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TONY PARSONS

Departures

Seven stories from Heathrow

"Say Hello, Wave Goodbye"

London: HARPER, 2011.

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Say Hello, Wave Goodbye

Airport Border Agent

The young woman in the white wedding dress entered the Arrivals hall, still looking radiant after the twelve-hour flight from Seoul, South Korea.

Even with three long-haul flights landing at almost exactly the same time, delivering just under one thousand passengers who would all have to present their travel documents to one of twenty immigration officers, somehow Jaswinder 'Jazz' Smith of the UK Border Agency knew that she would be the one to examine the smiling bride's passport.

Jazz always got the nutters.

Thirty minutes later, with the queues thinning out, Jazz said, 'Next,' and the bride stood before her, holding out the dark green passport of the Republic of Korea.

'This is probably a really stupid question,' Jazz said, taking the passport. 'But what's the purpose of your visit to the UK?'

The girl's smile grew broader. It wasn't just the wedding dress, Jazz thought. She was beautiful.

'I'm getting married,' she said, looking over her shoulder and acknowledging with a graceful nod the

smattering of applause in the Non-EU Nationals queue.

‘Congratulations,’ Jazz said. It was a biometric passport and she deftly read the microchip, which contained details about the passport holder’s face – the distance between eyes, ears, nose and mouth. As she had ten thousand times before, Jazz checked these details against the passport photo and the face in front of her.

‘To Prince Harry,’ the bride said.

Jazz shut the passport but did not hand it back.

‘What?’ she said.

‘I’m getting married to Prince Harry,’ the girl said.

Jazz made further checks.

Had the girl in the wedding dress ever been refused entry to the UK? Did she have a return ticket? Did she have sufficient funds for what was planned to be a two-week stay? Had she ever been deported? Had she ever been refused a visa? Was there any incriminating data on file? Was there any possibility that she wasn’t really going to get married to Prince Harry?

In the end, Jazz handed back the dark green passport with a smile.

‘Enjoy your big day,’ she said, and the young woman in the white wedding dress entered the UK.

The officer at the next desk, a middle-aged woman who looked Indian but sounded pure Cockney, glanced over at Jazz.

‘I remember when it was Prince Charles they all came over to marry,’ she said.

Jazz laughed. ‘Before my time,’ she said.

* * *

More travellers poured into the Arrivals hall. Jazz looked down at the flight lists, the numbers of passengers, and their nationalities. The Americans are coming, she thought.

‘Next.’

The man was perhaps forty. He was standing right over the desk and Jazz had to ask him to step back to the line, which he did with a shy apology. But he looked normal – or as normal as anyone looks after travelling from one side of the planet to the other in half a day.

‘Purpose of visit?’ Jazz asked.

The man took a breath.

‘Barack Obama has planted a microchip in my brain and he is currently streaming live images to my frontal lobes,’ the man said. ‘So I am here to claim political asylum.’

Jazz and the man – Donald Harrison, it said in his passport – stared at each other for a bit. Funnily enough, Jazz had heard this one before.

‘And I want to see *We Will Rock You*,’ Donald Harrison said. ‘The Freddie Mercury musical? Freddie Mercury of Queen?’

‘I’ve seen it, sir,’ Jazz said, her voice flat and hard. She indicated a small corral of seats next to the passport control desks – the Not-OK Corral, Jazz called it. I am going to ask you to take a seat, sir. *Donald Harrison*

His eyes were bright with the news that Jazz had seen *We Will Rock You*.

‘Any good?’ he asked.

‘I’m not really a Queen fan,’ Jazz confessed. ‘My

husband likes Queen. I got tickets for his birthday. Take a seat, will you, please?’

Donald Harrison snorted. ‘You don’t like Queen?’ said the man with President Obama’s microchip in his brain. ‘You must be mad.’

Jazz swiftly processed twenty assorted visitors to the UK. Tourists and businessmen, families and students, young and old and everything in between.

Jazz liked to say that it wasn’t her job to refuse entry to the UK. It was her job to have an inner alarm bell – rather like one of those microchips that President Obama plants in people’s brains. And when someone wasn’t coming to the UK for the right reasons, it was her job to hear that bell ring.

‘Next!’

The inner alarm bell rang loud and long when she looked at the passport photo of the young man dressed in black T-shirt, jeans and cowboy boots.

