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THE HUGE METAL DOOR slammed shut behind me.

Once again I was locked inside a Florida jail, as I had been hundreds of times during the previous nine years.

I glanced up at the CCTV on the ceiling. Unseen eyes would scan my every move until the moment I left. I winked at the camera. They hate that.

I walked alone down several corridors. Each time I came to a secure door, it opened remotely and I passed through. Eventually I arrived at a waiting area where inmates congregated to meet with their lawyers in the adjacent interview rooms.

I reported to the sergeant in charge of the section. Three stripes stood proudly on the sleeve of his crisply-ironed shirt below a Palm Beach County Correctional Department badge.

‘Name?’ he enquired.

‘Hugh Hunter. I’m the British vice-consul.’

‘Take a seat,’ he said. Custodial officers in Florida are rarely conversational.

I sat down. I knew I could be here a while. Regrettably, I was not permitted to bring any books or other reading material into the secure zone, lest I conceal within them a map or an escape plan. All I had was a small folder containing some case notes.

My eyes fell on a television set mounted on the wall, which was tuned to a news channel. After a short story about a man trampled to death by an ostrich, the British journalist Trevor McDonald appeared on the screen, reporting from some godforsaken corner of the world.

The only other people in the holding area were two inmates, both African-Americans, who were waiting to meet their attorneys. When they heard McDonald speak, their mouths fell open in shock.

‘Listen to the brother speak!’ shouted one of them.

‘I never done heard a nigger talk like that!’ exclaimed the other, in awe.

The one closest to me turned to me. ‘You ever hear a brother speak like that?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘He’s a well-known broadcaster – he has a great reputation in England.’

The other man turned to his friend. ‘What he say?’

‘He said the nigger’s got a reputation over in England.’

The second man leaned forward now. ‘Is that for real?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘He’s held in high esteem.’

‘Damn!’ he said. ‘That sounds like some serious shit.’

They returned to their own private conversation, but I overheard one whispering, ‘High esteem! Nigger’ll get ten years for that shit.’

After a short while, a guard entered and beckoned me to follow. He showed me to a small interview room where my prisoner was waiting. He was 22 years old, and his name was Paul Carr. He was from Burnley in Lancashire, and he had been arrested a few days before. I love freaky-looking people, and I couldn’t help but smile. He looked like someone had unscrewed the bottom off a toilet brush and glued it to a Toby jug; to make matters worse his ginger hair clashed horribly with the bright orange of his prison boiler suit.

He did not return my smile. We shook hands, and I sat down across the table from him. I started to introduce myself, but he did not wait to hear my name.

‘I didn’t do this,’ he snarled, ‘I’ve been framed! What are you going to do about it?’

Officially, as a British consular officer I was concerned primarily with the young man’s health and welfare, not his innocence or guilt. Most British consular officers around the world simply refuse to discuss the details of a given crime; in fact, the policy of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is to keep conversation strictly to mundane matters such as the prisoner’s diet and family contact.

Unofficially, I had realised a long time ago that to be of any real assistance to my compatriots I would have to tread a fine line between following FCO policy and telling the prisoners what they needed to know.

British inmates in foreign prisons are in an extremely vulnerable position.

It's often difficult, if not impossible, for them to find out what's happening and what *might* happen from anyone else, including – if they're lucky enough to have one – their lawyer. A consular officer probably has a good idea of what lies ahead; in my experience the average prisoner needs some straight talking, quickly.

Unfortunately, they don't usually like the straight part of the talking.

I looked at the young man across the table from me. He was legally an adult, but he still had much to learn about life. He'd managed to land himself in an American jail when he should have been back at Boots in Burnley buying some acne cream. It would be hard for him to be in this place. He was vulnerable and would certainly be a target for other, bigger men. I would help him as much as I could, but to do that I would need to know more about the situation.

I looked at my file, to check his name again.

'All right Paul,' I said, 'what's the story?'

