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This is Commander Bond

I like to think that the plane was Urquhart's idea of a joke. He was the only one of them to have a sense of humour (he must have found it inconvenient at times in that grey morgue of a building up by Regent's Park where they all still work) and since he booked my tickets when he made arrangements for my trip he would have known about the plane. It left Kennedy at 4 p.m. for Bermuda. What Urquhart failed to tell me was that it was a honeymooners' special, crammed with newly-weds on packaged honeymoons in the sun.

There is something curiously unsettling about mating young Americans *en masse*. I had already had a two-hour wait at Kennedy from London, this on an icy January Saturday with the authentic New York sleet gusting against the windows of the transit lounge. Now for a further three hours I had to share this nuptial flight on mercifully false pretences. The roses, the Californian champagne were not for me.

'Welcome aboard – this is the sunshine special, folks. For all of you just setting out

together on life's greatest adventure, the congratulations of your captain, crew and Pan Am, the world's most experienced airline.'

Polite laughter. Some cheery fellow clapped. And in my lonely gangway seat I started worrying about *my* adventure.

Where did old Urquhart's sense of humour stop?

Between me and the window sat a nice young couple, suitably absorbed in one another. She was in pink, he in dark grey. Neither of them spoke. Their silence was disturbing, almost as if in disapproval of my so-called mission.

Dinner was served – a four-course plastic airline meal, a triumph of space-age packaging – and, as I munched my Chicken Maryland, crunched on my lonely Krispee Krackers, my *angst* became acute.

Strangely enough, until this moment I had not bothered over my arrival in Bermuda. Urquhart had said I would be taken care of. 'It's all laid on. Everything's arranged, and, from what I gather, they do one rather well.' In London, words like these had sounded reassuring. One nodded and said 'quite'. Now one began to wonder.

I had a drink, and then another and, as the big, warm aircraft thundered its way towards the tropics, tried going over in my mind the succession of events that had brought me there.

They had begun almost two years ago, after I published my 'official' life of Ian Fleming. It was an unusual book

in the sheer spate of correspondence I received – from ballistic-minded Japanese, French teenage Bondphiles, crime-crazy Swedes and postgraduate Americans writing their theses on the modern thriller. I did my best to answer them. But there was just one letter which I had found it difficult to deal with. It was from Vienna from a woman signing herself Maria Künzler.

It was a long, slightly gushing letter written in purple ink and it described a prewar winter spent in the ski-resort of Kitzbühel with Ian Fleming. In my book I had dismissed this period of Fleming's life somewhat briefly. Fleming had been to Kitzbühel several times, first in the 1920s when he stayed there with some people called Forbes-Dennis. (Mrs Forbes-Dennis was, incidentally, the novelist, Phyllis Bottome.) Theoretically Fleming had been learning German, though in practice he had spent most of his time enjoying the mountains and the local girls. From the letter it seemed as if Miss Künzler had been one of them. Certainly her information about Fleming seemed authentic and she described certain friends from Kitzbühel I had interviewed for my book. This made a paragraph towards the end of her letter all the more baffling.

'So you can understand,' she wrote, 'the excitement we all felt when the good-looking young James Bond appeared at Kitzbühel. He had been in Ian's house at Eton, although of course he was much younger than Ian. Even in those days, James was engaged in some sort of undercover work, and Ian, who liked ragging people, used to make fun of him and tried getting information out of him. James would get very cross.'

When I read this I decided, not unnaturally, that Miss Künzler was slightly mad – or, if not mad, then in that happy state where she could muddle fact and fiction. I thanked her for her letter, and merely wrote that her anecdote about James Bond had caused me some surprise.

Here I should make it plain that when I wrote the *Life of Ian Fleming*, I never doubted for a moment that James Bond *was* Ian Fleming, a Mitty-figure Fleming had constructed from his daydreams and his childhood memories. I had known Fleming personally for several years – the very years in fact when he was writing the early James Bond books – and I had picked out countless resemblances between the James Bond of the books and the Ian Fleming I worked with on the *Sunday Times*. Fleming had even endowed his hero with certain of his own very personal trademarks – the clothes, the eating habits, even the appearance – so much so that whenever I pictured James Bond it was always Fleming's face (and not Sean Connery's) I saw.

