

Secret Soldier

I loitered at the station for over an hour, but Claire's pale, insistent face did not appear. Three calls and a jokey text prompted no response. The lack of contact from an obsessive communicator made me anxious. Still, there wasn't much to be overly concerned about: breaking news, copy to write, a deadline to meet - her work in London always came first. My job was to be there when everything else had ended. I decided to monitor arrivals from the grotty bar on Platform 1.

The afternoon was unusually hot and oppressive. I was wearing civvies - cream open necked shirt, jeans and new trainers. Beads of sweat travelled in convoy down my spine. A gaggle of Chinese students made the queuing office workers bristle with impatience. Behind me, a middle-aged couple argued about money and sex in an endless gush of loud resentments. It was a good show, but I moved out of earshot and gulped an inch of cold lager.

How to describe Claire? Everyone claimed to have a piece of the jigsaw, but very few saw the whole picture. Some used words like: ambitious, cunning, driven. And they were right. I preferred: passionate, generous, unresolved. She was either brimming with joy, or inconsolably broken. There wasn't much in between, except for a drawer full of dubious medication. Which version of Claire would turn up when we met: the celebrant or the defeated? I could never be sure.

It was two days before my second tour of duty in Helmand province. I was nervous, not about facing the Taliban again, but as a result of Claire's 'truth challenge'. She wanted me to send back dispatches for her paper; a first-hand account by *The Secret Soldier*, providing a unique insight into modern warfare for readers and the wider media. For her it was a perfectly reasonable request, the least I could do to make up for being absent from our faltering relationship.

To me the idea was a stunt, more likely to end up in a court-martial than reveal any hidden 'truth' about conflict or terrorism.

I listed the get out options in my notebook: flatly refuse and take the inevitable derision; agree, and blame operational difficulties for subsequently failing to deliver; or make my reportage so inept even Claire would beg me to stop. Then I tried to identify the necessary skills for being a covert army reporter in Afghanistan: literary skill, the ability to see and describe detail that would captivate a reader, all whilst avoiding death. My many shortcomings quickly became clear. No experienced journalist would take the risk. So why was Claire so keen? I came to an insidious conclusion: she was setting me up to fail.

But what if I took up the challenge? One skill I did possess would certainly be useful: a refined instinct for serious trouble. There would be no shortage of material. And providing I played it straight and avoided the temptation to portray a widely-despised conflict as somehow intrinsically worthy, there could be no accusation of bias. Most of my working life had been given over to the Forces, with precious little recognition. Maybe this was an opportunity to finally make an impact. More than anything I wanted to disprove Claire's one-dimensional view of my character and abilities. A blue paper slip dropped out of the notebook, in my handwriting:

Sunday, 0300hrs, awake for nineteen hours, body numb with tiredness and cold. Patrol ambushed by heavily armed insurgents behind a ridge. Hit the ground fast and got lucky. Two targets dead but half a dozen of us injured. Best friend Mike took a bullet in the stomach. Saw the fear on his face. Dragged him to a safe position, but don't think he'll make it. Waiting for back up, scared as hell, firing into the darkness every few seconds. Not sure if I can keep going. This country is vast and brutal. Why are we here?

The perfect story line for my first dispatch: bravery, suffering, perspective. I could see pound signs spinning in the editor's eyes. Claire would be amazed. She might begin to question her opinion about me. No need to mention that the piece was produced five years ago, during a quiet weekend reading Hemingway in Aldershot barracks. All I had to do was churn out more of the same every week. A nation gripped by real time action, described by one of its heroes – perhaps until the bright spark from a rival paper started to ask awkward questions. The news headline in my head was too believable: *Secret Soldier Jailed for Gross Deception*. End of not so glittering career, face splashed across the tabloids and internet. I tore up the blue slip and finished my pint. Claire would have to find somebody else to do her dirty work.

There was a disturbance in the crowded concourse. Two teenage girls were crying beneath the blank arrivals board. An older woman, perhaps their mother, was screaming, 'My husband! Has anyone seen my husband?' Her palpable distress made people stop and stare. Someone said that there had been an explosion on a train from London. Twisted metal, charred flesh – a familiar image, but my hands were shaking.

The news spread through the station like wildfire. Panicked commuters began to run in all directions; pushing, some falling over each other in their urge to escape. A glass partition shattered. Transport police tried to calm the situation. I sat back and waited for an instruction. Once a soldier, always a soldier. When it came, the announcement was ominous:

'Due to a security alert, all services have been suspended until further notice. Please gather your belongings and leave via the nearest exit immediately.'

Metal shutters clanged into position. Sirens wailed. The cavernous, domed terminal quickly emptied. A rapid response officer ushered me out. The controlled aggression in his eyes was reassuring. I walked the four miles back home to a life without Claire.

There were no dispatches from The Secret Soldier

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