



# PASSPORT, PLEASE



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## CHAPTER 1

# The Queen's House, the Clock, and the Beatles Street



For Themis, one of the best things about working the first shift of the day during the summer was watching the sun coming up. With the “auto-pilot” switched on, Themis drove to the airport. The dawn brought back vivid memories of the blue sea at Leme: beach vendors selling iced tea and *biscoito de polvilho*, Rio’s traditional beach snack, the feeling of salt on her body after spending a sunny day at the beach, and, more than anything, that atmosphere, so very familiar, but so, so far from her current reality. Now, proudly wearing her immigration officer’s uniform as a mark of what she had achieved, Themis was on her way to her first day at work. The six long weeks of training were over, and the role-playing with actors during the training course would now be replaced with real-life situations and actual people.

‘Good morning. I’m going to be your supervisor and mentor for the next few weeks’, said Balder. ‘We need to get a move on. The first flight of this shift is about to land’.

Everything felt calm at that moment. Three officers were taking their seats at fixed points where they would be spending the next hour. The chief immigration officer for that shift had already assumed his position at the watch house, a type of control room from where everything and everyone were vis-





ible and decisions – sometimes extremely difficult ones – were made.

‘So, how long have you been working in this field? And what made you decide to come to the airport?’ asked Balder.

‘I started working for immigration four years ago, but I found the work boring. I mean, there’s no fun in working with just documents and forms, is there?’ said Themis. ‘After a while, it all becomes very automatic. I needed something a bit more challenging, and I think working here with clients will make all the difference. I imagine that any questions about the process can be cleared up by directly asking the passengers instead of having to send them letters asking for documents, which was how we were required to do it when we were deciding on visa applications sent to us electronically or by post’.

‘Absolutely right!’ said Balder. ‘I mean, what’s the point of refusing entry to a passenger from a distance? Oh, and for the record, we’re not dealing with clients here. We’re not providing them with any kind of service. We’re working for the British government! Look at the passengers waiting for their arrival checks. What do you see?’

‘Passengers coming back from holidays, coming to do business, visiting their families?’ replied Themis with a nervous smile.





‘Every single one of those people is a liar until they prove to us that they’re not!’ said Balder, a more serious expression on his face this time around. ‘You see that passenger there, at the back of the arrivals hall? Look, he’s filling in his landing card. Look at the way he behaves. That passenger there is going to be your first refusal. Exciting, isn’t it?’

‘What do you mean, Balder?’ snapped Themis. ‘The guy’s done nothing wrong. No, I’m not going to refuse anyone entry without a good reason. No way!’

‘He’s not done anything wrong... yet!’ sneered Balder. ‘Don’t worry, we don’t refuse anyone without a good reason. You’re going to learn that the devil’s in the detail. In this job, you’ll soon see that it’s the small things that make all the difference. Look at this guy, for example. He’s already thrown at least half a dozen landing cards into the bin. For “normal” people, that might not mean anything, but not us – not the immigration rats. He’s nervous. Wait here a moment; don’t move’.

All Themis could think about was the comfortable decisions she used to make, from a distance, without suffering. If she refused someone a visa application, they could always make another application or even appeal the decision. *What about now though?* The arrivals hall was full of people. Officers were at their positions, vigorously stamping passengers’





passports; some of them asking questions, others waiting for an interpreter's assistance to make communication with the passengers possible. Waiting in queues, those people were carrying their dreams, desires, and ambitions in their luggage – a hope for better times, away from their countries of birth, far from the place they had once called home.

'Here he is', said Balder with an air of satisfaction. He had brought the passenger he was talking about to Themis' desk. 'Speak to him in Portuguese. He can't speak any English'.

'What is the purpose of your journey?' asked Themis, looking at Balder, not particularly in agreement with what he had just said.

'*Não falo inglês*', said the passenger, confirming that he did not, indeed, speak any English.

A faint smile played at the corner of Balder's mouth, but he remained silent.

'What's the purpose of your journey, young man?' Themis politely asked, this time in Portuguese, as she examined his passport.

'Holiday', he replied. 'You speak Portuguese. Cool!'

Themis checked the passenger's passport details on the borders and immigration control system and noted that he had an adverse immigration history. This could mean any number of things, but something stood out in this case. The young man





in front of her had had problems with a previous visa application.

‘Ask him if he’s ever had a visa refused in the past’, Balder impatiently said as she finished reading the alert message on the system. ‘I bet you a tenner he’ll deny it and swear on his grandmother’s life that he doesn’t know what you’re talking about!’

