

THE GREAT BRITISH SOVIET By Michael Percy

DATELINE WASHINGTON – 12th APRIL 1945

Vice President Henry Wallace looked out from the Oval Office window at the fine spring rain. It was one of those showers that happen when the sun is shining making the grass greener and the rain look like a silk veil in the light. He turned, sensing Frank Di Martino enter the room.

“I’m sorry sir,” said Martino. “It’s bad news. The worst.”

Wallace nodded slowly. “When?”

“President Roosevelt died a few minutes ago.” He dropped his head as if paying his respect.

“Okay,” drawled Wallace. I should send a note or something. For Mrs Roosevelt.”

“Yes sir. I’ll have it drafted.”

“Just something short, I’ll copy it in my own hand.” Wallace paused in thought. “Should we do flowers?”

“Not at this stage sir.”

“Okay, thanks.” He watched Di Martino turn to leave. “One more thing Frank, schedule a meeting of my staff for twenty-hundred, there’s something I want to get underway.”

Di Martino turned back, “It’s felt we should hold off until after the funeral sir, when you’re properly sworn in as President.”

“Hell no Frank. This is too important. I’m bringing our boys home. The Germans are virtually finished, I think we can leave the British to tidy up.”

“But that would be a major policy reversal sir, and President Roosevelt is... well he’s still warm.” He noted a flash of anger in Wallace’s eyes. “If you don’t mind me saying sir.”

Wallace stepped forward and put a hand on Di Martino’s shoulder.

“Roosevelt had me on his ticket to give him the Democratic left and the anti war coalition. I’ve delivered. Now I’m President I’m bringing our boys home. And every minute we waste costs another bunch of fellas killed or maimed. Twenty-hundred, okay?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

DATELINE LONDON – 13th August 1962

Jack Wynter looked down on Fleet Street from high in The Peoples’ Guardian offices. There was the usual mixture of Russian soldiers amongst the office workers; some enjoying their leave in the capital, seeing the sights that the Germans had failed to bomb, and some on armed patrol. Much of the bomb

damage remained un-repaired although hidden with giant hoardings proclaiming that the people of the Greater Union of European Soviets would forge a new society together. It was either that or a massive image of Khrushchev, sometimes smiling down on his people and sometimes looking off into a future which presumably contained a workers' paradise. Fifteen years had passed since the end of the German war and paradise seemed as far away as it ever was.

He set off down the stairs. The lift worked, most of the time, but nobody trusted it since the new Russian motor was installed; unless you were accompanying one of the Russian managers when it would have been a criticism of the political system not to risk the lift. The stairs spiralled round the lift cage. After two floors Jack stopped again to light a cigarette as he looked out across the city. Russian tobacco was enough to make you give up. But not quite enough. He needed a few minutes and a nicotine hit to calm his nerves. His visit to the eighth floor had been to see the Workers' Representative about having time off to attend his father's funeral.

Comrade Nickolay Spiakov was a large barrel-chested man who filled the broad leather office chair that was a left-over from the time before the invasion – unlike the lift mechanism.

"This makes a mockery of the promise you made with your comrade workers to devote your annual leave to the success of the new five year plan," said Spiakov in his deeply accented English.

"But this is a special situation," said Jack, "I am sure the comrade representative would want to attend his own father's funeral."

Spiakov made a minute adjustment to the angle of a dark grey folder on his desk but did not open it. He never did at these interviews; the presence of the thick file with your name was enough. "Your father was a dissident."

Jack laughed in frustration, "He was a union leader in the fire brigade, representing the workers."

"He misused his authority, he was guilty of promoting criticism of the state, undermining workers' unity."

"And for that he was shipped off to a collective farm in North Wales," said Jack. "It's me who is asking for time off, not my father."

"Privileges have to be earned. Would it be fair to give you the same privileges as those workers who diligently bring the truth to the people? You have been sent for re-training twice in five years. Your attitude to your work is... flippant, lacking commitment to proper ideology."

Jack thought, give me a decent story, a real story, and I'll show you commitment. But he said, "I am British. I want to use that Britishness to bring your message to the British people. The British do not respond to propaganda. Give us the truth and let us make up our own minds." Do that, he thought, and you'll be finished in six weeks.

Spiakov smiled as he brushed non-existent dust off the folder. "You call it 'my message'. Surely it is *our* message – comrade?"

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Sarah Wynter smiled at her six-year old son Nik. "All right my boy, six sevens?"

Nik screwed his face up as if it made his brain work better. "Six sevens, six sevens. Five sevens are...."

