

The Puzzle Maker

By

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## Chapter 1

Wednesday 10:15 AM October 11

The expansive Sunday Times editorial office was a hive of activity with reporters, researchers, and editors rushing to make their deadline in the dry air. At least it was not filled with smoke as it used to be when he first started thirty years ago. The blue nicotine hue that hung in the air was replaced by wafts of men's aftershave competing against the females French perfume which at times appeared to verge on chemical warfare. Sometimes smoke felt like the healthier option.

These days George did not recognise many of the younger faces; few were employed at the newspaper as long as he.

A young female intern, early twenties, with blonde short cropped hair, stared at him as he silently went past her desk. "Who's that?" She asked her colleague.

Ten years her senior and sitting opposite, she glanced up at the elderly man, early sixties, slowly weaving his way across the floor, avoiding eye contact with other staff. His non-distinctive, slightly ill-fitting dark brown pinstriped suit, with an overcoat folded over one arm, and a full-length black gentlemen's broly in the other, looked very much from another era.

"Oh," her colleague replied, as she peered over her reading glasses at the man headed for the opposite corner of the immense office. "That's George," she muttered, with little interest, then went back to study the copy in front of her.

The young female nodded and tapped her lips with her blue bic pen. "I've seen him before," she said, in a strong cockney accent. "He seems to float in and out without a word to anyone. Looks a bit of a nutter. What does he do?"

“Compiles the crossword puzzles.”

“Really? You mean those cryptic puzzles and all that? He does them? Wow. My dad used to crack his brain on them every Sunday afternoon. Used to drive my mom mad. Dead hard they are. I could never solve them.”

“Me neither.” Her colleague abandoned her text. “In fact I don't think anyone in the office has ever completed them twice in a row. He always comes up 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, or 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 of 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 clicking away on their computers, he strolled unobtrusively towards his own tiny room 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 joined the newspaper nearly thirty years ago; a guaranteed personal private office. However, the actual metered space had significantly diminished in size 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 had to be made redundant. The tall late Victorian mahogany stand now resided in his house just inside the front door, next to the near identical stand he inherited from his parents. George disappeared into his office.

The moment the door closed a woman in her early fifties, dressed in a light grey three-piece matching outfit, sitting approximately fifteen metres to the right of Georges office, opened a locked drawer under her desk. She removed a small box filled with envelopes, all cut cleanly open, together with folded printed emails lodged between them.

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

“Come in,” George said, in a barely audible voice.

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

“Good morning 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, and made eye contact for less than a second as she placed the box in the middle of his small century-old, dark mahogany desk.

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

“Thank you Matilda,” his soft voice answered, as he stared down at his table.

She lingered, as if wanting to ask something. George did not notice, his mind seemed elsewhere, then he pulled the box of letters and emails towards him.

“Right,” she said, 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 stare at the orderly bunch. He ran his hand along the edge of the letters and emails to get an idea of the amount. At least two hundred, he thought. Finding a winner would be quick. The puzzle last week was one of the easiest he had published in months, possibly years.

He had to give them hope.

Matilda could easily have done the sorting for him 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 general crossword puzzle that appeared in the newspaper every day of the week. Each would normally take about thirty minutes to work out, except Sunday. The cryptic crossword puzzle in 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 held up no matter what.

He reached into the box and took out a handful 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 puzzle was paramount.

The prize, a rolled gold fountain pen worth about two hundred pounds. Very generous, he thought. Although he could remember the day when printing the winners name in the newspaper was more than enough.

The cut-out puzzle solution from the newspaper remained inside the envelope, concealed. He knew of secretaries and assistant editors in other newspapers who removed the solved puzzle and pinned it to the outer envelope for the editor, all for convenience. To George it felt like a violation. After years of working in intelligence during the cold war he had a strong compulsion for privacy and confidentiality. Answers to even a crossword puzzle should not be exposed with a paperclip for all to see. Matilda had also strict instructions to keep the box in the small locked drawer under her desk, which she did. He could trust Matilda.

Within ten minutes he found a winner and he 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, it's been a trifle hectic."

"Well at least you're happy I'm sure. So, what is the honour of the 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."

"You will have to be quick. The deadline is tomorrow morning."

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

"Yes of course. I'll 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 up. Anything else?"

"How about dinner sometime soon?"

"Dinner? Now would be nice, it's been a while."

"Not this week, it's 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 folder containing templates of blank crossword puzzles for the Sunday edition. He checked the calendar pinned to the wall to see which week it was, then pulled out the corresponding template. Benton had an exact copy.

Three hours later George strolled up the small garden path of his early twentieth century terraced house in the quiet Wimbledon suburb. The leaves on the few shrubs in his tiny garden had now turned yellow. An autumn chill hung in the air. Time to sweep the path of all dead leaves tomorrow, and that would be enough gardening until spring. From his jacket pocket he took a small bunch of keys and inserted the front door key into the lock.