The message was telling her that this passenger had been refused a student visa less than a month ago. However, he was no longer travelling with the same passport he had used for the previous application, and as such, there was no record of this history in the travel document he was presenting her with now. It was customary practice for officers to write the number of the visa application on the last page of the applicant’s passport, and if his visa had been refused, this number would be underlined.

‘Balder, how did you...’, said Themis. She then turned to the passenger and carried on with the initial interview questions: ‘Have you ever faced any problem while applying for visas, either for the United Kingdom or any other country?’ she asked him.

‘No, never’, he replied, not even blinking.

‘Ask him if he knows anyone here’, said Balder. ‘And I don’t think I even need to tell you that I already know the answer!’

‘Do you know anyone here?’ Themis asked.





‘No, no’, the young man replied. ‘I’ve just come for a few days, on a holiday’.

‘So, why England?’ pressed Themis. ‘Why didn’t you choose some other country? One where you can speak the language, for example?’

‘Ah, because this place is cool, and it’s been my dream to visit here since I was a child’, he answered. ‘I always dreamed of seeing the clock and the Queen’s house and the street the Beatles crossed’.

‘Tell this fool to sit down’, said Balder. ‘In time, you’re going to see that people who aren’t telling the truth generally fall into this pattern. First, they don’t know anything about the destination they intend to visit. If it has been his dream since he was a kid, you’d expect him to at least know that the big clock is called Big Ben, the Queen’s house is Buckingham Palace, and the bloody Beatles street is actually called Abbey Road!’

‘OK Balder, calm down’, said Themis, trying to defuse the situation. ‘That doesn’t make him a liar though, does it? You haven’t even given him a chance to defend himself’.

‘Themis, I’m afraid you’re going to be very disappointed in your fellow humans’, said Balder. ‘That perfect world you think you know, it doesn’t exist. Since I began this job, I have stopped trusting even my own shadow! By the end of this shift, you’ll be





on your way to understanding this. At least I hope you will! You just watch. The Themis after working for the immigration service will be completely different from the one before you started here. Anyway, back to work. Come with me. I want to show you something’.

The two officers left the young man in the reserved waiting area, sometimes referred to as the ‘pan’, as they made their enquiries.

‘Let’s make a phone call’, suggested Balder.

‘To whom?’ asked Themis. ‘Buckingham Palace?’ she added ironically.

‘Oh, you’re funny’, said Balder. ‘No, someone far more interesting than that’.


Balder put the call on speakerphone so Themis could hear the conversation. It rang a few times before a woman answered, ‘Hello, information desk, how may I help you?’

‘This is Officer Balder, calling from immigration. Could you put a call out for me please?’ asked Themis’ mentor.

‘Of course’, replied the woman. ‘What do you need me to say?’

‘Please ask if there’s anyone waiting for a passenger called Felipe da Silva, arriving from São Paulo on flight PP8084’, Balder instructed the receptionist.





‘If anyone turns up, let me know and I’ll come down to you’.

‘No problem, Mr Balder’.

As they waited for the call from the information desk, the two officers printed out all the information on the passenger’s record, in particular, a copy of the student visa application form that had been refused, together with the reason for its refusal. The passenger had no idea about what was going on behind the scenes as he waited for the security checks to be carried out in the reserved area, alongside others who were also left to ‘simmer’.

*It’s like waiting in the wings for a theatre performance, thought Themis. The script, the costumes, the scenery – but here, someone’s future depended on the behind-the-scenes production.*

Themis’ thoughts went back to the time she had dreamed of being in her present position. She had newly arrived in the United Kingdom and was serving at the head of a never-ending queue of a fast food restaurant. She didn’t know much about the money, the culture, or the people, but she knew that, one day, she would be working on the other side of the street, at the Home Office, the headquarters of which were directly opposite the shopping centre where she worked. Her heartbeat quickened every time she saw someone in the queue wearing the ID



badge bearing the British Crown. How she would love to wear that pass one day – maybe even work at the airport!

‘Themis, I want to see these metal cupboards shining before we close for the day’, ordered the manager. ‘I want you to see your white face reflecting in the doors’.

Seven years later, those words still ate at her soul. She knew it had not been easy for her in the beginning, but that was just how it was for immigrants in countries far away from their homelands. When she mentioned to one of her co-workers that she would be wearing a badge bearing the British Crown one day, her colleague mocked her, reminding her that people like them did not get to work in those government positions, because they were nothing more than immigrants.

As these memories crossed her mind, Themis experienced a moment of sadness, but then she remembered that merely three years after those difficult beginnings, she had been successful in her application to join the civil service and began working in that same government department. In time, she had been invited to attend that very building, there, on the other side of the road – the building that, once upon a time, had been nothing more than an oasis in her imagination.