"No, don't you dare. You have to learn your tables. I warned you." With that she reached forward and started tickling Nik and he wriggled and screamed with joy.

"Forty-two, Forty-two," he shouted at the top of his voice. And then he wrenched himself away from his mum as he heard the front door. "Daddy, Daddy."

Jack dropped his brief case so he could catch the flying form of his son and swing him round. "Have you been body building again?"

"Do a rocket ship Daddy?"

Jack swung the boy up under his arm and ran with him into the kitchen roaring his best impression of a rocket ship.

"Look mummy, I'm Yuri Gagarin. Watch me land on the table."

"I'll watch you land in the bath. Daddy is late home and it's past bath time."

"Message received and understood," said Jack with his fingers pinching his nose. "Rocket diverted to land in bathroom as requested." And the rocket sored out of the kitchen.

It was another hour before Nik was safely asleep and the couple could sit down to their meal and Jack could break the bad news about the trip to Wales.

"All the bastard would give me was three days. He went on about my dad being a dissident in the Fire Brigade. Good job he only knows the half of it – if he'd known Dad had been letting loose with a sub machine gun during the invasion he'd have locked us all up."

"Keep your voice down, Nik may not be settled yet. I don't want him hearing about your dad's exploits."

"Nik's Grandad was a hero. He should know that."

When the Russians marched into Britain in 1945, Roy followed Winston Churchill's call to arms. But with the British Army spread across the globe the war weary Britons had little appetite for more fighting, especially without American support. The Russians arrived proffering a basket of food while concealing a gun behind their backs. And weren't the Russian boys our allies in the war and didn't they come with a promise to leave when 'Britain was restored to former glory'? And hadn't the Yanks left us in the lurch?

Amidst a mass exodus of rulers and royalty, Churchill stayed and paid the ultimate price defending his beloved home at Chartwell from the invaders. Roy Wynter took his place near Croydon manning the defences for London originally prepared to repel a German invasion. On the night of Wednesday May 30th 1945 Russian tanks overran the thinly defended line to the west of Roy's position. Under the threat of being surrounded the defenders tried to reorganise but it was hopeless.

The Russians concentrated on defeating resistance where it flared up and rounding up what they described as Nazi sympathisers and Capitalist

reactionaries. Roy was on the run for a week before he reached Paddington where he lived with his wife Rose and fifteen year-old son Jack.

Sarah finished her meal, "so what did Spiakov say about having a car for the trip to Wales?"

"I don't toe the line enough to have that sort of privilege, apparently".

"I wish..." she let her voice tail off.

"Wish what? Come on, what do you wish?" As if he didn't already know.

She started taking the dishes to the kitchen. "Just that it wouldn't hurt to co-operate at work. You can't change anything on your own and they can get very spiteful."

"Spiteful as in we can't use a company car?"

"Yes, what's wrong with that? Cars are available to reporters and other people get them. You talk so proudly about your dad but what did he achieve except getting him and your mum sent labouring on a collective farm"

"He was standing up for what he believed in and my dad is dead now because of them. Not even sixty. They worked him to death on that bloody farm."

"But you can't change that Jack. And what do we do if you get shipped off to some labour camp. I've heard they're sending people to Eastern Europe now. It's a death sentence."

Jack could see tears behind Sarah's eyes and he softened his tone. "It's not going to come to that. They get their money's worth from me, I write all their propaganda stories about the success of the current five year plan and how Mrs Smith from Basildon is proud Grandmother to five hundred bloody new additions to Socialist Britain. I do a good job for the bastards but don't expect me to give them my soul as well. Don't ask that."

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The funeral was in two days time and so they spent the evening packing ready to catch the train from Euston station next morning. Travelling through London was slow because of the heavy security caused by the IRA bombing campaign; having fought the British for home rule it was natural for them to take on the Russians. The bus inched past roadblocks and they were stopped twice by armed Russian soldiers for identity checks. Finally at Euston station they settled in their compartment with the only other occupant, a painfully thin grey haired man in his early forties. He was slouched in a window seat which was allocated to them but he gestured to the remaining window seat, "There you are comrade, be my guest." Jack smelt drink on his breath.

A few minutes later a girl of about seventeen entered the carriage and took the place next to the sliding door which opened to the corridor. She put her suitcase on the luggage rack and settled down reading a novel. Sarah took in her closely cropped blonde hair and baggy workers' trousers above ankle boots.

The man checked his watch every few minutes and as the departure time came and went he began to complain. "We had better trains in the war despite

the bombing. Bloody Russians.” He was drinking from a bottle of cheap gin. “They make us buy their crap diesel trains. Crap they are. Crap.”