'I was a passenger in a car that had drugs, but they say they were my drugs as well as his drugs even though it was his car. It wasn't my car and I don't even really know the bloke. I only went with him because I wanted to buy some cigarettes.'

'Well, that was a stroke of bad luck,' I said.

'Yeah, it was,' he replied, with no obvious sense of irony: a bad sign.

'What evidence have they got against you?'

'Just the drugs they found in the car.'

'Where were you when you were arrested?'

'Martin Luther King Boulevard.'

In tribute to the great civil rights leader, almost every American city has an MLK Boulevard, but they tend to be in the poorest parts of town, where crime is more prevalent.

‘There’s a lot of drug dealing and prostitution going on down there,’ I said.

‘Is there?’

I looked down at his arrest sheet, which I had in front of me. ‘It says here you were arrested at 2.30am. Is that correct?’

‘Er... yeah, that would be about right.’

‘At the time of your arrest, it says you had cocaine in your system.’

‘Did I?’

‘You know you did.’

‘That doesn’t have anything to do with anything. It isn’t illegal to have cocaine in your blood.’

‘Whether it’s illegal or not, and I think it probably is, being coked out of your head isn’t going to go down well in court, trust me. You’re in Florida, here – not Sweden. This doesn’t look good. You should probably prepare yourself to be here for a while.’

Possession of cocaine and, more specifically, conspiracy to distribute it was likely to earn him three to five years in a state correctional institution – and that was if he pleaded guilty. If he was convicted at trial he was facing five to ten years.

‘You can fuck right off!’ he snarled, ‘I didn’t do it.’

‘Hang on,’ I said. ‘Don’t take it out on me. I’m only telling you what to expect.’

I didn’t mind him venting his anger a little – it was only to be expected – but I didn’t want to get embroiled in a pointless argument.

We sat in silence for a few moments. Although he didn’t yet know it, Paul had been arrested during a police sting operation. He and his co-defendant had purchased a significant amount of coke from an undercover officer in a major drug-dealing neighbourhood. They had not bought cigarettes. There was no doubt in the minds of the

arresting officers that he had gone there for drugs, and I knew from experience that a Florida jury would have no doubt either.

After a while, he calmed down and looked at the table in front of me, where I had placed a packet of mints.

‘Whose mints are they?’ he asked.

‘Mine,’ I said.

He reached over, took two of the mints and put them into his mouth.

‘Whose are they now?’ he said.

‘Still mine,’ I said. ‘But you’re in possession of them. You were from the moment you took them and ate them.’

‘What if the mints got into my mouth by accident?’

‘By accident?’

‘They could have fallen in whilst I was asleep.’

He was being perfectly serious.

‘What’s that got to do with your charge?’ I asked.

‘It proves the drugs weren’t necessarily mine, even if I had coke in my blood,’ he said, slipping the packet of mints into his pocket.

‘It proves nothing of the kind,’ I said. ‘And please don’t test that argument in court. Now, can I have my mints back?’

‘Oh, yeah, sorry. I forgot they were yours.’

He knew he was guilty, but thought he’d be able to talk his way out of this. He did not understand that in the United States evidence and due process were not for the likes of him. He was in the country illegally – having overstayed a tourist visa – he had taken drugs and he had no money to pay for a lawyer. He was unemployed, uneducated and dripping with attitude. None of this augured well.

I knew he would spend the next six to nine months in that Palm Beach County Jail, during which he would receive little information about the development of his case.

Eventually, when his spirit was sufficiently depleted, the prosecution would approach him and offer him a deal: he could plead guilty to a reduced charge, have the whole thing resolved with just a

brief court appearance for sentencing and be on his way in a matter of months. Alternatively, he could plead ‘not guilty’, wait perhaps a year for a trial date and take his chances on the more serious charges. If he were to be convicted of them, he could face many years in prison.