On her first day of work there, she had thought she would just be there for training. The manager asked her to go to the security office to have a photo taken for her ID badge. Placing that pass around her neck gave Themis a great feeling of encouragement and also the certainty that justice had finally been served. She then went on to work there, in that oasis, for four more years before she began work at the airport. On that first day of her new job, Themis crossed over the road at lunch time and went into the shopping centre. She walked past her old workplace and saw that everything inside was just as it used to be: the same workers who did not believe in their own potential and the same manager who had bullied her so badly. It was as if no time had passed at all.

Themis left her reverie as a message came over the internal tannoy system:

‘Officer Balder, please come to the watch house. A call is waiting for you’, announced a voice.

Themis looked sceptically at Balder. She could not believe it could be someone from the information desk outside the terminal.

‘Yes, this is Balder’, said the officer. ‘Felipe’s girlfriend? We’re on our way’.

‘Come on, come on’, Balder impatiently urged Themis, grabbing his interview notebook and a ball-point pen with the lid missing. ‘Put your personal





stamp in your locker. We can't take that through security to the other side of the terminal'.

They passed through security and travelled down the escalator to the first floor. Arriving at the information desk, they found a young woman waiting for them.

'Good morning. We're from immigration, and we'd like to know if you're waiting for someone?' Balder asked.

'Yes, that's right', the young woman replied. 'Felipe. He's my boyfriend. He's coming to stay with me here in the UK for about six months. I'm studying here, but he couldn't get a visa. Is he OK?'

'Felipe's fine', replied Balder. 'I just have a few routine questions for you', he said, looking at Themis and taking down every detail in his notebook. 'Does your boyfriend know that you're here at the airport, waiting for him?'

'He knows, yes', said the girl.

'Does Felipe have a job in Brazil?'

'No, he's unemployed at the moment, but his dad helps him out from time to time'.

'And how does your boyfriend think he's going to support himself here for six months? I mean, six months is a long time'.

'He's just coming to keep me company', she replied.



‘Thanks for your help. We’ll contact you if we need any more information’.

The jigsaw was starting to come together to reveal a picture, but a lot of pieces were still missing. Despite this, Balder appeared to be in no doubt as to how the case would end. He behaved as though he already knew everything there was to know about this young man.

*Maybe he’d just got lucky? Yes, that must be it. How is it possible for someone just to look at a passenger from a distance and know all of that?*

Once they were back at the terminal, delayed after getting stuck in an infernal queue behind the crew of an Air India aircraft, Balder and Themis went to the passenger arrivals area and retrieved Felipe from the pan.

‘Just to make me feel better, can I ask him again what he came to do here?’ asked Themis, still struggling to come to terms with Balder’s verdict on this young man.

‘Ask whatever you think you need to. After all, you’re the officer in charge of this case’, Balder said encouragingly. ‘When you’ve got a bit of experience in this job, you’ll see how two or three questions are generally enough to know what sort of a person you’re dealing with’.





‘OK’, said Themis, still somewhat unconvinced. ‘Felipe, please tell me again the reason for your visit to the United Kingdom’.

‘Tourism. I came for a couple of weeks to see the place’, he stated once more.

‘Do you have a return ticket to Brazil?’ she asked him.

‘Yes...’, said Felipe, taking a crumpled piece of paper from the pocket of his jeans.

‘And where are you going to stay?’ she asked.

‘In a hostel, but I only paid for a couple of nights’, he replied, doing his best to convince Themis. ‘In case I wanted to go and stay somewhere else’.

‘Here we go!’ Balder sceptically exclaimed. ‘Same old story. Themis, please explain to this gentleman that he is detained as of now and that we’re going to confiscate his passport and luggage for further enquiries. Fill in the IS81<sup>6</sup> form that explains the legal grounds that give these powers to immigration officers. But before we take him to the holding room, tell him that we need to see his luggage’.

‘Felipe, we just need to check a few things regarding your journey to the United Kingdom’, explained Themis. ‘While we do that, we’re going to ask you to wait in our internal waiting room, where you’ll be more comfortable and can have something to eat

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Notice to a Person Required to Submit to Further Examination’; this document permits the detention of passengers in order to carry out further investigation.





and drink. First, though, we need to collect your luggage. How many bags did you bring with you?’

‘Two’, he replied.

‘Two cases for a two-week holiday?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, I didn’t know if it was going to be cold or not, so I thought it would be best to bring more clothes just in case I needed them’, Felipe replied.

