

Engelian Adventures: Transformations

Book 2: Transitions

Chapter 7

by

Phillip Berrie

A Story (Vers 1.0); © Phillip Berrie, 2010.

Check www.phillberrie.com.au/Fiction for other episodes and other tales.

Chapter 7

A newspaper is a great resource for a world-hopping wizard. And it is not necessarily the endeavours of the journalists that convey the most information to someone needing to find out about a place. Their articles deal with the usual things like politics, sport and the law, the substance of which varies little with only the names changing between incidents. It is the photographs, advertisements and the personal columns that reveal the current trends, fashions and acceptable practices permitted by the readership of the paper, which is just the sort of thing I needed to know if I wanted to blend with them.

I was half way through the classified ads of a recent copy of the Nassau Guardian when Jonathan came out of the other room. He was speaking earnestly to one of the devices he'd been carrying in his jacket pocket and I realised then and there that my ignorance about modern technology would have to be addressed sooner rather than later.

"Yes boss, trussed up like a chicken, but I doubt he'll still be that way by the time any one gets there," he said and started up the electric typewriter.

"Not my department," he said giving me a smile. "I fly the airplanes remember and besides I couldn't have, even if I'd wanted to. There was a witness."

"Ahh ... Yeah ... Okay, I'll see you shortly then. I'm at the airfield, so about an hour. Lunch? That would be great. See you then."

He closed the device and put it in his jacket pocket and then started doing something I couldn't see with the machine in front of him. This did not hold his complete attention though for he spoke as he worked.

"Sorry babe, I know I said I was free, but — 'fraid I gotta go talk with my boss about Bobby and what happened. I'll drop you home first, okay?"

Recent events were catching up with Jonathan and I realised I could lose him to his responsibilities if I was not careful. I got up and approached him considering my options. This would be the perfect opportunity for me to be rid of him, but then again, I was unlikely to find anyone else so aptly suited for getting me out of the Bahamas.

"Babe, I could really do with some coffee now. And I promise I won't molest you this time," he said, eyes on the television set in front of him.

His criminal connections could be invaluable. I would need identification papers and a passport to get to Nepal. This decided me. His plans to the contrary, he would take me along to visit his boss.

The electric kettle had been clever enough to turn itself off the last time it had boiled so it was simply a matter of depressing the obvious button to start it heating again. Then I turned to look at what Jonathan was working at.

A vivid picture of a scantily clad woman was displayed on the picture tube, but this was not television. Smaller, simpler pictures overlay the image and Jonathan — by means of one of the smaller devices I had puzzled over earlier — made a rectangle containing lines of text appear.

He manipulated the contents of the rectangle with an arrowhead that he directed with the device in his right hand and all of a sudden another large rectangle full of text appeared.

The text at the beginning of this new document, although it contained elements of English, didn't make much sense to me but then there was what appeared to be a message to Jonathan from someone who, from their familiarity of speech, was probably a relative. I read enough to realise that this was a private family matter and not to do with me and then turned away to make the coffee.

While I discovered that both coffee and sugar came in small sachets these days and that Jonathan mustn't take milk because there was none in evidence, I considered the technology that I had just seen displayed.

This was some form of electric mail being accessed on what must be one of the PCs I'd seen advertised in the paper. I still did not know what the acronym stood for, but I had seen several adverts for different brands of the device so it must be a very common term.

And I could understand why. Who would want to wait for the postal service to deliver a message by hand when it could be sent electrically? Though, when I thought about it, I realised it was an obvious extension of the use of radio. Television, wireless phones, why not electric mail.

"How many sugars?" I asked holding up one of the small packets for Jonathan to see.

"Two babe. I like my coffee sweet — just like my women."

I turned back to the kettle to hide my grimace and jumped when he patted me on the bottom.

Resisting the temptation to slap him, I poured hot water into the cleanest mug I could find and after searching briefly for a teaspoon took a wooden ice cream stick from a jar containing a number of similar sticks and stirred his coffee with it. I knew so little of this modern world. So, despite his over-familiarity, I needed to maintain my control of Mister Jonathan Anderson, if only just as a guide.

I placed his cup on the bench next to him and then with gentle fingers turned his face toward me, as would a lover seeking a kiss. When we made eye contact I used my mesmerising power on him again. "Jonathan, you will take me to see your boss, I am a witness and in danger from Bobby. I need to be protected. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good." I turned him back to his machine. "Now, tell what it is you are doing. I would like to learn about this PC of yours."

