

# **The Visitors**

**By**

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This story is based on an interview with a friend, a former British Army corporal who served in the Army Special Investigation Branch following service with the Royal Army Medical Corps in North Africa, Palestine and Suez during the period 1950-1957. I believe the essence of what he told me is correct. He recently passed away.

## The Visitors

The boy struggled and kicked with no sound coming out of his mouth. The rope was tight around his neck. Little more than eighteen years old, he hadn't started shaving, hadn't properly held a girl, yet he had no more than a few minutes to live. Cyanosis was starting to show in his rapidly bluing lips. His kicks were weakening, his struggle fading.

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A short way down the road from the tied cottage sat a black Morris Oxford. Maureen had noticed it arriving just after 4 o'clock but could not see the two men inside. She knew that a few minutes after her husband returned from his work there would be a knock on the front door of her home. An welcome knock.

Her older daughter Helen was sprawled on the grass making daisy chains and Jane, just over a year old, was asleep in her pram as Maureen sat in the deckchair on the lawn and wondered about the men in the car. It was a bright, warm June afternoon, and those men would spoil it as they had done many times before - she was sure of that.

Maureen's husband Mike was a gamekeeper on the country estate, a short distance from Whitby and just a mile from Robin Hood's Bay. The cottage in which they lived was tied to his job. As 5 o'clock drew near, Maureen called to Helen and carried Jane indoors. Then, as she stood at the sink in the tiny kitchen peeling the potatoes for the evening meal, Jane was in her cot and Helen bustled around her feet playing with Sam, their Jack Russel terrier. Suddenly, Sam barked and raced to the front door excitedly - he was always the first to hear Mike's van. Then she heard the estate van stop outside on the verge and the door slam closed. Sam continued his excited barking.

Boots crunched on the gravel as Mike walked up the front path and Maureen caught the smell of game as he walked in with Sam yapping at his ankles.

'I've got a brace for supper' Mike said as he patted her bottom and kissed the back of her neck - 'a Wednesday special again'. Two rabbits thumped onto the pine table.

'You and your Wednesday specials - they smell! Keep them out of here until you've cleaned them or we'll have the flies coming in. And while we're talking of flies, those men are back. What is it with them - wherever we live they've been turning up every year? What's it all about?

'Right I'll hang them outside the front door for now, and clean them later'.

'You heard me, what's it all about?'

She didn't see the anger in his eyes as he turned, but she heard it in his voice 'Look love, don't you get it? I can't talk about it so don't keep asking me every time they come! Get off my back will you?'

Helen began to cry but Jane in the next room was oblivious. Sam crouched under the table - no-one liked Mike's anger.

Then came the knock on the front door. Sam growled and then ran to the door, barking wildly.

'Mo, I need the parlour - they won't be here long, I promise. Sam! Quiet! Sam! Basket!' The dog ran to his basket in the corner and cowered. 'Sam Stay!'

Maureen said nothing more as she went to move Jane to her cot in the bedroom. Mike moved to the front door and led the visitors into the parlour.

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Two hours later they sat down to eat. Helen was reading in bed and baby Jane was asleep. The little conversation was very strained. Mike was still simmering, while Maureen was wondering when she would break the news about her missed period. She had planned to go back to her work full-time as a local midwife but that looked like a remote possibility now with another child on the way. Things were tough enough already and would likely get harder in the winter. Would Mike be pleased? He'd wanted a son. There was still hope, but now was not the time to tell him.

'Good stew'.

'It's nothing special'.

Mike mopped up the sauce with the last of the bread then dashed his cutlery onto the plate.

'I'm going to the pub, don't wait up on me'.

'I won't.'

Jane slept on, oblivious to the tension and hot words, but Helen began to cry as Mike slammed the front door. Maureen climbed the small stairway to comfort her daughter.

The next morning Mike left at his usual time to be on the estate by 7 o'clock. As he drove the van along the lane he thought back to the brief meeting the evening before. It was an annual event and it seemed it would be that way forever - they would never leave him alone. What he knew was too important to them. It had to remain secret.