The two officers led him to the baggage hall, where his were the only suitcases still going around on the carousel. The other passengers on his flight had already gone through immigration checks and collected their belongings. A calm atmosphere had been restored to the terminal, at least until the arrival of the next plane. Felipe, though, was starting to show signs of discomfort at having been held there for so long.

On opening the cases, Themis and Balder were surprised at the number of chocolates and wrapped gifts stuffed into the pockets of the cases.

‘We have to open these gifts for security purposes’, explained Themis. ‘Why have you brought along so many presents if you don’t know anyone here?’ she asked.

‘Erm... I... well...’, said Felipe, confused. ‘I might meet up with my cousin. She lives in Europe’, he offered after a long moment of hesitation.

‘Ah’, said the officers, looking at one another.






Returning to the second floor of the terminal, they led Felipe to the holding room – or, as Themis preferred to call it, ‘the waiting room’. Once he was in there, the assistant immigration officers would take his fingerprints and photographs. These biometric details would then be entered into a database that would carry out a search of the British immigration system across the world. Any information related to an adverse history on the passenger’s record, at any British port of entry or visa application post, anywhere in the world, would be there.

While the identification process was underway, Balder and Themis prepared to interview the passenger. They had already sent over the details of the situation to the chief immigration officer on duty and entered all the information into the system. They had also prepared a file containing all the information collected about Felipe so far – his arrival, the initial desk interview, findings in his luggage, and other observations that had been made, including the details of the interview with Maria, his girlfriend.

‘Standard procedure is for the officer to speak with the passenger directly, in their own language. This is only permitted in cases where the officer – as is the case with you, Themis – has the authority and the appropriate linguistic qualification issued by the border agency’, explained Balder. ‘However,





to make the conversation easier between the parties, we'll use an interpreter this time. That way, you won't have to translate everything for me while simultaneously making the case notes'.

'OK Balder', agreed Themis.

They arrived at the interview room in the holding area. Felipe was already waiting for them. It was a medium-sized room. Themis could see a cold drinks machine and another vending machine with crisps and snacks. There was a public payphone, a television, a toilet, and, at the back, three interview rooms. Outside, there were two security guards, who were responsible for taking care of security and providing assistance to the passengers. They recorded the times at which people went in and out, including officers, and provided microwaved meals to detainees who wanted to eat lunch or dinner while they were in the 'waiting room'. Just ahead of this area, there was another room where the detained passengers' bags were stored. Balder asked one of the security guards to open the door so Themis could take a peek inside.

'It's like the suitcases are alive in here', laughed Balder.

'What do you mean?' asked Themis.

As they opened the door, they were met with a cacophony of beeps and buzzes from various mo-





bile phones. These, no doubt, were calls from the detainees' relatives, friends, partners, and bosses, who were waiting outside and wanted to know what was going on. Those who got in touch with immigration would be given the number of the public payphone in the holding room, and this was the only way in which they would be able to contact their loved ones. Very often, a number of hours would pass before this contact was possible. This helped the officers, who preferred to speak to passengers before they contacted the people waiting outside for them. The credibility test was essential for the investigative work of the officers, who compared the responses given by all parties involved.

'Why aren't they allowed to keep their phones on them?' Themis asked somewhat naively.

'Unless you want your face and your identity broadcast live all over Facebook or YouTube, I don't think it's a great idea for us to let them have smartphones in there', said Balder, laughing. 'We only let them keep their phones if they don't have a camera. All detainees are searched before they go into the holding room, not just to see if they're carrying phones, but also to make sure that they're not hiding any pointed objects that could be used as a weapon against one of us'.





‘Blimey!’ exclaimed Themis. ‘I hadn’t thought about that’.

Even the Bic ballpoint pens were tied to the table and had their caps removed. Themis now understood why Balder always took the caps off his pens. All the tables and chairs in the room were screwed to the floor, and alarms and CCTV were installed all around the interview rooms for the safety of everyone. Balder told Themis that, on one occasion, a passenger had stabbed a pen into an officer’s hand.

‘Felipe, can you please come into the interview room with us?’ Themis asked. ‘Are you feeling OK? You understand the interpreter?’

‘Yes’, he replied.

‘What is the purpose of your trip to the United Kingdom?’ enquired Themis.

‘I’ve already told you this several times!’ he replied impatiently.

‘I want you to tell me again’, said Themis. ‘We’re formally interviewing you this time. Everything you say here will be recorded on your file. At the end of the interview, we’ll make a recommendation to our chief immigration officer as to whether you should be granted permission to enter the country or refused entry. And I should point out that it is a crime to lie to an immigration officer. Do you understand everything I just told you?’





