

Len Deighton

Spy Story



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Len Deighton was born in 1929 in London. He did his national service in the RAF, went to the Royal College of Art and designed many book jackets, including the original UK edition of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The enormous success of his first novel, *The IPCRESS File* (1962), was repeated in a remarkable sequence of books over the following thirty or so years. These varied from historical fiction (*Bomber*, perhaps his greatest novel) to dystopian alternative fiction (*SS-GB*) and a number of brilliant non-fiction books on the Second World War (*Fighter*, *Blitzkrieg* and *Blood, Tears and Folly*).

His spy novels chart the twists and turns of Britain and the Cold War in ways which now give them a unique flavour. They preserve a world in which Europe contains many dictatorships, in which the personal can be ruined by the ideological and where the horrors of the Second World War are buried under only a very thin layer of soil. Deighton's fascination with technology, his sense of humour and his brilliant evocation of time and place make him one of the key British espionage writers, alongside John Buchan, Eric Ambler, Ian Fleming and John Le Carré.

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‘But war’s a game, which, were their subjects wise, Kings would not play at.’

William Cowper, 1731–1800

Spy Story

The Patrick Armstrong novels

An Expensive Place to Die

Spy Story

Yesterday's Spy

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Spy

I

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RULES. ALL GAMES. STUDIES CENTRE. LONDON

Forty-three days without a night: six pale-blue fluorescent weeks without a sniff of air, sky, or a view of the stars. I drank in a cautious half-lungful of salty mist and smelled the iodine and seaborne putrefaction that seaside landladies call ozone.

HMS *Viking*, a deep water anchorage in western Scotland, is no place to celebrate a return to the real world. The uninhabited islands, a mile or more out in the Sound, were almost swallowed by sea mist. Overhead, dark clouds raced across the water to dash themselves upon the sharp granite peaks of Great Hamish. Then, in threads, they tumbled down the hillside, trailing through the stones and walls that had once been a Highland croft.

There were four submarines alongside the one from which I emerged. Out at the anchorage were more of them. The lash of the westerly wind made them huddle close to the mother ships and their crooning generators. The yellow deck lights were visible through the grey mist, and so were the flocks of gulls that screamed and wheeled and shrieked as they fell upon the kitchen garbage.

The wind brought gusts of rain, whipping up crested waves that awoke the subs. Underfoot I felt the great black hull strain against its moorings. The brow tilted. Stepping from the edge of each horizontal fin to the next was easier if I didn't look down.

Now the next hull groaned, as the same wave sucked and gurgled at its bow. The forecast had been reasonably right for once: overcast,

low cloud, drizzle and wind westerling. The rain scratched at the slop-coloured sea and crept into my sleeves, boots and collar. My rubber shoe slipped but I recovered my balance. I shook the water off my face and cursed pointlessly.

‘Steady on,’ said Ferdy Foxwell behind me, but I cursed again and built his name into one of the inversions.

‘At least the navy is on time,’ said Ferdy. There was an orange-coloured Ford on the jetty. The door opened and a slim man got out. He was wearing a Burberry and a tweed hat but I knew he’d be the British naval officer from the police office. He bent his head against the rain. The armed USN sentry at the end of the gangway poked his head out of his shelter to check the pass. I recognized the officer as Frazer, a lieutenant. He made his way along the slippery walk towards us, stepping across the gaps with commendable agility.

‘Let me take that.’ He extended a hand, and then smiled in embarrassment as he noticed that the shiny metal case was padlocked to a shoulder-chain under my coat.

‘Help Mr Foxwell,’ I said. ‘He never fastens his.’

‘Neither would you if you had any sense,’ puffed Foxwell. The man squeezed past me and I had a chance to look down at the oily scum, and smell the diesel, and decide that Ferdy Foxwell was right. When I reached the brow – the horizontal fin – of the next submarine I rested the box and looked back. The young officer was bowed under the weight of Ferdy’s case, and Ferdy was stretching his arms to balance his two hundred pounds of compact flab, teetering along the gangway like a circus elephant balancing on a tub. Six weeks was a long time to spend in a metal tube, no matter about sun lamps and cycling gear. I picked up the case loaded with spools and tape recordings, and remembered how I sprinted across these brows on the outward journey.

A red Pontiac station wagon came along the jetty, slowed at the torpedo store and rolled carefully over the double ramps. It continued along the front until turning off at the paint shop. It disappeared down between the long lines of huts. The curved huts were shiny in the rain. Now there was no human movement, and the buildings looked as old as the black granite hills that shone rain-wet above them.

'Are you all right?' Frazer asked.