True, there had been certain facts which failed to tally with the Bond-is-Fleming thesis. Fleming, for one, denied it – strongly. In a way he had to, but it is a fact that the more methodically you read the Bond books, the more you start to notice details which refer to James Bond's life *outside* the books – details about his family, glimpses of his life at school and tantalising references to his early secret-service career and love-life. Over the thirteen James Bond books the sheer weight of all these 'outside' references is surprising, especially as they seem to be remarkably consistent. It was this that originally gave

rise to rumours that Fleming, whilst including something of himself in James Bond's character, had based his hero on a real-life agent he had encountered during his time with British Naval Intelligence in the war.

One theory was that the 'real' James Bond had been a captain of the Royal Marine Commandos whose deeds and personality inspired Fleming. Another held that Fleming had carefully studied the career of the British double agent, James Morton, whose body was discovered in Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo in 1962. There were other rumours too. None of them seemed to hold much water, certainly not enough to make me change my mind about the Fleming-Bond relationship. Then the second letter came from the mysterious Miss Künzler in Vienna.

It arrived some three months after I had written to her, apologised for the delay and said that she had not been well. (From what I could work out, she would now have been in her mid-sixties.) It was a much shorter letter than the earlier one. The florid writing was a little shaky, but everything she wrote was to the point. She said that there was not much she could add to her earlier account of young James Bond. That Kitzbühel holiday had been in 1938, and she had never seen James Bond again, although she was naturally amused at the world-wide success of Ian's books about him. After the way that Ian had behaved it was funny, was it not? She added that Bond had written her several letters after the holiday. She might have them somewhere. When she could summon up the energy she would look for them and let me have them. Also she thought there were

some photographs. In the meantime, surely there must be people who had known James Bond at Eton. Why not contact them?

I replied immediately, begging her to send the letters. There was no reply.

I wrote several times – still without success. Finally I decided to take Miss Künzler's advice and check the Eton records for a boy called Bond. Fleming had entered Eton in the autumn term of 1921. Apart from saying that James Bond was younger than Ian Fleming, Miss Künzler had been vague about his age. (Supposing, of course, that an Etonian called Bond had really been at Kitzbühel in 1938.) I checked through the whole of the 1920s. There were several Bonds, but none of them called James and none of them in Fleming's old house. Clearly Miss Künzler was wrong, but out of curiosity I checked on through the early thirties. And here I did find something. There actually *was* a James Bond who was recorded having entered Slater's House in the autumn term of 1933. According to the Eton list he stayed just over two years; his name had disappeared from the spring list of 1936.

So much for the records, which neither proved nor disproved what Miss Künzler said. An old Etonian called James Bond certainly existed, but he seemed too young to have known Fleming. It was unlikely that anyone of this age could have been caught up in the secret-service world by 1937.

I tried to find out more about this young James Bond, but drew a blank. A puzzled secretary in the school

office said there appeared to be no file on him – nor had they any records of his family, nor of what happened to him. She suggested contacting the Old Etonian Society. I did, but again without success. All they could offer were the names of some of Bond's contemporaries who might have kept in touch with him.

I wrote to eighteen of them. Six replied, saying that they remembered him. The consensus seemed to be that this James Bond had been an indifferent scholar, but physically strong, dark-haired and rather wild. One of the letters said he was a moody boy. None of them mentioned that he had any particular friends, but no one had bullied him. There was no definite information about his home life or his relatives. The nearest to this was a passage which occurred in one of the letters:

> *I've an idea [my correspondent wrote] that there must have been some sort of trouble in the family. I have no details. It was a long time ago and boys are notoriously insensitive to such things. But I have a clear impression of him as a boy who had suffered some sort of loss. He was the type of brooding, self-possessed boy who stands apart from his fellows. I never did hear what became of him.*

Nor, it appeared, had anybody else.