'Yes', said Felipe, somewhat calmer now.

Themis repeated her question.

'So, as I was saying, what is the purpose of your visit to the United Kingdom?'

'Tourism'.

'How long do you intend to stay?' asked Themis, writing down all the questions and answers on the passenger record sheet.

'Two weeks'.

'Do you know anyone in the United Kingdom, either British people or citizens of other countries?'

'No, no one', he said. 'I came on my own, and I'll stay on my own'.

'So, how do you explain the gifts and chocolate inside your case?'


'Like I said, they're for my friend who lives in Europe. She might come over to meet me here'.

Friend! thought Themis, incredulously. 'When we were looking through your suitcases, you told us that you had a cousin in Europe', she said. 'So, what is she, your friend or your cousin?'

'Well, to be honest, she's a friend, but we think of ourselves as cousins because we grew up together'.

'Have you ever made any type of visa application for the United Kingdom or any other country?'

'No', he replied emphatically.



‘Are you sure?’ Themis persisted. ‘Are you categorically telling me that you have never applied for a visa to the United Kingdom?’

Themis found herself starting to agree with Balder. She was overwhelmed by a mixture of feelings. Sitting there in front of her was a fellow human being – someone from the same country as she – who was lying in a way that was almost convincing.

*How can someone lie so openly – he’s not even blinking – and worse, without feeling the slightest bit bad about it,* thought Themis.

Up until this moment, she had really believed that Felipe would, at some point, own up to the whole thing and admit that he was actually there to meet up with his girlfriend, who was spending the year in the United Kingdom as a student.

‘So, to sum up...’, concluded Themis. ‘You’re coming to the United Kingdom, this is your first time outside of Brazil, you don’t know anyone here, and you’ve come for a two-week holiday to see the Queen’s house, the clock, and the Beatles street, right?’

Before Felipe could come up with another fabricated response, Themis opened his file in frustration and showed him a copy of the visa application he had made in Rio de Janeiro less than a month before. She also showed him a copy of his previous



passport and a copy of the visa belonging to Maria, his girlfriend, who was waiting for him outside.

‘So, who is Maria?’ asked Themis, somewhat annoyed. ‘And this passport here? Who’s this, your doppelganger? And this student visa application with your signature on it, that’s not yours I suppose? Look Felipe, I’ve defended you from the start. I really thought you were going to tell me the truth when we came in for the interview. But you’ve really let me down.’

‘Well done, Themis’, said Balder with pride in his voice. ‘I think we’ve got our newest immigration officer in the terminal. I’m sorry if that was a bit difficult for you, but there’ll be thousands more like him’.

‘I didn’t know that I had to tell you my girlfriend was here’, said Felipe. ‘I’m sorry if I didn’t tell you the truth’.

‘Felipe, unfortunately, I have to refuse you permission to enter on this occasion’, said Themis. ‘As I explained at the start of our interview, lying to an immigration officer is an offence. In addition to being refused entry, you’ll be banned from entering the United Kingdom for the next ten years. Don’t worry, we’ll let Maria know of our decision. I’ll give her the internal contact number so she can call you if she wants to’.



‘Can you give her the gifts I brought for her?’ he asked.

‘Unfortunately, that isn’t allowed for security reasons’, explained Themis.

‘We’ll make the necessary changes to your ticket, and you’ll be returned to Brazil on the next available flight. We’ll be in touch with you again once we’ve spoken to our chief immigration officer. If you’ve understood everything, please sign here at the bottom of your interview notes. See you later’.

Themis and Balder left the room to take care of the paperwork necessary to send Felipe back to Brazil. They handed over the summary of the interview to the chief immigration officer and then called the airline company to inform them that a refused passenger would be returning to Brazil on the next flight that evening. Refused passengers always had priority seats. Even if the flight was fully booked, the airline was obligated to remove a checked-in passenger in order to make room for the detainee on board. Very often this led to bad feeling between airline workers and immigration officers; however, they were required by law to take the refused passengers. This was the main reason airlines required passengers to have return tickets, unless they held a valid entry visa for the United Kingdom.





Back in the changing rooms, Themis removed the insignia from her uniform and placed it in her locker, together with her personal stamp. Her first shift was coming to an end, and while she knew that she had done what she had to do, she could not help thinking about Maria, who must now be returning home alone. Felipe was on his way back to Brazil, having seen nothing of London other than the airport. He was going back to the same old life in the knowledge of one thing for sure: it would be a long time before he would be able to visit the Queen's house, the clock, and the Beatles street.





