

In memoriam David Lean

Credits

i owe thanks to all those
who encouraged me to
write, cheered me up
when i was in despair,
covered my dates,
kept my back free
and gave me courage,
when i needed it most.
thank you, dagmar, for
holding up the mirror to me,
olivia for the loving
caring.
thank you all for advice, patience
and love.

Eric Seger

The Tin Man

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A cool breeze swept across the beach, taking with it whatever stood in its way, propelling it a little ahead of it and depositing its cargo artfully on dunes stretching across the beach like wave valleys. Grains of sand swirled through the air and settled like small, hidden works of art on driftwood, dried-up algae and garbage discarded by human hands. They paused for a while, only to be whisked away to the other corner of the beach by the next gust of wind. They tirelessly covered up the flotsam and jetsam, making seaweed, which looked like upright tufts of hair from the dunes, disappear without a trace. From behind a large slate-grey piece of rock, on the wind-protected side, they fell by the thousands onto an earthly cover and formed a new sand dune. Being half-covered by the sand, a male corpse lay on his back, staring with open eyes into the grains of sand that trickled over the edge of the rock onto his face. A large gash gaped from the hairline across the skull, and hundreds of small crabs were busily tampering with the blood-smearing opening.

Constable Angus O'Malley stared at the animals in disgust. At times he was overcome by the desire to stomp on the critters with his coarse boots, flatten them, maltreat their skulls as well as the one with which they were engaged, yet he turned abruptly away and left the dead to them, if only for the sake of reverence.

"Damn," he said, and once again, "Damn!" stomping his boot on the ground while whirling new grains of sand into the wind.

His deputy, Constable Michael O'Keefe, meanwhile, squatted in the sand several feet from the body, puking up the last three days' worth of food from his stomach. O'Malley no longer knew which side to turn, on one his deputy was vomiting, the stench of which was drifting to him on the wind, on the other

a corpse at least two days old was gorging itself and spreading the sweet - sour scent of a Chinese meal.

Angus O'Malley was used to bad smells, especially when thinking of the pub in the village, however, this was clearly too much for him. He angrily stomped through the loose ground towards his service bike, which he had carelessly flung into the sand when he arrived at the beach, lifted it up by the handlebars and nimbly swung himself into the saddle once he reached the road. He pedaled as if there was a prize to be won by the end of the road, while trying to avoid every pothole along the way, a feat that he managed very poorly and was accompanied each time by a curse. His hands gripped the bicycle handlebars until his knuckles stood out white. From the outside, it appeared as if he was about to tear the bike to pieces, but O'Malley was only trying to remember the moment when the girl from the bakery O'Ryan had shown up in his guardroom an hour ago and informed him that there was a man down on the beach with a hole in his head and that he should please go and see.

"Damn!" The puddle almost tore the handlebars from his hands, causing the water to seep through his boot and onto his sock. The road to the entrance of the village seemed endless. At nearly fifty years old, O'Malley puffed toward the farm as if he had climbed Saint Patrick's Mountain in record time.

Gasping, he leaned his service bike against the barn wall and was shaking his head back and forth, swaying, by the time Farmer Reily, sitting on his tractor outside the barn door, asked him:

"Hey, Angus, is some ghost after you?" He climbed down from the vehicle and walked toward O'Malley.

"You may get right back on and ride with me to the beach," the policeman gasped, using the sleeve of his uniform to dry his face, which was covered with beads of sweat, and his

slightly graying hair, which was sticking to his head, soaking wet.

"Why would I do that, huh?" asked Farmer Reily, scratching his butt.

"Because I'm telling you. Get that trailer and step on it so we can get to the beach!" O'Malley climbed onto the machine and peered around for the farmer, who was still standing in the same spot, grinning stupidly at him.

"Come on, there's a body waiting for you!"

"A dead body? ...On the beach?"

"Well get on with it, or are you going to wait for the dead man to reincarnate?"

O'Malley smirked as he noticed the rigid expression on Sam Reily's face as he mechanically hitched up the trailer, then swerved out of the yard driveway at full throttle and seemed to be hovering over the holes in the asphalt.

