

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Cleary read law at University. After a brief foray into advertising, he decided to return to the law and qualified as a solicitor, later becoming a District Judge. He is now a Circuit Judge, sitting on the Midland Circuit and lives with his wife and son in Warwickshire.

NOBODY COMES

Anthony Cleary

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INTRODUCTION

“There are no constraints of the human mind, no walls around the human spirit, no barriers to our progress, save those we ourselves erect.”

Ronald Reagan, *State of the Union address*, 06 February 1985

Having been conceived, I guess, around about VE Day, I was born into the ‘Baby Boomer’ generation. No doubt many others born in the mid 1940s will remember, as I do, when the Berlin Wall went up. I was staying with a young friend with whom I had shared many long hot summer holidays idling our time around his orchard, clucking at his hens and riding our bikes between the geese, laughing as our bells and their honks shouldered out the insect-humming air.

I was a carefree youngster and understood nothing of the significance of the black-and-white images flashing across his father’s television. But I recall the deep sense of sadness that fell over the house that morning, as the partition of Europe took on a more sinister shade.

As my generation grew up in selfish introspection, Bill Haley shocked and excited our parents, while we grew our hair to unheard-of lengths, flirted with LSD, and swung

our way in, through and out of the Sixties. We had only seen peace, and our families had apparently never had it so good. There might have been occasional interruptions to our feel-good factor – the Cuba missile crisis, devaluation, a winter of discontent, the three-day week – but on the whole, we became accustomed to and rather liked the Gospel According to Mrs Thatcher, market forces, and the ability of the strongest to grab as much capital as possible, believing the wisdom that wealth would trickle down to those below us from our own profligacy.

While our American cousins appeared to be apprehensive of Russian hegemony, we were more curious than scared, and we rather liked the intrigue of the Third Man and then Smiley, as the dastardly secret services of the Communist bloc conspired to overthrow the Western imperialists.

Gradually, in the last quarter of the 20th century, we began to realise that we owed more to life and each other than simply dancing the night away on our little island. Television became an information tool as well as a source of entertainment. Michael Buerk took us to the Horn of Africa and appalled us with scenes of dying children. Bob Geldof channelled our dancing into giving. We learned the meaning of the Third World.

However, we still had no concept of how our neighbours in Europe were living. Millions of people behind the Iron Curtain looked westward, imagining wealth and security and, above all, freedom from totalitarian regimes which ruled them with an iron heel. We chose, however, not to look eastward too carefully, for there was no benefit in it. The Russians, the Warsaw Pact, the East Germans were all

objects of at best, intrigue and at worst, fear. Anecdotal evidence persuaded us that protection was needed against our Eastern neighbours, and both television and cinema fiction revealed just how uncomfortable it was to live within those regimes.

When cracks appeared in the edifice, we joined in the general rejoicing – first Poland, and then East Germany, and, of all places, the mighty USSR, revealed an inability to control the groundswell of a popular determination to break out, westward, if not in body, certainly in mind.

And then, a sea change. The closed, even sinister, world surrounding the line of Russian Presidents whom I could remember either from recent history books or from my own lifetime, Lenin, Stalin, Bulganin, Khrushchev, suddenly lurched towards tolerance and reason. President Gorbachev, a man with whom Margaret Thatcher famously proclaimed she could ‘do business’ took centre stage in Russia. Overnight, and with little apparent opposition from the Kremlin, outlying states of the Soviet Union sought to wriggle free from the Communist yoke. Suddenly, we could not simply look over the Berlin Wall, we could look through it, as students and young people swarmed over it, breaking it down.

The power of television not only recorded but appeared to provoke change throughout the continent. And inevitably, the dissatisfaction of the life endured for so long by the people of Romania welled up; mass meetings developed into revolution, and revolution into assassination. A particularly nasty brand of dictatorship was brought to an end.

But what was left was a damaged country rife with

corruption and with a stagnant economy. And there was more. There were tens of thousands of children, Ceaușescu's children as they became known, who were living in utter squalor.

ONE

“There are things known and things unknown
And in between are the doors.”

William Blake, *The Marriage of Howard Hall*, 1757–1827

The Ilyushin seemed to be gliding rather than under power. I looked out of the window as we dropped, silently, towards the ground. Everything seemed to be grey – the high cloud cover, the horizon, and the large, apparently barren, fields below.

We seemed to be entering an empty, even dead, world, without life and without movement. I saw no cattle, no crops, and, indeed, no activity at all. Just bare, dusty fields, with no farm machinery nor even any sign of habitation.

As we dropped lower, I saw the beginnings of a very large airfield and the first signs of life, a line of half a dozen jet aircraft with air force markings, drawn up at the edge of a runway. Their wings glinted as we passed overhead, although I could not, still, detect any sunlight. There was no sign of activity around them but, somehow, their very presence suggested a vaguely menacing alertness.

There seemed to be nothing else, even as we landed. The pilot appeared to nurse the plane down to the ground, so

gentle was the contact with the tarmac. I could see nothing out of the window other than the continuous grey runway surface and some grey trees in the distance.

The ground rumbled beneath our wheels, and we slowed, braking in a regular but slowing rhythm.

We taxied into Romania.

TWO

“Life is made up of the most differing, unforeseen, contradictory, ill assorted things; it is brutal, arbitrary, disconnected, full of inexplicable, illogical and contradictory disasters which can only be classified under the heading of ‘Other news in brief’.”

Maupassant, *Pierre et Jean*, 1887

January 1990, latitude -34 degrees south, longitude 172 degrees east, the north-western seaboard of Northland, New Zealand.

