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SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

# WHEN'S DADDY COMING HOME?



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*When's Daddy Coming Home*

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# 1

## Did you sign this check?

I will never forget that rotten day.

Monday lunchtime, late January 2009; I'd just wrapped up a meeting with my attorney, Ludmilla, at Dubai's luxury Shangri-La Hotel, when my cellphone rang.

'Peter, you'd better get your arse back to the office, something very urgent's come-up.'

It was my straight-talking business partner, Kieran Beeson.

'What's the problem?'

I sensed someone was breathing down Kieran's neck.

'Look, Peter, please get yourself back, now,' pleaded Kieran, a 'street-wise,' twenty-something.

Minutes later I was in my white Range Rover, foot down, barreling along the Sheikh Zayed Highway to my office in Al Barsha where two men in white *dishdashas* were waiting.

The smiley, older one raised a hand: 'Come on in, Mr. Peter, yes, do come in,' he beckoned.

They were cops from Dubai's Department of Criminal Investigation, an elite force reporting directly to the Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed. They investigated everything, from serious white-collar crime, to terrorism and Dubai's underworld.

The two officers weren't the only members of the reception committee.

I hadn't noticed him at first, but one of my clients, a Dane in his mid-thirties, sat grim-faced and arms-crossed, in a corner. He glared at me, but said nothing. He didn't need to.

I'd a fair idea why police had dropped in for a little chat.

I was the boss of a Dubai-based property development company and the Dane was a member of a syndicate of forty-two Emirates airline pilots

who'd invested U.S.\$7 million in my firm. The money was a loan, to build a luxury apartment complex.

But the entire Dubai economy had recently collapsed. As a result, the apartment construction project went to hell in a handcart and the pilots lost their life savings. I didn't escape the carnage. My firm had gone bust and I was effectively bankrupt.

The meeting earlier with my lawyer had been about cobbling together a financial rescue package for the Emirates flyers.

'OK, chaps, how can I help?' I inquired with a smile.

'Mr. Peter, we're taking you for questioning to Bur Dubai police station,' said the older officer.

Now, as any old Dubai hand knew, in a potentially dodgy situation with Emirati cops, it paid to remain smiling and polite and normally any problem; or *mushkela*, in Arabic; was smoothed over, especially for a Western expat.

As far as I knew I'd committed no crime, so I assumed we'd trot along to Bur Dubai, have a chin-wag over a glass of sweet tea, clear up any *mushkela* and I'd be back home in time for dinner with my lovely wife, Susan, and a cuddle with our two-year-old daughter, Olivia, our little princess.

I followed the police in my own car, as they'd asked me to, for the fifteen-mile drive to Bur Dubai, where I was ushered into an interrogation room and invited to sit down.

One of the CID officers immediately dived into a file and waved a post-dated security check in front of my nose. It was one of forty-two check I'd signed and handed to the pilots, as per my agreement with them.

'Did you sign this check, Mr. Peter? It's bounced. There's no money in your account.'

I am a straight-batting sort of guy and there was no point denying it: 'Yes, of course that's my signature, definitely. My company collapsed, that's why there's no money, the pilots know that,' I replied.

Looking back, I wished I'd taken a moment at that point to call to my attorney, Ludmilla, because events took a life-altering twist.

Immediately I nodded I'd signed the bounced check, the two cops ended the interview, told me I'd been arrested, and then escorted me to another interrogation room deeper inside the Bur Dubai police complex, where they locked me in.

The clunking sound of the lock made me feel a as in a chill. Everyone in Dubai was aware of Bur Dubai's sinister reputation for violence among prisoners and for police brutality.

A few years before fourteen prisoners were killed when another inmate set fire to a cell.

Two years after my arrest, Lee Brown, a forty-nine-year-old Brit from London, died in the same police station. The poor devil was found half-naked in his cell; his family claimed he'd been beaten to death during interrogation; the police denied it, and the cause of Lee's demise was never proved.

But, back to events that evening, and I sat on my own, twiddling my thumbs for an hour in the locked interrogation room, then another hour, still wondering what the hell was going on.

Three hours slid by when suddenly there was a noisy commotion; a turning of the locks. Police shoved a crazed-looking young Arab man into the room. Then they secured the doors again.