In Florida, less than three per cent of prosecutions end up in front of a jury: the rest are resolved by plea bargains. The Floridian judicial system has more to do with economics than justice. Depending on your viewpoint, it is either ruthlessly perverse or extremely effective.

From out in the corridor I heard a buzzer sound, followed by a loud click. A metal door then slammed shut, and there was the sound of a big key being turned in a lock. There was a shout in the distance, which echoed down the hallway. Somebody banged something metal against the pipes. These are the sounds of confinement.

A sorry-looking son-of-a-gun with a broom shuffled up to the window of our room. He was wearing the distinctive blue tunic of the jail ‘trusty’, one whose good conduct permitted him to work and earn credits within the jail system. He made no effort to sweep anything. When he saw us, he came right up to the glass and smiled. He only had one tooth, which was gold, and his gums were bleeding. He was a black man who had dyed his hair blond, but his dark roots were showing: evidence of his months in pre-trial detention. He grasped the broom handle like a microphone and in a fine tenor voice he began to sing us a Frank Sinatra song. He had, apparently, done it his way. That was probably a mistake.

‘We haven’t got any cigarettes so fuck off!’ shouted my client, before he’d got past the first verse. Frank grinned and hobbled away.

‘What’s he in for?’ I asked.

‘Arson,’ he said.

‘What did he set fire to?’

‘His granny.’

‘Bloody hell! Did she survive?’

‘She was already dead. He was trying to melt the gold fillings out of her head before the undertakers got there.’

We both contemplated this in silence for a moment. I was getting hungry and I wanted to return to the relative sanity of the outside world. I started to put my papers away.

‘What happens now?’ Paul asked me, his tone more conciliatory.

‘Probably nothing much for a while – my guess is not for several months, maybe even the best part of a year. You can’t make bail because you’re in the United States illegally; if you paid the bond you’d only go straight to an immigration detention centre. Let me ask you, how well do you know the bloke who was driving?’

‘Hardly at all.’

‘Can you be sure he won’t give the police a statement incriminating you?’

‘No, he won’t do that, he’s a mate.’

‘Well, is he your mate, or a bloke you don’t know?’

‘Bit of both, I suppose.’ Even he was embarrassed by his lie.

‘Be prepared for the fact that the prosecutor will almost certainly approach this guy in about six months and offer him a sweet deal in exchange for a statement implicating you. They may even come and offer you the deal first. You need to think about what you’re going to do when that time comes.’

‘I can’t grass him up.’

‘Well, that’s your prerogative. I’m only telling you what I think will happen. Besides, you might feel different about that after you’ve been in this hellhole for six months.’

‘No, I won’t.’

I sensed a slight anger in his tone again.

‘Listen, I’m here to help,’ I told him. ‘I’ll do whatever I can, and if you need anything you can either write to me at the consulate, or you can call us reverse-charge. They call it a “collect call” here. Ask for me or my assistant, pro-consul John Corfield.’

I stood to indicate that the meeting was over, and he rose to shake my hand. He muttered a few words of thanks. I rarely got even that much from most prisoners.

On the way out, I stopped at the jail's reception area to retrieve my leather jacket and bag from a locker. I had two missed calls on my cell phone. One from my girlfriend, who'd left the four-word message that no man ever wants to hear: 'We have to talk.' The other was from my colleague, Linda, at the British Consulate General in Atlanta. There was no message, but I returned the call anyway.

'Hey there, it's me,' I said. 'I think I missed your call earlier?'

'Hey Hugh,' she said. 'Listen, I have to go into a meeting right now, but I just wanted to let you know something before it gets out.'

She was whispering, which usually meant something interesting was happening.

'Is everything okay?' I asked.

'Well, they offered me early retirement this morning, and I'm just going back in to tell them I accept it.'

I wasn't too surprised at this news, but it was sad. I wondered if she was the first one to desert a sinking ship. I didn't say anything.

