shaw was a true lover of the Arts, and fought tooth and nail for larger government subsidies in matters which fell within his bailiwick: a fact which made him the particular darling of actors, directors, musicians, painters, and all others concerned with what they saw as the United Kingdom's primary export: theatre, music, ballet, opera, and the like.

On that August Monday, Archie Shaw lunched at 'Le Chat Noir', his favourite restaurant in Chelsea. With him were his wife, the dazzling Angela Shaw, and two internationally famous theatre directors. Later the public learned that the conversation had concerned an attempt to inject massive sums of money into the country's now non-existent movie industry. It was a scandal, Archie had said towards the end of the meal, that Britain, once a prime movie-making country, had been denuded of the facilities which at one time had drawn directors and actors from all over the world.

The lunch finished at exactly three o'clock. Farewells were said

on the pavement outside the restaurant, and 'The Archie and Angela Show' – as they were commonly referred to in the Press – walked slowly to their car which had been parked in a side street some five minutes away. They strolled, hand in hand like young lovers, he tall, broad shouldered with one of those patrician profiles which remind people of the lineations found on coins of the great old Roman Empire; she petite, snubnosed, with blazing red shining hair falling to her shoulders.

They reached the car, which Archie unlocked, swiftly moving around the vehicle to open the passenger-side door to see his wife safely in, before returning and settling himself into the driver's seat. They planned to drive to their small country cottage some ten miles south of Oxford.

Archie turned the key in the ignition, and died, together with his wife and three innocent bystanders. The explosion was heard over five miles away, as it ripped through the car, throwing shards of metal in every direction. One of the dead was a passing cab driver whose passenger emerged without even a graze. 'I saw this great blood-red gash of fire,' this lucky man said to the television news cameras. 'I can't recall even hearing the explosion, but the fire seems to have burned itself into my memory. I shall never forget it because I swear that I saw an arm come flying from the middle of the fire.'

Later evidence showed that the bomb had been in place for almost forty-eight hours, controlled by an ingenious device which had allowed the vehicle to be started and driven eight times before the mercury switch was activated to detonate the twenty pounds of Semtex, wedged in a neat package directly behind the dashboard.

Nobody was surprised when the head of the Bomb Squad, a Metropolitan Police commander, gave a Press conference that evening, indicating that the explosive device bore all the hallmarks of the Irish Republican Army. There was much said about barbarity and a complete disregard for the sanctity of human life.

On the following morning, the IRA vigorously denied having placed the bomb, and on that same Tuesday afternoon, a third assassination took place. This time in Paris.

Pavel Gruskochev was another household name. A survivor of the cold war, he had come into prominence about the same time as another great Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Gruskochev had fled to political asylum in the West as early as 1964, having had his great seminal work, *A Little Death*, banned from publication within the Soviet Union. Indeed, he only got out of Russia by the skin of his teeth, with the hounds of the KGB baying at his heels.

The novel was published in London and Paris in 1965, and in the United States early in 1966. It was a vast and huge literary success, a triumph that would be repeated three years later with *After the Onion Skins*. Both of the books tore down the ragged canvas of Communism, using every device at the novelist's disposal – satire, romance, the shades of real history, fear, and wonderfully vivid narratives which blew away the cobwebs of the mind.

Now, on this Tuesday afternoon in August, the month when Parisians ritualistically leave their city to the tourists, Pavel Gruskochev announced a Press conference. Every newspaper and magazine in the world had someone there, for the Russian was known for his lack of interest in the Press, and his almost hermit-like existence.

As well as the representatives of the Press and TV, many of the author's devotees, hearing of the Press conference, rushed to be present, so when the great man stepped up to the microphone-laden podium, in his French publisher's office, he blinked, surprised at the crowd packing the room.

His statement was short, terse, slightly emotional, and could quite easily have been sent out as a written document.

'I have asked you here, because those who advise me, feel it is necessary for me to say what I have to tell you, here in public,

and not as a disembodied voice informing you on paper,' he began in his halting, still highly accented English.

'This is, I think, a little like closing the door after the horse has bolted, for so many of my Russian friends have already returned to the place of their births. I have hesitated, and rightly so, for until recently I was still regarded officially as a non-person, that strange term the old régime granted to people who told the truth. Well, I am no longer a non-person.' He held up a small slip of paper and a passport.

'This morning, I was informed of my reinstatement as a Russian citizen, so, it is with immense pride and pleasure that tomorrow I shall return to the place of my birth, to my roots which, even in a long exile, have remained intact.'