She looked at him and she looked at the passport and she read the biometric data on the microchip and somehow it did not fit. In the passport photo the man looked as though he had had some kind of cosmetic surgery. But in the flesh, he just looked unwell.

‘Take a seat,’ she said.

They looked at each other and she watched him work out that it was pointless to argue. The man in black joined Donald Harrison in the Not-OK Corral. Jazz looked down at his passport photo again. She was not an expert in forged passports. But she knew a man who was.

‘Next!’

An American girl, maybe eighteen, sweet and blonde and pretty. And she wouldn’t look Jazz in the eye. And she shifted her weight from foot to foot. And she was so nervous that she almost rattled.

‘How long are you planning to stay, Megan?’

‘Two weeks,’ the girl said quickly. ‘Just two weeks. Just two weeks and then I’ll – you know – go home.’

Jazz smiled pleasantly. ‘And what are you planning to do in the UK?’

‘I want to see the wax museum?’

Jazz nodded. Madame Tussauds was a legitimate reason to visit the United Kingdom. Lifelike effigies of Nelson Mandela and Brad Pitt – how could anyone resist?

‘What do you want to see there?’ Jazz said.

Megan had not been anticipating a follow-up question about the world-famous wax museum.

‘Candles?’ she offered.

Jazz looked at the young traveller. This girl should not be a problem, Jazz thought.

But she is ...

✓ ‘And I want to try some of that world-famous British pizza,’ Megan said, and Jazz got that cold, tense feeling that came upon her when she knew that someone was telling her lies.

* Jazz had jotted the girl’s answers down on the back of her landing card. The information would be stored forever. The fact that she wanted to go to the most famous wax museum in the world to look at the candles. The fact that she could not wait to try the finest pizza

her creation
of the fact

that British cuisine could offer. It was all carved in stone now.

Jazz wished that the girl would do herself a favour and stop talking. Because every time she opened her mouth she made it more difficult for Jazz to allow her entry into the United Kingdom.

'May I see your return ticket, Megan?'

But she did not have one.

And that clinched it.

'I'm going to ask you to take a seat, Megan,' Jazz said. 'And I'll be with you shortly.'

At last the girl looked Jazz in the eye, and she seemed to size her up. And what the American girl saw was a small blonde woman, ten years older than herself, and dressed in a blue skirt and a white shirt with the UKBA flash. Her pretty face twisted with a kind of sneering contempt.

'But what about the crazy lady in the wedding dress?' the girl said. 'You let her in.'

Jaswinder Smith of the UK Border Agency took a deep breath.

'Because I don't care if someone lies to themselves,' said Jazz. 'But I don't like it much when they lie to me.'

'This passport is a fake,' said the UKBA officer who knew about these things. 'It's a pretty good fake, although I wouldn't rate it any higher than that.'

Ken was the UKBA officer you went to with what they called 'questioned documents'. He worked mole-like in a small, windowless room off of the UKBA's

main office, which was one level up from the Arrivals hall and hidden behind a bank of smoked glass.

Out in the main office space, officers monitored CCTV images of the airport and checked flight lists on their computer screens and watched the passengers in the queues for passport control. Everything was bustle, light and a never-ending parade of planes and people. But Ken's dark little room was the exact opposite. There was nothing in there apart from Ken, a machine called a VSC40, and hundreds of passports from every country on the planet.

There were passports that had been stolen, forged and borrowed. There were expired passports that had been tampered with to make them appear valid. There were passports with pages removed and inserted, passports with photographs that had been changed, altered or substituted, passports with real visa stamps removed and bogus stamps inserted. Ken and his VSC40 saw through them all.

'Nothing feels right about this guy,' Jazz said. 'What do you think?'

Ken adjusted the machine. The VSC40 could read microchips, assess paper quality and read surface features such as visa stamps. It knew its way around watermarks, metallic strips and ink quality. It was a lie detector for passports.

'He makes me think that the ex-KGB guys do the best forgeries,' Ken said, making an adjustment so that he could zoom in on the passport's photograph. 'We see the best forgeries in the world at this airport. What we have here is not in that league.'

He removed the passport and handed it to Jazz. 'Pages have been removed and replaced,' he said. 'Probably some visa stamps he didn't want anyone to see. So they've had to hand-stitch the pages, rethreading the document in the existing holes – there's no high-tech way to do that. It's old school, but it's been done well. They've done minimum damage to the passport and that's always the smart move. But it's the photograph where they give themselves away.'

Jazz looked at the photograph of the man in black. 'Looks weird,' she said.