The sun was well up as he parked the van under a chestnut tree. The breeze was up in the north east bringing a hint of the sea and Norwegian spruce. The sounds and smells of the country early on a summer's morning were something he relished, breathing deeply as he heard a blackbird singing to warn others away from his territory.

Then, as he headed towards the estate outhouses he stopped in his tracks and shook his head. Last night's row with Maureen came to him again and he swore. He had wanted to share his secret with Maureen, but he couldn't. He had responsibilities, a family. A military prison was not an option. He also had other secrets – a brother and sister down in Surrey, where he was brought up, nieces and nephews, but nobody up here knew that.

'Morning Mike'.

'Good morning Sir' he replied, straightening his back and raising his head instinctively. He almost saluted. In his pre-occupation, he hadn't noticed the estate manager approach. *Creepy bastard.*

'A lovely morning, a hint of Norway in the air I think. We should have some settled weather for a few days.'

'Yes, I think we will, Sir.'

'With luck we might get the hay cut and dried this week. I say, you don't look too happy Mike, what's wrong?'

'Had a bad bit of fish last night I think.'

'Oh that's a shame. It happens. Well, what have you got planned this morning?'

'I'm going to check the North Wood, Sir, I think we've had some poachers setting snares there again' and I found some traces that look like they might have taken down a deer.

'I'd love to get the buggers in court, teach them a lesson.'

'They'll not be fit for court if I catch them, Sir.'

'Yes, well, make sure you don't overstep the mark with them. I'll see you in the estate office at lunchtime. Carry on the good work.'

*Prick.* Mike walked over to the keeper's store selected a key from his large bunch and unlocked the door. He took a 12 bore shotgun down from the rack, broke it and checked it. He slung a belt of cartridges over his shoulder along with his gamekeeper's bag, and set off to walk the north wood and estate wall.

There was still a sour taste in his mouth and it was nothing to do with food. He had seen some dreadful events supporting mine clearance in North Africa, he'd parachuted into Egypt as an army medic when the Suez Crisis was developing. He had served in Palestine and East Africa treating injured and sick troops but none of the sights were as dreadful as those he had witnessed in a British Army barracks. Although he had been demobbed from the Royal Army Medical Corps three years previously, the Army would not let him go completely. He held secrets that the Army wanted to stay secret.

How could he tell Maureen? How would the conversation go? He'd played it in his mind many times.

*'Although I was only a Corporal, they picked me out.'*

*'What do you mean 'picked you out'?'*

*'They thought I had potential. When I joined up at sixteen I'd been making fence posts for three years. It was a dead end job, it bored me bloody stiff. Then one day I passed a recruiting office in town and went in. The Army said they would teach me to read and write. Turned out they tried hard to teach me how to think, too, no harm in that. Anyway, I was bit of a cheeky sod, but my first CO understood me. I liked him too, he was a decent bloke. He had a gammy leg after being wounded in the First World War and walked with a stick. I don't think he went overseas in the Second, though, because of his leg. He even called me Michael and showed some respect for me. He said I had an IQ of 140, well above my rank.'*

*'I hope our girls have inherited some of that.'*

*'Don't interrupt, Mo. This is serious. You asked me to tell you and it's hard for me to talk about. I'm not supposed to tell anyone anything, not a word. It's all been covered up. You've got to swear not to tell another living soul or I will be sent to a military prison – and they'll never let me out. Just talking to you about it I'm breaking the Official Secrets Act.'*

*'But what have you done wrong?'*

*'Nothing, nothing at all. I did everything right, I followed orders and didn't do anything bad like those bloody Nazis who said they were just following orders. No more questions, please. Let me tell it my own way or not at all! Well, you know about my RAMC service in North Africa, Palestine, Suez and the rest. Those men in the car yesterday were here about one assignment I did, in England, not far from here in fact. Those men come back every year to remind me to keep my mouth shut and get me to re-sign the Official Secrets Act.'*

*Mike licked the sweat off his top lip.*

*'After my overseas service they picked me out as I said, and I was transferred to the Army SIB – the Special Investigation Branch. That's a section of the Army which investigates crime within the Army – thefts and fiddles, even murders. We were like policemen, detectives really – the equivalent of the CID but with much more power. It was interesting work, there were so many fiddles going on and it really made me use my brain to catch the buggers. There was thieving right, left and centre with much stuff still left over after the war. Hard to keep track of it all. Anyway, one day, the Colonel called me into his office. I remember his words clearly':*