This was distinctly tantalising for, as close readers of the Bond books will recall, these few extremely inconclusive facts find an uncanny echo in the obituary of

James Bond, supposedly penned by M himself, which Fleming published at the end of *You Only Live Twice*. According to this source, James Bond's career at Eton had been 'brief and undistinguished'.

There was no reference in any of the letters to the reason M gave for James Bond's departure – 'some alleged trouble with one of the boys' maids'. But there were two other interesting parallels. According to M both of Bond's parents were killed in an Alpine climbing accident when he was eleven and the boy was subsequently described as being athletic but 'inclined to be solitary by nature'.

None of this proved that the mysterious James Bond who had entered Eton in 1933 was Fleming's hero. As any libel lawyer knows, coincidences of exactly this sort are a hazard every author faces. Just the same, it was all very strange.

My next step was clear. Bond's obituary goes on to say that, after Eton, the young reprobate was sent to his father's old school, Fettes. Accordingly I wrote to the school secretary asking if he could tell me anything about a boy called Bond who may have entered the school some time in 1936. But before I could receive a reply, another letter came which altered everything. Inside a large brown envelope bearing a Vienna postmark was a short official note from an Austrian lawyer. He had the sad task of informing me that his client, Fraulein Künzler of 27, Friedrichsplatz had died, not unexpectedly, in her sleep some three weeks earlier. He had the honour now of settling her small estate. Among

her papers he had found a note saying that a certain photograph was to be sent to me. In accordance with the dead woman's wishes he had pleasure in enclosing it. Would I be so kind as to acknowledge?

The photograph proved to be a sepia enlargement of a snapshot showing a group of hikers against a background of high mountains. One of the hikers was a girl, plump, blonde, extremely pretty. On one side of her, unmistakable with his long, prematurely melancholy Scottish face, stood Ian Fleming. On the other was a burly, very handsome, dark-haired boy apparently in his late teens. The trio seemed extremely serious. I turned the photo over. On the back there was a note in purple ink.

> *This is the only picture I could find. There seem to be no letters, but this is James and Ian out in Kitzbühel in 1938. The girl with them is me, but somehow I don't think you'd recognise me now.*

So much for poor Miss Künzler.

The photograph, of course, changed everything. If the young tough really was James Bond – and why should the defunct Miss Künzler lie? – something extremely odd had happened. The whole idea of Fleming and the James Bond saga needed to be revised. Who was this James Bond Fleming had evidently known? What had happened to him since 1938? How far had Ian Fleming used him as a model for his books? The reality of Bond opened up a range of fascinating speculation.

I had not heard from Fettes, and there was still precious little evidence – a photograph, an entry in the Eton Register, a handful of coincidences – enough to pose the mystery rather than solve it. But there were certain clear lines now which I could pursue and did – but not for long. I had barely started contacting several of Fleming's friends from the Kitzbühel days when I was rung up by a man called Hopkins.

Once a policeman, always a policeman – there was no mistaking Mr Hopkins's voice. He understood from certain sources that I was making certain inquiries. He would like very much to see me. Perhaps we could have lunch together? Somewhat incongruously he suggested next day at the National Liberal Club in Whitehall Place.

Mr Hopkins was an unusual Liberal: a big, bald man with outsize eyebrows, he was waiting for me by the bust of Gladstone in the foyer. Something about him seemed to make old Gladstone look a little shifty. I felt the same. We had a table by the window in the big brown dining-room. Brown was the dominating colour – brown Windsor soup, brown walls and furniture. Mr Hopkins, as I noticed now, was wearing a somewhat hairy, dark brown suit. When the soup came he started talking, his sentences interspersed with noisy spoonfuls of brown Windsor soup.

'This is all off the record, as you'll understand. I'm from the Ministry of Defence. We know about your current inquiries. It is my duty to inform you they must stop.'

'Why?'

'Because they are not in the national interest.'

'Who says they're not?'

'You must take it from me they're not.'

'Why should I?'

