

The Puzzlemaker  
by  
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Chapter 1

Across

1. Life's certainties (5-5)
8. Forerunner MI5 (3)

London, Wednesday, 11 October. 12:15 PM

The sprawling Sunday Times editorial office was, as usual, a hive of activity and a slight distraction to his train of thought. Around him, journalists, researchers, and editors rushed to make their deadline in the 30m wide 60m deep, dry, poorly regulated air-conditioned room. These days, George did not recognise many of the younger faces; few were employed at the newspaper as long as he.

At least it was not filled with smoke as it was thirty years ago when he first began. However, the blue nicotine hue that once hung over the cigarette smoking staff was now replaced by wafts of men's aftershave competing against female perfume, which, at times, seemed like all-out chemical warfare. Maybe smoke was a healthier option, he thought, as he made his way across the floor to his own quiet, odour free domain.

A young female intern, early twenties, with short-cropped purple hair, stared as he walked past her desk. "Who's that?" she asked her colleague, sitting opposite.

Ten years her senior, fashion editor Beverley Grange glanced up at the man, early sixties, carefully weaving his way through the rows of desks, across the floor, avoiding eye contact with other staff. His non-distinctive, slightly ill-fitting dark brown pinstriped suit, with an overcoat folded over his left arm, and a full-length black gentlemen's brolly hanging from his wrist, looked very much from another era.

"Oh," Beverley replied, as she peered over her reading glasses at the unimposing man headed for the far corner of the office. "That's George," she sighed, then went back to preparing her copy for publication.

The young female nodded and tapped her lips with her Bic pen. "I've seen him before. Floats in and out without a word to anyone. Looks a bit of a nutter. What does he do?"

"Compiles the crossword puzzles," she replied, uninterested.

"Really? I've never seen him at any of the editorial meetings. You mean those cryptic puzzles and all that sort of thing? He does them? Wow. My dad used to crack his brain on them every Sunday afternoon. Drove my mum mad, that did. Dead hard they are. I could never solve them."

"Me neither." Beverley said, dropping her pen and abandoning her text. She removed her reading glasses and glanced around the room. "In fact I don't think anyone in the office has ever completed them twice in a row. He always comes up with brain crunchers."

"Brain crushers you mean. So he *is* a nutter," she sneered.

No one knew how George managed to avoid the compulsory editorial meetings, annual Christmas parties, receptions of expired, retired, or job-changing colleagues, but he did. The tedium of shaking hands and explaining his work to someone new, or listening to drunken co-workers talking about their latest exploits with bad breath bathed in a vapour of alcohol and vomit, was all too much for him to bear. After his first years of employment he developed an art for avoiding nearly all forms of contact with anyone in the office not connected to his work.

There was only one person of course, and that was enough.

Unmindful to the general noise of people talking, chatting on phones and typing on keyboards, he strolled unobtrusively towards his own tiny office in the corner.

A treasured luxury in an age of desk sharing and cutbacks, he had successfully negotiated an irreversible clause into his contract when he first joined the newspaper; a guaranteed private office. However, the actual metered space had significantly diminished over the years. Now there was just enough room for a small desk and a chair, and no more. During the last downsizing, his own hat and coat stand was made redundant. The tall late-Victorian, dark-brown mahogany stand now resided in his house just inside the front door, next to the near identical stand he had inherited from his parents.

The moment his door closed and he settled into his chair, a woman in her early fifties, who watched him through the opaque glass window of his office, came into action. She opened a locked drawer under her desk, and removed a small box filled with envelopes. All were cut cleanly open, ready for inspection, together with folded emails lodged between.

As always, she knocked gently on the door and waited for permission to enter.

“Come in,” George said, his voice scarcely audible.

Holding the box firmly, she opened the door just enough to step in.

“Good afternoon George,” she said, cheerfully. “We've got a healthy batch this week. It should keep you busy for a while.”

George gave a short but shy smile. For less than a second he made eye contact as she placed the box in the middle of his small century-old, patina rich desk.

“I'll drop around later to see if you've picked any winners. Quite a few this week, I'm sure.”

“Thank you Matilda,” his soft voice answered, as he gazed at the overflowing box in front of him.

She lingered, as if wanting to ask something. George never noticed, his mind was elsewhere. He pulled the box of letters and emails towards him.

“Right,” she sighed, with an air of finality, “I'll leave you to it.” Matilda closed the door and returned to her desk.