'Because that's not him,' Ken laughed. 'It's someone else. Look at the area around the mouth and eyes. Hold it horizontally. Can you see the abrasion?'

Jazz held the passport sideways and squinted hard. And she suddenly saw the faintest of scuffmarks on the photograph of the man in black – just a few grey dots, nothing more. But it was there all right. Again she felt the flash of ice-cold irritation that came when she knew she was being deceived.

'So it's some other guy and it has been altered to look like our boy downstairs?' Jazz said.

Ken nodded. 'It does less damage to a passport than a fake photo.' His smile lit up the dark little room. 'It's not a bad idea – if you get away with it.'

Jazz closed the passport. 'Thanks, Ken.'

'You think he's importing controlled substances,' he said.

'I'm thinking that – right here, right now – he has swallowed more cocaine in condoms than you have had hot dinners,' she said.

'One problem with that theory,' Ken said. 'Drug mules very rarely go to the trouble of *forging passports*. The dealers can always find gullible mugs to carry the product in their gut, working on the business model that enough of them will get through. How do you explain that?'

Jazz shook her head. 'I can't,' she said. 'Yet. Maybe he got ripped off by a mule and is into DIY.'

A young UKBA officer appeared in the doorway. Jazz looked up at him and gave him leave to speak with an imperceptible nod.

'You have three for the holding rooms,' the young man said. 'The American girl – she's making a bit of a fuss. She was shouting about seeing a lawyer. You might want to see her first.'

'No,' Jazz said. 'First we have to catch a plane.'

They walked to the gate just as the aircraft was arriving. Jazz and the young officer – Norm – stood just behind the men from Airside Ops who would tell the flight attendants that they were clear to open the door. And Jazz noticed that Norm was shaking with nerves.

'You've been working mostly Customs, right?' she said.

He nodded. 'We had a mental morning,' he said. 'At Departures we found this guy with twenty grand in cash in the lining of his hand luggage, flying to Istanbul.' Norm smiled, wiping the palms of his hands on his trousers. 'He said it was for safekeeping.'

'Well, you can't be too careful,' Jazz said. 'There are a lot of dodgy characters about these days.'

'You think he was going to buy drugs at source?'

'Maybe. Or he might have been laundering money made over here. Or he could have been off to buy something really expensive – like people. They cost quite a bit. So you gave him the option to leave the money or go before a magistrate and argue his case?'

Norm nodded. 'He said – *I fly.*'

'The smart move.'

'And at Arrivals there was this guy from Dubai with a collection of camel-fighting DVDs. What kind of sicko wants to watch camels fighting? And there was a woman from Vilnius with five thousand cigarettes in her suitcase.'

'She's really got to try cutting down. Norm? Will you do something for me? Try taking a deep breath, will you?'

'And there was this old man from Ghana who wanted to bring in some dead rats on a stick.'

'It's a West African voodoo thing,' she said. 'Each to his own. Listen – calm down a bit, will you? You're babbling, Norm. Is this your first coded landing?'

'Yes.' He wiped the palms of his hands on his trousers again. 'Yes, it is, Officer Smith.'

'It's going to be fine,' Jazz said. 'The man we're meeting is an Iraqi national who has been granted asylum in Greece. But he doesn't want to live in Greece. He wants to live here. So he keeps coming to the UK and pretending to be someone he's not. We have to grab him as soon as he appears, okay? Guys like this, they either leave their passports on the plane or destroy them in the first toilet on land. We're not going to let him get that far. Got it?'

'Got it.'

'Good. Here we go.'

The door opened and the passengers surged out of the plane. Jazz saw a flight attendant with a look of horror on her face and she followed her eyes to a curly-haired man in his twenties who was ripping up his passport and stuffing it into his mouth.

'Oh, this one's good,' Jazz said. 'Oh, this one's very good.'

Jazz and Norm grabbed his arms as he came off the plane and, while he coughed and retched and ingested the last morsels of his Greek passport, they steered him towards the Arrivals hall.

'How's Greece these days?' Jazz said.

'I was never in Greece,' the man croaked, before sagging in their arms and beginning to gag. 'I am from Afghanistan,' he choked. 'Where I was cruelly molested by the Taliban.'

'He's going to be sick,' Norm predicted.

They were outside a men's toilet. Jazz thought about it for a second and then shoved the pair of them towards the entrance.

'Just don't let him out of your sight,' she said.