I shouldered the wet case as I started down the companionway to the jetty. The hatch in the sentry hut slid open an inch or two. I could hear the radio inside playing Bach. 'OK, buddy,' said the sailor. He slammed the hatch shut as a gust of wind hammered the hut with rain.

There was a panel van behind the Ford. A bad-tempered Admiralty policeman grumbled that we were two hours late and about how the Americans couldn't make tea. He scowled as he signed for the cases and locked them in the safe in the van. Ferdy shot him in the back of the head with a nicotine-stained finger. Frazer saw the gesture and permitted himself a thin smile.

'Perhaps a tot?' said Frazer.

'I wish I had your job,' said Ferdy Foxwell.

Frazer nodded. I suppose we all said that to him.

There was the clang of a steel door. I looked at the nuclear submarine that had taken us to the Arctic and back. We civilians were always permitted to leave first. Now there was a deck party assembling forward of the conning tower, or what I'd learned to call a sail. They faced several more hours of work before the sub's second crew arrived and took her to sea again.

'Where is everyone?'

'Asleep, I shouldn't wonder,' said Frazer.

'Asleep?'

'A Russian sub came down through the North Channel and into the Irish Sea on Wednesday morning . . . big panic – hunter killers, sonar buoys, County Class destroyers, you name it. Yards of teleprinter. Seventy-two hours of red alert. We were only stood-down last night. You missed the pantomime.'

'They were frightened it was going to put guns ashore in Ulster?' Ferdy asked.

'Who knows what?' said Frazer. 'There were two Russian intelligence trawlers and a destroyer off Malin Head, too. You can see they'd be worried.'

'So?'

'We stopped Class A Radio traffic for five and a half hours.'

‘And the sub?’

‘They tracked it out past Wexford yesterday afternoon. Looks like they were just taking our pulse.’ He smiled as he unlocked the door of his car. It was well cared for, and all dressed up in black vinyl, Lamborghini-style rear-window slats, and even a spoiler.

‘They’re tricky bastards!’ said Ferdy resignedly. He blew on his hands to warm them. ‘Who said something about splicing that damned mainbrace?’

Frazer got into the driver’s seat and twisted round to unlock the rear doors. ‘It might have been me,’ he said.

I reached under my oilskin coat and found a dry handkerchief to polish the rain off my spectacles. Frazer started the car.

Ferdy Foxwell said, ‘Never mind the dollars and the cinnamon toast and grain-died steaks . . . six weeks without a drink: it’s positively unnatural.’

Frazer said, ‘Not all the skippers are as bad as Fireball.’

Ferdy Foxwell settled back into the rear seat of the car. He was a huge man, well over six feet tall and broad enough to carry it. He was in his early fifties but still had enough brown wavy hair to visit a smart barber once a month. But his hair was no more an advert for the barber than were his rumpled suits for his Savile Row tailor, or his curious inability to spell for the famous public school to which he’d also sent his two sons. ‘A drink,’ said Ferdy. He smiled. His crooked, gapped teeth needed only gold wire to complete the image of a mischievous child.

The Admiralty van containing our tapes went at the regulation fifteen miles an hour. We followed at the same pace, all the way to the exit. It was a double compound, with a large checkpoint at each gate, and the wire twenty feet tall. Newcomers were always told that HMS *Viking* had been a prison camp during the war but they were wrong, it had been an experimental torpedo testing unit. But it would have done, it would have done.

The dog handlers were drinking hot coffee in the guard tower and the dogs were howling like werewolves. The sentry waved us through. We turned on to the coast road and went down past the housing, the Officers Club and cinema. The streets were empty but

the coffee-shop car park was full. The lights of the housing were lost in a flurry of sea mist that rolled in upon us. The Admiralty van continued along the coast road to the airport. We took the high road, climbing steeply up the narrow road that leads to the moors and the pass over the Hamish.

Defoliated by Iron Age farmers, the land is now good for nothing but a few black-faced sheep. This ancient tilted edge of Scotland has only a scattering of poor soil upon the hard granite that does not weather. I felt the wheels hesitate on an ice patch, and ahead of us the higher ground was grey with last week's snow. Only the red grouse can survive outdoors on this sort of moorland, sheltering under the heather and feeding upon its shoots, moving gently all the time so that the snow does not bury them.

From here the valley formed an enormous stadium, roofed by the hurrying black clouds. Halfway up its steep far side there was a huddle of grey stone cottages smudged with smoke from open fires. One of them was a cramped little pub.

'We'll stop for a drink at The Bonnet?'

'You'll not get me past it,' I said.