*'Corporal, get in to your civvies. I'm sending you to live with a family for a few weeks. I want you to let your hair grow, start to look and talk like one of the family. Pick up a few words and mannerisms. Stop acting like a soldier for a while.'*

*'Why me, Sir?'*

*'Because you've got the right look about you and I know you can do the job. Make no contact with anyone here on the base or any of your family. This is top secret. Then in a few weeks time I will meet you in London to give you a more detailed briefing.'*

*Maureen bit back her questions as Mike continued.*

*'So, that's when it all started. He gave me an envelope full of fivers and an address to go to, down in the East End in London. I'd never held so much money and I'd never been to the East End for that matter. That's how much he trusted me. I put my civvies on and caught the train to London. Then, a bus out to Stepney, out in the East End. There was a still a lots of bomb damage in the area. Quite a shock I had when I got there.'*

*'Why?'*

*'I got off the bus and asked directions. Just look for the three brass balls, you can't miss it, I was told. I found the address and sure enough, there were the balls hanging outside a shop. A bloody pawnbroker's shop! I don't know how the balls had survived the war – I thought all the brass had gone for shell casings, maybe they'd been replaced. Anyway I couldn't miss the building – those on either side were just piles of rubble. God must have smiled on the family, I reckon. They lived in a flat over the pawnbroker's shop - Saul Marks and Son. I'll never forget them.'*

*'A pawnbroker's?'*

*'Yes, they were Jewish pawnbrokers. Saul Marks himself opened the door when I knocked. He was wearing a yarmulka.'*

*'What's a yar...yar...'*

*'Yarmulka. It's a Jewish skullcap. Orthodox they were.'*

*'A Jewish pawnbroker – Good Lord, what on earth was the army doing sending you to live with a Jewish family?'*

*'As the Colonel said, 'You've got the right look. Start to talk like one of them. Pick up a few words and mannerisms. You'll have an ID card and ration book in the name of Lawrence Marks.'*

*'I don't think you look like a Jew.'*

*'Well, the Army did. Maybe it's my nose, but I'm glad they didn't look too closely as I wouldn't have passed the shower test.'*

*Maureen smiled. 'Oh, I see what you mean, sort of.'*

*Mike pressed on. Now that he had started telling the story it was getting easier after being bottled up for so many years.*

*'So, I moved in with them, learning to be Jewish, at least on first pass. They were very nice people and Mr. Marks was obviously ex-army. He never asked why I was there – he must have known my CO or there was some other connection, possibly with the real reason behind my assignment. There had been a son, but a bomb got him one night during the Blitz and they never found his body. Tragic it was and I don't think they ever recovered from that – who would, ever? Besides that, they'd lost some relatives in one of the concentration camps – Auschwitz I think it was. Fucking German bastards.*

*Anyway, I learned a lot from them. They're a lot like us really, normal if you know what I mean, though obviously they were Jewish and they had some strange rituals and customs. I didn't go with them to the East London Synagogue or anything like that, I couldn't have got away with it. I even learned a bit about the pawnbroking business, helping in the shop. They passed me off as a cousin who wasn't Orthodox, staying with them for a while. Anyway, after a few weeks I got a note through the post. It was written on plain paper, no names, no identification, but I knew who it was from. It was really strange – addressed to me as Lawrence Marks. I didn't feel like Lawrence Marks, but I was learning to answer to the name. The note was unsigned, telling me to go to a particular café on such and such a day, to meet 'someone I would know'.*

*So I went, and it was the Colonel himself who met me at the café. He handed me a small cheap cardboard suitcase. Real cloak and dagger stuff it was. We went for a walk, through the ruins of Stepney and sat in a park. Green trees in the middle of rubble – I'll never forget it. God, they were hit hard by the Luftwaffe. Poor buggers. More than twelve years on and it was still a mess, although clearance was well under way.*