Inside the darkened hallway, a ray of autumn sunlight shone through the blue, red and yellow arched stained-glass door panels onto the rustic brown and white diamond shaped floor tiles through to the kitchen at the back of the house. A couple of small paintings with unassuming scenes of the English countryside hung randomly on both walls left and right and along the stairs. Above them small Japanese puzzle boxes of various sizes, resting on little dark brown wooden ledges, sporadically decorated the remaining free space.

George placed his broly in the mahogany hat and coat stand that had previously resided in his office. Next to it stood the similar stand with a gentlemen's broly and a woman's umbrella resting upright in the umbrella well, his parents, who died more than twenty-five years previous.

He hung his dark tweed overcoat with care on his own stand then headed for his comfort zone.

Darker than the hallway, the front sitting room curtains were always drawn. A world of difference to the editorial office, the air here greeted him with the soft sweet smell of wood with a hint of Pledge furniture polish. 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.

In the opposite corner next to the dated cream dark brown tiled fireplace, he poured a Drambuie from a small drinks cabinet, and sat down in a comfortable dark leather armchair. Many years ago it was turned towards the fireplace and governed by his father. It now faced out into the room, the most ideal position for concentration, and where he had the best view. After taking a sip he placed the whiskey glass to one side and let his eyes fall on to a

small box that lay on the rosewood side table next to the armchair. Unlike the small hand sized boxes in the hallway, this was twice as large.

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

At eyelevel he studied it closely. From the moment he left his house this morning to go to his office, this box was the only thing that had occupied his mind. Benton's telephone call had made him forget about it for a short moment, but now, feeling refreshed and energised, he came back to it. The person from whom he had purchased it maintained it was made for a large doll's house and represented a cabinet for one of the rooms. 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 in the middle and pressed. A small drawer opened; empty. This he had already done a number of times before, but knew there had to be more to it. Many of the lines were just that, lines. But he had his doubts. He turned the box over and took a better look in the open drawer.

George had an idea.

He placed his fingers in the open drawer slot, then moved his hand from left to right, there was nothing. Feeling slightly defeated yet still hopeful, he gently shoved his hand in deeper, then felt something, a lever.

This was new.

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

It was impossible to see if it contained anything because the first open drawer blocked the view. When he attempted to close the top drawer, the bottom drawer began to close in unison. George stopped to concentrate. He tried to pull the bottom draw out completely, it was not possible. He pushed the bottom drawer back in, and it clicked into place. Once again he inserted his fingers into the slot, pushed the lever, and the bottom drawer sprung out a second time. 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. What was the solution, he thought.

The only sound in the room was the faint ticking of the early thirties mantelpiece clock on top of the fireplace. George shifted in his armchair, then sat upright, alert. He turned the box around whereby the drawers faced outward, and ran his fingers over the smooth wood on each side. Unnoticed before, he felt two points on each side. Both slightly protruding, like the smoothest bump, no more than a half a millimetre, and hardly detectable. Shoddy workmanship or water damage affecting the wood to expand ever so slightly could be the cause, but George knew better. A box so expertly crafted as this could have no flaws whatsoever. Water damage could not work so precisely on either side and nowhere else. There had to be more.

He had a thought.

He turned the box around, placed each index finger over the bumps and pressed hard. Pressing on the top drawer with both thumbs, it slid in with a gentle glide. The bottom drawer finally remained open. Finally, success.

To his surprise it held a small parchment. He smiled briefly, then cautiously took it out. It was covered with small Chinese characters. He tilted it towards the dim light emitting from the forty Watt bulb behind the faded lampshade in the ceiling, and studied it. Minutes later, George reached for the old telephone next to him and punched in a number.

“Hello Benton? Yes it's me, George. I found something you might be interested in. It's a Chinese parchment, sixteenth or seventeenth century I think. You might want to have a crack unravelling.”

“Really? Where did you get it.”

“A little present from one of my boxes, and it looks authentic.”

Benton sounded excited. “That's very kind of you.”

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

“Did the work for Sunday go okay?”

“Yes, it's in.”

“Wonderful. Thank you very much George. Speak to you soon.”