Descendants of European settlers, or *Pakeha*, frequently allow the glorious landscapes of their country to speak for themselves. Likewise, their Australian neighbours have a way of telling it how it is. If they want to give a name to a large river, for example, they choose a name which, to them, is obvious: ‘Big River’. There is a small bird found in eastern Australia with the most attractive plumage and charming song. That same bird has a habit of searching for prey on exposed mud flats, leading to its rather dull but, one supposes, factually correct name of Mud Skipper. New Zealand, where I was brought up for my first few years until my mother decamped to England, makes little effort to

attach colourful or grandiose names to objects which speak quite loudly enough for themselves. The Maori would name features of the landscape in the poetry of their tongue, giving lakes, mountains, and plains an almost mystical quality. Without a written language, their long descriptions have been translated into phonetic, Anglicised versions, which themselves seem to add mystery and rhythm. But where no Maori name existed, the early European visitors, like their Australian cousins, wasted little effort.

1990 was the year of the Commonwealth games in Auckland. I found myself on one glorious midsummer morning standing on Ninety Mile Beach, a mathematically inaccurate name (it is, in fact, closer to fifty miles long) which is quite incapable of doing any justice to the sound and sight of water meeting land in front of me. The most beautiful and unspoiled golden sand stretching as far as the eye could see on a wide, wholly uninterrupted vista, rising gently on my right to an unbroken line of cliffs, and falling away on my left, some seventy metres away, to the roaring breakers of the Tasman Sea. It seemed to go on for ever, both from behind me and ahead of me, fading into what appeared at first glance to be fog or sea mist, but which, on closer inspection, was salt spray thrown tens of metres into the sky by the waves crashing incessantly on to the sand.

And there was no one there.

I could see the occasional footprint – even a hoof print from time to time – but there was no sign of any human life, no habitation, no camper vans, tents or caravans, and no trace of the detritus or litter which reveals the presence of human beings.

Just this beautiful, powerful, warm sea.

Dressed for an early morning run, I simply ran into the waves, exhilarated. My eldest brother had been keen to inform me that the amount of water that would fill the average household fridge would weigh approximately one ton. And fridge after fridge and then more fridges cascaded onto the beach, plucked me up and threw me back each time that I dived, head first, into the breakers.

The heavy artillery shouldered its way over and under me, while the cavalry triumphantly rose and swept forward, chasing the battalions of infantry further and further up the beach, bustling and scrambling for footholds, before rushing back to regroup for the next assault.

And all the time, the noise of this tumult and the drifting salt spray hung over my senses.

Time stood still.

I lay, exhausted but invigorated at the very edge of the waterline, meeting only the advance guard scampering up the beach towards me before retreating, giggling and jostling, back to the next breaker.

As I looked through the spray up at the bright blue sky, I wondered what could get better than that? At that moment, rather selfishly, I considered that I was, after all, in the best of all possible worlds.

But, of course, moments like that could not – and indeed should not – last. And I was brought down to earth pretty rapidly that evening when I put a call through to my wife, Carmel, at home in England. She had not joined me in New Zealand because she cannot set foot in an aeroplane, but she was always very supportive of my comparatively infrequent trips back to where I consider to be my homeland, to be with my brothers and my father's family. In this call, however, it was clear, despite the poor connection, that she was unhappy.

“What's the matter?” I said. “Are you all right?”

“Not wonderful. Have you seen the reports coming out of Romania?”

“The *New Zealand Herald* isn't exactly strong on the northern hemisphere,” I replied, before biting my tongue at my insensitivity. “Well, no,” I spoke more softly, “I haven't.”

The *New Zealand Herald* was a newspaper more noted for its charm than its coverage of events on other continents – the reader was treated to a diet of local and parochial snippets. I had not seen television for days, if not weeks. One of the blessings, at least in those days in New Zealand, was the comparative concentration of the broadcast media, both radio and television, on the affairs of the local community and a limited amount of coverage of current affairs in the wider southern hemisphere. Exposure, in England, to three broadsheet newspapers, and both national and international coverage of news on three separate TV channels was a luxury I wasn't sure that I missed.

I explained that I really didn't know what it was that had upset her.

"You remember before you left that we saw that man in charge of Romania being executed with his wife?"

"Yes, sure, it was Ceaușescu and his nasty-looking spouse. It was rather brutal, but I suppose it saved the expense of a show trial."

"That's a horrid thing to say, but that's not the point."

"And the point is?"

I stopped – each time we spoke, we interrupted each other. The typical echo which one had to endure over these thousands of miles meant that we had to adopt what my ex-RNZAF father called the old 'RT' practice, Receive – Transmit, saying one's piece, and then shutting up while the other person replied. One word or even a cough transmitted over the phone would effectively block out anything being sent by the other.

After a pause, she carried on.

"There are these dreadful news flashes coming in from Romania showing thousands of children locked up in orphanages. No one seems to know how they got there, although it's been suggested that it's the fault of the government, or Ceaușescu, and they are in the most dreadful state of repair."

"Who are," I said, trying to be flippant, "the children or the orphanages?"

"You wouldn't say that if you had seen them." She sounded genuinely upset.

"I'm sorry, that was silly of me. What's going on? What have you seen?"

She told me that news teams had had access to what appeared to be orphanages in Romania and had found children in the most dreadful state of neglect, in buildings which were falling down around them.

There appeared to have been a universal cry for help for the country – to provide clothing, food, and even toys for these poor wretches, who appeared, in many instances, to be half-starved.

They were crammed together in the most unpleasant living conditions and were horribly deprived.

Already, tradespeople of every description were on their way to try and carry out repairs to the crumbling buildings in which the children were housed. Trucks with food and clothing – some in convoys, some individually from local church groups and the like – were heading east across Europe in a confused but generous attempt to do something, anything, to address the suffering in the faces of the poor waifs who were caught on camera.

