

Castaway Heritage

By Stephen Silverwood

Introduction

The Eye of the Terrier

The thing about modern warfare is that you don't get to look into the eyes of your enemy. You don't get to clash swords across a battlefield or see the expression on their face as the killing blow is struck. You don't get to smell their fear or sense the fiery aura of their bloodlust. You don't even see their face.

These days there is a remote operator on the outward fringe of the battlespace jockeying a drone into position, or maybe a sniper lying in ambush half a mile away, their target little more than a CGI blip. For the target, death comes from above, like the finger-flick of a bored god on a row of dominos. Flick. Down you go. Bored. Next.

The orders, too, are issued remotely. No more lusty speeches by the general on horseback before the serried ranks, no more personal exhortations to glory. Just videos uploaded to YouTube or bulletins on news apps.

We have rendered warfare into a technological bureaucracy. Murder by paperwork.

And our bureaucracies have hardened into distant machines. Wait a year for an operation only to get the wrong surgery? Sure. Flick. Down you go. Wait a year for a court date and then adjourn it for another year because reasons? Flick. Terminate your disability benefits because you were too sick to attend an assessment? Flick. Exclude your kids because their GCSE predictions might bring down the school's rating? Flick. Imprison you in an immigration detention centre for administrative convenience? Flick. Next.

I have battled against the immigration department of the Home Office for twenty years through my work with refugees and asylum seekers and, to me, it represented the ultimate in remote bureaucracies. I saw it more as a living machine than an institution run by individual people. Just as single-celled organisms developed into more complex lifeforms, so too has mankind developed into more complex structures, I thought. The Home Office has become sentient. It lives, it grows, it breathes. It inhales desperation and exhales bits of paper. It feeds on human misery and excretes lucrative outsourcing contracts to private sector companies. It is faceless.

But last week I looked into its eyes. I looked into its eyes and they were human. They were human and they were the eyes of a total weirdo.

I was sitting in Courtroom Number One in the First-Tier Tribunal of the Immigration and Asylum Chamber at Taylor House, Clerkenwell. I was perched on the windowsill in the far corner of the room, closest to the judge's bench, because there were no more chairs left. The Appellant had a lot of friends and the room was filled with people who wanted to be there to support him. I didn't mind not getting a chair too much, as the sill was quite generous and it afforded a better view of the Appellant. It also unwittingly put me in the direct eyeline of the Home Office Presenting Officer. He was a small, skeletal man who looked compressed somehow and who had the habit of leaning his bald head forward on his neck at a certain angle that made him look like a bull terrier.

The Home Office Presenting Officer is like the prosecution lawyer in a criminal courtroom. They cross-examine the person appealing the refusal of their asylum claim (the Appellant) and put the case on behalf of the Secretary of State as to why this person should be denied immigration status in the UK. Except they are not lawyers, they are just civil servants. Bureaucrats.

The Home Office Presenting Officer had been battering the Appellant with a series of demeaning questions about his mental health, even asking him at one point, "Do you

think you are mad? Are you mad?”, to the extent that the Appellant was now rocking back and forth in his chair and the hearing had to be adjourned while he suffered a panic attack in the hallway outside.

The Home Office Presenting Officer shuffled his papers and glanced up. Our eyes met. I was idly thinking about how malicious he was, and how he had induced a panic attack in a vulnerable person and how it would be great if he were punished somehow by having, oh I don't know, feelings maybe?

He continued to look at me. Expressionless.

Ordinarily I should have softened my focus and just taken in the rest of the room gradually, quickly enough so that it looked like I had not been staring at him, but slowly enough so that it did not look like I was self-conscious about it. But I didn't. I thought, “Sod you, why you should I? You're not a very nice person. I don't care if you feel uncomfortable.”

He carried on looking at me. Right into my eyes.

He was dead ahead.

I realised that he was not planning to look away.

Time ticked by.

I grew up in London and lived on a rough estate. I am familiar with “glaring geezer stares” and have played this game before. He was giving me evils. We were now both staring each other down. Whoever could make the other one look away first would establish dominance.

But this felt odd. It was the wrong location for this sort of thing. You're better off in a pub or on the street. Not a courtroom.

It had already gone on for way longer than it should have.

The seconds continued to pass.

I hadn't meant for any of this. It was never my intention to engage in this kind of game. They are silly and childish. They are also hard to win if your enemy is demented enough.

I didn't want to play this game. But at the same time I was damned if I was going to look away first. I refused to punk out for this pitbull. Who the hell did he think he was?

If you feel uncomfortable when you are staring someone out then it means you have a gut feeling that you are inferior or that you have a lower status. I was not uncomfortable. Was I uncomfortable? I was not uncomfortable. I did not want to feel uncomfortable as that would make me feel uncomfortable.

I knew the Appellant well. I had known him for years. I knew how much he had suffered while this immigration appeal was going on. I felt like I owed it to him to keep staring back. No surrender. But it had gone on for a really long time now and I was starting to feel like I might start to feel uncomfortable if it didn't start stopping soon.