He went on a little longer, thanking people in France, Britain and the United States for their friendship, help and understanding during his years spent far from his homeland, then, as quickly as it had begun, the conference was over.

People pressed around him; reporters barraged him with questions, men and women thrust flowers into his hand, and one very tall woman, dark and wearing a broad, stylish hat that almost hid her face, handed him a wrapped package.

Later, those near to Pavel Gruskochev swore that the woman spoke to him in Russian, that he smiled at her and clutched the package to him as though it were something very precious. Certainly there was one photograph of the moment which showed him peering towards his benefactor with what appeared to be almost awe.

Ten minutes later, as he sat alone in the back of a taxi, the package exploded leaving the great novelist as though he had never been, his driver severely injured, and the traffic around the Champs Elysées clogged for several hours.

On Wednesday came the fourth assassination, though at that time nobody was linking any of these deaths one with another.

Twelve noon, Eastern Standard Time, Washington, DC, United States of America.

Mark Fish was unknown to most people. Only insiders, and the political correspondents, knew him as well as they could know any man in his shoes. As Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence, he was usually kept lurking in the background, for the Central Intelligence Agency is like an iceberg. Everyone knows it is there, but outsiders only see the tip, for the rest is cloaked and out of sight. Mark Fish was normally out of sight.

On this Wednesday, the DCI was out of the country, so it was Fish who made the trip from Langley, Virginia, to Pennsylvania Avenue and the White House to deliver the weekly personal briefing to the President. He had been called upon to do this on several previous occasions, so it was nothing out of the ordinary.

The briefing lasted a little longer than usual, and just before noon he returned to his car, was driven out of the side entrance, and then down on to Pennsylvania Avenue itself.

The driver had to wait for a matter of two minutes for a break in the traffic, so the car moved quite slowly into the right-hand lane. It was at this point that Mark Fish shifted his position, leaning towards the nearside window as though to get more light on the document he was studying.

Nobody either saw, or heard, the shot. The window fragmented and Fish was thrown against the back of his seat, the top of his head exploding, hurling bloody debris against the leather and glass, three 'Equalloy' bullets smashing into his head. The Equalloy round, made in the United Kingdom, is now an almost redundant type of ammunition, but it is still available; a fourth generation Accelerated Energy Transfer (AET) round, the Equalloy is designed to fragment on hitting its target. It also has all the necessary non-shoot-through requirements of present-day special forces, thereby minimizing the risk of killing bystanders. On its initial tests, the Equalloy penetrated only 2.5 inches of Swedish soap – the ammunition-designers' substitute for human tissue.

Later, the DC Police Department, aided by both the FBI and

Secret Service, measured and calculated the trajectory of the bullets, thereby roughly approximating from where they had come.

Among the many bystanders was one tourist who had been taking photographs at the time. One frame from his 35 mm camera yielded a small clue, for it showed an elderly man standing in almost the precise spot from which they had estimated the bullet had been fired.

He appeared to be a man in his late seventies or early eighties, dressed in jeans, an L. L. Bean checked shirt, and a blue, billed cap bearing the legend, 'Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas any more.' The 'Old Guy', as the investigators called him, carried a thick walking cane with a duck's head brass handle. At the moment the picture had been taken, he had the cane raised, pointing directly at Mark Fish's car. Once this photograph had been enlarged and enhanced, there was little doubt that the 'Old Guy' had been the assassin, and that his walking stick was, in reality, some kind of deadly weapon.

And nobody could account for the reason Mark Fish had rolled down his rear window, thereby making the assassin's job a thousand times easier.

Only a couple of international newspapers picked up on the fact that three high-profile figures, and one very senior intelligence officer, had been murdered in as many days, and in as many countries, but no link was officially made by any of the law-enforcement organizations involved. Yet the truth was that, in less than one week, four prominent victims had died in various ruthless, brutal acts of violence. Though nobody linked the deaths, one thing was certain: each of them had been a target; each had been stalked, sought out and killed with some care and preparation; and, while the specialists in terrorism had named possible groups as the perpetrators of these killings, no organization had come forward to claim responsibility – an oddity that was the one constant in the four deaths, for terrorist

groups are rarely slow in claiming success after a carefully planned operation.

On the Friday of the same week, another killing took place. This time it happened in Switzerland, and the victim could not by any stretch of the imagination be called high profile. In fact, she was just the opposite, and it was this fifth death which brought James Bond into the picture.