“Well, the sooner you get back here, the better, because you need to see the coverage on UK television of what has been revealed in Romania. It really is quite dreadful. TV cameras have entered a number of orphanages, showing children who have been left to waste away, either through government indifference or lack of money to care for them.

“There are many people going across even now to try and help – painters, decorators, electricians, plumbers, you name it. When you come back, I want you to see what you can do.”

“Ah, yes,” I replied. “You know that I would be very happy to get stuck in, but you also know that I only have to look at a shelf and it falls down.”

My legendary DIY skills had been the butt of many family jokes over the years, and I was not entirely sure what I could do to contribute positively towards any aid endeavour which required skills of plastering, wiring, or painting. Even hammering nails might be a problem.

Nonetheless, I was perfectly happy to return home at the end of the Games and be brought to account, and Carmel seemed marginally reassured when we rang off.

What on earth, I wondered, had been discovered? I had not recalled any particular news item when I left for New Zealand, but obviously things were now being unearthed which demanded international attention. My usual disinclination to read any newspapers on holiday was replaced by a need to access as much current news as I could, and the next day, on my return to Auckland, I got hold of the main broadsheet, and a back issue of *The Times*.

Sure enough, it was reported that things looked pretty bleak and that, as Carmel had said, television crews and reporters had found their way into a number of orphanages, broadcasting footage which revealed buildings in a dreadful state, and children in worse. I knew of the revolution in Romania, which was itself not many months old, and I knew also that President Ceaușescu and his wife had been shot by firing squad. Countries within the Warsaw Pact had, for some time, been shaking off either direct Soviet rule or the governments of puppet dictators. The Iron Curtain still existed, but was itself retreating, and a new dawn, heralded in particular by the demolition of the Berlin Wall, had given all of us, particularly those who had seen the wall being built in the first place, hope for a

new Europe and a less anxious life.

Now, however, it seemed that those positive developments were being accompanied by harsh reality. Reports suggested that the poverty, let alone the instability, in countries like Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania appeared to have persuaded those countries that if family income was so meagre that a child or children could not be properly nurtured or fed, then the children should be removed to 'orphanages', notwithstanding that one or even both of the child's parents remained alive. It was taken that the state would provide a basic standard of care and certainly a better one than that which was available to the parents – and it was even imagined that there would be a time when the family's situation would improve, and the child or children could be returned.

But things had, it seemed, got out of hand. Children had been discarded and put into these establishments and simply abandoned. Such was the demand that government ability to provide adequate resources for their children – in terms not only of food, warmth, and adequate buildings, but also in terms of staffing – simply did not exist. If plans had been made, they were not followed.

To Western eyes, the situation appeared appalling and cruel, and, as Carmel had said, a wave of volunteers had already begun to sweep across Europe to see what could be done for the children. Not only were convoys of aid making their way across the continent, but medical staff, sacrificing their own leave and even in many cases, wages, were taking time off to access the orphanages to see what they could contribute toward an increasingly problematic presentation of malnutrition, developmental delay, and

disability, both mental and physical.

I was, of course, powerless in New Zealand, but it was not long before I had returned to England, when Carmel gave me more examples of the horrors which had been unearthed during my absence. From what she said, it seemed that our television screens were full of more revelations every day.

Then, only days after I had returned, breakfast television included an interview with a young student doctor who had himself only recently returned from Romania. Carmel and I were riveted by what he had to say. He had been assigned to one of the orphanages and had first-hand knowledge of the conditions in which the children were existing. And there was worse.

“The aid, the comforts, large and small, from blankets to toothpaste – everything that householders back in England are putting together for transmission across to Romania – is being pilfered,” he said. “It simply will not get through to the children. Even if the aid gets to the orphanage itself, it is then taken away by the staff, who take it all home.

“While there is no excuse for it, it is simply the case that the economy in Romania is in such a dreadful state that many of the staples which householders in the UK regard as almost a birthright, staples which are so commonplace and which can be easily transmitted by lorry from England to Romania, are simply unavailable anywhere in the country to anyone other than those who can afford to buy goods in ‘dollar shops’.

“I beg everyone who is watching this programme,” and he looked directly into the camera, “please do not send aid.

It will not get to the children. Instead, we, you, everyone, must move heaven and earth to get the children out of those places.”

The interviewers appeared to struggle to find words to say in response to his plea. Either it was wholly unexpected or they were caught up in the emotion of the moment, an emotion which was certainly shared by Carmel and me, for we looked on in stunned silence while this young medic recounted his own experiences.

The programme moved on and I, of course, had to go to work. There was little time to say anything and indeed neither of us knew quite what to say, so troubling was that news item. But one thing was clear. Carmel had made up her mind. Her husband might well be hopeless at DIY, but what we could not provide in terms of skilled labour, we would offer, instead, by way of a loving home.

“I think it would be a good idea if you went over there and brought back a child – perhaps two.”

Half-ducking the issue and half in agreement, I had to get to work. “Okay,” I replied, before climbing into my car. “Sounds like a plan.”

THREE

“Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.”

André Gide, *Les faux-monnayeurs*, 1869–1951

The plane came to a halt, and the engines died. I assumed, in an effort to save energy and gasoline, that the pilot had chosen to turn off every possible drain on his electrics and fuel. The air conditioning shut down, and the cabin lights were switched off.

Almost immediately, the aeroplane became hot and stuffy and increasingly uncomfortable. I peered out of my nearest window to try and get some bearings, but could see nothing except for, in the distance, a line of trees. On the other side of the aisle, my fellow passengers were looking out, but I couldn't see past their shoulders to establish whether or not there were any buildings in sight.