*Anyway, 'Michael', the Colonel said '...sorry, I mean Lawrence. You are re-joining the army. Your call-up papers are in the case. Learn your background, use the East End family as your cover. Get a train next Thursday to Catterick Camp – it's all there on your National Service call up letter, with your medical fitness certificate – so don't worry, you don't have to suffer the medical again!'*

*'The old bigger actually had me laughing! Anyway, he went on:'*

*'Handle that case very carefully – it's got a Browning and ammunition in it – you may need them. Remember the regulations about not carrying a weapon on base – you will have to break them and keep it concealed. Only the CO at the camp will know your purpose.'*

*'And what is my purpose, Sir?'*

*Jane started crying upstairs. Maureen watched as Mike stared across the room, re-living events from years before.*

*'Sorry darling, I must check Helen and feed Jane - I will only be a few minutes'. Mike nodded and drifted away.*

*The train journey to the National Service Camp had been uneventful. There were forty or fifty other lads on the train. The camp processed about one thousand national service conscripts every week, starting every Thursday. He had to act as if he were a raw recruit, not a seasoned soldier six years older who had already seen men blown to*

*pieces, who had held men's insides in place with his hands while they died crying for their mothers during mine clearance in El Alamein.*

*His mind jumped forward. He could remember shouting for help, the smell of cordite mixed with disinfectant and the stink of urine, a sergeant groaning with his broken shoulder jammed in a urinal trough, and blood on the floor and his shirt. Another sergeant with one of Lawrence Marks's bullets in his leg was screaming for help. And all the time he, Mike – Lawrence - was holding up the Jewish recruit to take the weight off the noose around his neck.*

*The duty officer ran in with two guards and Lawrence shouted 'Get the CO'. The officer bridled and said 'Steady on, now Corporal, you can't talk to me like that you know.'*

*'Yes I bloody well can, Sir! Get the CO, now or you will be on a charge! Sir.'* The officer turned and ran out.

*Lawrence looked at the nearest guard 'Help me take his weight and get him down, and you' – he nodded to the other guard – 'take my pistol and watch these bastard sergeants. Don't let them go anywhere, they're fucking murderers'.*

*Another sergeant arrived and cut the rope. They lowered the Jewish conscript to the floor. He was alive, just. Lawrence removed the noose and gave him first aid as the CO and camp MO arrived. The conscript was stretchered and taken to the officers' sick bay, breathing normally by now. The other conscripts were up by now, awakened by the gunshot and then just as quickly confined to their quarters with guards on the doors. More guards arrived with another medic. The injured sergeants were given first aid and then arrested and taken to the sick bay under close guard. The CO took over and ordered Mike to his office.*

*'Well done, Marks, it seems you saved that man's life and we've got to the bottom of this dirty business at last. Tell me exactly what happened.'*

*Lawrence replayed the events, then the CO spoke again. 'You know are not to discuss this with anyone, save your direct CO. That is a clear order. Understood?'*

*'Yes, Sir. My CO told me it was top secret.'*

*'It is. There will be nothing in writing, no written report.'*

*'Understood, Sir.'*

*Then Lawrence was warned yet again of the dire consequences if the episode was not kept secret. These would include a court martial – in secret - and sentencing to a military prison.*

*'Collect your kit and go straight to the guardhouse at the main gate. Don't talk to anyone. There will be a taxi there to take you to the station. Take a train back to your base and report to your CO. He will be expecting you. Leave your weapon and ammunition with me.'*

*'I'll need a receipt for the weapon, Sir, or I will be on a charge.'*

*'Don't worry, I'll advise your CO of the circumstances.'*

*'Understood, Sir.'*

*'Thank you, Corporal. And once again, well done. Dismissed.'*

*Within 20 minutes Lawrence was in a taxi heading away from the camp.*

*Mike started from his memories as Maureen returned. 'Mike, you look pale – are you alright – you're sweating. Shall I make you a cup of tea? Then you can tell me some more.'*

*'Yes please, tea would be lovely – I'll get the bottle of scotch.'*

*His hands were trembling slightly as he sipped the tea after lacing it.*

*'They sent me there under cover because several two Jewish conscripts had been found hanged. It had been reported as suicide, but the senior officers did not believe it and the SIB was called in. I was told to visit the toilets regularly and keep my ears open. My hut was all Jewish recruits grouped together, as they did then – Catholics, Jews and the rest all in their own separate huts according to religion. That's why I had to act like one of them, as if I was Jewish.*

