

A CHANGE OF KEY

THE STARMART'S GOT a new owner; it seems to change hands every time the wind changes. Another young Indian couple – she's pregnant, leaning heavily on the counter, and Marko has to say 'Excuse me' so he can slide the day's newspaper from the pile under her elbow.

'Cold isn't it,' she says with a bright, tired smile. 'Gives me chilblains.' She shows him her red swollen fingers.

Chilblains. Now there's a word. Marko nods. He tucks the paper under his arm and the shop bell buzzes as he goes out the door.

The darkness is coming quickly, and he slaps his way faster across the car park. The seven floors of the building loom above him in

chunks and squares of light and dark, and the lights are already on in the lobby. In the lift he unfolds the paper as usual to take a quick look at the front page.

And slumps hard against the wall of the lift.

The lift doors shush open then close again at his floor, the lift travels to a higher floor, someone gets in, the lift goes to the ground floor, a voice says, 'Are you getting out?' Then it says, 'Are you okay?' Marko nods. He makes himself stand up and press the button for his floor. He makes himself walk along the corridor, he fumbles with the lock until somehow his door opens, he moves his legs until he is beside his bed, then he falls flat onto it. The newspaper crunches up under him.

Then he makes himself sit up and turn on the light.

He spreads the paper out on the bed, and there, at the top of the front page, the small headline: *MP Claims KGB Spy Living Here*, and a thumbnail photo. On page five he finds the full story, with the photograph. A grainy picture of a man disappearing into the front

entrance of a building. The doorway could be anywhere. But it's not anywhere, it's these flats. And the man is him. Hardly recognisable, but enough. He reads the story. An Opposition MP has asked a question in Parliament of the Minister of Immigration – if she's aware of the presence in New Zealand of a man identified as being an informant for what was known as the KGB, later the FSB. The man is known to be a fluent Russian speaker. How is it that New Zealand's immigration system is so lax it allows such people to enter the country? The Minister's reply – that their screening system is robust, and there is no evidence that the man has any current connection with the Russian spy agency.

The MP has tabled the photograph. What does that mean, *tabled*? That they could print it?

There isn't much to the article, just a couple of paragraphs. But it's a grenade.

Marko can't breathe. He'll die here on the bed from not breathing. He crashes into the bathroom and throws cold water over his head, and his breath starts again in long rasping

gasps. He stumbles to his front door – he left it wide open when he came in, and he looks out into the corridor but there’s no one there, and he slams the door and locks it. Then he sits down on the bed again and tries to read the article more slowly. But the words are sliding away from him and he can’t read anything.

It’s hardly identifiable, the photo. But the bookseller recognised him. That’s why he called him a traitor.

A traitor.



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