'Great,' I muttered to myself, 'now you're in a locked Bur Dubai interrogation room with a nut-job.'

The disturbed lad's eyes bulged, his hair was disheveled, his forehead and t-shirt were streaked with dried blood; he'd clearly been in a punch-up and, from his demeanor, I guessed he'd not been taking his meds.

As he paced the floor and ranted, I tried to make conversation as best I could. I established he was Palestinian, and he'd been in a fistfight with another guy for reasons he had difficulty explaining, and I couldn't work out.

I began to worry he might attack me when, suddenly, the doors rattled open again. Another man was bundled in; an Egyptian named Farid who spoke with an American accent.

Farid was an intelligent business person like me, also in his forties, a family man with a kind, handsome face. He explained he'd lived most of his life in the States, but, had recently established himself as a property developer in Dubai, just as I had done before the economy crashed.

'Why have you been arrested? Dud checks?' I asked.

'Yes, my friend,' Farid said, with a half-smile.

I warmed to Farid immediately, his presence made me feel safer. Meanwhile the Palestinian fretted and muttered away in the corner.

We were left alone for another hour until police officers marched in and handcuffed the three of us. I noticed, from my watch, it was nine p.m.

They handed us over to armed police who hustled us out of the building into the metal cage of a security van parked outside.

‘Now they now take us to Al Rashidiya police station,’ said the troubled Palestinian, who’d been arrested a few times before and knew the drill.

As the van’s engine revved and moved off and we bounced around in the cage at the back, I muttered to myself: ‘Peter, you’re in deep, serious shit now.’

He may have been as mad as a box of frogs, but the Palestinian pugilist was correct about our destination.

We pitched up at Al Rashidiya’s massive police detention center where cops ripped the van doors open and screamed at us: ‘*Yellah! Yellah!*’ ‘Go! go!’

The three of us scrambled out into Dubai’s version of Bedlam. There were hundreds of men in handcuffs and, I realised, we were part of the daily round-up of suspects from police stations across the city. Amid the roar of reversing prison vans, clouds of exhaust fumes, blazing headlights and shrieks from impatient guards, was a heaving mass of prisoners, mostly culled from Dubai’s Asian workforce: Indians, Nepalis, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Malaysians and Filipinos.

Sticky heat, arc lights, the confused cacophony and sheer numbers of men, young and old; my heart raced; my eyes darted left and right trying to spot another white face, one of my own.

But, I saw no one. On that dark night it seemed I was the only Westerner being herded into the Al Rashidiya Detention Center.

I like to think of myself as strong-willed and at that point I gave myself a pep talk.

‘Peter, don’t worry. They won’t keep you here. The office will call a lawyer and get you bail. This was all a mistake, they’ll let you go,’ I said under my breath.

Suddenly, a shove in the back and guards pushed me, Farid, and the Palestinian, toward a slow-moving line of prisoners. Some younger ones were sobbing, overwhelmed by what was happening.

Guards yelled at us to hand over valuables and personal items such as cellphones, credit cards, watches, bracelets.



Eventually, I reached the front of the queue still dressed in my business slacks and shirt from earlier that day. I had the equivalent of about U.S.\$200 dollars in UAE *dirhams* rolled in my pocket.

The check-in clerk, if I can describe him thus, was, according to his name tag, called Tariq, a chubby Emirati who clearly had an appetite for pies.

He said nothing and leant back in his leather swivel chair to look me up and down with a sneer, like I was the last turkey in the shop. I weighed him up too.

I put him in his early thirties, his military cap was set at a rakish angle, his brown uniform was grease-stained, his massive belly threatened to burst through the straining buttons on his tight tunic.

I sensed he was savoring the moment of having a Westerner in front of him and, without troubling to lean forward and out of his reclining position, he exclaimed: ‘Ah-ah! a British man. You’re welcome here!’

After fumbling through paperwork his fat fingers reached down to scratch his crotch, then, with eyes glinting, he said: ‘Let me tell you something very important, Mr. Peter.

‘People in this place, Al Rashidiya, will make you lots of promises, tell you lots of things, but I’m the only one who can give you anything you want; please remember that.’

