

Anything worth having needs constant work

It's that sinking feeling. Janice senses something bothering me. I get that ... but I'm lost – have been for quite a few days now.

She's looking at me, puzzled. 'What's going on?'

'I'm caught,' I reply. 'There's no way out.'

She doesn't ask the obvious follow-up. I like that in her. She just watches me; wondering what's happening in my mind – waiting, giving me time.

'Janice, my old life has come back to haunt me.' As I look at her, I feel torn. Goodness, we are workmates, friends ... comfortable friends. We enjoy each other's company. It's not fair to disillusion her with my real story. Habits of a lifetime – keep some distance.

It's really about respect – not burdening others – one of many life lessons from my precious mother. Sadly, she died before I reached my teens. I've so missed her wise guidance ever since.

Janice reaches across to hold my hand and beckon me into a hug.

I pull away gently. I have to be strong, independent.

She handles it with her usual accepting composure.

I don't want to lie to her and, anyway, my old world would be beyond her comprehension. I didn't mind deceiving people for *the Cause*. But *the Cause* is history. I feel such a failure for ever trusting in it.

'Tell me what you can!' She speaks so softly.

I say, 'Not yet. I'll work this out. I need to go for a walk.'

'Can I come too?'

'I need to think.'

'I'd like to walk with you. Nothing is ever as bad as it seems.'

I feel my cheek muscles tugging my lips up into a sad serene smile. How can I resist her, even when I'm so unworthy?

We walk down through the trees near a quietly flowing stream. She is beside me – undemanding – her eyes soothing, whenever I glance at her.

I suppose she would guess something of my past from my general polite manner, especially to women – a legacy of watching my mother being 'put down' by others in my early years. Then the discipline of military training – respect for officers, even when it was sometimes misplaced.

I used to compliment myself on hiding any weakness. But now? I'm getting older ... not old, but moving on from that cold time of my early to mid twenties.

I catch her eye again. 'I don't want to disappoint you, Janice. I'm not proud of my past.'

She smiles gently. 'I like you, the man I know **now** – the man who cares. Whatever you've done before is not as important as who you have become!'

I shake my head and wince. 'But it's conscience, Janice – about the ill-understood things I did back then. They break through to the present – tormenting – and when they are about things that actually happened, it's hard to find words to explain them to anyone, let alone justify them.'

She squeezes my hand. 'You're holding down a responsible job in our huge distribution centre for the cheeses and milk products that supply this city. You handle people every day with graciousness. People respect you. You deal with the receipt and dispatch of a multitude of orders with a calmness that's frankly impressive. You are a good and talented person.'

I grin wryly at her. She's a pal.

But she sees the world through her lens of peaceful normality.

She knows me at work ... and in some happy days we've spent together in recent months. We do care about each other ... but she doesn't know anything about my journey before this time. I always dodge those questions with a practice refined over the last decade. Resolving my past life in my own mind needs constant work – **by me** – not in sharing with others.

'What's worrying you?' she tries again.

Well ... maybe I should trust her a bit more. Maybe I really **have** to, **now**.

'I was in the military.'

She gives a relaxed smile. 'I kinda worked that out.'

'I killed people back then.'

She frowns. 'That's what the military is trained to do, I guess. So many bad situations. Combat.'

'Oh! The military wasn't all bad. They taught me a lot – how to plan, teamwork, skills, how to deliver outcomes – they became my only real family for a while, with my Mum gone. But I was also in a special group trained to target particular enemies.'

I see it slowly dawning as I watch her – the furrowed brow, the questioning eyes, the sigh.

'Go on.' She takes a deep lungful of air, to prepare.

'It was years ago. I was trained to be a sniper – a killer of particular people. And I did. In an assassination squad – and now I'm compromised.'

Her eyebrows scrunch. 'Why? Why are you compromised? Wasn't it the job you were required to carry out by your superiors?'

'It was probably bending the rules of engagement ... secret, covered up.'

'But weren't you just following orders?'

‘Yes I was, but that’s the Nuremberg defence. It didn’t wash then and it wouldn’t wash now.’

‘Why not?’ A confused pout. A wrinkling forehead.

‘Because we’re supposed to see the difference between right and wrong.’

‘Didn’t you?’ Eyes wide in question.

‘No. Not at the time. I was doing what I was trained to do. Looking back, I was brainwashed ... but no-one, who hasn’t been through it, understands that.’

She sighs, searching for a solution. ‘So, why is this an issue now? Isn’t that all a long time ago?’