“Excuse me but please mind your language”, said Sarah.

“My language, my language. Huh. It won’t be long before they ban that as well. Mark my words. The kids are learning Russian in school. It won’t be long. I tell you, not long.” He sat back in the seat as the train lurched forward. “At last. Only forty minutes late. At least the Nazis ran their trains on time.”

Nik gave up his window seat for distance from the drunk and sat near the compartment door opposite the blonde girl who gave him a brief smile. Jack slipped into the seat next to the drunk. “Take it easy please, my boy doesn’t want to hear all this. You’re spoiling his trip.”

“Oh I was forgetting, no free speech any more.” He put a finger to his lips. “Shssh.” Then he tapped his nose with his finger. “Mum’s the word – just like in the war. Mum’s the word.”

Jack returned to sit next to Sarah and whispered: “he’ll be asleep with the drink soon.”

But the drunk’s hearing was good. “Not me – I can hold my drink. Learnt that in the army. Served with the Yanks I did. Liaison officer. D-Day, Battle of Normandy, The Rhine. All that. Great blokes the Yanks. They had great stuff. Food, nylons – nothing they couldn’t get for you. But they let us down in the end. Turned their backs on us.” He put on a fake American accent. “Okay you guys, we’ve sorted the Nazis now we’re off home. See Ya”. He dropped the accent. “Bastards.”

“Please, not in front of my son,” said Sarah.

“Sorry lady, but they are ba...” He briefly put his hand over his mouth. “I blame that new President who took over after Roosevelt died in ’45. Henry Bloody Wallace. Who the hell is Henry Wallace when he was at home. And Kennedy’s no better. After all we’ve done for the Yanks that’s all the thanks we get. Should have stayed to sort out the Ruskies. Blown up a few of them with an H Bomb like they did the Japs. That would have put a stop to the Greater European bloody Soviet.”

“Please,” said Sarah, “we could all get in trouble if somebody hears you.”

The man leaned forward firing his boozy breath at them. “I rest my case, where’s your free speech? I ask you?” He lurched back and turned to look out the window. His forehead slumped against the glass. “Gone, that’s what,” he mumbled and fell fast asleep – snoring.

“Lets hope he stays quiet,” said Sarah. “He’s just a foul mouthed drunk.”

“A lot of people feel like that,” said Jack, “especially his age group who knew what it was like before.”

“And what was it like before? Don’t pretend everything was perfect before the war”

“Not perfect, no. But it’s been fifteen years and still we’ve got food rationing and bomb-sites all over London. We’re not exporting, industry’s a complete mess and all we get are new five-year plans every six months. The Russians are making a worse mess – they should sod off and leave us to sort things out ourselves.”

Sarah crossed the compartment to sit with Nik. "You just look for trouble don't you. We could be going in a car if you didn't cause trouble all the time."

"Oh yes, give up my principles for a bloody car ride."

"It wouldn't hurt. And don't swear."

Sarah settled with Nik reading his story-book with him and Jack slumped against the window in a sulk; a mirror image of the drunk whose snoring built to a crescendo until it woke him with a jolt.

"What. Was I snoring?" He pulled himself up in the seat, shook his head and winced at an obvious headache. He leaned forward. "Sorry mate. I may have been a bit... you know."

"Rude is the word," said Jack.

"Only I've had some bad news – lost my job. Office manager I was. They've given me something else. Bus conductor. Half the money. I've got a family, what am I supposed to do on half the pay? That's the way it is now, we're all just puppets for those bastards in Moscow."

The blonde girl closed her book with a loud thud. "I've had enough of this, I'm reporting you to the guard. All of you." She stood up and Jack noticed by the title that her novel was written in Russian. She certainly was not Russian, by her accent he guessed home counties, from a good family.

She stood with her hand on the carriage door handle and stared with disgust at the drunk. "At least the state guarantees you have a job – all workers are treated with respect, even drunks. All the profiteers and capitalists have been eliminated.

"The alternative to support from our Russian allies was occupation by the Americans and what do you think that would have been like? Look what the Americans do to black people – they use them like slaves and make them live in shanty towns. No better than the Germans. That would never happen in a true socialist state. A workers' state. The only nation to benefit from the war was America – their capitalists made fortunes by supplying arms to Europe even while their own soldiers were dying. Russia didn't run away when there was no more profit to make, she has sacrificed everything for the future of Europe."

The drunk pulled himself upright in his seat. "That's what I said, the Americans are shit. I should know, I worked with them."

The blonde girl began to open the door and Sarah laid a hand on her arm. The girl stared at Sarah as if she was sprouting a second head.