I almost responded: ‘Well, Tariq, that’s very nice of you, but I wasn’t planning to stay.’

‘I can get you anything, anything at all, except one thing.’

He then paused theatrically.

Breaking an awkward silence;

‘And what’s that?’ I asked.

Looking at me with a steady stare and grinning, he replied:

‘I can’t let you leave this place, OK?’

The previous few hours had been utterly surreal. I was tired, mentally near breaking point, and the guard Tariq telling me I wasn’t going home that night, or maybe not at all, had left me devastated.

I was desperate to speak to my beautiful wife, Susan, or indeed any normal person outside the hellhole I’d just been dumped in, but they’d taken my cellphone away.

‘Christ, how the hell am I going to get out of this mess?’ I said under my breath, as Tariq’s plump hand casually flicked me on to the final stage of the check-in process.

By then I’d caught up with Farid and the wild-eyed Palestinian who looked as if he was about to deck some poor bastard, and three of us were taken by elevator to a first-floor landing of the main detention block where guards heaved on a huge, steel door.

It opened to reveal a vision of hell; a vast chamber about seventy-feet long, crammed wall-to-wall with prisoners, many hundreds of them, sprawled across grubby mattresses. A place where all hope was gone.

The smell hit me and I gagged on the acrid stench of stale sweat, urine and human shit. The chamber’s walls were stained dark yellow from decades of nicotine.

As my eyes adjusted to the Stygian gloom, I slowly focused on a sea of swarthy faces glaring at back at me; the new boy.

‘In you go, Mr. Peter,’ said a guard nudging me across the threshold with his elbow. Then, the great door groaned and slammed shut with a metallic thud. There was no escape.

It felt like I’d been thrown into a kind of underworld, and I wandered hesitantly down endless lines of mattresses and men to get my bearings more than anything else.

The first thing I noticed was so many prisoners had an odd, glassy-eyed look, as if they were staring at some unseen distant parallel universe. They were there, but not there. I could have been King Kong wandering amongst them. I doubt it would have registered.

I heard a man cry in pain from a far-off, dark corner, deeper inside.

I pushed on like a jungle explorer, getting the ‘lay of the land’, and counted ten cells to the right of me with five bunk beds in each. Surely that wasn’t enough for the masses of prisoners?

Further in, small bands of Asians, mostly Pakistani youths, their pupils dilated like dinner plates and arms swirling like Dervishes, staggered toward me, babbling away in Urdu. They were obviously off their heads on crack, or some other mind bender. They pushed their wild-eyed faces into mine to take a better look at me.

The fact they’d lost their minds was a blessing in a way because it was easy enough to shove them away. One was so thin, it was like pushing at a sack of dried leaves, so fragile, I felt I could have walked through him.

‘Hold it together, Peter, hold it together,’ I repeated to myself.

‘Keep a grip.’

I pressed on, and at the end of a corridor I came across three filthy lavatories and a couple of makeshift showers. The shitters were simple holes in the ground with a tiled slab over them. No toilet paper, just grubby jugs of water; a scene of indescribable filth really. The smell was so vile I wanted to retch.

Close by, I noticed a small courtyard open to the skies, also packed with inmates, mostly Asian and Arab men, sprawled across more grubby mattresses. Those without a bed were stretched half-asleep on tables in what could have been an eating area.

My recce completed, I estimated there were around 400 prisoners. I guessed some had been arrested for murder, robbery, drug dealing and sex offences like rape. Others were there for what is euphemistically called ‘white-collar’ stuff, like fraud and embezzlement. I wondered if any were bounced check cases like me?

Having got the geography of the place in my head I retraced my steps. I noticed there was no clock; so no sense of time. There was nothing to read, no distractions, so most of the day and night, I assumed, was spent fending off attackers, sleeping as best you could, eating and praying to God that someone was going to get you out.

For a minute or so, for reassurance, I kidded myself I’d wandered onto a film set and all around me were actors, because that’s what they looked like. This could not be real.

But where were the cameras, the director and producer?

No, it wasn’t a remake of *Midnight Express*, or even a bad dream.

This horror story was very real, and I was one of the central characters.

I swiveled through a one eighty degree turn and began to wander back toward the main door.