'My God, it's cold,' said Ferdy, and rubbed the condensation from the window to see how far it was to the pub.

'There's the one I'm going to get next year,' said Frazer. A large light-blue BMW was on the road behind us. It had a left-hand drive. 'Secondhand,' Frazer added apologetically. 'It shouldn't cost me more than a new one of these. My next door neighbour has one. Says he'll never buy another English car.'

Cars, politics or climate, for a Scotsman they were English if bad, British if good. Perhaps he sensed my thoughts. He smiled. 'It's the electrics,' he said.

I could hear it now, just a faint burr of the Highlands. It would make sense for the navy to use a local man for this kind of job. Strangers could still find a barrier of silence once the cities were left behind.

Frazer took the hairpin bends with exaggerated care. On one of the turns he stopped, and reversed, to pull tight enough to avoid the snow-banked ditch. But the blue BMW stuck with us, following

patiently. Following more patiently than was natural for a man who drives such a car.

Frazer glanced in his mirror again. 'I think we should,' he said, voicing our unspoken thoughts, and Ferdy wrote down the registration number in his crocodile-covered notepad. It was a Düsseldorf registration, and even while Ferdy was writing it, the BMW gave a toot and started to overtake.

Whatever was the extent of his intention, he'd chosen his moment well. The BMW squeezed past us in a spray of powdery snow from the drift on our left, and Frazer's nervous reaction was to swerve away from the flash of light blue and the hard stare of the bearded man in the passenger seat.

The road was downhill and the ice was still hard and shiny up here on the top of the Hamish. Frazer fought the wheel as we swung round – as slowly as a boat at anchor – and slid almost broadside down the narrow mountain road.

We gathered speed. Frazer pumped the brake pedal, trying vainly to snatch at the road. I could see only the sheer drop, down where a clump of firs were waiting to catch us a thousand feet below.

'Bastards, bastards,' mumbled Frazer. Ferdy, flung off-balance, grabbed at the seat back, the roof and the sun visor, so as not to grab at Frazer and kill us all.

There was a thump as the rear wheel struck some stones at the road edge, and the tyres for a moment gripped enough to make the differential whine. Frazer was into bottom gear by now, and at the next patch of stones the car whimpered and ceded to his brake pedal enough for him to narrow the angle at which we were sliding. The road was more steeply downhill and the low gear had not slowed us enough to take the steep bend ahead. Frazer hit the horn in two loud blasts before we hit the banked snow that had collected around the edge of the hair-pin, like piped icing round a birthday cake. We stopped with a bang of hollow steel, and the car rocked on its suspension.

'My God,' said Ferdy. For a moment we sat still. Praying, sighing or swearing according to inclination.

'I hope you're not going to do that every time someone tries to overtake,' I said.

‘Just foreign registrations,’ said Frazer.

Frazer started the engine again. Gently he let in the clutch and the car waddled out of the drift. He took the middle of the road, and at no more than twenty-five miles an hour we went all the way down to the bridge and up the next climb all the way to The Bonnet.

He pulled into the yard there. There was a crunch of gravel and a soft splintering of ice. The BMW was already parked but none of us remarked upon the way its driver had nearly killed us.

‘I’m not sure I’d enjoy it,’ said Frazer, talking of the voyage but studying our faces as if to see the effect the near-accident had had on us. ‘I’m a destroyer man myself . . . like to keep my head above water.’

I would have described Frazer as an office-boy, but if he wanted to play Long John Silver it was all right by me.

‘Peace time,’ pronounced Ferdy, ‘a submarine trip north is no different to trailing Russians round the Med in an intelligence trawler.’

‘In winter the Med’s a damned site rougher,’ I said.

‘You’re right,’ said Ferdy. ‘As sick as a dog, I was, and I could see that Russian cruiser as steady as a rock all the time.’

‘Your second trip, wasn’t it?’ asked Frazer.

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, you chaps never do more than one a year. It’s over and done with, eh?’

‘Are you buying?’ Ferdy Foxwell asked him.

‘Then it’ll be small ones,’ said Frazer. The wind bit into us as we stepped from the car but there was a fine view. The hills at the other end of the valley obscured the anchorage, but to each side of the summit I could see the Sound and the mist-shrouded islands that continued all the way to the grey Atlantic breakers. The wind sang in the car aerial and tugged at the chimney smoke. We were high enough to be entangled in the fast moving underside of the storm clouds. Ferdy coughed as the cold wet air entered his lungs.

‘All that air-conditioned living,’ said Frazer. ‘You’d better take your briefcase – security and all that, you know.’