It took about a quarter of an hour for anything to happen. Then I saw two cars pull up next to the aircraft, and from somewhere out of sight, a mobile stairway was produced and put up against the side of the plane. Our door was opened by a flight attendant, but any hope that this would be accompanied by cool, fresh air was dashed

when it became clear that one of the reasons that the cabin was so stuffy was that the temperature outside was even more uncomfortably hot.

From the cars, up the stairs and into the aircraft climbed three characters straight out of Central Casting. Broad, Slavic-looking, grim faces, raincoats and homburg hats, they came up the aisle looking from side to side, glaring at each passenger as if to seek out an enemy of the State.

There had been no welcoming message over the intercom that I could identify, and there was certainly no hint of welcome in the faces of these three men as they traversed the aircraft. Apparently satisfied that, at least outwardly, there was no Western spy on board, the three about-turned, descended the stairs and returned to their cars, which drove off.

However, any assumption that this meant that we were now free to disembark was clearly unfounded, since we then waited a further quarter hour without any progress at all, it seemed, being made.

I sat back and thought about our situation. It had been agreed that I should travel to Romania with my mother rather than Carmel, but meeting my mother at Heathrow had been a shock. She was dreadfully overweight. I knew that many heavy smokers who gave up smoking found it difficult to keep control of their weight, but my mother was now in a different league. She was clearly finding it difficult even to walk anywhere at a reasonable pace, and she didn't look particularly happy carrying her one, thankfully small, suitcase.

There was nothing I could say. I was grateful that she had immediately jumped at the chance to come to Romania with me, but I wondered to myself whether she knew what was ahead of us both. I, of course, had no idea, but I doubted that it would be easy and I was immediately concerned that she might not be able to cope.

Language was probably not going to be a major problem – it was already clear from the signs on the plane and from my limited research that French was the second language of most Romanians. I knew my mother was pretty good at languages, and I had spent a summer vacation *en famille* in southern France when I was a teenager, learning to speak the language or, effectively, starve. No, it wasn't communication which troubled me, it was the ability to get around.

We had made ourselves as comfortable as possible on the plane, which, mercifully, was only a little more than half full, and although leg room was extremely cramped, both she and I were able to sit with empty seats on either side of us.

During the flight itself, we had had a foretaste of the deprivation which we were to witness at first hand. It was a small example, but a telling one. The in-flight catering was clearly a resource which Tarom, the state airline, could not afford to purchase outside Romania, and consequently the passengers were treated to the sight of a tea trolley advancing up the aisle bearing a battered metal tea urn. With the cup of tea, assuming one accepted it, the stewardess offered us a piece of stale bread and a small piece of ham. My mother declined it, while I nibbled at the bread and drank the tea.

While we waited on the tarmac, I took a longer look at my mother. She had slept for most of the flight, but had not

looked particularly comfortable. I tried to convince myself that the cause was the relatively spartan aircraft and the increasing stuffiness inside the cabin rather than anything more fundamental, but I wasn't convinced.

Finally, as we endured the mounting heat, an ancient single-decker bus wheezed up and pulled to a halt at the aircraft steps, and with apparent reluctance, the flight attendants invited us to move out of the aeroplane.

My mother and I were lucky enough to be close to the front of the cabin, and so we found a place on the bus in the first tranche of passengers to be released from the plane. When it became clear that one bus was not enough, our unhappy fellow travellers had to remain in the cabin while we were taken to the terminal and disgorged to allow the bus to return.

This achingly slow pace gave me an opportunity to survey the terminal before we entered. Towering above us was a rather unpleasant-looking large cube made, it seemed, either of wood or with wood facings and a significant amount of dirty glass. It had all the appearance of one of the worst examples of 60s' brutalism. It did not exude menace – it was simply thoroughly unpleasant.

Eventually, joined by the remaining passengers, we entered the building in a bedraggled crocodile, through the beginnings of the arrivals hall, to collect our luggage. We moved, in single file, past a cubicle which appeared to house some sort of border control. Each of us proffered our passport, and, almost unseen behind the glass partition, an official stamped it, without appearing to take the least interest in its contents.

We moved on, through a small door into a cramped area which was almost devoid of light. I couldn't see any form of carousel, but eventually, an official switched on an elderly angle-poise lamp and pulled the cord of a petrol generator, which struggled into life with something of a clatter. This appeared to power an ancient conveyor belt behind a rubber screen, and slowly, to the sound of a dreadful rattling, suitcases began to push through the screen onto a set of metal rollers which themselves came in a straight line down the centre of the room toward the waiting passengers.

In the gloom, I could make out suitcases, baby-walkers, boxes – the usual detritus from a disembarkation. Each passenger who recovered his or her belongings was given a cursory check by bored-looking Customs officials who, with a piece of chalk, would make a faint mark on whatever possessions were produced to them, after which they and, in due course, we, emerged into the main hall of the terminal.

FOUR

“We learn from experience that not everything which is incredible is untrue.”

Cardinal de Retz, *Memoirs*, 1673–76

Carmel and I share a similar characteristic, that of impatience. In many people, that is translated into brisk efficiency. In our case, however, it translates into getting on with things at a rush, without necessarily considering tangential or, indeed, any consequences. From the moment that young doctor appeared on the screen, our minds, our common aim, became fixed, and by unspoken agreement, we were not prepared to tolerate any obstruction.

Initially, we had no plan, but at least we knew that every stage of what we were about to undertake was sequential and that until we had completed one stage, it was pointless proceeding to the next.

We were prepared to take our cues and follow directions from any contact we could find, anyone with experience of Romania and even of bringing a child out. And so, quite fortuitously, it seemed, we had found within a matter of days that an English newspaper, the *Daily Express*, was itself following the fortunes of a young couple who had travelled to

Romania with the declared intention of adopting two babies.