Hundreds of dark eyes had fixed on me, and definitely not in a friendly way

I knew I needed my own bit of personal turf in the chamber of horrors, and, as I scanned around looking for a spare mattress, one inmate caught my eye.

He looked like he was Iranian, he was in his forties, with salt and pepper hair and goatee beard. He was incongruously suited-up, 1970s-style, with

an olive-green jacket and matching flared trousers, a mustard shirt, flowered tie, and you couldn't miss his pink, plastic sandals.

Sitting crossed legged on his mattress, like Buddha, he had what the military call command presence, but what, actually, had drawn me to him was his whistling, electric kettle, just coming to the boil.

'Tea?' he asked casually, as if I'd just popped in for a cup of Earl Grey.

'Please sit down here with me, my friend. Make yourself comfortable.'

He shuffled along his mattress to make room and pushed a grubby polystyrene cup toward me.

'So, my friend, you're British, are you? Very good. I like British.'

He handed me a used tea bag and poured boiling water into my cup.

'Well, I must tell you, please be very careful in here my British friend.'

I nearly replied: 'No shit, Sherlock!'

Our conversation flowed, very easily, and I discovered his name was Haj; he was indeed Iranian. Given his attire he surprised me a little by claiming he'd been a highly respected lawyer in Dubai who'd been recently arrested, not because he'd done anything illegal, but because his boss was a fraudster.

I didn't quite get that and didn't inquire further, but I was already enjoying Haj's openness and his warmth, as well as his tea.

He was keen to know how I'd ended up in Al Rashidiya, so I explained the story of my business deal with the syndicate of Emirates pilots which to that had fallen through, how my company had gone bust, how I was bankrupt and the pilots had lost U.S.\$7million of investment.

'Emirates Airlines is part of the government. Best you pay the company's pilots their money back, or you'll be in jail for a very, very long time, my friend. They'll keep you forever if you don't.'

I insisted to Haj I'd done nothing illegal. I told him that my company had got into a mess because of Dubai's economic crash, and I did, indeed, have plans to repay the pilots, as soon as I was freed. First, I needed get out of this place.

'OK my fine Englishman, you do your best with that and good luck.'

We chatted for a few more minutes and then he declared: 'The first priority is to find you a mattress, as you'll be here a while. They're not free. You have to buy one.'

As in the world of real estate I'd left behind, 'location, location, location,' even in Al Rashidiya's hall of horrors, was everything. Mattress

placement also settled your status in the inmate pecking order. Those who could afford it were at the posh end, next to the main door, and the destitute were near the bogs.

So, according to Haj, a mattress near the stinking lavatories cost only a handful of *dirhams*, the equivalent of five bucks. But a mattress in prime real estate, close to the big metal entrance door, was the most expensive; up to two hundred bucks each.

Continuing the sales patter: 'By the way, Mr. Peter, you can hot-mattress if you want; share with another prisoner perhaps? Maybe that's for you: twelve hours on, twelve hours off?'

Noting my frown: 'Well, perhaps not then!' he said.

'No thanks, Haj, I definitely need my own mattress.'

'OK, I can find you one, in a very good position here, near me. As you can see it's halfway between the water closets and the front door.'

I felt that he could see my eyes light up.

'That will be five hundred *dirhams*, (one hundred and fifty U.S. dollars),' declared Haj, sensing he was close to a deal.

Five hundred *dirhams*, it was most of the money in my pocket, but I had no choice. I hoped to get bail in the morning, so I needed my own space to sit, gather my thoughts and perhaps even get some sleep. For that I needed a well-positioned mattress.

'Done, sounds like a bargain!' I said and shook Haj's hand, intrigued that even in that darkest of places, good old supply and demand capitalism still flourished.

True to his word Haj haggled a mattress for me from another prisoner who was selling his to buy pain killers, and I slumped down on it.

My makeshift bed was blood-streaked and piss-stained, but I had no choice. It was my own safe island.

Mattress deal done I picked up my conversation with Haj.

'It seems pretty lawless in here,' I remarked.

'It is. Emirati guards don't come inside or patrol. They're too scared. We prisoners police ourselves,' said Haj.