'I'm sorry I won't be able to watch out for you any more, but you'll be fine without me,' she said.

'Yeah, I'll be fine,' I said. 'Listen, I have to go, but I'll call you in the morning. Good luck.'

'Thanks, drive safe.'

In the car park, I prepared my Triumph motorcycle for the ride back to Orlando. Most British diplomats don't conduct their business trips on motorbikes, but most British diplomats weren't paid as badly as I was.

Thick, black clouds gathered to the north, which was exactly where I was going. I knew it was going to rain, and rain hard, but tried to persuade myself that maybe it would blow over. Driving a bike through a Florida storm is wet and dangerous and exhausting.

Half an hour later, as I headed up the Florida Turnpike, it burst right in front of me. Two hundred metres up the highway was a curtain of heavy rain, literally a dark grey wall of water, and at that point there's nothing to be done other than grit your teeth. Within seconds

every part of me was soaked; I could smell the rain in my clothes and the roar of it drumming on my helmet filled my ears.

Within seconds, the water on the road surface was an inch or two deep and the bike began to aquaplane slightly; I slowed as much as was safe – the visibility was extremely bad and cars can come up behind you fast – and a speeding dump truck passed me on the outside and threw up a torrent of water, temporarily reducing my visibility to zero. My heart rate accelerated, and I could feel the adrenalin pumping through my body. The bike wobbled a fraction. In anticipation of a grim death, I braced myself and gripped the bars tightly.

2

MY STORY ACTUALLY begins at Toronto's Pearson airport in the spring of 1996. I had just spent the weekend visiting my brother, and was attempting to go back to my apartment in New York. At Pearson you clear US immigration at the airport before you fly to the States, and I was in the middle of an uncomfortable discussion with the US immigration officer about my domicile arrangements.

'Are you living in the United States?'

'What do you mean exactly by "living in the United States"?''

'Is your main residence in the United States?'

'No, as I've told you, my main residence is in London, England.'

'I think you're living in the United States.'

'Well, you're wrong. I've already shown you my air ticket to London in two days' time.'

My flight back to New York City was due to leave in less than an hour. The immigration officer looked at me for a few moments. She sensed I was lying, but I'd chosen my words carefully and I was not about to change my story, no matter how many times she asked me. It was a stalemate.

'Take a seat over there and wait,' she said.

She took my passport and my air tickets to New York and London and went off to speak to someone else. I'd already been in the secondary-interview room for half-an-hour answering the same questions over and over. This wasn't looking good, and I figured the game was up. I had moved to New York in 1990 to study at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. After graduating I worked for a year – acting in obscure, *off-off-Broadway* theatres – on a practical training visa, which expired in 1994. By that time I was living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. For the next two years there was a kind of grey period, where I was in and out of the United States on

my B1/B2 tourist visa. I never overstayed the time restrictions of any given entry, but on the whole I was probably spending more of my time in America than I was supposed to.

I went and lay down on the seats, and I must have fallen asleep because I awoke with a start over an hour later, when the immigration officer shouted at me to get up and come back to the desk. From the look on her face, I guessed I was going to be refused entry to the US.

I wandered over, trying not to look too despondent.

‘I’ve spoken to my supervisor,’ she said, ‘and I am under instruction to admit you to the United States. But only for a period of 48 hours.’

‘Okay,’ I replied casually, furiously trying to calculate where that left me.

‘If it was down to me, you wouldn’t be getting in at all,’ she said, as she stamped my passport with unusual vigour and stapled inside it a white I-94 departure card before tossing it back across the counter at me, along with my flight ticket.

‘Please thank your supervisor for me, he is eminently wise.’

I don’t think she appreciated that last remark because, as I turned to leave, she offered a parting shot.

‘You’d better be on the plane to England in two days,’ she said. ‘And the next time you come back to the US, you can expect some problems at immigration.’

That was all I needed, some black mark against me on the computer. I waved goodbye over my shoulder as I left the interview room and headed through to the departures lounge.