‘It’s only dirty underwear,’ said Ferdy. He coughed again. Frazer

went around the car testing each door-lock and the boot too. For a moment he looked down at his hand to see if it shook. It did, and he pushed it into the pocket of his trenchcoat.

I walked across to the BMW and looked inside it. There was a short oilskin coat, a battered rucksack and a stout walking-stick: a walker's equipment.

It was a tiny cottage. One bar; a front parlour except for the warped little counter and flap scorched by cigarettes and whittled with the doodles of shepherds' knives. On the whitewashed walls there was a rusty Highlander's dirk, an engraving of a ship in full sail, a brightly shone ship's bell and a piece of German submarine surrendered in May 1945. The landlord was a shaggy-haired giant, complete with kilt and beer-stained shirt.

There were two customers already drinking, but they had taken the bench near the window so we could stand around the open peat fire and slap our hands together and make self-congratulatory noises about its warmth.

The beer was good: dark and not too sweet, and not crystal clear like the swill that the brewers extol on TV. The Bonnet's had flavour, like a slice of wheat loaf. Frazer knew the landlord well but, with the formality that Highland men demand, he called him Mr MacGregor. 'We'll have another fall of snow before the day's through, Mr MacGregor.'

'Is it south you're heading, Mr Frazer?'

'Aye.'

'The high road is awful bad already. The oil delivery could not get through that way: he made the journey by the road along the Firth. It never freezes there. It's a wicked long journey for the boy.' He prodded the peat fire with a poker and encouraged the smoke to turn to flame.

'You are busy?' asked Frazer.

'Travellers. People walk, even in winter. I don't understand it.' He made no attempt to lower his voice. He nodded impassively at the two customers by the window. They were looking at large-scale walker's maps, measuring distances with a tiny wheeled instrument that they rolled along the footpaths.

‘Travellers, walkers and spies,’ said Frazer. The wind banged on the tiny window panes.

‘Ahh, spies,’ said the landlord. He came as near as I’d ever seen him to laughing: the two men in the window seat looked like some inept casting director’s idea of Russian spies. They had black overcoats and dark tweed hats. Both wore coloured silk scarves knotted at their throats and one man had a closely trimmed grizzled beard.

‘We’ll have the other half, Landlord,’ said Ferdy.

With infinite care the landlord drew three more pints of his special. In the silence I heard one of the other men say, ‘In our own good time.’ His voice was soft but his accent had the hard spiky consonants of the English Midlands. In the context of our remarks the sentence hung in the air like the peaty smoke from the fireplace. What in their own good time, I wondered.

‘Well, what’s been happening out here in the real world?’ said Ferdy.

‘Nothing much,’ said Frazer. ‘Looks like the German reunification talks are going ahead, the papers are full of it. Another car workers’ strike. The Arabs put a bomb in the Tokyo Stock Exchange but it was defused, and Aeroflot has started running its own jumbos into New York.’

‘We get all the big news,’ said Ferdy. ‘And American hometown stuff. I could tell you more about the climate, local politics and football scores of the American heartland than any other Englishman you could find. Do you know that a woman in Portland, Maine, has given birth to sextuplets?’

It had begun to snow. Frazer looked at his watch. ‘We mustn’t miss the plane,’ he said.

‘There’s time for one from this man’s stone bottle,’ said Ferdy.

‘The stone bottle?’ said MacGregor.

‘Come along, you hairy bastard,’ said Ferdy. ‘You know what I’m talking about.’

MacGregor’s face was unchanging. It would have been easy to believe him deeply offended, but Ferdy knew him better than that. Without taking his eyes from Ferdy, MacGregor took a packet of

Rothmans from his pocket. He lit one and tossed the packet on to the counter.

MacGregor went into his back parlour and reappeared with a jar from which he poured a generous measure. 'You've a good palate – for a Sassenach.'

'No one would want the factory stuff after this, Mac,' said Ferdy. MacGregor and Frazer exchanged glances.

'Aye, I get my hands on a little of the real thing now and again.'

'Come along, MacGregor,' said Ferdy. 'You're among friends. You think we haven't smelled the barley and the peat fire?'

MacGregor gave a ghost of a smile but would admit to nothing. Ferdy took his malt whisky and tasted it with care and concentration.

'The same?' asked MacGregor.

'It's improved,' said Ferdy.

Frazer came away from the fireplace and took his seat at the counter. MacGregor moved the malt whisky towards him. 'It will help you endure the cruel blows of the west wind,' he said.