My stomach tightened. I was locked in with hundreds of hardened criminals, some of them killers, and assorted crazies like the Palestinian. There were no guards. How could that be?

'He's the sheriff in Dodge,' said Haj, pointing to a man built like a four-hundred-pound gorilla.

‘He’s Abdul, an Emirati prisoner.’

The finger point from Haj was the man-mountain’s cue to make himself known and, as he closed in, I noticed his broad forehead and chubby cheeks dripped with perspiration. His very snug-fitting, three-quarter-length *dishdasha* was stained beneath his armpits and across his crotch area.

But his size and grubbiness weren’t his main distinguishing features. Abdul only had one functioning eye. His right one had been sewn up. Inmates nicknamed him: Cyclops.

‘Ah, Briteesh man, welcome!’ Cyclops roared during our first encounter.

His left eye stared me down; it had me mesmerised, it was unblinking, like a shark’s.

Short on small talk, Cyclops cut to the chase.

‘I can get you phone and anything else you want, but, you pay me fifty *dirhams* each time I help you, OK, Briteesh? Fifty *dirhams*, remember!’ he bellowed.

Fifty *dirhams* was about fourteen bucks and I was in no mood for bargaining with a one-eyed thug. I simply nodded.

‘Yes, sure, whatever you want.’

Cyclops had business elsewhere in Hotel Hell and, satisfied he’d marked my cards, he waddled off and left me to ponder how I was going to get some sleep.

Getting shut-eye amid the general din and fluorescent lights, which evidently burned day and night, wasn’t easy.

I’d purloined a dirty blanket and tried to doze, but then an orderly prodded me with a plate of rubbery chicken and rice I’d requested many hours before. I waved him away. I wasn’t hungry.

Just as my eyes closed again there was awful, unearthly cry.

‘Come on, you bastard, come on!’

‘I’m going to fucking kill you.’

Peeping from beneath my blanket, I recognised the man shouting death threats was Farid, the Egyptian I’d met earlier; no longer the placid, urbane businessman.

I could see he was already trading punches with a young Arab man who was obviously the aggressor, just a few feet away.

The battling duo edged closer, fists flying, and eventually one of them was stomping around on my mattress; I couldn’t see who because I’d buried myself beneath my blanket and I was praying I wouldn’t get hurt.

After a minute or so Farid's warrior cries, became moans of agony, then: silence.

I peeped out again. Farid was slumped on the floor in a heap. He'd been stabbed and his back slashed with a make-shift knife made from a toothbrush and two razor blades; the blades had been pushed into the melted end of the toothbrush.

The young Arab had abandoned his weapon and had already staggered away as bright, fresh, crimson blood, oozed from Farid's body and seeped toward my mattress.

Inmates who'd watched and cheered on the bloody brawl to its gory end, stepped forward and heaved Farid over their shoulders to carry him off to who knew where? They were like 'seconds' in a prize fight.

'Fat chance of him getting any medical help,' I said under my breath. At the same time, I thought about Farid's wife and kids.

Within minutes the chamber returned to normality, as if nothing had happened, and I never saw Farid again or found out whether he'd survived. I sincerely hoped he had.

For the rest of the night I laid on my mattress, thanking God I'd suffered no harm and reflecting on what had been the worst day of my life.

Only hours before I'd been in a luxury hotel, living it large, going about my normal business of making money like thousands of other expats. Whatever problem, the Emirates pilots had with me, I didn't deserve to end up like this. Yes, they'd lost their shirts; their life savings in some cases; but I had plans to refinance the deal and to compensate them.

Then, what would Susan, my wife, be thinking? She'd be at home worried sick because the office would have let her know I'd been arrested.

My mind was still racing as I did my best to get some sleep, already realising hope of freedom is the only true asset any prisoner has.

'Peter, you need to get a grip. Adapt to survive.' I told myself, as I stiffened my resolve to face whatever the next day might bring.

'Come on,' I muttered. 'You're Peter Margetts, a fit, forty-six-year-old and a self-made millionaire who's pulled himself up by his bootstraps from nothing.'

'You've come from nowhere, survived career ups and downs. You're as at home mixing with high-flyers on Dubai's golf courses and smart cocktail parties as you are downing a pint with the hoi polloi.'

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