Down on the beach, O'Malley peered over the fence separating the road from the beach to check that nothing had changed. The gray-green waves were still crashing against the beach, and his constable was still crouched in the same position he had left him, as well as the body was still in the same place, no matter how much he wished it wouldn't be there when he got back.

"How did he get here? Did he wash up?" yelled Sam into the dying engine noise, eyeing the corpse with concern.

"Why, do you know him?" asked O'Malley, assuming Sam recognized the body.

"No, no... I don't think so!" He took a step closer to the dead man. "Or do you? No, I'm sure I've never seen this guy before. At least not around here in Lahinch!" Sam scratched his butt. O'Malley watched him do it, thinking about how certain people, when they were nervous, scratched their heads or chewed

their fingernails; Sam was different, fingering his backside.

"So, you're sure about this. O.k., then help me load the man up!"

"What, load him up? I'm not touching a dead body, I'm not crazy! That's bad luck. Why don't you call your deputy..., what's O'Keefe doing back there?" It was only now that Sam had noticed him and waved over. "Sitting there like an old cocker taking a dump!" Turning to O'Malley, "Now come on, you're needed, there's work for you!" barked Sam against the wind, which was now picking up strongly again, reigniting the game with the sand as before.

O'Keefe moved slowly toward them, glancing briefly at the corpse, with the corners of his mouth vibrating and his Adam's apple undergoing wild twitches. Dangling from his neck was a camera, with his clothes smelling strongly of vomit. The deputy turned on his heel, put his hand in front of his mouth, and headed back to where he had come from.

"What's the matter with him? Look at that!" Sam looked from one to the other. "Stinky as a lord he refuses to work! Well, I'll be damned!"

"Leave him and you help me." O'Malley dragged the dead man by his boots to the trailer.

"No such thing," Sam waved his hands defensively.

"Touching dead bodies is bad luck. Heck, I wouldn't even carry my old Betty packed in a coffin anywhere, much less one I don't even know."

By now, O'Malley had leaned the dead man, who stared at him with cracked eyes, against the trailer while the little crabs lingered quietly at the wound.

"Oh, but drunkenly laying on top of her when she can't breathe from asthma, that can do!" O'Malley heaved the body onto the loading bridge, gasping like he had been doing half an hour before.

"Who says so?" demanded Sam to know.

"Never mind about that. Now get your mill started so we can get out of here before the whole village gathers around because of your noise." Angus O'Malley hauled an old tarp over the body of the corpse so that he wouldn't have to look at the angry arthropods that were in turn tampering with the wound, meanwhile Sam started the tractor and, with a wild look on his face, set off on the road home. Halfway down the road, a man on a bicycle came toward them, his eyes roaming over the trailer, catching sight of the half-covered body. Stopping, he braked sharply, hitting a particularly deep pothole, and falling over the handlebars onto the road. He was babbling confusedly, half dazed by the fall, half dazed by what he had seen, when the deputy found him sitting on the side of the road minutes later.

"Where do you want it?" wanted Sam to know as they pulled up to the edge of the village. He lifted his foot off the gas pedal and looked questioningly at O'Malley.

"Into the firehouse, nobody will find it there any time soon." O'Malley aimed his finger in the direction of an old barn that had been converted into a fire depot. Grinning, Sam put his heavy boot back on the pedal, causing the engine to acknowledge with a puff of black smoke from its towering exhaust.

The decrepit barn doors, all looking tanned from the constant change in weather, howled on their hinges, reluctantly revealing the entrance. O'Malley pushed and shoved the gates open wide enough for Sam to reverse the trailer into park, unhitch it, and exit the shed again, before carefully locking the gates from outside.

"Next time you drive by my precinct, why don't you toss my bike off the trailer and... keep your mouth shut, goes without

saying, doesn't it?" addressed O'Malley to Sam with an officious undertone in his voice. The latter swallowed hard and managed a nod before giving his tractor the spurs and disappearing in a cloud of soot.

Walking down the main street to his precinct, Angus O'Malley couldn't rid himself of the suspicion that he was being watched. His eyes registered slight movement on the curtains of windows, even though the street lay deserted before him. House doors were frantically closed as he approached, prompting him to wonder if the villagers might have had something to do with the affair on the beach. He had abandoned the thought by the time he pushed open the door handle to the police station. A faint stench of vomit, mixed with tobacco smoke, lay heavy in the room. Nothing was to be seen of his deputy, except from the toilet he heard muffled scrubbing noises, and then the toilet flushing. Michael O'Keefe stepped out of the door, as white as a sheet covered with wet stains on his uniform, giving a fragile impression of human weakness.