George leaned back in his armchair and took another small sip of Drambuie. He acquired the box about a month ago for more money than he had bargained for. The parchment had now increased that tenfold. Every day since the purchase it had occupied his mind. The beauty of the seemingly simple box fascinated him. He could not help but wonder about its secrets. The contents were indeed interesting, but to George the mystery of the box itself

was the real prize. Rarely had he seen such an unpretentious work yet so complicated. Other than the few lines, there were no markings on the outside whatsoever. It was like a block of wood, but too beautiful and well-crafted to be *just* a block of wood. Made of sandalwood, it had a beautiful dark red-brown colour with no lacquer, ebony, elaborate carving or veneer to expose its origin or secrets; a rarity. Most puzzle boxes he found over his many years of collecting were heavily lacquered, or had ebony inlays or ivory set into the wood for decoration. At first he did not believe the box was Chinese until he found a small and faint Chinese symbol in the wood on the underside. He thought it was from something banging against it, since it looked like a dent or small scratch. After close inspection under a strong light and magnifying glass he realised it was a symbol from the Song dynasty in the eleventh century. The parchment had been hidden 400 years later. Everything about the puzzle box was a mystery, which made it all the more interesting. Boxes like these, did not really exist before the nineteenth-century. Was the parchment original? What did it mean? Benton should be able to decipher the ancient symbols, it was after all, amongst other talents, his hobby. Then the puzzle would be partially solved. He was not too sure he could ever get to the bottom of it, time had buried many secrets here. Selling it on could be very beneficiary especially now anything old and Chinese had gone through the roof. It could even secure him a very nice pension for the next thirty years. But would he sell it? Never.

Feeling relieved and proud of his little conquest, he took another sip and looked up at the walls of his small living room. Chinese and Japanese puzzles and boxes in all shapes and sizes rested on their individual handmade shelves, filling just about every nook and cranny. Only a small fraction of his collection, he began when he was about ten years of age. His uncle, who worked with the Americans after the surrender of the Japanese after World War II, gave it to him as a gift when he realised his passion for puzzles as a young boy. The collection grew until it filled every inch of his bedroom before his father allowed him to extend it into the garage in his late teens. There he began to construct his own little puzzles and intricate boxes and the wooden shelves they stood on. After his parents died he gradually filled every room in the house. Each with its own private collection, depending on where it came from, level of difficulty, and the beauty of it. It was also the reason why he never married. Any girl of interest back in his youthful years never shared his fascination. Only his parents were his true fans, but they were long dead. These days he isolated himself

from all but one or two friends like Benton who seemed to understand his mind and accept his own peculiar interests.

## Chapter 2

Tuesday, October 17. 1:30 AM

No better time to work. At least few people would notice him as he made his way through the dark streets on foot. The ones who did see him were wary of meeting others on the quiet streets. Muggers and sex crazed maniacs seemed to rule this area of Belgrade after dark. He could have been one, it was a very thin line to cross, but his work had its own rewards, cash, and enough of it.

He crossed the street, casually, not drawing attention to himself in his dark grey and black clothing. Hood up, underneath a baseball cap, he looked like a regular teenager of the era. Hitting thirty, he had the walk and the motions of a youth, but that was where it ended. The tracksuit had no identifiable stripes or logo markings. His black trainers were also not identifiable, a thick black marker had taken care of that.

It was not exactly cold, the temperature was around 14°C. The fine polyurethane gloves he wore were not because of the weather.

Coming up to the traffic lights he did not wait for the little green man to appear. The only cars around were stopped at other lights further up.

Just another two blocks, a ten minute walk, and he would be there. In the distance he heard the wrinkle of a bottle rolling on concrete. Two legs stuck out from a doorway. A drunk. Since the end of the Civil War many old soldiers had traded their guns for drink, just like his father. Sad, but what else was there to live for. Anyone over fifty had a hard time getting work. Unemployment benefits were near non-existent. Instead of a weekly pound of potatoes and some meat many used the allowance to buy Rakia to forget the misery. Alcoholism had never been so bad, and he didn't help prevent it either.

Now a block closer he saw the tall dark industrial building that housed the largest printing press in the country. Memories immediately came to mind from when he worked there during the summer holidays. His father, who always said he worked for the president but never explained exactly what, got him the job of cleaning the thick grind of oil and ink off the machines, and other menial cleaning jobs.

None of the higher managers ever spoke to him, but always greeted him with a polite smile and nod when they passed him on the work floor. He never realised why none of his fellow workers, especially his age, got the same treatment, now he did.

Little had changed in and around the building for the last hundred years, so he suspected few of the habits on the factory floor would have changed since he worked there fourteen years ago. The old bent and rusted wire fence that surrounded the building had been replaced with one sturdier, but that could never stop him getting into the grounds. His best way into the building itself would be through the emergency exit door on the left. Normally it could not be opened from the outside. The smokers had long fixed that problem. The locking mechanism had been adjusted so they could go out for a smoke break and not worry about being locked out.

In the distance a police car appeared up the street. It was not the moment to be stopped and asked for ID papers or worse still, searched. He ducked into a darkened doorway and waited for them to pass.

A couple hundred yards later he stood at the fence and looked around for any sign of movement. Nothing. Usually the only sound normally heard at this time of night was from the printing press inside. There was silence. Another look around to check for anyone watching, he was alone. He opened his hand and a steel cutters concealed up his sleeve slid down. He gripped the end with both hands and began to cut through the wire. Two minutes later he stood next to the smokers door and gently opened it a couple of centimetres.