I bite my lip and screw my eyes tight, as I think.

My voice sounds shaky, quivering, as I say, ‘They want me to do it again.’

‘Rubbish!’ A defiant head shake. ‘You’re not in the army now. Go to the police!’

‘You don’t understand. These people are not military anymore. My past is known by some. They’re very powerful ... operating beyond the law, with plenty to lose, controlling a lot of what goes on behind the scenes in this country and across other countries. They kill and torture anyone who gets in their way ... including intimidating their friends. It’s not me I’m bothered about, Janice. But they could come for **you**.’ And I point at her, my lips pursed in apology.

‘What?’ She stares at me, wide-eyed. ‘Who are these people? I’ve never heard of this.’

‘That’s because you’ve lived a peaceful, honest, trusting life, Janice.’ I look into her stunning blue eyes. ‘Authoritarian countries, criminal networks, gangster mobs do this all the time. They use mercenaries. That’s a whole other dark world, way beyond the military.’

I can see her confusion, so I say, ‘How often have you heard of someone challenging the powerful and getting shot, or blown up in a car or dying in a mysterious poisoning or a fire? You know about that – even from the everyday news channels. But it’s not just in dictatorships that these things happen. It’s in open democracies too, under the guise of national security, official secrets, clandestine operations, dark ops – a controlling cloak of sealed information.’

‘That’s crazy!’ She flicks her hands in frustration. ‘You’re a sensible and responsible man. Think for yourself. You are not programmed to jump to the call of anyone like that!’

‘I’d like to think so too, Janice, but it’s not quite that simple. Some of these dominating groups don’t see the world as we do. They live in their own fantasy of intimidating, commanding obedience, the threatening power of illegal money-making, disregarding anything other than their own needs. They are too strong. There are always bad repercussions for resisting them.’

She’s been telling me to think for myself. My brain was indoctrinated early into a mindset of following instructions ... where someone had already done the thinking for me. Blind obedience! And I sometimes feel that I’m back in that robotic realm – ‘the cult’ of needing to conform to belong. It takes constant effort by me to resist mindlessness, to be the person that Janice thinks she is seeing.

I was good at what I was trained to do back then but there’s no way out of that illicit dark episode in my life. It will never stop – for me. I’m trapped in this sticky spider’s web of their secrecy and intrigue.

What a disaster. What to do?

We were expendable before, in the military – for a *cause*. We knew and accepted that. We killed then to save other lives. I expected that we could die.

We faced each operation as a potential suicide mission. My real mistake came after the military, when many of us felt unloved and unwanted in society.

Some went into security services for important people. Some, like me, became mercenaries – in Africa, Asia and the Americas ... and for covert ‘official’ contractors. We killed then for money – still conditioned to ignore any scruples – until we woke up to what we were doing. There had to be a better way.

Now, after a decade of effort, I have developed a niche for myself – a peaceful, non-aggressive niche – reinvented as a minor-level manager in a huge metropolitan dairying warehouse. I was selective about what I told them at interview – military, sporty. I passed their tests for numeracy, basic computer literacy and emotional intelligence. From there, I have proved my worth over nearly ten years of good quiet service, working my way up to my present level. I have given that willingly to the company and its people. My mother would have been proud. I’ve had no contact with past military colleagues for years.

And now, I’ve met Janice, who works in the office – kind, gentle, smiling, intelligent Janice. She has become a good friend – a companion for going out together. She is my dream of what a good friend, and maybe partner, should be. I have been so happy since meeting her.

Me? A hired assassin, again? *Kill an enemy of the free world – **the appeaser**, who is charming everyone with his smile, his beautiful wife and a desire for peace.* No way! But that’s what they’re demanding of me – the old mercenary network trying to manipulate, using their customary threats against disobeying. Madness!

How is someone, who is only seeking world peace, seen as a threat to their power? Who sees killing opponents to be the only solutions to problems?

Perhaps in a defensive war for survival, within limits – but ...? Maybe it's a challenge to their freedom to wage their wars or make massive profits? Power crazy. Total greed. A deluded fantasy about world domination. Anarchy – not democracy. No rules apply to them. If it were just a video game, it would still be too ludicrous to even consider.

Of course, I will not do what they say.

But how to protect those around me ... Janice ... and the targeted appeasing supposed '*enemy of the free world*'?

A strange thought has been circling in my head since this business returned. *It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done.* I read that, as a teenager, in a cartoon version of a Dickens' classic ... to get me through those damned English lessons at school. It seems so long ago, now. I liked that story. I even tried to read it in the proper book from the library but I struggled with all the strange words, back then.