He headed for the desk without looking at his supervisor, and with awkward gestures made a pass at it. O'Malley watched him with a suspicious grin.

"Well, are the photos all developed yet? Can I take a look at them?"

"No, of course not. I just got here and had to clean up first, but I'll have them developed in about fifteen minutes..." O'Keefe stood up, grabbed the camera, and disappeared into the darkroom down the hall.

The old, slightly rotten office chair creaked under O'Malley's weight as he plopped himself into it. Angus's eyes drifted over the opposite wall and lingered on the picture, hanging at a slight angle on a nail, portraying the current president of the

Republic of Ireland. How fleeting, he thought, not taking his eyes off it. With one foot draped on the desk and his arms folded behind his head, O'Malley stared at the figure, which gazed unabashedly at him with soft-lidded eyes. He wondered why the walls of all the offices in the world are plastered with portraits of people who mean nothing to the people who work there, and why they don't hang up pictures of the officers' relatives, such as father and mother, or the picture of the precinct commander's wife, in which case his wife Imelda would now be hanging there on the wall, telling him perhaps intuitively how he should solve the case. With his left hand, O'Malley searched for the phone book, which lay diagonally down in a drawer. He had come to the decision that this case was probably beyond the scope of a village policeman in a small precinct in the middle of nowhere. His job had nothing to do with researching other people's lives, his job was to maintain order in the village and to prevent excesses by blokes who all too often gave the dark stout in the pub the opportunity to drown their brain matter. As he began to turn the dial on the black machine, his deputy came out of the darkroom and slammed the photos down on his desk. O'Malley dropped the phone at what he saw.

"What the hell is this? These are the photos you took on the beach? You can't be serious?" Angus looked at his subordinate with wide-open eyes. "You're really serious, I don't believe it. What am I supposed to do with these pictures?" While saying that, he held up four photos. "And then so many? You're really talented, I'll give you that. After all, who manages to snap an entire film in one morning, of which only four pictures are of any use? On the first one you can see a leg, probably of the dead man, on the second one a blurred skull, I suppose also of the corpse, and now comes the most beautiful photo, number three..., your vomit in close-up razor sharp! Pity that it's

only in black and white and not in color, since one would really feel sick when looking at it. Oh, and number four, a really nice landscape shot, congratulations, you're a born photographer!"

"I can't help it if the sight of dead bodies makes me sick. I also can't go to a hospital without it upsetting my stomach," O'Keefe grumbled, still looking as ashen in the face as he did on the beach.

The three-minute rain that poured down on Lahinch smelled of fish and salt. Nevertheless, O'Malley darted outside the precinct door to look for the detective's car, which was due to arrive from Tralee. After speaking to the district judge hours ago on the telephone and giving him a precise account of the facts of the case, the latter promised to send him his ablest man. O'Malley did not think much of city people who invaded his territory, who had no idea of the country and its people yet could not control their loose mouths. He was only half finished with the thought when a car pulled up to him, body swaying, and came to a stop in front of the office. The black sedan's door opened a crack, only to be closed again immediately afterward. Angus O'Malley tried to catch a glimpse inside, of the passengers, though, to his chagrin, saw only an umbrella that had been opened too soon, that is, already in the car. Hectic broke out, voices were raised, until finally the door was opened a second time and a lean man in his mid-fifties revealed himself under the umbrella as the best man from the Criminal Investigation Department in Tralee. Grey was the color of his face, and piercing eyes behind rimless glasses whose lenses mirrored every movement of his head did not make the black-haired man, whose razor-sharp voice sounded commanding, seem any more likeable.

"Are you the precinct commander, or are you just doing the doorman here?"

A slight shiver ran down O'Malley's spine. There was a particular accent to the voice, and he thought he had heard it somewhere before. Without answering, but with a little sideways motion with his head, O'Malley opened the door to his office.