A short time later we left Jonathan's business premises and walked over to the main administration building. I was wearing hat and dark glasses again and he was carrying what little luggage we possessed.

Jonathan was apparently well known by the staff and bantered with several including the official who checked us off the airport grounds. I was a little concerned about this, but needn't have worried. The man simply referred to information displayed on his own PC and let us through.

Presumably there were no identity checks on purely domestic travel and Jonathan had gone to the trouble of verbally logging a flight plan on the radio before we had left Andros Island.

With a sudden epiphany I realised the power of the personal computer as Jonathan had told me such devices were called. These descendants of the room-sized computers of the sixties were vastly more capable than the punched card driven calculating engines I had scorned back then. But their increased capability was only the half of it. They were all connected by this e-mail to create something that Jonathan had called 'the web'. Not only would correspondence be so much easier, but surely all sorts of information would be far more accessible. Whole libraries could be available from one's desk. Overseas business transactions could take place in minutes rather than days. Official records of any sort could be available to any bureaucrat at the touch of a button.

Jonathan took my hand and urged me along saying something about blocking traffic; I'd stopped in the middle of a walkway staggered by the implications of the ubiquity of such information access. Then I stumbled after him wondering if I could really achieve what I was trying to do.

In truth, my only hope was that this web was not complete, that there were still holes where someone, such as myself who did not belong, could hide and avoid being noticed by the establishment. Otherwise it would not be long before I became trapped by it like some poor insect.

In the public area of the main building Jonathan headed straight for the small cafeteria. Still occupied by my thoughts, I followed automatically and had a hot dog complete with the insipid mustard that the Americans

like thrust into my hands. Jonathan ate his with gusto and it was then that I remembered that he hadn't had breakfast. I did not feel hungry and gave him mine, which he gratefully accepted. I did sip some of the coffee from the cardboard cup that he gave me, but found it too bitter and left it on the table.

We soon left the building and entered the car park. Jonathan's car was a futuristic-looking two seater, which he unlocked with a gadget on the set of keys he'd collected off a peg on the wall of his office. More electric wizardry. And for such a mundane purpose. I would have to be extremely wary about not letting my ignorance show.

I was still somewhat distracted by my revelation at this point and it wasn't till he started the engine and turned on some most disagreeable music that I was brought back to the matter at hand. If anyone could help me negotiate this new world of information it would be the criminal fraternity. Surely, if they still existed, then it must be possible to escape the notice of the information overlords. I gritted my teeth with some hope as we pulled out of the car park and headed towards the high-rise buildings of Nassau, with the radio blaring much too loudly.

Fortunately the trip was a short one, so I did not have to suffer for too long. Some of the melodies and rhythms in his music were actually not that atrocious and there were musical instruments being played that I'd never heard the like of before. I just wished the musicians hadn't sung along. The vocals were all either: too loud, too fast or too garbled for me to understand and that just ruined the rest of the piece for me.

Jonathan's apartment was quite well appointed. It was on one of the upper floors of the building and looked out over a magnificent beach. Apparently crime did pay, at least in the Bahamas. He changed yet again into clothes that were more expensive looking than the old casual set he had put on at the airport. Then there was a difficult moment when Jonathan suddenly realised that, not only was I wearing his clothes, but I apparently didn't have any of my own here for me to change into.

My not having any clothes was apparently harder to understand than my wearing his, so I reconditioned him on the spot so to believe that I was a resident of Andros Island and that we'd left the island in such a hurry that I hadn't been able to collect any of my own things. Obviously, this would have to be remedied in the near future with a shopping trip, but first we had a luncheon date with his boss, Loomis.

In short order we were back in his car and after another blessedly short, music-accompanied trip we arrived at a walled estate a little way down the coast. Jonathan spoke to a grill at the gate and a minute later we were pulling up on the gravel drive outside of a large, salubrious hacienda.

We were met at the door by a serious-looking individual who Jonathan introduced as, Bob. The man eyed me with suspicion and it was only after Jonathan explained that I had saved his life and that I was 'okay' that he let us into the entrance hall. But his job wasn't over for he relieved Jonathan of his firearm and then searched us both in a professional manner. Fortunately, he didn't think to investigate the hard lumps of Jonathan's bullets in my pocket — no doubt thinking them something other than what they were.

