

LETTERS FROM THE ATTIC

Real life inspiration behind the Jack Rogan Mysteries series

Gabriel Farago

Second Edition

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Winston and the fire warden

To have your case adjourned on Monday morning after having worked through the entire weekend with little or no sleep, is every barrister's nightmare. Sadly, that was exactly what happened to me on this occasion. I was staring down the barrel of a week without work. Bugger! Disappointed, I walked back to my chambers.

When I opened the door to my room, I noticed that the small portable TV that I kept on top of my drinks cabinet to watch the cricket was on. That's strange, I thought, walking over to the cabinet to turn off the TV. Before I could reach for the switch, I heard a strange growl. Looking over my shoulder, I saw a small dog, eyes bulging with disapproval, staring at me. At first I didn't trust my eyes, but when I turned around to face the strange visitor, there was no denying it: there was a dog sitting on my Chesterfield, watching television. Quite small, but feisty with a head that was a little too big, tiny ears, and a squashed nose that suggested that he liked to chase parked cars, he was snorting and making other obviously hostile noises. When I tried to reach for the switch again to turn off the TV, the growl became louder, and the hairs on his back began to bristle. Realising that confrontation wasn't an option, I began to slowly back away towards the door.

Tom-Tom was busy as usual. She excelled at multitasking. I waited until she came up for air after answering several calls at the same time, before stating my case.

'There's a dog in my room watching television,' I said calmly. Tom-Tom stared at me, just as the dog had done moments before.

'What are you doing here?' she asked. 'You're supposed to be in court!'

'I wish I was; adjournment.'

'Shit! Come with me and not a word to anyone.' With that, Tom-Tom got up, and hurried down the corridor towards my room. 'Cyril's wife came in half an hour ago with that wretched dog, Winston. She was on her way to the dentist and wanted to leave Winston with Cyril for an hour. He's in court, so she left him with me!'

'And you parked him in my room and turned on the TV to entertain him. Is that it?' I said.

Tom-Tom looked at me sheepishly and shrugged. 'He likes television. You've got to keep him in there until she gets back.'

'You're kidding!'

'Name your price.'

'I should be in court running a case; instead, I'm back in my room doggy-sitting?'

‘What’s that?’ said Tom-Tom, pointing to the open door of my room. ‘You left your door open? Jesus!’

Winston was gone.

Tom-Tom was becoming hysterical. ‘You let him out!’ she shouted.

‘Calm down; he couldn’t have gone far. Let’s find him. You go that way, I’ll try the other side.’

A barrister’s floor on Monday morning is pandemonium. The reception area was full of instructing solicitors and their anxious clients – standing room only – and the floor clerk was trying to answer a dozen questions at the same time. Thankfully, the dog wasn’t there. Relieved, I hurried past. As I turned the corner, I just caught a glimpse of a curly tail disappearing into one of the rooms to my left.

Looking frantic, Tom-Tom came running towards me from the opposite direction. ‘Have you seen him?’ she asked.

‘He’s just gone into Clive’s room,’ I said, pointing to an open door. Coming closer, we could hear voices.

‘My God. Lady Ashburton is in there with her solicitor; important conference. Do something!’

‘What exactly did you have in mind?’

‘You’re the barrister; improvise!’

‘It’s not my dog.’

‘It’s our problem.’

‘Oh no. It’s your problem.’

‘You owe me.’

That was true. Tom-Tom surely knew when to call in favours. I went down on one knee, pretending to tie my shoelaces and, keeping my head down, I peered around the corner through the open door into the room. What I saw wasn’t encouraging.

Lady Ashburton sat on a chair facing Clive’s desk with her back turned towards me. Her solicitor sat next to her. Clive sat behind his desk, facing the door. Thankfully, he was reading something and didn’t look in my direction. The really disturbing bit, however, was lurking under Lady Ashburton’s chair directly in front of me.

‘Can you see him?’ whispered Tom-Tom anxiously.

‘I can, but it’s not looking good,’ I said, standing up.

‘What’s he doing?’

‘He’s chewing the strap of Lady Ashburton’s handbag.’

‘Oh my God! No one noticed?’

‘No. Not yet.’

‘What are we going to do?’

‘I have an idea; come.’

I mainly said that to comfort Tom-Tom. However, something had crossed my mind, but I needed a little more time to work out the details. It was a daring plan.

‘You’re the fire warden-right?’ I asked.

‘I am,’ said Tom-Tom.

‘Get your helmet and a blanket. I’ll give Clive a call. We’ll meet in my room. Hurry!’