"My name is King, Charles King. I hold the rank of Chief Inspector with the Irish Criminal Investigation Department and I'm here to work on an unsolved murder case. Question: Who are you and where is the body?"

That's two questions, you stupid moron, O'Malley thought, and strolled emphatically slowly behind his desk. He already had the name Bond, James Bond, on his lips, but withheld the innuendo. Most probably the guy would still have taken the joke the wrong way and caused a fuss. Fellows like this King were a disgust to O'Malley. They came waltzing in from the city, trying to enforce their impositions, and considered everyone in the country utterly stupid. O'Malley felt hurt in his recognition but was smart enough not to let his frustration be noticed, trying diplomatically to ensnare his opponent, as whom he considered King.

"My name is O'Malley, Angus O'Malley. I'm the precinct captain in this town. That's my deputy Michael O'Keefe back there..." his extended index finger pointed at the busy-looking O'Keefe, who had buried his head deep in some unimportant paperwork. "The body is lying in the old splash house, half a mile from here, laid out on a trailer belonging to Farmer Reily...."

"Well, I didn't want to know it in such detail, it's enough if you give me some clues! Something like how and where the body was found, what is the name of the person, male or female, something like that, precise for that."

O'Malley's stomach lining began to rebel. He knew it, this guy was going to cause him trouble. Only that it would happen

so soon surprised him at that point.

"Well, the male body was found down on the beach this morning by the baker O'Ryan's little daughter. The name of the deceased we don't know, nor do we know the circumstances that led to his death."

"Are there any photographs of the site where the body was found, any drawings or anything like that?"

"Deputy O'Keefe took photos, but..."

"Can I speak to the witness, or has she already been questioned? Is there a transcript?"

"What witness, what protocol? Who are you talking about? O'Ryan's daughter is six years old and discovered the body while playing, there is no way she was present at the crime or witnessed anything!" O'Malley was getting slightly nervous about so much obtuseness this guy was spouting, yet he made an effort to answer the chief inspector's questions accurately.

"Can I talk to the little girl, or is there some kind of problem there too?"

"Across the street, that's where the bakery is." O'Malley tried to leave, the chief inspector holding him back by the sleeve of his uniform jacket.

"Talking to the kid, I do, and only I do. Are we clear on that!" His eyes pierced O'Malley's face.

"Sure," O'Malley said, repeating it a second time. "Sure."

They paused for a moment outside the door of the bakery. Up and down the street they looked before the chief inspector pushed down the handle and trudged into the store. A bell, which sounded as if it was powered by drained batteries, jingled far in the back of the room. Looming over the sales counter that dominated the small room, framed with small windows of glass that did more to conceal than present the sparse dis-

play, like a string of pearls, were unrolled, tacky-looking fly-catchers which had long since ceased their service, as there was no room left on the surface of the narrow strip for new additions. Racks running along the walls overflowed with items of daily use, a hodgepodge of human needs. A jumble of articles, the meaning of which was probably known only to the owner of this general store, reigned above and below the shelves of the racks. Behind the counter, things came to life when a corpulent man suddenly appeared out of nowhere and fixed his suspicious gaze on the visitors.

"Oh Angus, is that you?" he addressed O'Malley, tying the two lines of his old apron, which hadn't been cleaned in weeks, three times around his bulging belly before knotting them in the middle of his body bulge. "What can I do for you?" he opined after his strenuous activity caused his neck to swell.

"Chief Inspector King from Tralee has a few more questions for little Rachel..., you know, about the body on the beach."

"I don't know any inspector. What did you say his name was?"

"Chief Inspector King is my name!" the man from Tralee reported back out of the trance he had been in since he entered the room. This barrage of commodities, right down to magazines and newspapers, bewildered him so much that he summarily forgot his mission and only found his way back to reality thanks to their chattering palaver.

"I would like to have a talk with your daughter, if it were possible, at once!"

"I see, that's not possible, I'm sorry."

"Oh, she's not at home?"

"Yes, yes, she is at home. But she can't talk to you. I'm sorry to say."

"What do you mean! She's at home, but she can't talk to me. Bring your child here, and I'll talk to her."

"Are you deaf? I told you it wouldn't work. Angus, you tell him, the guy obviously doesn't understand me!"