Their story was already provoking considerable interest and was obviously good ‘copy’, but it was short on detail. Of course, the average reader would not be terribly interested in the nuts and bolts of the expedition, but I needed detail and I needed to know exactly what steps should be undertaken if I was to be successful.

This being before the gloomy days of data protection, the *Daily Express* news desk was prepared to give out the telephone number of the couple, Ian and Paula Marriott, and they, for their part, did not immediately hang up when I made contact.

“It’s chaotic,” Ian told me. “There is no adoption legislation in place and the government is at sixes and sevens. You have to rely on local government, such as it is, to provide you with the necessary documentation to enable you to get out of the country and back here with a child.”

“So, is it right that you have actually managed to bring two children back into the UK?”

“Yes, we have, and we’re very relieved that we have managed to rescue them. But if you think that this was just an adventure, and we did it as a knee-jerk reaction, then think again. Adoption is a serious commitment which must not be undertaken lightly.”

I wondered if I was going to be treated to a lecture on childcare, and whether I was expected to explain my own motives. However, I bit back on my response and let him carry on.

“I promise you that this isn’t a frivolous enquiry. I absolutely agree that this is not a time for adventure; it is

a mission partly to rescue and partly to look forward and provide nurture for children who are currently abandoned with no future whatsoever. My wife and I realise that the challenge is probably immense, but the reward will be greater. Not a reward for us, but for the child or children.”

I told him that I had already heard of the need for a Home Study report by my own local authority and that I would have to make contact with the local social services office.

“I understand the need for social enquiry reports when adoption is being undertaken either in this country or from abroad, and I can assure you that my wife and I will allow ourselves to be subjected to the necessary scrutiny to satisfy the childcare authorities in this country and, hopefully, in Romania.”

That seemed to satisfy Ian, who, it turned out, was more than anxious to help. I immediately regretted my initial but thankfully unspoken reaction to his questions – it became clear as we spoke that he had the best interests of his and the remaining children at heart.

“Okay, this in general terms is what you have to do, and is best described by what we did.

“We travelled to Romania without the faintest idea of where we might find a child. To give us some guidance, we made contact first of all with the Romanian embassy in London and they, for their part, appeared willing to give us a list of orphanages which might be prepared to co-operate with us.

“For the privilege of entering the country and following up our enquiries we had to pay some sort of visa fee, which

seemed pretty pointless and designed only to produce some foreign exchange.

“In fact, there’s a travel agent in Hertfordshire, trading as Friendly Travel, a chap called Harry McCormick, who’s prepared to offer special deals to couples travelling to and from Romania on these adoption missions.”

He gave me the address and phone number of the agent, and went on:

“When you get there, you must decide on the area which you wish to investigate and then, as we discovered, it would be a good idea to find yourself a taxi driver who can act as guide and interpreter. That is exactly what we did, and we spent a day moving between orphanages, seeking to identify the babies whom we could bring back to the UK.”

“When you have found the babies, you need the consent of the mother to the removal and adoption of the children. Then you need the authority of the local mayor, and once you have that, you get hold of the President, who signs it off, and when that’s been done you can return to the United Kingdom, provided you have entry clearance from the British consulate.”

I was writing furiously as he described this remarkable process. The lack of formality seemed more than a little surprising and fraught with snares. But I was assured that the process was actually as simple as it sounded. And the mayor and most of officialdom, according to Ian, were particularly amenable to staples which were only found with great difficulty in Romania – vodka and American cigarettes.

There was evidently no formal procedure and it was, he said, a usually pretty straightforward task to find the

mother, obtain her consent, and then, having obtained the necessary documentation from the mayor, make one's way to the President in Bucharest, produce the documents to the British embassy and obtain clearance to bring the children back into the United Kingdom.

"And that's it?"

"Well," he said, "it worked for us and it should still work for you. So, the best of luck."

And that was it. He promised to write to me with all that he had told me – and I for my part now had a scattering of scribbled notes taken during our conversation. I hung up the telephone in a pretty bewildered state. Was it really possible to extract a baby from an orphanage, find and effectively bribe an official, and then, with the approval of the President and, after him, the British embassy, simply load the child onto an aeroplane and end up back home in the UK?

Stranger things have happened, I supposed, and there on the pages of the *Daily Express*, I could see a delighted young couple with two babies who had at one stage shared an open suitcase on the trip back to the UK, looking not only none the worse for the experience, but very much the better for it.

So, more things to do. Contact the Romanian embassy; badger my local authority to progress a report on our circumstances at home; identify possible areas to pursue in Romania; establish just how I could travel, investigate and return and complete the trip without Carmel.

This last issue was likely to be something of a problem. I was a Registrar, a judicial post in the County Court,

employed by the government. I was to discover that my line manager, Robin Holmes, the Courts Administrator, was remarkably sympathetic to my need to take time off, but Carmel was self-employed, working virtually single-handed in her own clothing boutique in Leamington Spa. The clothing trade had not been particularly buoyant for some time, and relied, season by season, on maintaining sales before the stock became unsaleable, as 'dead stock'. Customers at her end of the market were extraordinarily fickle. Each season (for the purpose of buying, that is,) lasted only a number of weeks rather than months, and it didn't take very much, either in terms of weather or economic decline, for sales to fail at a crucial time, leaving the retailer no choice but to discount heavily in a desperate attempt to remove stock from the shelves.

Throughout the existence of her shop, Carmel, like an enormous number of small independent retailers, had to remain at the helm, hands on, with a keen eye to her business overdraft, making visits to London to purchase the following season's stock from a host of independent labels. If she didn't, and given that we both would have to be away from the UK for a good number of weeks, there was little doubt that her business would fail.