Norm and the passport-muncher disappeared inside the toilet as a familiar figure walked slowly past her, taking his time, his progress hampered by the arriving passengers flooding in the opposite direction towards the Arrivals hall.

'Donald?' she called. 'Hey, Donald!'

She caught up with him. He looked at her mildly, slightly bewildered, as if they had never met.

'Don't go anywhere, Donald,' Jazz said. 'We need to have a chat. Okay?'

He smiled and they walked back towards Arrivals together. Norm was standing outside the toilet.

Alone.

'I don't know what happened,' he said. 'I washed my hands -'

'Look after Donald,' she said.

Jazz headed back towards the gate, guessing that the man would try to land himself - meaning arrive at one terminal and then attempt to clear Immigration at another. They didn't get many runners. Maybe one a year. There was nowhere to run to.

Sooner or later, Jazz thought, you bang your head up against my border.

She saw him at the end of a long, deserted hall, one of those seemingly infinite empty spaces that could suddenly open up at the airport, and she broke into a run, catching up with him as he paused at a glass wall with the runway beyond, considering his next move.

They looked at each other.

He was a foot taller and twice her weight.

Jazz moved slowly towards him.

'Don't make me take you down,' she said quietly.

He laughed at that, but when he tried to push past her she slipped one leg behind him and shoved his chest hard with the palms of her hands. He fell backwards and went down fast and heavy. She left him there, flat on his back, moaning something about knowing his human rights and being molested by the Taliban while she picked up his holdall and began to

search through it for travel documents. But it looked like they had all been eaten.

He jumped up and tried to snatch the holdall from her.

'My bag, my bag!' he cried. 'You give me my bag back!'

'Hey,' she said, frowning as she held it away from him. 'Manners. What's the magic word?'

His face got a sly look.

He wiped a crumb of passport from his bottom lip.

'Asylum,' he said. 'The magic word is . . . asylum.'

Once you cleared passport control you turned left to collect your baggage and get on with your life. But if for some reason you did not clear passport control then you turned right and were escorted beyond a sign saying AUTHORIZED STAFF ONLY to a strip of locked, glass-walled holding rooms.

One of the rooms was for families, stuffed full of brightly coloured, ancient toys. Right now it held a weary-looking man and woman and a tiny child who was contemplating a stuffed monkey with many miles on the clock. The other rooms held Megan, Donald and the man in black.

Jazz looked at them through the glass. The man in black, hunched in his seat, sweating heavily. Donald staring into space, humming a selection of Queen's greatest hits. And Megan, looking at Jazz through the glass, not afraid to meet her eye now as she mouthed one word.

Bitch.

'I'll start with her,' Jazz said, and she swiped the card that let her into the holding room.

'You can't keep me here like this,' Megan said.

'I can keep you here for twenty-four hours,' Jazz said. 'But I don't need that long. May I look in your rucksack?'

There was so much intelligence to be found in bags. Megan threw it at her.

The first thing that Jazz found was a card. Some kind of greetings card. She took it out of the envelope and read, *Good Luck With Your New Life*.

It had been signed inside by lots of people – the kind of card you get when you are going away forever. Some of them seemed to think that they would never be seeing Megan again.

'Do you have a boyfriend here, Megan?' Jazz said, holding up the card. 'Maybe someone you met in the States? Someone you are very fond of? A British guy who you are planning to live with in the UK? Stop me if I'm getting warm.'

'You can't talk to me like that,' Megan said, her face flushing red. 'It's nothing to do with you.'

'I have police powers,' Jazz said. 'I can arrest you, and I can charge you, and if you are found guilty of an offence serious enough, somebody can send you to prison. And I can instruct the airline that brought you in to take you back.'

'And what if they refuse?'

'They never do.'

Megan sat down and covered her face in her hands. 'Ever been in love?' she said.

'Once,' Jazz said.

'And do you know what it's like when you will do anything for him? Absolutely anything?'

'Well,' Jazz said. 'He did talk me into seeing *We Will Rock You*.'

The man in black stood there with sweat pouring down his face, his arms rigid by his side, focusing every fibre of his being on trying not to shake.

He had been removed from the holding area and they were now standing in a bare red-and-grey room.

'This is what is going to happen,' Jazz said. 'I can go to my line manager and ask for permission to give you either a rub down, a strip search or an intimate search. Guess which one I'm going to ask for?' She nodded at Norm. 'It's same sex for searching, so I will not have the pleasure. Have you done your nails, Norm?'