O'Malley shifted from one foot to the other. Bummer of a situation he found himself in. Chief Inspector King deprived him of an answer.

"Now listen to me carefully for once. If I don't get to see the kid right now, then..."

"What then? Are you threatening me?" Tom O'Ryan stepped out from behind the counter and motioned toward King. O'Malley moved sideways and stepped between the fighting cocks.

"Nobody wants to hurt anybody here; we just want to talk. Right, gentlemen!"

The situation calmed only when the doorbell clanged and a woman with a shopping bag on her arm entered the store.

Standing outside in the street, King reluctantly thumped his foot on the cobblestones. A whiff of fresh bread mixed with a waft of smoke from a peat fire accompanied his emotional outburst. O'Malley drew his handkerchief from his pants, held it to his nose, and blew hard against it.

"What was that all about," King continued to maltreat the cobblestones. "Is this guy crazy? Or just stupid?"

"You're not from Ireland, am I right?" O'Malley stowed his cloth folded in his pants pocket.

"No, I'm from England. But what's that got to do with it?"

"A great deal. An Irishman's mentality is extremely different from other islanders. His kindness to strangers does not necessarily mean that he lets them in on his mess of a soul. What goes on in his innermost being, he is silent about."

"Don't start that with me. Mentality, my ass. I've lived on this island for many years, yet no one has ever wanted to talk to me about his messed up inner life. And as for this guy..." his thumb pointed to the windowpane, blinded by dirt, of the

front door. "For that, I don't need an underpaid precinct captain in a barren Irish village or a dumbed-down shrink to tell me this guy's crazy. Now let's go check on the body, maybe he's a little more sociable than the rest here."

O'Malley was trying to keep up with the onrushing chief inspector. He had no idea where he was going, but he was headed for the firehouse, so O'Malley let him trot along, steering the man to his destination with a few shouted words after him.

Reaching the firehouse, the first thing King did was to rattle the old gates, only to discover cunningly afterwards that they were locked. O'Malley jiggled the key out of his pocket and unlocked the gates. Sam Reily's trailer stood as if abandoned in the converted barn, and King looked stupidly at his aide, grinning.

"Now where's the body? Not run off or stolen, is it?" The body could not be seen through the high sides of the trailer, prompting the chief inspector to make this comment. Angus O'Malley wished for nothing more than to see the hour when this idiot would leave his village again. He climbed onto the trailer without answering and folded back the tarpaulin so far that the feet of the corpse could be seen. Chief Inspector King did the same, heaving his skinny body over a wheel and shimmying up the side of the board, his curses lost somewhere in the barn.

"He's beginning to stink!" was the only condolence on his part upon catching sight of the corpse, and, "How long has he been lying here?"

He pulled the tarp completely off the dead man's body. Little crabs, still under the tarp, began their game anew. With the sudden brightness, they paused in a wait-and-see position for a moment before resuming their frantic activity, only to annoy O'Malley with it.

"Like I said, since this morning!" O'Malley's words came out fiercer than he wanted, partly because of the crabs, but also because he was tired of repeating himself. Couldn't the guy remember anything? How did he get his title, he asked himself secretly, when he saw all those people under the archway. There were twenty or thirty men and women crowding under the door, looking at him and the inspector in amazement.

"What are you doing here!" O'Malley came down from the trailer and walked toward the people.

"Oh, Mr. Precinct Inspector, why don't you ask these gentlemen to step closer," O'Malley heard the chief inspector whine in the back. With curiosity as the driving force, many people forgot their innate inhibitions. But what was meant to be a call ended up being a run for the best seats. Having just managed to sidestep his way out of the line of attack, O'Malley would have been run over in cold blood. The crowd stood waiting in front of the trailer, looking up at a chief inspector who stood on the bridge like a commander directing people from above.

"Any of you gentlemen got a flask of whiskey?" King glanced expectantly around the room. At the rear of the line, an old man held up his hand, which held a small, tinny flask with a trademark printed on it in color. Many hands hurriedly passed the flask into King's outstretched hand.

"Here commissioner!" A young woman pressed against the trailer, with her face flushed with excitement.

"Chief inspector! There's got to be time for that!" The woman's face glowed, this time because of the stranger's reprimanding words.