You can stare at another man for a matter of seconds and it's one thing, but once you start getting into double digits, and then into minutes, then you're either going to have to fight or you're going to have to kiss. I didn't massively feel like either would be appropriate.

Was I jeopardising the whole case? What if I just kept staring back and it drove the guy into a mad rage and caused him to be even more aggressive with his questions and that set off a chain of events that led to the Home Office winning the case? Maybe I was just being egotistical and selfish. Should I be a paolooka? Should I pretend to be yellow? Should I throw the fight for the good of the kids, like Jimmy Cagney at the end of Angels with Dirty Faces?

No: stop. I was being overly anxious. What “mad rage”? What “chain of events”? No. Don’t give in. You just happened to be looking at him, but he was the one who went and made it weird. You cannot add any further height to his ego. He must be stopped.

Time goose-stepped onwards relentlessly. Neither man wavered.

I started to wonder if I should smile. It might break the tension. But then it might let him off the hook and I wanted the contest to end but I didn’t want to let him feel good about it.

The Appellant still had not returned to the courtroom. I continued to sit on the windowsill. We continued to stare at each other while the air conditioning blasted the room with an unnecessary coldness.

Taylor House is a little fortress. You enter through a portcullis of x-ray machines while security guards fuss over your bag and make you take stage sips from your water bottles. It is a pantomime. Then you have to throw shapes while another security guard buzzes you with the handheld metal detector. Stand here. Turn around. Lift your arms up. Put your arms down. Put your left leg in. Put your left leg out. In, out, in out, shake it all about.

Then you go up in the lift to the waiting room. Receptionists standing behind thick glass. Chairs bolted to the floor. Trials listed on a long wall. Corridors snaking off through double doors.

Clumps of people mill about, each with their own role to play, each easily identifiable by their dress and the relative degree of terror on their face. You can spot the Appellants. The stooped shoulders, the backpack, the anxious relative by their side to lend support or, conversely, the void around them that signals the palpable absence of anyone lending support. Today some of them are Kurds, some are Punjabis, some are Somali, one or two could be Albanian. They have tried to dress smartly because this is their big day in court, after all, but they do not have access to the full wardrobe options of someone who is permanently resident in a country or the economic arrogance of dry cleaning. Maybe it is a worn patch on the elbow or an unconvincingly sponged foodstain on the cuff, or some other subtle indicator that they lack status.

You can spot the interpreters. They’ll have the same ethnicity as the Appellant but they’ll move more comfortably in the clothes. They’ll have a bounce to their heels that is otherwise absent from the Appellant’s gait that sets them apart immediately. They’ll be smiling. It will seem incongruous.

You can spot the representatives. Lawyers are all a type anyway, and barristers more so. The suit will be that little bit more expensive, that little bit more old-school. If you have been to Taylor House before you may even recognise a few of the faces. There’s the one who looks like Sam the Eagle. There’s the one that looks like a Pakistani Robert Kilroy Silk, and you enjoy the celebrity-simile purely because of how much it would irk the real Robert Kilroy Silk. There’s the one who has never met any of his clients before and is walking around calling out their name in the hope of finding them somewhere in the building.

Then there are the court staff, scurrying about as if their lives would be so much easier if everybody else would just go home instead of cluttering up the courtrooms and the corridors with their nonsense.

Then there are the Home Office Presenting Officers. Flitting like shadows in the hallways, hidden behind piles of paperwork. Ringwraiths. Nazgûl.

Bull terriers.

I don’t know how much time had passed. It could honestly have been hours.

I was still sitting on the windowsill staring directly ahead. The Home Office Presenting Officer was still sitting at his desk, staring straight back. His face refused to

betray his thoughts, but I caught a glint in his eye early on in the game and I knew that he was having a good time. This was his domain. Dominance would be his. He was certain.

I wondered what he saw when he looked at me. What would the Home Office see? Perhaps something in opposition to itself? In my mind he was a Witchfinder on a mission to expose the Appellant as a swindler. Perhaps he saw me as gullible, having been taken in by the Appellant's story. Perhaps he saw me as a bleeding-heart liberal, ready to believe any old rubbish. I don't know. Perhaps he simply saw me as one more enemy to be defeated in this, his ritual arena.

This was a pathetic game of his. But I was still playing. Why was I playing? I had started it but I still felt like it was not my game.

What was my exit strategy here? Would smiling help to disarm the game? To subvert the whole enterprise and display that I scoffed at convention? Or would it just look like I was trying to curry favour and therefore mean that I had lost the game? People who consider themselves to be superior are more likely to smile back at people they perceive to be inferior, but less likely to smile back at those they perceive to be superior to them. So if I smiled, and he smiled back, then that would mean that he perceived me to be inferior and I would have lost. But, if I smiled, and he did not smile back, then that would mean he perceived me to be superior. I would have won. Staring competition or not. But if I smiled at him in the first place, then this could be perceived as a sign of weakness, that I was trying to demonstrate that I was not a threat, and therefore demonstrate that I perceived myself to be inferior. But we were locked in a game of mutual intimidation: if I smiled and he refused to smile back, it might be because he knew I was just trying to unseat him, or even because he perceived me to be of equal status and knew that he could not defeat me, but had simply to maintain his own position as long as possible. Is this what was happening?