Added to that, she couldn't fly. And if she and I were to travel to Romania either by road or train, it was clear that each journey would take two or even three days. I had picked up a complicated-looking volume of European train timetables at our local main train station and established that the rail link to Bucharest from England followed the route of, or even was, the original Orient Express, although

the timetable suggested that it was very much a shadow of the romantic transportation described by Agatha Christie. Indeed, it halved in size somewhere along the route, one set of coaches going off in one direction, the other continuing on towards the east.

This was to be no Wagon-lits romance. It was not, as I had protested to Ian Marriott on the telephone, an adventure. It was a mission and it had to be undertaken as efficiently as possible, which meant, in particular, speed, and if I were to find one or even two babies, nursing them on a two- or three-day rail trip would be extremely difficult.

Of course, I did not know the half of it.

But what I did know was that Carmel could not accompany me and I would have to make the trip with someone else. My immediate thoughts turned to my mother – not a woman with the greatest maternal instinct and one who had effectively left much, if not all, of my care to surrogate foster parents and boarding schools while she, for her part, pursued a lifestyle which was not suited at all to either matrimony or child rearing. In her sometimes chaotic travel through life, she had married no less than four times. I was her firstborn, and Lucy, my half-sister, was born to my mother's marriage to my second stepfather. Lucy herself had been left mainly to fend for herself, and although, for a good part of her younger life, she had had to share a home with her mother, it was an unhappy and difficult experience.

But my mother had many attributes, some quite surprising. In my late teens, I recall that she was an assistant governor at Holloway prison in London. Later, she became

the first woman to be appointed an assistant governor at a male prison, in Maidstone. She did not stop there and was sent by the Home Office to assist in or, as far as I knew, even run, the women's prison in Kowloon, Hong Kong. In between her third and fourth marriages, she had bought a tiny apartment on a Greek island, and would drive from London, through Europe and into Greece in her battered Austin Allegro without any thought of danger or mechanical breakdown.

I remembered that, when I was about ten, she obtained a pilot's licence, and although I never saw her at the controls of an aeroplane, she had admitted to me that on her maiden solo flight she ran out of fuel and had to crash land, to the delight of the local press, which published a picture of her Tiger moth nose-down in a country ditch.

She had a remarkable brain – she played bridge for Sussex and, indeed, her second husband was also a county player. So also did she have an extraordinary gift for languages. Her second husband was an Israeli, and her third, although not Israeli, was Jewish, and whether for the hell of it or not, I do not know, she learned Hebrew. When appointed to the prison in Kowloon, she learned Cantonese.

Above all, she loved to travel and she loved a challenge.

I had not seen her for ages. After I left university, I had found my own accommodation in a garret in London, while she embarked on her remarkable career changes, moving between partners, some of whom she married, with a rapidity which matched her undeniable speed of thought. Her fourth husband, Freddie North, whom I had met some years before, was an international bridge

player and author, with an enormous reputation among the bridge-playing fraternity, but I had only seen the two of them together once since their marriage – the third such ceremony to which I had not been invited.

I could think of nobody else, and so, with some trepidation, I telephoned her.

“Darling,” she exclaimed breathily – I imagined I could hear her exhaling streams of cigarette smoke, although I knew very well that she had, remarkably, given up a 50-a-day habit at a stroke some years ago – “how exciting. Of course I will go with you.”

Naturally, I was grateful. I gave her the basics and told her that I would be in touch.

What I did not bargain for was her state of health.

FIVE

“The most absurd and the most rash hopes have sometimes been the cause of extraordinary success.”

Vauvenargues, *Reflections and Maxims*, 1746

Next step, a home study report. Ian had told me to make contact with the Department of Health rather than the Home Office, and he explained that written guidance had just been published, setting out the steps to be taken, with a heavy emphasis on what should not be done. The home study, as I already suspected, was perhaps the most crucial document, which both the Romanian authorities (presumably the orphanage or maybe the mayor, or even the President) and the department would need. Oddly, I discovered that the guidance suggested that the report should not be sought until after a child had been identified, which meant a period of uncertainty and delay which could, I imagined, take months. It seemed to me that it was important to deal with this fundamental building block of the whole endeavour right at the start. If there was to be any problem, it didn't seem sensible to leave that unaddressed let alone unidentified until after a child had

been found but left behind, while paperwork was being assembled at heaven knows what pace.

And I knew that in the eyes of social workers, I was not young. I was 44 and Carmel a year younger, and no matter that I was active, both in the squash court and on the hockey pitch, I gathered that miles on the clock mattered rather more than good mechanical condition to some local authorities.

So I put my hand to the word processor and sent off a letter to my local social services office. The reply was short and to the point. Home studies were not being undertaken by this local authority and probably not by others, either. Resources, slim as they were, were concentrating upon the needs of children within the county, and therefore, unfortunately, no assistance would be provided to me.

On reflection, that might well have been a reasonable standpoint, but in my heightened state, I was not prepared to accept no for an answer, and so I pressed the point. I telephoned the author of the reply.

“Can you tell me whether I’m right in believing that you actually have a statutory duty to carry out a home study report?”

“No, I don’t think we do,” she replied. “And even if there was such an obligation, it would have to be balanced against our duties to the children within the county.”

“But children come into the county from all directions,” I said, “both home and abroad, and you are obliged, of course, to carry out your duties under the Children Act in respect of all, and not just those whom you choose.”

That sounded far more unpleasant than I meant it to

be, but before I could mend the fence that I had started to trample down, my contact retorted, “No matter what you say, you can’t tell me how this authority should manage its obligations to our families.”