George took a moment to contemplate, then ran his hand along the edge of the letters and emails. At least two hundred, he thought. Finding a winner would be quick. The cryptic crossword last week was one of the easiest he had published in months, possibly years.

He had to give them hope.

Matilda could have picked out a winner, but that was not the way things worked in his tiny department governed by time and tradition. George was head of his own one-man operation devising the cryptic and quick crossword puzzles that appeared in all The Times newspapers. Each would normally take about thirty minutes to work out, except Sunday. The cryptic crossword puzzle for the Sunday Times was meant to be difficult. If it did not crack brains, its reputation would flounder. Created by his predecessors in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, standards were set, and had to be upheld, no matter what.

He reached out and gently took hold of the first bunch of letters and emails. Matilda had sorted them in the usual manner. The first to arrive were at the front and last at the rear. His sense of pride that everything was fair and square for those who took the time and effort to solve the puzzles, was utmost paramount.

The prize – a rolled gold fountain pen worth two hundred pounds. Very generous, he thought. Not that he agreed to this altruistic prize depicted by senior management. He could remember the day when printing the winners name in the newspaper was more than enough accolade.

As usual, and according to his instructions, the cut-out puzzle solution remained inside the envelope, concealed. He knew of secretaries and assistant editors in rival newspapers who removed the solved puzzle and pinned it to the outer envelope for the editor to check, all for convenience. To George that felt like a violation. Years of working in intelligence during the Cold War implanted a strong compulsion for privacy and confidentiality. Even the most facile answers to crossword puzzles should not be exposed with a paperclip for all to see. Matilda had strict instructions to keep the box in the small locked drawer under her desk, which she dutifully did.

He could trust Matilda.

Within ten minutes he found a winner and was in the process of writing down the name and address when his telephone rang.

"Hello?" He answered, then recognised the caller at the other end. "Ahh, Benton old friend," he said, in a mildly uplifting voice. "How are you? Haven't they pensioned you off yet?"

"Oh no, I'm still here," Benton replied, "but in general I spend most of my time in the garden, except for the last couple of weeks. Things have been getting a trifle hectic."

"Well at least you're happy I'm sure. Well, what do I owe the honour of your call?"

"I have a small job to do and I'd like to use your services, if you don't mind, that is?"

"Of course, you never stop working for Queen and Country do you?"

"Or retire," Benton replied. They both chuckled.

"I'd be happy to do a placement for you. When?"

"If it could go out next Sunday, then that would be wonderful."

George glanced up at the mundane calendar pinned to the grey wall next to his desk. "You will have to be quick. The deadline is still Friday, as usual."

"I was going to bring them around myself but I could give them to you right now, if that's okay with you?"

"Yes of course. I'd be happy to do that for you."

George wrote down the words Benton dictated. "Very good. I've got that. I should be able to think of a question that will match. Anything else?"

"How about dinner sometime soon?"

"Now that would be nice," George replied. "It's been a while."

"Not this week, too busy. Let me give you a call when the time is right."

"That's fine, Benton. I'll speak to you soon."

George looked down at the words on the note pad. From his desk drawer he removed a separate folder containing special blank crossword templates for the Sunday edition. He checked the week number on the calendar, then pulled out the corresponding template. Benton had an exact copy.

Down

1. Easily influenced (8)
2. Keep (something) going (7)

Three hours later, George opened the gate to the small garden of his early twentieth-century terraced house in the quiet Wimbledon suburb. The leaves on the few shrubs had turned yellow and fallen. An autumn chill hung in the air. Time to sweep the path and remove the dead leaves tomorrow, and that would be enough gardening until spring. From his jacket pocket he took a small bunch of keys and inserted one into the Yale lock he had known his entire life.

Inside the darkened hallway, a ray of autumn sunlight shone through the blue, red, and yellow arched stained-glass windows onto the rustic brown and white diamond shaped floor tiles. Two small paintings with unassuming scenes of the English countryside hung randomly on both walls, left and right. Above them, sporadically decorating the remaining free space, small, hand sized Japanese puzzle boxes, rested on little dark-brown wooden ledges.

George hung his dark tweed overcoat and placed his broly in the mahogany hat and coat stand that had previously resided in his office. Next to it stood his parents near identical stand. A gentlemen's broly and a woman's parasol rested upright in the umbrella well, as they had done for the last twenty-five years, since their death.

George headed for his very private comfort zone.