It was Vizzini's Dilemma and I could clearly not choose the wine in front of me.

But what to do?

We were both tough guys. OK. We had proved this. But now it had gone on way, way longer than was ordinary and now we were both being weirdly competitive and aggressive. But there was no way out.

Looking into his eyes was like looking into the soul of the Home Office. Here it was, finally, after all my years of battling the acephalous monster, I was face to face with... well, if not *the* head of the monster, at least *a* head of the monster. It should have been a moment of catharsis or at least confrontation: here I was, having struggled for decades to give a voice to the voiceless, now I was finally able to put a human face to the faceless, but there was nothing there. Just a hostile nothingness. The eyes of a bull terrier.

The judge shifted in his seat behind his big desk, jumbling huge bundles of legal files like a deck of playing cards swollen and unshuffleable after being left out in the rain.

The clock on the wall opposite the judge ticked. Tick.

The Appellant had still not returned to the room. His other supporters fidgeted about on their chairs. There were at least a dozen of them in the room and twice as many outside. Were they all just bleeding-hearts like me?

I did not look away. He did not look away.

The wall behind the Home Office Presenting Officer swirled off into space.

Cthulhu, undead in the gravity well of a black hole, spiralled infinitely, leaking foul nightmares.

There was nothing now, nothing, not the waterfall of time, not the ticking of the clock, not the chill of the air conditioning, nothing, just those two beady eyes, unblinking beneath a bald dome in a skull of a face. Nothing.

Why was he still staring back at me?

How long is it humanly possible to do this for?

Look away. Give it up, you psychopath. You are at work! This is not the time. What are you playing at?

Look away!

Why won't he look away?

Suddenly, in the periphery of my vision, one of the supporters stood up, and then a second, and then a third. They filed out of the room to check on the Appellant or to use the loo or to get a snack, I don't know, but, as they were filing out, other people were filing in, and bags were being moved and chairs were being swapped around and, with an instant subconscious knowledge of every permutation of meaning in the action, my eyes flicked over to see what was happening.

Flick.

The Home Office Presenting Officer looked over too.

Flick.

The spell was broken.

Thank god.

Neither of us looked back at each other.

In the foyer afterwards, I met up with some of the other supporters. A woman immediately said to me, "Did you see the guy from the Home Office? He was like a pitbull."

A few hours later, we were standing on the street outside of Taylor House. The Appellant had won his appeal. He had held his nerve despite the aggressive needling of the Home Office and his own rising terror. His representative had delivered a barnstorming speech and the judge had allowed the appeal, to the thunderous applause of the supporters. The Appellant could hardly believe his luck.

Jacob was there, too. You will find out more about Jacob later. But, anyway, Jacob was there and he produced not only a bottle of cold champagne but also enough cups for everyone to drink a toast.

"Congratulations!" we all said. "Congratulations!"

As we chatted excitedly about the trial, I overheard two male supporters talking. I could not believe what I heard.

One of them was telling the story about how, during the trial, he chanced to make eye contact with the Home Office Presenting Officer. He realised that the guy was trying to stare him down and he decided to stare back, refusing to be intimidated, but then the Home Office Presenting Officer did not look away for an obscene amount of time and he was unable to sustain it.

The man he was talking too was laughing. He had experienced exactly the same staring competition as well.

I rushed over and told them my story, and shared my relief at the moment when the other supporters had stood up and given me an excuse to break eye contact. It was hilarious that the Home Office Presenting Officer had played the same game with half the men in the room. We laughed at the absurdity of it and the foolishness of his masculinity (while I secretly told myself that I was probably the most manly as I held my gaze for much longer than either of the other two men).

"The guy was like a pitbull, wasn't he?" said one of them.

"Hey, look, there he is now!" said the other.

The Home Office Presenting Officer strode out of Taylor House as if he had won the case. He walked past us, earphones in, sunglasses on. It wasn't really a sunglasses kind of day but OK whatever.

The two men watched him closely.

"Who does he think he is?" said one of them.

"Quiet, he'll hear you," said the other

“I don’t care.”

“How do you think he sleeps at night?”

The thing is that he probably sleeps better than any of us, I told them. Unlike us, he doesn’t care. This whole thing is just a game to him, an exercise in domination and conquest. Just like all the other automata inside the machine of despair. There is no guilt inside a black hole. Maybe he believes that all of the Appellants are liars and that his job is to expose them or maybe he doesn’t care one way or the other. It doesn’t matter. We’re the ones lying awake at night. Not because we have committed deeds that are cruel, but instead because we have empathy for the suffering of others. We don’t feed off of it. We don’t use it as currency. We don’t exclude people from our sympathy purely because of the colour of their skin or their immigration status. We feel everything.

If you are reading this, then chances are you feel the same way too. Like those of us stood around outside Taylor House with our little plastic cups of champagne, you too lie awake at night for no reason you can understand. You too have failed to be remote.

Congratulations.