So he must have rationalized many such drinks up here on the bare slopes of the Grampians' very end. A desolate place: in summer the heather grew bright with flowers, and so tall that a hill walker needed a long blade to clear a lane through it. I turned an inch or two. The strangers in the corner no longer spoke together. Their faces were turned to watch the snow falling but I had a feeling that they were watching us.

MacGregor took three more thimble-sized glasses, and, with more care than was necessary, filled each to the brim. While we watched him I saw Frazer reach out for the packet of cigarettes that the landlord had left on the counter. He helped himself. There was an intimacy to such a liberty.

'Can I buy a bottle?' asked Ferdy.

'You can not,' said MacGregor.

I sipped it. It was a soft smoky flavour of the sort that one smelled as much as tasted.

Frazer poured his whisky into the beer and drank it down. 'You damned heathen,' said the landlord. 'And I'm giving you the twelve-year-old malt too.'

‘It all ends up in the same place, Mr MacGregor.’

‘You damned barbarian,’ he growled, relishing the r’s rasp. ‘You’ve ruined my ale and my whisky too.’

I realized it was a joke between them, one that they had shared before. I knew that Lieutenant Frazer was from RN security. I wondered if the landlord was a part of it too. It would be a fine place from which to keep an eye on strangers who came to look at the atomic submarines at the anchorage.

And then I was sure that this was so, for Frazer picked up the packet of cigarettes from which he’d been helping himself. The change of ownership had been a gradual one but I was sure that something more than cigarettes was changing hands.

In games where the random chance programme is not used, and in the event of two opposing units, of exactly equal strength and identical qualities, occupying same hex (or unit of space), the first unit to occupy the space will predominate.

RULES. 'TACWARGAME'. STUDIES CENTRE. LONDON

The London flight was delayed.

Ferdy bought a newspaper and I read the departures board four times. Then we drifted through that perfumed limbo of stale air that is ruled by yawning girls with Cartier watches, and naval officers with plastic briefcases. We tried to recognize melodies amongst the rhythms that are specially designed to be without melody, and we tried to recognize words among the announcements, until finally the miracle of heavier-than-air flight was once again mastered.

As we climbed into the grey cotton wool, we had this big brother voice saying he was our captain and on account of how late we were there was no catering aboard but we could buy cigarette lighters with the name of the airline on them, and if we looked down to our left side we could have seen Birmingham, if it hadn't been covered in cloud.

It was early evening by the time I got to London. The sky looked bruised and the cloud no higher than the high-rise offices where all the lights burned. The drivers were ill-tempered and the rain unceasing.

We arrived at the Studies Centre in Hampstead just as the day staff were due to leave. The tapes had come on a military flight and were waiting for me. There is a security seal when tapes are due, so we unloaded to the disapproving stares of the clock-watchers in the Evaluation Block. It was tempting to use the overnight facilities at

the Centre: the bathwater always ran and the kitchen could always find a hot meal, but Marjorie was waiting. I signed out directly.

I should have had more sense than to expect my car to sit in the open through six weeks of London winter and be ready to start when I needed it. It groaned miserably as it heaved at the thick cold oil and coughed at the puny spark. I pummelled the starter until the air was choked with fumes, and then counted to one hundred in an attempt to keep my hands off her long enough to dry the points. At the third bout she fired. I hit the pedal and there was a staccato of backfire and judder of one-sided torque from the oldest plugs. Finally they too joined the song and I nudged her slowly out into the evening traffic of Frogнал.

If the traffic had been moving faster I would probably have reached home without difficulty, but the sort of jams you get on a wet winter's evening in London gives the *coup de grâce* to old bangers like mine. I was just a block away from my old place in Earl's Court when she died. I opened her up and tried to decide where to put the Band-aid, but all I saw were raindrops sizzling on the hot block. Soon the raindrops no longer sizzled and I became aware of the passing traffic. Big expensive all-weather tyres were filling my shoes with dirty water. I got back into the car and stared at an old packet of cigarettes, but I'd given them up for six weeks and this time I was determined to make it stick. I buttoned up and walked down the street as far as the phone box. Someone had cut the hand-piece off and taken it home. Not one empty cab had passed in half an hour. I tried to decide between walking the rest of the way home and lying down in the middle of the road. It was then that I remembered that I still had the door-key of the old flat.

The Studies Centre was turning my lease over the following month. Possibly the phone was still connected. It was two minutes' walk.

I rang the doorbell. There was no answer. I gave it an extra couple of minutes, remembering how often I'd failed to hear it from the kitchen at the back. Then I used the old key and let myself in. The lights still worked. I'd always liked number eighteen. In some ways it's more to my taste than the oil-fired slab of speculator's bad taste that I'd exchanged it for, but I'm not the sort of fellow who