*I had a bunk nearest to the toilets and listened every night. I was in and out of the toilets a lot and the lads started taking the piss – I had to tell them that I had an infection. That made them look up to me - they thought I was a regular with the prossies, experienced with the streetgirls, so I had to make up a few stories.'*

*'I'm glad they were made up, love.'*

*'Yes, well... erm... one night – I'd been there just over a week - I heard some noise in the toilets. I ran in half dressed. It was unbelievable. One conscript – Paul Landy it was - was hanging from a window frame by his neck. A sergeant was pulling down on his body with another sergeant egging him on. It was bloody shocking - they were laughing while that boy was dying. I'd got there just in time – I was screaming at them and I even started crying. Then I lost it completely and used the Browning. I shot one sergeant in the leg as I struggled with the other - I used my elbow and back-headed him in the face. Luckily he slipped and fell into a urinal breaking his shoulder.*

*The truth was that at least two - probably more - conscripts had been hanged by the two sergeants. It was sport for them, and was becoming a regular thing. They hung the poor boys up and pulled down on their bodies to make it quick. It was murder, although the official files said suicide. Suicide was not uncommon with National Service recruits, but it was happening too often there and the CO was suspicious.*

*What's worse is that the boys' families will never know – they still think their sons killed themselves, and always will. They'll live with the shame – and that's really bad in the Jewish community. The Army is still hushing it up. Jewish conscripts being hanged by Army sergeants would not go down well, especially after Hitler and now that Israel has just become a country.*

*That's why I can't talk about it and that's why these men come back every year to remind me to keep my mouth shut and make me sign the Official Secrets Act. I don't know if it will ever stop.'*

*Maureen held Mike's damp hand. 'That's so terrible Mike, I'm so sorry. No wonder you didn't want to talk about it. You've been so strong. But whatever happened to those murderers?'*

*'I don't know. Prison maybe. We'd all know if they had been executed for murder. At least, I think we would. I've lost all faith in the Army, the Government, the whole bloody lot of them. I discovered the truth but all they did was cover it up and keep it quiet. My CO was a decent man but his hands were tied too. It makes me sick. I wonder what happened to Paul Landy, where he is today, whether he has a family. It's a strange feeling.'*

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Mike knew that the visitors would keep coming and he would swear that he had not told anyone. Then, he would take the offered pen and sign the Official Secrets Act yet again every year until the visits stopped, if ever.

He shook his head and took a deep breath. Their type is always around, following orders, he knew. The system would never forget him.

A bell tinkled. 'Morning, Mike' said the postman on his bicycle, just entering the estate driveway as Mike reached the North gate.

'Good morning to you too, Thomas – a beautiful one isn't it?'

'Aye, it surely is that' he called over his shoulder as his bicycle coasted down the drive.

Mike shook his head. No, he would not tell Maureen. He'd have to keep the secret.

In fact, it would be more than sixty years until he shared his secret with anyone. By then Maureen would be long dead and he would be a grandfather. The men in the black car would certainly be retired - if not dead - but there would still be a file, somewhere, a file with his signatures inside. A State never forgets.

What was the point of telling? Would anyone really believe his story? Ever?

He bent down and retrieved the last of his snares. No catch last night. He'd have to buy something for supper. Maybe the village butcher still had some of that deer he'd poached and sold him last week. The price would certainly be good, that was guaranteed.

He continued on along the North wall of the estate, picking up the tune of the postman's whistling. Rock and roll or something, they called it. He'd read the name Buddy Holly somewhere, maybe in the Yorkshire Post. Yes, 'Reminiscing', that's what the tune was called. Strange that he'd remembered that. But then, he'd always had an eye for detail and a good memory. The Army had seen that in him.

He started whistling. The melody cheered him up, and he decided he would take the family to Whitby in the van for an ice cream after tea, but only if the sun was still shining.

It would turn out to be a good evening, and he'd learn that he was going to be a father again. It would be a son, but he wouldn't know that for some time yet.

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