Clearly I was going to get nowhere but I had a last throw. “Look,” I said, “You and I are not going to agree on whether you should or should not devote resources to this particular task, but I’m going to have to ask you to refer the case to the Director of Social Services. If he maintains the same view that you have described, then I propose to take the matter further, to the department in London, and if necessary to the Secretary of State.”

“Well,” she said, “you’ll have to put that in writing, and until you do and the Director takes a different view, I’m afraid that we can’t help you further.”

Thank goodness, I thought to myself, she didn’t end the conversation with ‘have a nice day’.

By this time, I had built up a head of steam, and I was not prepared to let the matter grind to a halt. In reserve, I had read somewhere that it might be possible to obtain the services of an independent social worker for the preparation of such a report, but as a matter of logic, I wondered whether that would satisfy the British government, let alone the Romanian authorities, given that payment to an independent social worker to compose such a report would be unlikely to produce a negative outcome. At least a local authority social worker would, I took it, be entirely objective and, if appropriate, would say loud and clear if parents could not pass muster. And, of course, the local authority adoption panel would itself be cautious about

approving adoptive parents where the documentation before it had been prepared by an expert in his or her field, but an expert in the pay of the proposed adopters.

So the next day, 22 May 1990, I sat down and prepared a letter to the Minister of State for the Department of Health and Social Security, the Right Honourable Virginia Bottomley MP.

I was past caring whether my letter would be greeted with enthusiasm, or indeed if I were to be labelled as some sort of vexatious applicant. Frankly, I doubted that Mrs Bottomley would herself even read the letter, and even if she did, would take a personal interest in my individual problem. What was important, however, was that someone in authority in my local area might not be prepared to take the risk of criticism from London.

And while I waited for the outcome, there were more things to do.

First, Ian Marriott had set out a list of papers which I had to prepare in support of the home study report, and I noted them down in what was to become my travelling dossier:

- a letter from my mortgagee, confirming satisfactory conduct of our home loan;
- confirmation from our accountant of our income and solvency;
- photographs of our home;
- a medical report on each of us;
- references;
- confirmation by a lawyer that British law enabled us to adopt a foreign-born child in the UK;

- a 'Home Office letter' outlining the steps from adoption to approval to entry clearance.

This dossier had then to be notarised in England and then translated into Romanian. He told me of a translator in Bucharest, Lily, who would undertake a translation at half the cost and three times the speed of anyone in the UK. Meanwhile, it had to be 'certified' by the Romanian embassy in London – quite what that entailed escaped me, but, as Ian and I both suspected, it seemed to be a useful, if modest, source of hard currency for the Romanian authorities.

As Ian Marriott told me, "They only accept cash."

While preparing all this, I had to make contact with the Romanian embassy. Again, this was a letter, designed along the general lines described by the Marriotts. I was, they said, to indicate quite openly that I wanted to offer a home to a child or children in an orphanage in Romania and I needed permission to enter the country and an indication of whether or not I could rely on the co-operation of the authorities.

The letter in reply was surprisingly swift, and set out a number of minor stipulations, fees, and an indication of where children could be found. It was the latter disclosure which was the most depressing, for the letter included page after page of addresses, both in town and country, where children were being accommodated. I imagined that these addresses were those which the Romanian government was prepared to reveal, being, I assumed, the least unpleasant of the bunch. Ian had cautioned me that there were far more, but even reading through the enclosures revealed tens of thousands of children, scattered around the country, in the

establishments which I knew had only been glimpsed in the television news broadcasts, and which had so distressed not only me but the majority of the British public.

At least I had some certainty. I knew where to go, in London, for my first port of call, I knew what to say, and I knew what to pay. I knew that I would not be challenged about my destination and that the embassy would simply leave it to me to decide where to go. The list which I had composed with Ian's help still required a number of formalities which were not difficult to overcome. My main problem remained: the absence of a home study report.

Then, a week later, the caravan lurched forward. A letter from my local authority, dated 25 May, written three days after my letter to the Secretary of State had arrived in London.

"I understand that Mrs Maudsley had communicated to you Warwickshire's policy on adoptions.

I am writing to inform you that the Association of Directors of Social Services have very recently issued new advice, which questions this policy. Essentially it does encourage Local Authorities to undertake Home Studies on children from Romanian Orphanages.

I will ask Mrs Maudsley to contact you as soon as possible after the Bank Holiday."

I mouthed a silent 'thank you'. But there was no time to sit back in satisfaction, for the second task which I had set myself was to attempt to find someone who had wider experience of Romania and of the problems we

might face. Might I even find a contact who would be of assistance?

Fortune took a hand. The Baptist church in Kenilworth was advertising for clothing and basics of every kind to load up in a regular shuttle service run by the local pastor, Graham Prestridge, who was arranging trips in and out of Romania with, effectively, emergency supplies. With some trepidation, I phoned him and introduced myself.

His response was immediate and charming, but pessimistic.

“I appreciate your motives and how you feel, but you’ll not receive any co-operation in Romania itself. The Romanians don’t care for their children being removed.”

“I don’t understand,” I replied. “Don’t they understand that the children are literally living in a sewer, and that it is vital to remove them?”

“Yes, I think they do.”

“Can they remove them, themselves?”

“No,” he conceded, “they can’t.”

“So why on earth do they resent or object to offers from abroad to take the children into loving and supporting homes?”

“I can only imagine that they are anxious about the children losing their birthright.”

“But, in heaven’s name, their birthright is a pretty long second behind their first right to the unquestioning and loving care of a family which will nurture them into adulthood, when they can, themselves, choose whether or not they wish to examine or fulfil what is rather loosely called their birthright.” I marvelled at my apparent pomposity.