'Because if you don't, we'll have the Official Secrets Act down on you just so fast that you won't know what's hit you.'

So much for Mr Hopkins. After brown Windsor we had cottage pie, apparently the staple food of Liberals – nutritious doubtless, but no great stimulus to conversation. I tried getting Mr Hopkins to reveal at least something of his sources. He had been at the game too long for this. When we parted he said, 'Remember what I said. We wouldn't like any unpleasantness.'

'Tell that to Mr Gladstone,' I replied.

It was all most unsatisfactory. If there were really any reason for keeping quiet about James Bond, I felt I had a right to know. I certainly deserved an explanation and from someone with a little more finesse than Mr Hopkins. A few days later I received it. This was where Urquhart comes upon the scene. Another invitation out to lunch – this time to Kettners. I said I wouldn't come unless he promised no more threats at lunchtime. The voice at the other end of the telephone sounded pained.

'Threats? No, really – how unfortunate. Simply an intelligent discussion. There are some slightly sensitive areas. The time has come to talk . . .'

'Exactly.'

Urquhart was very, very thin and managed to combine

baldness with quite startlingly thick black hair along his wrists and hands. As with the statues of Giacometti he seemed to have been squeezed down to the stick-thin shadow of his soul. Happily his expense account, unlike his colleague's, stretched to a bottle of respectable Chianti.

From the beginning I attempted a bold front, and had produced the photograph of Bond and Fleming before we had finished our *lasagne*.

'Well?' I said.

'Oh, very interesting. What a good-looking chap he was in those days. Still is, of course. That's half his trouble.'

'You mean he's alive? James Bond's alive?'

'Of course. My dear chap. Why else d'you think we're here?'

'But all this nonsense from your Mr Hopkins – the Official Secrets Act. He almost threatened me with gaol.'

'Alas, poor Hopkins. He's had a dreadful lot of trouble with this dreadful lot. He has a hernia too. And an anaemic wife. Some men are born to suffer.'

Urquhart smiled, exposing over-large false teeth.

'No, Bond's an interesting fellow. He's had a dreadful press of course and then the films – he's not at all like that in real life. You'd like him. Perhaps you ought to meet him. He enjoyed your book, you know – your *Life of Ian*. Made him laugh, although, between the two of us, his sense of humour's not his strongest point. No, we were all extremely grateful for your book. Hopkins was certain that you'd smelled a rat, but I told him not to worry.'

'But where is Bond and what's he doing?'

Urquhart giggled.

'Steady. We mustn't rush our fences. What do you think of this Chianti? *Brolio*, not *Broglio* as Ian would insist on spelling it. But then he wasn't really very good on wines. All that balls he used to write about champagne when the dear old chap couldn't tell Bollinger from bath water.'

For the remainder of the lunch we chatted about Fleming. Urquhart had worked with him during the war, and, like everyone who knew him, was fascinated by the contradictions of the man. Urquhart used them to avoid further discussion of James Bond. Indeed, as we were leaving, he simply said, 'We'll be in touch – you have my word for that. But I'd be grateful if you'd stop your investigations into James Bond. They'd cause a lot of trouble if they reached the papers – the very thought of it would do for Hopkins's hernia.'

Somewhat lamely I agreed, and walked away from Kettners thinking that, between them, Hopkins and Urquhart had managed a deft piece of hushing up. Provided I kept quiet I expected to hear nothing more from them. But I was wrong. A few weeks later Urquhart rang again, asking me to see him in his office.

It was the first time I had entered the Headquarters building up by Regent's Park which formed the basis for Fleming's 'Universal Export' block. I was expecting something altogether grander, although presumably all secret services adopt a certain camouflaging seediness. This was a place of Kafkaesque oppressiveness – grey

corridors, grey offices, grey people. There was a pair of ancient milk-bottles outside Urquhart's door. Urquhart himself seemed full of bounce. He offered me a mentholated cigarette, then lit one for himself and choked alarmingly. The room began to smell of smouldering disinfectant, and it was hard to tell where Urquhart ended and the smoke began.