"Constable O'Malley! Would you mind opening the back drawer for me so people can see the man. Maybe someone will recognize him; it would save us a lot of legwork and time."

Chief Inspector King was in his element. Commanding

strangers from on high, seeing them carry out his orders, and being admired for it, was something he loved.

Awkwardly, he opened the tin bottle by pulling the cork out of the neck with two fingers and theatrically plunged the contents into the head wound of the corpse. Murmurs went up through the crowd. King was actually expecting applause, but only the owner of the bottle complained loudly about such a foul waste of the precious liquid. The crabs remained calmly in their respective positions, suspecting that they were drops of water, then frantically tried to rid themselves of the alcohol, only to flee the area afterward. From the opening spurted small animals like people from the subway shaft during rush hour. While noting it with satisfaction, O'Malley wondered why this idea hadn't occurred to him long ago, but then was interrupted in his train of thought a moment later when the chief inspector called him to help.

"Help me straighten out the dead man so people can see the face!"

Together, they heaved up the torso of the corpse, with its head hanging slightly askew on its neck due to the rigor mortis that had set in, and its bent arms standing grotesquely away from its body, giving the dead man the appearance of a puppet.

"Who knows this man, who knows his name and where he came from?" shouted King to the crowd, scanning each face for an answer.

It was Sam Reily's wife, Betty, who started off with guesses as to the origin and name of the body but was informed by fellow citizens that this man of that name would have long since been resting in the graveyard of the neighboring parish. In a huff, she retreated to the back row, to the old man who was mourning the spilled whiskey. Thereupon Kate, the wife of Baker O'Ryan, tried her luck, speculating in names as others

speculate in stocks on the stock exchange. With every name she called out, a negative bleat went through the crowd, reducing the chief inspector's hopes of getting a useful result to zero. By the time the baker's wife had finally uttered the last false name and everyone had resigned themselves to the reality of knowing nothing, a woman in a headscarf and raincoat emerged from the semi-darkness of the far corner.

In her mid-sixties, tanned face from all the work in the fields, curved spine from carrying heavy loads, she moved toward the trailer walking on a cane and looked first into the face of the dead man, then into the face of O'Malley.

"You have not been in this village long enough as a precinct captain to know this man. But the older among you..." she turned to the people behind her back. "You all know the name of the man who now lies dead on the trailer, and you all know of his inglorious history. Now don't pretend you don't recognize him." Then she turned back to Chief Inspector King, pinning his eyes before continuing, "Some people you never forget, they say. May it be because you loved them or because you hated them. But beloved people are remembered, only those who were hated, they fade in memory with time. But this one..." she poked the body with her cane, "...I don't think any of us will ever forget."

"So, you knew him?" King's question went out to everyone present, though he observed only the aged woman.

"Knew him? Who knows his fellow man? No, no one really knew him. But the stories that went around him, I know them..."

"Well, what kind of stories?"

"If you want to hear details, Inspector, pardon me, Chief Inspector, you'll have to ask the ladies in the village and in the countryside, they can give you more detailed information about this bastard!"

"Interesting. But the name, good woman, you could at least tell me. Or do I have to go to the country first to find out?" Malicious laughter followed the inspector's question.

"No, I'll leave you with this one on the hard journey you'll have to take to clear up this case, so you'll know what devil you're chasing. His parents christened him..." The woman paused.

In front of the gate, a car came to a halt. Staring through the glass of the car window, soiled by dead insects, two men gazed in irritation at the group of people crowded into the firehouse. Deputy O'Keefe and the driver of the hearse presumed they were already at the body's funeral above the sight. The arrival of the two brought the investigation to a halt, prompting everyone to turn and stare at the black van with its frosted glass windows attached to the back. Once the driver stepped out to open the hatch, which revealed the tin coffin, the discipline of those present was over. Everyone rushed outside to admire the car and its contents.

O'Malley and the woman in the raincoat remained with the body, whereas Chief Inspector King jumped from the trailer, having heard a name that had been lost in the general commotion. A name that had haunted his previous life penetratingly.

"O'Connor, Paddy O'Connor!" the woman said. "Loathed and ostracized by all as the *Tin Man!*"