When he was sure we posed no threat, he gestured for us to precede him and directed us through the house to a large courtyard dominated by an in-ground swimming pool where we met the master of the house.

It was the large mahogany desk set up under the canvas awning at one end of the courtyard that told me that Jonathan's boss, Loomis, was more a business man than a common criminal. Loomis himself was a small petite man with a mane of silver hair dressed in a black business suit. Standing behind his seat was a giant, bald-headed, black man dressed in white slacks and a tight fitting, t-shirt of the same colour. When he saw us Loomis got to his feet and came towards us flanked by his bodyguard.

"Johnny! Johnny, I am so glad to see you," he said taking Jonathan into his embrace. Jonathan returned the hug for several seconds before Loomis broke free. "It's terrible about Nicky and Tom. And to think that, Bobby ... Why?"

Jonathan just shrugged and all three of them, bodyguard included, looked awkward for a moment. I on the other hand was fairly sure the thousand dollars in my pocket was part of the answer.

Loomis was the first to recover. "Sit down Johnny," he said directing Jonathan to a chair next to the desk. "I'm sorry. I made a bad mistake underestimating Dickson and we have to talk about what to do." He then turned his gaze to me. "And this would be?"

"My rescuer and the witness I told you about," explained Jonathan who then turned his eyes to me as well. "Go on babe — let Mister Loomis see you in all your glory."

I had already resigned myself to this, but was somewhat taken aback by Jonathan's obvious pride in my features. Loomis and the giant, looked at each other and then gave me their undivided attention.

I took off the hat first and gave it to Jonathan and then slowly took off my glasses. "Hello, my name's ... Tina," I said trying for timidity.

"My dear young lady. You look ... amazing," said Loomis regaining his manners after a few seconds. "You must forgive me, but you look so much like one of those elves from that movie." He turned to the giant, "Doesn't she, Justin?"

Justin looked down at me with eyes that showed more intelligence than I'd expected, but he said nothing and simply nodded. I had no idea what they were talking about and so also said nothing.

Loomis broke the silence by stepping closer and asking, "Excuse me, my dear. But may I have a closer look?" I nodded uncertainly and he carefully ran a fingertip over the tip of my left ear and then moved from side to side looking intently at my eyes. "Plastic surgery?"

Smiling at the solution he offered me I nodded enthusiastically. "It's rather good, isn't it?"

"On you, it looks spectacular, my dear," he said, beaming at me as if I was his own creation.

He then directed me to sit down next to Jonathan and dragged a chair into position for himself so that we were sitting knee to knee. The giant stood watching over us all with a distrustful look in his eye.

"Now what's this about Tina saving your life?"

"Bobby killed Nicky and Tom and took me by surprise. He would have killed me too if Tina hadn't stopped him," said Jonathan taking my hand.

I extracted my hand from Jonathan's grip and then, noticing that Loomis had seen this action, quickly gestured with both my hands and exclaimed excitedly, "I keep telling you. It was nothing! You were fighting and I just hit him with the heaviest thing I could find."

After miming the clubbing of someone with an imaginary weapon I returned my hands to my lap and made a mental note to order Jonathan to keep his hands off me.

"Well Tina," said Loomis. "It seems I am indebted to you for saving the life of one of my men. I will have to see if I can reward you in some way."

He then spoke to someone behind me. "Robert, there will be one extra for lunch. However, before you head to the kitchen could you please show Miss ..." and to my horror he looked to me expecting me to complete his sentence.

"Smith," I said somewhat lamely and saw Jonathan stir. In an attempt to prevent him wondering why he hadn't known my family name I reached out and took his hand. This distracted him and made him smile.

"Miss Smith," continued Loomis without comment, "to the guest wing so that she can dress for dinner." He then rose and held out his hand to help me to my feet. "Run along dear. Johnny and I need to talk business

and once you have freshened up we can all have one of Robert's lovely lunches."

I would have rather stayed and found out more about Loomis' operation, but that was impossible considering the role I had fallen into through circumstances. I got up and smiled politely at Loomis and then followed the multi-talented Robert around the pool towards a suite of rooms at the far end of the courtyard.

Enjoying the Story?

**For more, and other stuff, visit
www.phillberrie.com.au/Fiction**