Jazz was holding a piece of cloth that might have been used to clean spectacles. She showed it to the man in black and dabbed it against his forehead.

'This goes into a machine called an Ionscan,' she said. 'It tells me if you have been anywhere near narcotics. Now you might think you've been very careful, but I can promise you that you haven't been careful enough. I shall swab your shoes, your hands, and your perspiration. It is impossible to avoid being contaminated in some way. And when we leave the airport for the detention centre, you will leave in handcuffs, and will have made the transition from passenger to prisoner.'

The man in black stared at her, eyes bulging, grinding his teeth.

'Grand tour first?' Jazz said.

They led him through to a giant X-ray machine. It looked like the kind of metal detector you get at security, but blown up to epic proportions.

'This will show up your intestines and bowels a treat,' Jazz said. 'Then the results go to a radiographer at St Bart's Hospital, who gets back to us in two or three hours.'

The man in black began to tremble. Norm looked nervously at Jazz. She put her face close to the man's ear.

'Ask yourself this,' Jazz said quietly. 'Do I really have two or three hours?'

Finally she showed him the special toilet. This always gave them pause for thought. It looked more like a medieval gallows than a lavatory. There were steep metal steps leading up to a metal platform that seemed sturdy enough to support a scaffold. But instead of a gibbet there was a toilet bowl with no lid. Directly below it there was a steel-framed glass window with two long black rubber gloves built into it, reaching inside like curious snakes.

'This is where it gets messy,' Jazz said. 'You've got - what? Seventy to one hundred sealed wrappers inside you? I've seen people who have swallowed narcotics wrapped inside tin foil and clingfilm wrappers. Can you believe that? You wouldn't be that stupid, would you? Even condoms - well, that violates all sorts of health and safety rules, and it's still a risky business.'

Because sometimes they break. Any idea what that does to the human heart?'

He swallowed hard.

'We're both professionals,' he muttered.

'~~Not you,~~ Jazz said. 'You're an amateur. This is what I do for a living. Now - before we begin - is there anything you want to tell me?'

The man in black stared at her, eyes wild and bulging. With an enormous effort, he shook his head. He could no longer hold his hands still by his side. His mouth opened. Nothing came out.

Suddenly he pitched forward and Norm cried out, catching him as he fell. Norm was a strong lad, young and fit, but in the end he had to ease him gently to the ground.

You can't hold a dead man for long, Jazz thought.

Towards the end of her nine-hour shift, Jazz sat with Donald in the holding room.

'Donald, your family have reported you missing,' she said. 'I spoke to your wife. She's really worried about you. They all miss you. Your wife. Your daughter. Your grandson. Remember them?'

He looked confused. 'My family?'

She showed him the boarding card in her hand. 'They're all going to be waiting for you in Boston, Donald. The airline that brought you here is going to take you back.' He looked uncertainly at the boarding card. 'We're going to put you on a plane, okay?' Jazz said. 'And your family will be waiting for you at the other end.'

'Okay.'

Jazz stood up to leave.

'But what happened to me?' he said. 'What the hell happened to me?'

Jazz was on the verge of telling him about being refused and removed. Why it happened. What it meant.

But she knew that wasn't really what he was asking about, so she just gave him a little smile, and she said nothing.

Jazz walked Megan to her gate.

With her rucksack and her hair tied back, she suddenly seemed very young. It was the final call for boarding.

'Listen,' Jazz said. 'Listen to me, Megan. It keeps. It does. If it's real, then it doesn't just fade away overnight.'

Megan sighed and handed over her boarding card to the attendant at boarding. When the ticket stub was handed back to her, she stared at it thoughtfully.

'And you know this - how?' she said. 'Because of you and the *We Will Rock You* guy?'

'Just trust me on this one,' Jazz said. 'If he loves you, and if it's meant to be, then he'll wait. Okay?'

Megan looked at her and then looked quickly away, her eyes shining with tears. They were closing the gate.

'You better go now,' Jazz said. 'Maybe I'll see you again one day.'

'Yes,' Megan said. 'Thanks.'

Jazz watched her board the aircraft. There was a flight attendant in the doorway, anxious to shut it in

preparation for take-off. Megan turned to wave goodbye.

'What's he called?' Jazz said. 'What's the name of your English boyfriend?'

The American girl had a lovely smile.

'Harry,' she said. 'His name is Prince Harry.'