"Please don't do this," pleaded Sarah. "It was only talk."

The girl shook her head slowly. "You are all backsliders and complainers. Your generation represent all the old rotten Capitalist values. Take your hand off me."

"What are you afraid of?" said Jack. "A little honest criticism?"

Sarah gripped the girl's arm tighter. "Please. My husband could lose his job over this. I'm a teacher, I trained in Moscow, I understand the importance of socialist principles."

"A teacher!" the blonde girl spat the words. "You are the worst person to teach our young. You do not deserve that privilege." She pulled Sarah off with her free hand and threw open the compartment door.

Jack stood, holding onto the luggage rack. "Don't talk to my wife like that – you're just a brainwashed spoilt brat."

"I'm fetching the guard." She left the compartment.

Sarah slumped next to Nik and hugged him close. "What's going to happen to us?" She looked darkly at Jack, "Why did you talk to her like that. You've just made things worse."

The guard returned with the blonde girl. He was a red faced Welshman closing fast on retirement. "I have to make a report of this sort of thing, it's railway regulations."

"And it's the law," added the blonde girl.

"Yes, the law as well." The guard turned to the girl. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Do your duty."

"Fair enough." He turned his back on the girl, and with an apologetic smile she could not see, said, "I'm going to have to see your identity papers."

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Nik did not know the woman who ran towards them at Prestatyn railway station but her smile, the tears of joy and outstretched arms made it seem safe.

"Look Nik," cried Sarah, "it's Granny Wynter."

Rose Wynter swept Nik up in her arms and then somehow caught all three of them in a tangle of arms and kisses. She insisted on carrying Nik to the waiting farm truck and hugged and kissed him repeatedly. It almost hurt but it was love, Nik knew that.

The farm truck was a pre-war Bedford with a square cab in black and rust. The women took the cab with Rose driving and the men rode in the open back with the suitcases. "Sorry about the transport. Lucky it's a fine day," called Rose.

Nik didn't need an apology, he was overjoyed with the arrangement and waved happily at the sour faced soldiers on guard at the station entrance.

"It's so lovely to see you," said Rose as the truck reached its top speed of twenty-eight. And then: "How did Jack take the news about his dad?"

"Very badly I'm afraid," replied Sarah. "It was a shock for him, worse because he hadn't seen Roy for so long. Then he went into a sort of angry phase – at the Russians, and, to be honest, at his dad. He's a lot like his dad must have been. Proud, outspoken. Jack's got himself into trouble over the years, particularly at work."

The Trelogan Valley Collective Farm did not offer any promise of a country idyll. There was a traditional farmhouse but it had been given over to storing machinery and fuel. The farm workers lived in a purpose built barrack block of timber and asbestos which from the outside was indistinguishable from the animal barns save for a row of black chimneys and tiny windows. The workers were segregated into single sex dormitories. There was no separate provision for married couples or children. Food was served in a communal hall.

Rose showed them to a bare room which was normally a storeroom and now contained three single wooden beds, "This is all we can offer I'm afraid. I'm with some of the other girls down the hall."

"No problem," said Jack. "Can we have a quiet word Mum?" Rose nodded and led Jack into the central passage, closing the door behind them. "In your letter you said dad drowned. How did it happen?"

"It was at a place called Point of Ayr quite near here. Some of the men go fishing there on their day off, it adds to the rations. Sometimes they would swim and your dad was swimming off the point." Her voice trailed away. "There are some strange tides up there."

Jack slumped back against the rough timber.

"I'm sorry," said Rose. "You've no idea how hard it is to tell you this. So far they've not recovered dad's body." Rose's heart felt like it was being dragged from her chest as she watched the devastation on her son's face.

"We will be having a memorial service, a celebration of his life." Rose took her son in her arms as they both wept. "We've got our memories – hold on to those."

After the evening meal Rose arranged for someone to mind Nik so the three could be alone. Rose took Sarah and Jack's hands and held them in hers. "Would you like to get away from all this?"

"From what?" said Sarah. "The funeral?"

"No. From everything. The rationing, the Russians, the... greyness of everything."

"I don't understand," said Jack.

"It could happen. There is a way out," said Rose and she began to smile. "We just need the guts to take it."

"You're not talking about... some sort of suicide pact?" said Sarah pulling her hand away from Rose.

"No, no. God no. Never that. I mean leave the country." Now she laughed seeing their stunned looks. "It is possible. It happens all the time. The whole of Europe leaks like a sieve," explained Rose. "The Russians can't control the borders and thousands make a run for it every day. The whole thing is hushed up of course. They do catch a few unlucky people but most get clean away."