In an hour there would be a coffee break and some of the workers would come out to get their nicotine fix. But why was everything quiet? He peered in and immediately saw the problem. The printing press had broken down. Workers in their oil and ink stained blue overalls had a side panel off and were replacing a broken gear. All he had to do was wait, then he could carry out his orders.

An hour later the large Heidelberg rotary printing press started up. The repair mechanic stood on top of the inspection gantry that overlooked the long line of large, noisy printing presses. He rested on the steel safety barrier and scrutinised the role of paper being fed into the machine. As the noise built up he put on his yellow ear protection headphones. The machine would have to be taken apart at the end of the week for major maintenance, but right now, getting it to work eighty percent of the time seemed to keep the foreman happy.

Of course, complaints would come in from clueless managers, usually interims, about the extra hours needed to carry out the maintenance. This sort of on-the-go repairs cost a lot more in the long run, unfortunately none of the suits were employed long enough to realise that.

The platform gave him the bird's eye view which enabled him to spot obvious problems with the paper feed. He leaned over the barrier to inspect the second machine in front of him. With concentration fixed he never heard or noticed the person in the dark blue overalls come up the ladder, and take up position behind him.

The spray of blood that hit the paper on the giant rollers swiftly carried on down the printing press line. At the far end, and out of sight, his colleague was surprised at the sudden red streak running through it, which began to spread over the entire role like the unfolding of a red silk shawl. He hit the emergency stop.

Bojan Nikolic sat in his small two-room apartment in Belgrade watching television. It was three thirty in the afternoon and after a few hours sleep he was drinking his fathers home-made Rakia. At least ten bottles he bought from him each week, which contributed to his father's meagre state pension, and sold most of them on to friends for a little profit. Not that he really needed the money, he did it more to help his father then anything else. When he arrived back at his apartment in the early morning, before dawn, he took a shower and dumped the overalls in the small open fire in the living room.

BZZZZZZZ – the door buzzer went. He hated the sound of that buzzer. Every time it buzzed it jolted a few nerves, and every time he thought he would change it, but never got around to it. He put the glass of Rakia to one side, went to the door and peered through the spy hole. A familiar smiling face greeted him, and held up an envelope with payment for the nights work. Bojan turned the extra security locks on the door, and opened it wide. The smile and envelope had disappeared. He looked down to see a gun with a silencer. His friend moved forward. Bojan backed into the room and three bullets were fired.

## Chapter 3

Wednesday, October 18. 10:15 AM

People could set their clocks on George's trips to the office. At exactly the same time every week he appeared, for some, it seemed out of nowhere. Across the large editorial floor he strolled without so much as a gesture or a nod to any of the staff, and disappeared into his tiny office. Matilda, as usual, removed the box from the locked drawer and brought it to him.

Sitting at his desk he carefully began to go through the envelopes and emails, one by one he checked the answers. Of course there were the regulars, he recognised their handwriting immediately. But just because they were regulars it did not mean they always got it right. There were also those who for ever complained it was far too complicated, and requested the crossword be more accessible. He also had small group of fans who would write personal letters to the "*puzzle maker*", as they called him. Some wanted to meet him and get to know the person behind the famous cryptic puzzles. A few even requested a picture. He ignored them all.

George sifted through the completed puzzles. Some were ninety-nine percent right, but incorrect spelling, or a letter crossed out and superimposed by another, making it nearly illegible, would be their downfall

"Tipp-Ex," he mumbled, "use Tipp-Ex."

Some, of course, would fill in nonsense answers. But hopefully, somewhere amongst the pile he would find a winner. This week gave little hope, his insert for Benton last week would bring the best to their knees. But as usual, he always had a backup.

The telephone rang. George picked it up.

"Good afternoon George. How are you?"

"Ahh Benton, my old friend. Very well thank you. Just sorting out last week's winners. I think the extra insertion last week caught most out. But not to worry, if nobody can solve it then we'll just have to dig up Mr Smith, won't we?"

“Yes, you always had one to pull out of the bag, didn’t you. And talking of pulling something out of the bag, would it be possible to add another insertion this week?’

“Yes, of course. For Queen and country, as always.”

“Wonderful, here is what I have.”

George wrote down the couple of words and stared at them for a second. One was six letters the other eight.

“In the usual place?’

“Yes, please. I hope it’s possible.”

“No problem at all. They will be in the Sunday edition as usual.”

“Thank you George, much appreciated. By the way, I’ve got an opening. How about dinner next Friday evening.”

“That would be wonderful.”

“About seven?’

“That would suit me just fine.”

George reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out a small dark brown leather bound diary, and wrote down the time and date.

“I’ve got that. Thank you very much, and I’ll see you then. Cheerio.”