I’d missed my flight, and had a three-hour wait for the next one – though fortunately the check-in staff understood the situation, and stuck me on the next flight without penalty.

On the way back, I considered my options.

I didn’t want to go home to England: that was for sure.

Flying to London on Wednesday would keep me within the strict letter of the law, but I doubted I’d get back in to the States any time soon.

Failing to leave the country by Wednesday would leave me in the States unlawfully.

After landing at La Guardia, I disembarked and found myself mingling with a large crowd of people in the lounge waiting to take the next flight out. The atmosphere seemed unusually tense, so I asked one of the passengers what was going on.

‘The earlier flight to Toronto was cancelled,’ he said, ‘so we’re all waiting for the last plane back tonight. They’ve oversold it, so most of these people don’t have seats yet and they’re trying to get on the flight.’

There was a scrum of desperate passengers around the desk, gesticulating and shouting at the airline staff. At that moment I had an inspirational idea. I approached the desk and stood at the very end. Just under the counter was a pile of I-94 immigration departure forms, which had been collected from the passengers who had already checked onto the flight. I removed the I-94 card from my passport and placed it inside the sleeve of my jacket. At a certain moment a man at the other end of the desk demanded loudly to be given a boarding pass, or to be checked on to a flight with another airline. As the staff members turned to deal with him, I gently tucked my I-94 to the middle of the pile on the desk, turned and walked away.

The records would now show that I had entered and left the United States on the same day. That solved the first part of my problem, but I was still unsure what to do about the long-term situation.

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The next day I called a mate of mine, Lance, who worked at the British consulate-general in New York. He’d once told me that if I could get a job at the consulate, I would get a diplomatic visa, as he had done a couple of years before. We went for a beer and I explained my problem.

‘Well, I’ve got some great contacts,’ he said. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’ (Months later, I discovered that he’d been sleeping with a woman in the personnel department. He lost his job a few years afterwards when he tried to put his hands down the knickers of a young secretary working in the political section: she subsequently turned out to be with MI6.)

With Lance pulling a few strings and maybe some bra straps, a week or two later I found myself interviewing for a position as a visa officer at the consulate. There was only one other applicant. I was offered the job the next day, and I started the following Monday.

Two weeks after I began, I was given a few days off work to go to London and get my visa from the American embassy. My visit to the embassy went without problem, and the next day I boarded a flight back to New York. My arrival at JFK didn’t go smoothly.

The immigration officer took one look at my passport and told me I’d have to go for a secondary interview. I went into a large separate room adjacent to the admissions desks and waited. After about an hour the senior immigration officer called me forward.

‘Are you Mr Hugh Hunter?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Have you ever had any problems with US immigration?’

‘No, I have not.’

‘Well, I don’t like this,’ he said. ‘I don’t like it at all.’

‘What’s the problem? Is there something about me in the computer?’ I asked.

‘No, not exactly, but if you didn’t have this diplomatic visa in your passport, I would refuse you entry and send you back to London. As it is, there’s not much I can do about it.’

He didn’t explain further. I was mystified, but he gave me my passport back and wished me a good day.

I went back into the consulate the next day. My job involved processing visa applications from people in the United States who wanted to travel to the UK. For obvious reasons, I never mentioned

the incidents at Toronto or JFK to anyone in the office, but I wondered what had actually happened. I found out about two months later when I was sent to JFK airport for a day's training on fraudulent and counterfeit travel documents. The two instructors were US immigration officers. Towards the end of the day, one of the officers mentioned, almost in passing, that they had an unofficial system to identify people who they were suspicious about, but could not record on the computer.