Fortunately, the Reverend Prestridge was not troubled by it. "You may be right, and you and I could discuss this and even argue it for hours to come without a satisfactory conclusion. The problem is that the Romanian mind-set is not one which is, at least at the moment, amenable to persuasion that there is a better alternative to leaving the children where they are.

"There are charities out there, both from this country and others, who are desperately trying to extract the children into local hostels or into foster care. The government is not impeding them..."

"I bet it isn't," I muttered.

"... But the task is huge, and it is little more than a drop in the ocean."

"So why on earth are we standing by and allowing this to happen?"

I realised almost as I finished the question just how stupid it was. It was, I suppose, simply an indication of my frustration, but I knew that that alone would get me nowhere. What I needed was to establish whether or not Graham had any contact whom he might suggest I should follow up.

He was extremely reticent. To be fair, he was very probably anxious not to compromise his own attempts to establish some sort of aid route into the country.

"I'll think about it," he said. "I'm travelling to Romania with the next vanload next week, and I should be back in 10 days' time. I hope I'll be able to give you a more constructive answer then."

I realised that I could not really ask for more, and, of course, I knew both that he was himself offering a

lifeline to Romania and that he was also being extremely reasonable in our discussions. So I put a lid on my impatience and thanked him as cordially as I could and promised that I would make contact once more on his return. I wished him well for his next endeavour, and underlined my good wishes with the promise of a box of provisions.

Over that weekend, Carmel and I put together a box of soap, toothpaste, T-shirts, socks and household bits and pieces which we reckoned would fit the bill, and I delivered it to the Baptist church for the next convoy. As I did so, I wondered if and when I might follow the box to that unhappy place.

I would have to wait for the next 10 days, I realised, before establishing whether or not contact could be made with some sort of support in Romania. But, meanwhile, we received the promised phone call from Mrs Maudsley of the local authority.

“As you know, the Director of Social Services has considered your case and has decided that he will put aside resources so that you may have a home study report prepared for your proposed adoption.”

“That is remarkably good news and extremely kind of him,” I said.

“He would rather that you didn’t write to the department in London, since he has taken this decision on his own initiative.”

“Ah,” I said. “I have in fact written already and I’m extremely grateful to the Director and I will ensure that if I receive a reply from London, the department is made aware of the local authority’s willingness to help. Anyway, what now?”

“Well,” said Mrs Maudsley, “the requirement is that we come to your home, carry out interviews with you and your wife and look into your background, check references and prepare a report. If the report is positive, we put it before the adoption panel. You’ll appreciate that the investigation that we must undertake is quite intensive.”

“I quite understand that and I can promise you that my wife and I will co-operate fully. When do we start?”

To my surprise, I was promised an immediate start, and our first appointment was made there and then.

“This would normally take about eight weeks but we understand your wish to move on as swiftly as possible, given the reports of the state of the children in Romania, and we will endeavour therefore to wrap it all up for you in six weeks. Then we have to wait for the decision of the adoption panel, which can take anything up to another two months to reach a conclusion, simply because of the queue of applications for consideration by the panel which doesn’t meet every day of the week.”

I avoided voicing my immediate sense of disappointment, realising that steps had to be taken and protocols followed, and that these things could not be done overnight. If we were to succeed in speeding anything up, it would have to be by co-operating fully with the social work team rather than complaining every step of the way.

The important and encouraging thing was that we now appeared to be making progress.

And then, at the promised time, 10 days later, Graham Prestridge made contact.

“I’m going to give you some names,” he said. “It is important that you keep my name out of it, because I don’t want them to feel that I have betrayed them, and I know that they do not really want to be involved in what Romanians consider to be against rather than in the interests of their children.”

He went on, “Let us meet and I will give you a name and a phone number. Then, it’s up to you.”

Barely able to contain myself, I agreed to get together with him.

Hours later, eager to obtain as much information but remembering to restrain myself, I listened as he told me of the contact whom I might approach.

First, he had heard of a government official and his wife in Romania who had adopted two children themselves. The husband was, it seemed, a clinician in a position of authority for the region around Bacau, in the east of the country, close to the Iron Curtain. He had responsibility for the oversight of three orphanages. He apparently spoke perfect English.

In that same city, there was an English nurse, undertaking some form of liaison between that official, the orphanages and visiting volunteers. She would probably know very much better than anybody what was going on on the ground and where I might undertake my enquiries first.

Finally, I was given the name and phone number of Mary Gibson, the personal assistant of the chief executive of a nascent charity, the Romanian Orphanage Trust, working out of an office in central London. She would be, I was told, the least anxious to be identified, but might well, nonetheless, be prepared to give me some contact details which I could follow up in Romania.

“I’m sorry to bang on about this,” he said, “but I really must ask you to respect my wish that you keep everything you hear from me entirely confidential. Of course, you may use the details I have given you, but I really don’t want to be identified as the source of this information. I’m sure you understand that I want to be able to move the aid convoy in and out of Romania without losing the trust of my own contacts.”

What a curious and depressing overview, I thought. I couldn’t wholly grasp the need for caution, and I still couldn’t understand why it might be that Romanians could have any doubt about the endeavours of those who desperately wanted to help the children.

“Bear in mind that your motives, and the motives of many others, are entirely Christian and based on the needs of the children. There are others, however, whose motives are sinister – those who have taken children and trafficked them for the most dreadful purposes.”

In my innocence and in my desire for speed, I’d never thought about that, and I had given no thought at all to the sordid and unpleasant behaviour of those who would prey on children and take every opportunity to get hold of a baby or an infant for their own appalling and criminal ends.

At least, I hoped, a properly authenticated home study report would prove something of a barrier to criminals and a reassurance to the authorities. Graham agreed, but pretty obviously without great enthusiasm. We shook hands and he wished me well.