

The Chess Board

Jim Reay

Chapter 1

England. 16 December 2008

‘My self-esteem is not based on anyone else’s opinion of me.’

I shout with joyous defiance. I get that now. The traffic on the M4 whizzes busily past my westward-bound Mercedes, oblivious to my loud voice resonating inside the car. On this wet cold Tuesday, faint clouds of misty condensation puff above the dashing rows of vehicles, hurrying anonymously to be somewhere in the morning air, so much more fervent than on the sleepy highways of the Queensland Darling Downs, my home for the past many months.

The rented Merc is not a status statement, more a reflection of a performance requirement and availability.

I glance at my scrawled name, Spencer Avery, on the car rental agreement which I have tossed on the passenger seat. At one time, I would have been annoyed that my name and title hadn’t been neatly typed – or that the document hadn’t always have been carefully filed in the glove box. I’m so much more relaxed now as my powerful car coasts steadily onwards past Swindon and towards Bristol. Winter has stripped every tree branch; they all stand frozen; silent mournful fingers pleading to the heavens. I sense my lips curling into a smile. My zany humour has returned – I can look at the dreariness of the scene and feel the funny side – as I visualise those trees as statued sentinels, patiently waiting to be *re-leaved* by the next change of shift; to spring.

‘Don’t snow,’ they are saying – and I agree. I have grown to love a less chilling type of atmosphere. The meanings behind that thought maintain my grin, as the cruise control carries me along in the obedient

Chapter 7

Outside Berlin, East Germany. 28 August 1967

The side of his face was squashed against the weathered wood of the barn loft and his head hung motionless through the high hatchway. Pungent fumes of wood-tar oil from the door-framing stung his nostrils and slowly brought the soldier back to consciousness.

His right shoulder and hip were deadened from the shock of the bullets hitting. A Kalashnikov automatic rifle lay just beyond his grasp on the loft's wooden floor. With his head lolling through the high exposed opening and blood soaking his grey-olive uniform, he knew he would look lifeless to the Americans down below. He grew increasingly aware of the wind whistling like a choir of owls through leafy, summer branches.

As the soldier's right eye opened partly, grey shadows scudded in front of the waning full moon and stars, lighting the courtyard below in pulsating waves. The scene flickered frustratingly like an old black-and-white movie; but this was real, very real.

He could see Oleg on the ground of the courtyard below, his hands restrained behind his back, wincing in pain from the gory wound in his left thigh. The soldier listened to the voices from below.

'What's your name?' There was a cold menace in the American's tone.

'Oleg Davidenko,' came the reply; the Russian officer's eyes watched his inquisitor carefully. There was no way to avoid the gun which pointed towards Oleg. The two Americans whispered urgently to each other.

Chapter 14

Toowoomba. 29 April 2008

Peter sat alone on a verandah chair, thinking through the possibility of losing his mother so soon after this joyous reunion.

She was justifiably proud of his achievements; just what he had hoped for. Yes, he had done well. His mother was right. He had retained much of his Russian language, living with migrants in Queensland. There were memories of his early days growing up in the Donbas industrial area of the eastern Ukraine. His grandmother had worked in the coal industry offices – cleaning, his mother was in the army and his father was ‘away in GDR’, the German Democratic Republic.

It had seemed like a real adventure for a six-year-old to travel out to Australia to live with his extended family, Uncle Ivan and Aunt Nina. He remembered his mother’s tears at the airport. He was just going on a holiday with his aunt. He hadn’t understood till much later what had been so upsetting. His mother had always been away a lot. It had been his grandmother who had been caring for him most of the time – and she was grumpy, forever uptight and complaining.

The scent of that hug with his mother in Kiev had remained clear in his memory – the last time he had been in her arms. He had that image of her waving goodbye as he boarded the plane, the tears – and then the adventure had taken over.

Woolloongabba in Brisbane, his first home in Australia, housed many Russian immigrants. He had settled into the local schools, played soccer well, was good at maths and could speak two languages capably by the time he reached high school.

Chapter 30

The camp-fire crackled. We were all gathered around; seated on fallen tree trunks and camp chairs. Herbie's descriptions held us spellbound, his words creating such clear images in our minds; we could almost smell and hear the lowing cattle mobs being moved down wide stock routes and across the Channel Country. His words sounded almost poetic.

It was a world of horses, hobbled at night; men and their cattle dogs; friendships; teams working in harmony; rogues bending the rules as they killed an unbranded beast over the fence to provide fresh and salted beef for the trip.

'It sounds so romantic,' said Melanie wistfully. 'D'you know, I've never been on a muster. Seen them occasionally when we've travelled but we don't run cattle. Yet the old tracks still pass through our property. That's my bush heritage in northern New South Wales and along the Macintyre.'

I remembered her at the art gallery pointing out the paintings of an Australia now largely past. She had sounded nostalgic then too. In her lifetime, cattle were transported by road-train, not on the hoof. Herbie's stories brought history to life for us all.

'Yes,' acknowledged Herbie. 'They's all empty stock routes now – but we mustn't forget the history ... and the people who made it happen.'

He talked of Aunty Edna's father, droving right down into New South Wales. They'd called him 'Husk'. Edna had a dreamy look as she listened, no doubt picturing her dad droving a steaming mob over the Warrego or the Balonne or the Macintyre.

Melanie sat close. 'It's good to be able to call you Spencer, out here,' she said.

About the Author

Jim Reay is a former high school principal and senior public servant; now a writer of short stories and mysteries. Born a Scot and educated to post-graduate level in Britain, he worked in London for several years before emigrating to continue his career development. He brings a range of perspectives to his stories; from the land of his youth as well as his love of history, learning, culture and Australia.



www.jimreaywriter.net