‘As you’ve learned,’ he droned in a flat, nasal monotone, ‘the ink we use to stamp passports is red in normal lighting conditions, but it glows blue under an ultraviolet light. If we have a suspicion about someone, but maybe for legal reasons we can’t log it on the computer, we simply take several pages from the middle of the document and scuff the corners in the ink. When you look at that passport under an ultraviolet light, the whole corner of the passport glows bright blue. If you ever see that, you’ll know that there’s been a problem of some kind but, probably because we couldn’t prove it, it hasn’t been logged. Treat such visa applicants with caution.’

The next day I took my passport to work. That evening, after everyone else had left, I looked at it under an ultraviolet light. The corner was bright blue. I removed the edges of the affected pages surgically with a scalpel, shaving off a little more each time until all the ink was gone. I never had a problem with US immigration again.

I worked in the consular and visa section at the British Consulate in New York for around 18 months. It was a zoo. In those days consular and visa work was of marginal importance to the FCO, so we were inadequately funded and understaffed. Money was spent, instead, on the commercial work done at consulates – most of that money was, in my opinion, completely wasted, a good proportion of it on pointless lunches for diplomats. For most of the commercial officers, their only qualification to do the job was a brief FCO training course and almost none of them had had any hard experience in commerce, but within

the closeted confines of the FCO, where there were few commercial realities, they were pretending to be businessmen. The truth was easy to see: by lunchtime on the Friday before a long weekend, the trade and investment offices were empty. In the visa section, by contrast, a dozen of us would be working into the evening to process hundreds of last-minute applications from people needing to travel to or through the UK that weekend. We never got so much as a word of thanks for it from the management.

It was actually an embarrassment. Every day, the visa queues would stretch out of the waiting room and past the elevators. Having stood in such lines many times myself, I knew how that felt and I often wondered how many people contemplating investing or working in the UK had taken one look at that line and gone elsewhere with their money and skills. Yet dozens of diplomats, whose remit was trade and investment, sat idle just a few metres away. It was a joke.

One morning we had a security briefing from a London-based officer. He told us how important our safety was to the FCO, and reminded us to be vigilant for unattended bags and suspicious behaviour. When I returned from lunch that afternoon, I stopped by our security guard, a young Puerto Rican employed via a local agency to save money. He spoke a kind of restructured English and he had a metal detection wand he waved all over the visa applicants before he allowed them into the waiting area.

‘Hey there, Juan, how are you?’ I said.

‘Hangin’ good, amigo, takin’ it easy on the tenth floor.’ He then attempted one of those complicated urban handshakes, but I failed miserably so he just punched me in the hand.

‘Tell me, what do you have to do when the metal detector goes off? Do you have to pat people down?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. I’ve been working here two years, and this thing didn’t never gone off. Not even one time.’

‘Really? Can I see it please?’

‘Sure thing.’

Our Man In Orlando

I took the end off of it and gave it a brief examination.

‘You need batteries in here, my friend.’ I told him.

‘Nobody said nuthin’ to me about no batteries when I got this job,’ he replied, snatching back his wand indignantly.

That was how important our safety and security *really* was.

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As the months passed, I began to find myself at odds with the management. It all culminated in the autumn of 1997, when we were told to expect a visit from a London-based FCO inspection team. We got the news on a Thursday afternoon, and the team was going to be in the office on the Monday morning. The inspectors were going to audit our visa operation to see whether we had sufficient resources and whether we were doing our jobs properly. We didn’t, and we weren’t. Naively, I was happy: I thought the inspection would reveal this and that the parlous situation might be rectified. Instead, our bosses panicked and asked for volunteers to come in and work over the weekend to clear the enormous backlog of applications. I spoke up to refuse, and encouraged the others to do the same. The request was fundamentally dishonest, and would prevent the audit team from ascertaining the real situation.

I ended up in an argument with my line manager. In front of the whole office, she screamed at me that I wasn’t a team player and criticised me for my attitude. *My attitude?*

In the event, they got their volunteers, the auditors came in, spent the entire day in the consul’s office and left on the Tuesday afternoon without even stepping foot into the processing office where the work was done. The hours spent over that weekend clearing the backlog had been wasted. The pile of folders could have been plonked in the centre of the office and strewn with fairy lights and the auditors would not have seen them. That was an interesting lesson for me on how the FCO conducts its oversight.