Actually in the past couple of days, Janice has helped me get why I liked it. She wouldn't have realised why it was in my mind – I love her innocence. 'It's the plot you like,' she said, '*the what happens, the emotion, the drama, getting to the point* – not all the clever literary structures and background context.'

She was probably right. She is so much more cultured than I could ever be. What does she see in me?

But I can't ignore this horrible demand ... or I and others will be dead in a few days. I don't mind dying but I would be really angry if others suffered because of me ... and my past mistakes.

What to do? No one person can take out all the conspirators at those lofty levels. They have too much protection. I used to provide that for a living.

How to get past all that? I need a plan.

‘Janice, I’m going to take two weeks leave to sort this business out. I’ll phone you when I know more.’

She tenses up at my words. Her eyes are wide. ‘I think you should go to the police,’ she says. ‘Please!’ holding her cupped hands together in front, pleading.

‘Yes, I will, Janice. I promise.’ Just not the type of police she’s imagining. I smile to relax her. ‘My mother used to tell me, *Anything worth having needs constant work*. I’ve never shirked work. Mum also said that *Some things need to be stopped in their tracks*.’ She was referring to being bullied by relatives. ‘Don’t worry, Janice. Our friendship is worth having and I will sort this out. This business needs my concentrated efforts to resolve it. Trust me.’

My plan is forming. I will contact the people who want this killing done ... and find the trail to other players, behind the scenes – the big shots. If it goes wrong, the authorities will have me as their ‘patsy’ for public consumption – *the lone crazy gunman who used to be a military and mercenary assassin. The world is better off without him*. But they will also get to many of the ‘ghosts’ – higher up the structure – those who are promoting and sponsoring this maddening chaos and insurrection. The target will be safe because I will deliberately miss him.

If my plan works, I’ll come back from leave to, hopefully, put my past behind me and spend lots of happy days in the future with my delightful friend.

I make contact with the sanction organisers. They appear pleased that I will accept the task. They will provide the location – in a different country, the weapon, the distraction, the getaway and the payment. I ask all the questions, just

as I would in times gone by. They provide all their answers and assurances. It's to be a cross-fire in Paris – I am but one of the shooters. They are not letting their target out of that area alive.

Back in the day, I had a security code word when being implanted for an 'official' sanction. Today, my phone rings to the message bank of a nondescript building, not far from the centre of power. I leave my code word and phone contact.

A quiet voice returns my call and asks to meet me ... in a park. I don't recognise the voice – it's been a long time since I was involved – but I know the manner of speaking. The code word is still enough of a password to generate interest in very secure circles.

It takes several contacts and, doubtless, many careful 'official' checks on my credentials before I get to the person I want to speak with. Eventually, I am spirited into a discreet room with a huge electronic screen.

I brief several important people about the details of my role – target, location, time, distractions – along with as much information as I can surmise about the senior players in the chain of command for the proposed murder.

And ... my desire to never be involved in such operations ever again.

I call Janice from an international payphone to tell her that everything is in hand and that, if all goes well, I hope to see her soon. I am at peace.

This is a necessary closure to a past life. In my mind, the target will be safe because I will miss him. I will take out the cross-firer instead. Janice will be safe – my secure code partners can guarantee that. That's a priority.

The first media report: *A gunman allegedly attempted to assassinate a visiting president in Paris today. The culprit was intercepted and shot dead by the special police service guarding the president. The visitor is safe.*

The second media report: *Special police raided a secluded farmhouse/winery today being used by a clandestine insurrectionist gang. Fourteen gang members were killed. No prisoners were taken. A treasure trove of evidence was recovered – money, drugs, weapons, explosives, literature, international networking and cyber-communications equipment.*

The third media report: *In a separate incident in Paris today, a second gunman was found shot dead by a high-powered rifle near the scene of the alleged attempted visitor assassination. Apparently, it had happened just before the other alleged assassin was killed.*

Speculation suggests that the lethal bullet might even have been fired by the first gunman and it was this particular action that alerted the special police service to intercept his own attempt on the visiting president. The dignitaries are all safe and unharmed. The police advise that any danger to the public has passed.

Janice receives a card, posted in Paris. It reads, *‘My mother told me that anything worth having needs constant work and some things just need to be stopped in their tracks. I will take care of the second and, all things being equal, I will return for the first. If not, thanks for caring. Live well. I am at peace with my past now.’*