"But what about dad," said Jack, "dad won't be with us."

"We talked about it. We even planned it. It's what he would want us to do."

"It sounds very dangerous," said Sarah.

"Roy and me have been helping people use an escape route for years. Our job is to organise small boats that carry people out to the ships – merchant ships out of Liverpool. The ships' captains have to be bribed and that's not cheap but now we get help from America – ordinary people who we helped escape raising money so more can follow."

"You two did all this alone?" asked Jack.

"Of course not. We're just a small part. We've no idea how the people get here or what happens after they leave. We get a message to pick them up and we pass them on down the line."

For the first time in two days Jack smiled. "My mum, the resistance fighter."

"How much does it all cost?" asked Sarah. "We've no money."

"You don't have to worry about that, it's all taken care of." Rose noticed a cloud fall across Jack's face. "Assume it's for services rendered, if you like."

"Where would we go?" asked Sarah.

"America," said Rose as she hugged them to her.

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The memorial service for Roy Wynter was set for ten o' clock the next morning. Death was one of the few things the workers got time off for. About forty people gathered in a field next to the compound where there were about a dozen graves. To one side stood two men in heavy country suits, the farm supervisor and his assistant. Roy was to have a tree with a small headstone next to it.

Rose stood with Nik between Sarah and Jack. They all held hands. "We're not allowed religious funerals," Rose said to nobody in particular. "Not that Roy would want one."

The people began to file past Rose giving condolences, some gave her tearful hugs and had special words about Roy. They shook hands with Jack and Sarah. A pile of wild flowers grew on and around the headstone.

When everyone had passed in this way Rose stepped forward. "I'm not going to stand here and talk to you about my husband. He would hate that. You all knew Roy and so you know all there is to know about the man. He could be outspoken, he often said too much."

There were laughs here, memories.

"But he always believed in what he said, always stood by his words. Thank you all for the kind thoughts."

She rejoined Sarah, Nik and Jack. "I'd like to walk," she said picking up a small bag she had brought from the accommodation block.

The walk she chose was the path to Point of Ayr, where Roy disappeared. It was a bright, sunny, windy day. Warm if you kept moving.

"Were you able to be happy here?" asked Jack.

"On the farm?" answered Rose. "In a way we were. People make the best of things. Dad always missed you. We both do. And we hated not seeing Nik more." Tears were on her cheeks again. "I'm so sorry you've got to go through this Jack."

Overnight Sarah and Jack had discussed the idea of going to America.

"Will it be safe and is it better for Nik? That's all that counts," said Sarah.

"It must be better than growing up here. Do you want him to be like that girl on the train. Spying on people. Reporting them."

"Of course not, but he's our son. He'll learn from us to be more tolerant."

“Can we resist the whole weight of the state system. And if we did, it would put Nik out on a limb. Most of the other kids will be die-hard informers, just like that girl.”

By dawn they had agreed on making a run for America.

There was a strong wind on the Point of Ayr as they looked down on the sea and watched the waves rolling in. The footpath had wound through the stunted and wind slanted bushes and gorse until soil had eventually given way to sand and they crested the dunes overlooking the estuary of the river Dee. Four miles away on the far shore was the grey outline of West Kirby.

Rose took Sarah and Jack’s hands and held them in hers. “In a week we will all be in America.”

Jack’s face was dark. “I’m sorry Mum, but I can’t stop thinking about dad. He won’t be with us.”

“Where’s America?” asked Nik.

Rose swept him up into her arms and pointed out to sea. “A long way away, further than the eye can see. We’ll be going on a little boat and then a big one. You’ll love it.”

Rose led them back by a different path which ran parallel to the shore line. They came to a row of derelict beach huts and Jack tried to remember happier times, family holidays with his Dad when he was a boy. But the sight of the ramshackle huts simply mocked his memories.

Rose stopped and forced open one of the doors against its rusted hinges. She tossed the bag she carried into the hut.

“What are you doing?” asked Jack.

Rose pulled the door shut and faced Jack. “Just delivering a few supplies.” With that a broad grin spread across her face but it was directed past Jack, at someone behind him. He spun round.

“Hello son,” said Roy Wynter. I’m sorry we put you through this but it was the only way to make sure they’d let you come. Now, let me see that grandson of mine.”

(4932 words)

(Historical note: Vice President Henry Wallace was known to be sympathetic towards Russia and in fact believed the American and Russian revolutions were “part of the march to freedom of the past 150 years.” He left office only 82 days before Roosevelt died so just missed becoming president. But what if...)