After this incident I was certain that my card was marked, and that I needed to think about an exit strategy. Then, just before Thanksgiving in November, I arrived at work one morning to see a notice on the message board.

Vacancy: British Vice-Consul, Orlando

This was a significant position. The successful applicant would have responsibility for all consular protection matters pertaining to British nationals in Florida, which meant anything from dealing with holidaymakers who'd lost their passports to visiting murderers in prison. But I was mostly interested because the successful candidate would be in charge of the office, reporting to the British Consulate General in Atlanta 400 miles away. Whoever got this job would be largely free of micromanagement and interference. From my experience thus far in the FCO, that was no small consideration.

Owing to my relative lack of consular experience I didn't think I had much chance of getting the job but I flew down to Atlanta for an interview anyway.

I've done many things in my life, and for several years I had been a London firefighter. During my interview, the consul general asked me what skills from that job I might be able to bring to this one. I didn't actually think there was much crossover, but I didn't want to say that. So I said the only thing I could think of. 'I'm pretty good at putting out fires.'

'Ah, yes,' he said, as he noted my answer down, 'that would come in useful.'

I was momentarily confused by this comment, until it dawned on me that he was speaking metaphorically. He obviously hadn't heard that all firemen are secret arsonists; I thought everyone knew that?

The next morning I was offered the job. It was time to escape from New York.

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The British vice-consulate in Orlando had opened a few years earlier after the explosive growth of charter airline travel to Florida from the UK and a large increase in the resident British population.

My first day in the vice-consulate was in February 1998, a month before my 36th birthday. I was replacing vice-consul Linda Nassar, an American from Georgia – not all British consuls are British. A glamorous southern belle, she was blonde, in her early 50s and spoke with a laconic confederate drawl. But her easy, laid back nature disguised a keen intelligence and a wealth of knowledge about consular work, which she'd been doing for 30 years. She'd seen it all, and I would draw on her experience repeatedly.

After Linda and I had breakfast together, she introduced me to my two staff. Viv McCulloch was a gregarious, open, smiling woman; Sarah Bishop was not.

I spent the rest of the day drinking coffee and talking to Linda whilst she smoked.

'I didn't think you were allowed to smoke in office buildings in Florida,' I said.

'Well, I've sealed it off,' she said, pointing to the ceiling. There were yards of nicotine-stained tape covering every vent and fire alarm. 'Besides, this is, technically, British territory so British laws apply here. You can still smoke indoors in England, right?'

'Er... yes,' I said. You could back then. 'So anyway, I assume most of my work here will be lost passports and expired air tickets?'

'Well,' – almost all of her sentences started with 'well' – 'there's a bit of that, but you'll spend most of your time dealing with British prisoners.'

'Are there a lot of them?'

'Hundreds.'

'*Hundreds*? Are you kidding?'

'Well, we probably deal with more arrests and more long-term prisoners than any other British consulate in the world. Serious criminals, too, some of 'em.'

‘Murderers?’

‘Yeah, we have a couple dozen of those, and new ones every year.’

‘Anyone I would have heard of?’

‘Well, maybe one or two, but mostly they never made the news in the UK.’

‘How come?’

‘Well, the newspapers here rarely report on the nationality of defendants in trials. And if the press here doesn’t mention it, the press in the UK doesn’t usually get to hear about it.’

The job was beginning to sound even more interesting than I had originally anticipated.

I subsequently found that Linda had been right. The consulate in Orlando did deal with more arrests and prisoners than any other British consulate in the world. In fact, for several years, we dealt with more British prisoners than all of the British consulates in France put together.