'This business of James Bond,' he said. 'You must forgive my seeming so mysterious the other day. I really don't enjoy that sort of thing. But I've been contacting the powers that be, and we've a little proposition that might interest you.'

He paused, tapping a false tooth with a cheap blue biro.

'I'll be quite honest with you. For some time now we've been increasingly concerned about the Bond affair. You are by no means the first outsider to have stumbled on it. Just recently we've had some nasty scares. There have been several journalists. They have not all been quite so, shall we say, cooperative as you. It's been sheer murder for poor Hopkins. The trouble is that when the story breaks – and of course it will, these things always come out in the end – it will be damn bad for the Service. Seem like another gaffe, another Philby business, only worse. Can't you just see those headlines?'

Urquhart rolled his eyes towards the ceiling.

'From our point of view it would make far more sense to have the whole thing told responsibly.'

'Meaning suitably censored.'

'No, no, no, no. Don't bring these obscene words in unnecessarily. This is a story we're all proud of. I might almost say that it is one of the most startling and original coups in our sort of work. Without exploring it completely it would be hard to understand just how remarkable it is.'

I had not suspected quite such eloquence in Urquhart. I asked him to be more explicit.

'Certainly. Forgive me. I thought you were with me. I am suggesting that you write the full life story of James Bond. If you agree, I'll see that you have full cooperation from the department. You can see his colleagues. And, of course, I'll make arrangements for you to meet Bond in person.'

As I learnt later, there was more to Urquhart's plans than he let on. He was a complex man, and the years he had spent in undercover work made him as secretive as any of his colleagues. What he failed to tell me was the truth about James Bond. I had to piece the facts together from chance remarks I heard during the next few weeks. It appeared that Bond himself was facing something of a crisis. Everyone was very guarded over the details of his trouble. No ailing film-star could have had more reverent discretion from his studio than Bond from his colleagues at Headquarters. But it seemed clear that he had been suffering from some complicated ailment during the previous year which had kept him entirely from active service. The symptoms made it sound like the sort of mental and physical collapse that

overworked executives succumb to in their middle years. Certainly the previous September Bond had spent over a month in King Edward VII Hospital for Officers at Beaumont Street under an assumed name (no one would tell me what it was). He seems to have been treated for a form of acute hepatitis and was now convalescent. But, as so often happens with this uncomfortable disease, he still had to take things very easy. This was apparently something of a problem. The doctors had insisted that if Bond were to avoid a fresh relapse he simply had to have total physical and mental rest from active service and the London winter. James Bond apparently thought otherwise.

He was insisting forcefully that he was cured and was already clamouring to return to active service. People appeared to sympathise with his anxieties, but the Director of Medical Services had called in Sir James Molony – the neurologist and an old friend and ally of James Bond in the past – to back him up. After seeing Bond, Sir James had raised quite a furore in the Directorate. For once they really had to use a little sympathy and imagination for one of their own people. Something concrete had to be done for Bond, something to take his mind off his troubles, and keep him occupied and happy while he recuperated. According to Sir James, Bond had been complaining that 'with liver trouble it's not the disease that kills you: it's the bloody boredom.'

Surprisingly, it was M, rarely the most understanding of mortals where human weakness is concerned, who had come up with at least a partial solution.

One of the few men M respected in the whole secret-service world was Sir William Stephenson, the so-called 'Quiet Canadian' who had been the outstandingly successful head of British Intelligence in New York through the war. For several years now this lively millionaire had been living in semi-retirement on the top floor of a luxury hotel in Bermuda. Both Bond and Ian Fleming knew him well. Why not, suggested M, have Bond sent out to stay with him? They would enjoy each other's company and Bond could swim, shoot and sail to his heart's content. Sir James approved the idea of Bermuda. The climate was ideal but, as he said, the last thing Bond required was a vacation. He'd had too much vacation as it was. His mind needed to be occupied as well.