With less light than the hallway, the front sitting room curtains were always drawn shut. The scent of soft, sweet wood with a hint of furniture polish greeted him. Nearly all visitors who came to the house were brought into the dining room at the rear. His front sitting room was special. No more than five people had entered here within the last twenty years.

George poured a Drambuie from a small drinks cabinet, and sat down in the worn leather armchair once governed by his father. Many years ago it was turned towards the fireplace, now it faced outward, the most ideal position for concentration, as well as the best view.

After taking a sip, his eyes fall on to a small box that lay on the rosewood side table next to the armchair. Unlike the petite, hand-sized boxes in the hallway, this was twice as large.

George took it in his hands and turned it over. It felt smooth, old, and silk like, with fine lines carved into the wood which gave the impression of little drawers.

He raised it to eye-level and studied it closely.

From the moment he left the house that morning, the ornate box had occupied his mind. Benton's telephone call had briefly disrupted his train of thought, but now, feeling refreshed and energised, he was once again engrossed in his most recent puzzle. The person who sold it claimed it was a doll's house cabinet. He knew better, but did not say. To George, it had puzzle written all over it.

Carefully, he placed his fingers on each side of the box and pressed. A small drawer opened, empty. This he had already done many times before, but knew there had to be more to it. The finely carved lines were just that, lines, but he had his doubts. George turned the box over and tried to peer inside, then he had an idea.

He placed his fingers in the open slot, then moved his hand from left to right, it was certainly empty. Feeling slightly defeated, he gently shoved his hand in deeper. The fleeting idea of getting stuck worried him, and the notion of damaging the box began to seriously play on his mind. Carefully rooting as deep as he dared, he felt something – a lever.

This was new.

Never had he come across anything like this before. A brief smile crept to the corners of his mouth, and a tempered rush of excitement heightened his senses; this was the thrill. Gently, not wanting to damage the lever, he pushed against it. A second drawer, directly beneath the first, sprung open.

The open top drawer obscured any view of the one beneath it. When he attempted to close the top drawer, the bottom began to close in unison.

George paused to concentrate.

He then tried to pull the second drawer out completely, it didn't move, however he found was possible to push the bottom drawer back in; it clicked into place. Once again, he inserted his fingers into the top drawer, pushed the lever, and the bottom drawer sprung open once again. Leaning back in the armchair, he took another sip of Drambuie. For the next ten minutes he stared at the box in near absolute silence. The faint ticking of the early-thirties mantelpiece clock on top of the fireplace was the only sound in the room.

The solution was somewhere, but where?

George shifted in his armchair, then sat upright. He turned the box around so the drawers faced outward, and ran his fingers over the smooth wood at each end. Unnoticed before, he felt two dull points each side. Both slightly protruding, no more than a half a millimetre, and hardly detectable. Shoddy workmanship or water damage may have caused the wood to expand ever so slightly, but George knew better. A box so expertly crafted as this would have no craftsmanship flaws. Water damage could not work so precisely without affecting nothing else. There had to be more.

He had a thought.

Turning the box around, he placed each middle finger over the bumps and pressed hard. Using both thumbs, he pushed against the top drawer; it slid in with a gentle smooth glide. The bottom drawer finally remained open. Success.

To his surprise, a small, cream-coloured parchment lay rolled inside the compartment. It smelled of peony, a Chinese flower normally associated with wealth and aristocracy in ancient times. He smiled briefly, then carefully removed it. It was covered with small Chinese characters. George reached for the old seventies black telephone next to him and punched in a number.

“Hello, Benton? Yes, it's me, George. I found something you might be interested in. A Chinese silk parchment, eleventh century, I think. At least the box may be, the parchment could be later. I thought you might want to have a crack at unravelling it.”

“Really? It sounds like a piece of Chih, expensive in those times. Where did you get it?”

“A little present I discovered in a puzzle box I recently acquired. It does look very authentic.”

Benton sounded excited. “And very rare indeed, I can imagine.”

“I'll bring it with me when I see you next time.”

“That's very kind of you George, I would love to see it. Did the work for Sunday go okay?”

“Yes, it's in.”

“Wonderful. Thank you very much, George. I'll get back to you on the dinner, it's still impossible to pin a date at the moment.

“No rush Benton, you always know where to find me.”

“Yes, you are not one for change, are you?” Benton chuckled. “Speak to you soon,” he said, and hung up.