I had a few days with Linda, during which we reviewed case files, talked about resources and ran through staffing issues. Then she left for the British Consulate General in Atlanta, from whence she had come four years before, to take up a promotion. She would also be my main point of contact in Atlanta.

I didn’t feel remotely qualified for the job I’d taken on.

Florida is the size of England and Wales combined – the distance from Pensacola at one end to Key West at the other is over 500 miles. I was there to deal with pretty much any problem you can think of involving British nationals, as well as taking on a few statutory functions, such as signing certain official documents and undertaking ‘maritime investigations’ – mostly inquiries into deaths on board British-flagged vessels. There would also be occasional representational duties, such as public speaking and media relations.

But mostly I would deal with criminals.

If the job was big, the pay wasn't. There are two types of people who work in an embassy or consulate – ‘diplomatic service personnel’ and ‘locally-employed staff’.

‘DS’ personnel are your traditional, career diplomats – known within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as ‘UK-based’. They generally work a rolling pattern of three years in a developing country, followed by three years in a developed country, followed by two or three years in the UK, until retirement, and they are extremely expensive. They’re paid good salaries in UK pounds, but the many allowances and expenses they receive whilst abroad usually dwarf their salaries, and their children are normally entitled to a Government-paid private education. They also usually have lavish accommodation – the consul at an adjacent post to mine was UK-based and the rent on his apartment, paid by the FCO (i.e. the British taxpayer), was almost \$10,000 per month. This was a huge and entirely unnecessary extravagance: it was almost never used for official government business, such as entertainment of local dignitaries, or accommodation of senior British officials who might be visiting the area, which were the only reasons that I could see might be used to remotely justify such expenditure.

Sadly, that wasn't something I personally had to worry about. I was locally-employed (LE), and LE staff were contracted to a particular position at a specific post and paid a salary in the local currency. Rest assured that ‘LE’ personnel don't get the big money or the flashy perks; when I started I was paid less than \$2,100 per month, and from that I had to fund my own accommodation, transportation and airfares back to the UK.

I had found an apartment within walking distance of the office, which meant I didn't need to rush out and get a car, but I couldn't afford much furniture. Fortunately, the second day I was there I found a perfectly good old armchair in the car park outside my front door where somebody had abandoned it. A cheap bed from a company by the railway station and a small table and chairs from a second-hand store made it habitable. It was Spartan, but it would do.

A few weeks later I solved my transport dilemma with a 1996 Triumph Trident motorcycle. It was black with red trim, a gorgeous bike and cheaper than a car, if not so convenient. For long distance travelling, I'd fly and rent a car at the other end.

The day after I bought the Triumph, I rode it over to a small airfield in Orlando and booked my first flying lesson. I had always wanted to be a pilot and instruction in Florida was relatively inexpensive: now was the time to make it happen.

Back in the office, the workload was heavy from day one.

Consular relations between the United Kingdom and the USA are governed by the terms of the Anglo-American Agreement on Consular relations (AACR) of 1951. The terms of the treaty are far reaching, but one of the most important aspects of it concerns the arrest of British nationals in the States (and, conversely, the arrest of American citizens in the UK, as the treaty is reciprocal). Whenever a British citizen is arrested in the US it is mandatory for the police (or other arresting agency) to notify the British consulate, even if the arrested person does not want this.

In fact, the police frequently fail to notify the consulate of arrests, which was an ongoing problem, but the number of notifications was still high and the phones rang constantly. We received faxes informing us of arrests several times each day. It was hard to stay on top of it all, but I worked long hours to do so – invariably more than 60 hours a week during the first few years. Normally, I would need to travel a couple of days each week, usually to visit prisoners, but also others who were in trouble of some kind, which meant working weekends to catch up.

Notwithstanding the low pay and the long hours, I was excited and enthusiastic about the new job: it looked as if it would be fascinating. I was immensely proud to be in charge of a Foreign Office post, and, above all, it offered a real opportunity to help people in difficulty.

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