It was here that Head of Records (a distinguished Oxford don and former agent who acts as the historian of the different branches of the Secret Service) put up the idea of getting Bond to write his memoirs. For him it was a perfect opportunity to get the authentic version of the career of the most famous British operator of the century. But it was M who pointed out that Bond was the last man to expect to write his story. It had always been hard enough to get the simplest report from him after an assignment. It seems that at this point Urquhart had brought up my name as a solution to the problem. Why not send me out to Bermuda once Bond had settled in? Together we could work on his biography. Bond would have something definite to do. Head of Records would get his information. And he

and Hopkins would at last be well rid of the nightmare of an unauthorised account of the whole extraordinary James Bond affair reaching the newspapers.

'You mean,' growled M, 'that you'd let this writer fellow publish the whole thing?'

'If he doesn't,' Urquhart apparently replied, 'someone else is bound to before long. Besides, that whole business between you and Fleming and 007 is going to rank as one of the classic pieces of deception in our sort of work. The opposition know the truth by now. It's time a little credit was given publicly where it is due.'

According to Urquhart, M was susceptible to flattery. Most old men are. Somewhat reluctantly he finally agreed to back my mission.

Back in London, all this had seemed quite logical and clear. If Urquhart told me Bond was alive and well and living on some distant island, I believed him. Now, with the first lights of Bermuda gleaming below us in the darkness, I wasn't quite so sure. The air-brakes grumbled down, the undercarriage thudded into place; Hamilton lay straight ahead.

The night air was warm and scented. Stepping down from the aircraft was like the beginning of a dream. There were palm trees beside the airport building, hibiscus and azaleas in bloom. For the first time I began envying the honeymooners. I trailed behind them, feeling conspicuous and lonely. Urquhart and London seemed a long way off. Urquhart had told me I would be met at the airport. I hadn't thought to ask him how. Stupidly I hadn't even an address.

In immigration I produced my passport. The official looked at me suspiciously, then signalled to somebody behind him. A good-looking coloured girl came across to me, smiled, said she hoped I'd had a lovely trip and would I come this way? Outside the airport concourse a large black chauffeur was just finishing putting my luggage aboard a large gold-coloured Cadillac. He saluted lazily, opened the rear door for me, then drove us effortlessly along a road beside the sea. I tried making conversation, without much success. I asked where we were going.

'You'll see,' he said. 'We'll soon be there.'

We purred across a causeway. There was a glimpse of palm trees, lights that glittered from the sea. Then we drove through high gates, along a gravelled drive, and there before us, floodlit and gleaming like that party scene from *High Society*, stood the hotel – old-style colonial, pink walls, white louvered shutters, pillars by the door. The pool was lit up too. People were swimming, others sitting on the terrace. A doorman in top-hat and wasp-coloured waistcoat took my distinctly meagre luggage to the lift.

Urquhart had said, 'they do one rather well.' They did. Bath already run, drinks waiting on the table, a discreet manservant to ask if I had eaten or would like something from the restaurant. I told him 'no', but poured myself a good slug of Glen Grant on ice. I felt I needed it.

'Sir William asked me, sir, to kindly welcome you and tell you to treat this place as your own home. When you are ready, sir, say in half an hour, please ring for me and I will take you to Sir William.'

I bathed luxuriously, changed into the lightweight suit purchased three days before from Aquascutum on Urquhart's expense account and, after more Glen Grant, I rang the bell. The manservant appeared at once, led me along a corridor, and then unlocked a door which led into a private lift. Before starting it the man picked up a telephone inside the lift.

'Augustus here, sir. Bringing your guest up now.'

I heard a faint reply from the telephone. The lift ascended, slowly.

At the top there was a slight delay, as the doors evidently opened by remote control from the other side. When they did I walked straight into an enormous room, most of it in shadow.

On three sides long, plate-glass windows looked out on the dark night sea. Along the fourth side there were chairs, a radio transmitter, two green-shaded lamps. By their slightly eerie light I could make out only one man at first – elderly, grey-haired with a determined, weather-beaten face.

'I'm Stephenson,' he said. 'London have been telling me about you. Glad you could come. This is Commander Bond.'