I picked up the phone and called Clive. ‘It’s Gabriel, Clive. Don’t hang up!’ I said. ‘I know you’re in conference, but this is urgent; trust me. We have a crisis ...’ I explained the situation to Clive the best I could. To his credit, he didn’t panic, nor did he lose his cool. After all, barristers are supposed to be able to deal with pressure, and Clive rose to the occasion.

‘Can you see him?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he mumbled, ‘it’s just as you said.’

‘Still chewing?’

‘Yes, I think so. He looks happy.’

‘Good. Now, listen carefully, this is what we are going to do ...’

‘So far so good,’ I said to Tom-Tom as she burst into my room with a blanket and fire helmet under her arm. ‘Put your helmet on and come with me. I’ve just spoken to Clive; he knows.’

‘What are we going to do?’

‘Improvise. We’ll pretend the fire alarm’s gone off somewhere in the building, and we have to assemble at the lifts as a precaution. I’ll distract Lady Ashburton and the solicitor and usher them out of the room with Clive, and you throw the blanket over the dog and subdue the beast; easy.’

‘You’re out of your mind!’

‘You have a better idea? Let’s hear it.’

‘Clive’s in on this?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Here goes my job!’

‘Bullshit! Just think of it as a fire drill; piece of cake.’

‘How can you joke at a time like this?’

‘Let’s go.’

Tom-Tom's red cashmere jumper certainly looked the part, but the fire helmet, which was several sizes too big, gave her an almost comical look. The stilettos are a bit of a worry, I thought watching Tom-Tom strut down the corridor like a starlet in some crazy Broadway show.

'Here we go,' I said, taking a deep breath, 'let the show begin.' With that, we burst into Clive's room.

'Sorry to interrupt,' I said, 'we have an emergency!'

'Fire alarm,' said Tom-Tom, bending down looking for Winston.

'We must leave the room at once,' I said, pulling Lady Ashburton out of the chair. She was a frail creature in her late seventies, and I almost lifted her off her feet.

'How exciting,' said Lady Ashburton, holding on to my arm.

Lady Ashburton's solicitor, an elderly, reserved man I had met before, just looked at us in amazement, but didn't move.

'Clive, take Mr Barlow to the lifts; we may have to evacuate. Quickly!'

I was almost at the door with Lady Ashburton in tow, when I heard it; a muffled growl. Looking over my shoulder I saw Tom-Tom kneeling on the floor. She had thrown the blanket over Winston and was trying to pull the strap of Lady Ashburton's handbag out of his locked jaws. Not surprisingly, Winston refused to co-operate and put up a fight.

'What's that?' said Barlow, pointing to Tom-Tom who was trying to subdue Winston as he struggled like crazy under the blanket.

'A firebug? She's the fire warden,' said Clive calmly. 'Let's get out of here.'

I thought we had almost made it, when Lady Ashburton stopped in her tracks and began to panic. 'My handbag; where's my handbag?' she shouted. 'I don't go anywhere without my handbag!'

'Don't you worry, I'll go back and get it,' said Clive. He winked at me, turned on his heels, and saved the day.

'He's such a lovely young man,' said Lady Ashburton, linking arms with me. 'Do you think the firemen are on their way?'

Moments later, Tom-Tom appeared. Breathless and a little worse for wear, but otherwise in control, she declared the emergency over. When she turned around, I noticed a long tear on the right sleeve of her jumper. 'False alarm,' she said, patting Lady Ashburton reassuringly on the arm.

'No firemen?' said Lady Ashburton, obviously disappointed.

'I'm afraid not.'

‘What a pity.’

‘Where is he?’ I asked, taking Tom-Tom aside.

‘Your mate Winston?’ she said, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

‘He’s not my mate.’

‘Back in your room, of course, watching television. Silly question.’

Barristers are supposed to be in the business of making speeches. However, one of the most difficult speeches I remember having to make was a eulogy a few years later.

After a short but devastating illness, Tom-Tom passed away, and her partner asked me to give the eulogy. Instead of following the traditional path, I decided to tell the story of Winston and the fire warden, because it allowed me to talk about Tom-Tom the way I remembered her: intelligent, vivacious, generous to a fault, and with a sense of humour that never deserted her. As tears of sadness were banished by laughter and the funeral turned into a celebration of her short, but brilliant life, I knew that I had chosen the right path.

A good barrister never asks a question without knowing the answer. Being a good writer is all about choices. I’ve struggled for years to reconcile the two.

**** End of Chapter Excerpt ****

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