

Ralph gets a surprise at work

The farming company in Cambridgeshire was called FGP. Ralph was giving a presentation to a customer on the sources of their year-round supply of garlic when the call came from a very pompous sounding City lawyer.

“I need to talk to you Mr Phillips. Private matter. Nothing to worry about old boy. I’ll come to you. Can you find somewhere quiet we can have a chat? Sure it’ll be to your advantage. It’s about a small inheritance. Could you bring some ID? A passport? Just a formality. Any old passports might be helpful. Just to fill in the gaps.”

The white van parked in a lay-by on a quiet lane, flat Fen farmland all around. It was wet, raining hard. A man got out and put a barrier around an imaginary hole.

“Lovely weather,” he said in Zulu.

“English only,” said Angel.

Angel turned to another man watching a monitor. An image from a small camera attached to a man’s suit lapel was flickering on and off.

“Good for sound and vision Chief,” said the man.

The flickering image of an office reception area appeared. Angel could hear the receptionist on the telephone.

“Fresh Grown Produce, good afternoon.”

In a refrigerated cold store Ralph in a white coat was in heated discussion. There was a problem with a load, the quality poor. A load speaker boomed over the noise of fork lift trucks moving pallets, beeping as they reversed. ‘Visitors for Mr Phillips’.

Ralph met them in reception, two men. The older lawyer who had called was very tall and wearing a dark suit and a younger man, Ralph assumed his assistant, had a military short haircut. He led them to a meeting room.

“Will this take long? You mentioned an inheritance. I’m not expecting anything.”

In the van Ralph’s image appeared on the monitor and his voice came through the headsets they are wearing.

“Is that your man?”

Angel shrugged.

The lawyer talked with his head bowed, as though even while sitting he was too tall for the room.

“Well hopefully there won’t be any misunderstanding. May I just ask to see your passport?”

A knock on the door interrupted them.

“Excuse me,” said Ralph.

The people Ralph had talked to in the cold store came into the meeting room, their white coat tails flapping like tropical birds. Ralph asked them some questions.

“Tell them to pack as much as they can, at least enough to cover the suppliers freight costs.”

The supplier was useful, a good farmer, the customer liked him. It wasn’t the farmer’s fault that the weather had turned wet and unseasonably cool in Greece.

“And get out that temporary specification that allowed for poorer quality. Like that Argentinean load.”

“Ronaldo’s?”

“No, his is always good. The other Argentinean.”

Ralph would talk to the customer as soon as he could get rid of his visitors.

“And tell the technical department it’s their own fault they haven’t had residue analysis back. I took them samples myself over a week ago.”

Ralph turned back to the lawyer. The younger man was taking notes, filling in a form from the details on Ralph’s passport.

In the van, Angel looked at Ralph on the monitor.

“Is it him?”

Angel thought of Elanza. He pulled his boom microphone toward his lips. The young man in the office taking notes touched his ear.

“Ask him how he spells his first name. Ask him exactly if it is Ralph with an f or ph,” Angel said.

In the meeting room, the man repeated the question to Ralph.

Ralph smiled. Looked at him and then looked out of the window. It was raining harder and only three in the afternoon but it felt nearly night. He remembered the sun of Africa, of his trip Cape Town to Cairo, of Elanza, his first time.

“It’s in my passport.”

“Please Mr Phillips. Is it Ralph with an f or ph?”

“It’s with an R.”

In the van Angel looked at him. It was over.

“That’s our man,” he said.

The technician in the van repeated it to the meeting room. The man taking notes touched the elbow of the old lawyer and nodded. The lawyer became less pompous, as though it had been an act. He was very professional, competent. He looked at Ralph.

“Mr Phillips, may I ask you a question?”

Ralph said nothing.

“Just out of curiosity, if you could do anything, go anywhere, what would that be?”

Ralph looked at him. He thought of the problems, the never-ending stream of issues, the people he had to appease to make it work, every day.

“I’d get a boat and I’d sail away.”

The rain thundered against the windows. It was pouring wet and nearly dark.

“Somewhere sunny.”