

## A Glamorous Existence?

We all have a tendency to think that other people lead more interesting lives than we do. A Formula One champion driver, an Oscar-winning actor and an MI6 agent have each told me over the years how much more exciting my job was than theirs; while I, of course, knowing how diminished and controlled the life of a foreign correspondent has become, assured them that it wasn't.

I've sat beside a beautiful, well-known model and watched as she pulled off her shoes and showed me what eight years of photoshoots and excessively high heels had done to her feet. I've listened to a world-renowned rock star telling me how sick and tired he'd become of life on the road and the company of the other members of his band; not to mention the girls who still, he said wearily, imagine he'd prefer a night with them to sitting at home with his wife on a couch by the fire, with his dog curled up on the mat. Glamour is the quality we infuse into other people's lives, not our own.

So it is with the job of the foreign correspondent. We get on a lot of planes, we sleep in a lot of hotels, we see a lot of things other people don't see, and we meet a lot of intriguing people. Sometimes it's dangerous. Yet it isn't as exciting and fulfilling as other people assume, or as we expected when we first launched ourselves into the job. The glamour vanishes the instant you try to reach out to touch it.

I confess, though, that it was this perceived glamour that made me yearn to be a foreign correspondent. I was twenty-three, and shackled to a sub-editor's desk in the BBC radio newsroom at Broadcasting House, in the West End of London. Around me were people who seemed only a little lower than the angels, possessing the kind of savoir-faire that someone like me from rural Suffolk and south London could never hope to emulate. They strode around the third-floor corridors at Broadcasting House like demi-gods, charming the secretaries with their compliments and the bosses with their stories from the inexpressibly fascinating places they'd just come back from.

One lunchtime in the BBC Club bar at the Langham Hotel, opposite Broadcasting House, I gripped an orange juice (I was a teetotaler in those days) and stood silently on the outer fringes of a small gathering of worshippers around a tough, ebullient character in his forties, his face pitted with long-dead acne, who was paying a fleeting visit to London from the Far East. 'I've got this simply enormous bed, you see – the bloody BBC won't pay for me to have a suite, so I have to have an ordinary bedroom, and the bed fills up the place. Anyway, over my head there's a bell-push. I press it once, and a gin and tonic appears. If I press it twice, a girl appears. And if I press it three times two girls appear.'

The worshippers collapsed with ingratiating laughter. I stood there and thought with the seriousness of youth about what he'd said. I didn't necessarily want to be him, sprawled on his gigantic World of Suzie Wong bed in the tropical heat: I could never imagine myself so cynical, so worldly-wise. But his life seemed wonderfully exotic, and he appeared to be utterly liberated from the petty rules and regulations that controlled the life of a junior sub-editor.

When I started at the BBC in 1966, I understood nothing whatever of the complex hierarchies around me. Apart from anything else, it took me some time to realise that the oldest members of the staff around me in the radio newsroom were usually the ones who had clung on longest and had failed to move onwards and upwards.

'Be careful,' said one tall, scholarly character with thin, straggling white hair, a stoop, a stained tie, a disturbing lump on his forehead and a pawky, subtle wit, 'if you don't get out of here pretty soon, you'll end up like me.' I didn't want to end up like him, even though I liked him immensely; apart from anything else he put me up for membership of the London Library, to which I have belonged

ever since. So I took his advice, and was out of there within eighteen months. Of course, big organisations being what they are, I immediately found myself locked up in another prison, but at least it was a different one, equipped with a new set of chains.

It soon became abundantly clear to me that everyone I came across carried their own legend around with them. In a place like this, you were who you announced yourself to be. There were those who just wanted to be comfortable, and wore cardigans and old, soft shoes to prove it. There were clever, pushy young men and women whose very way of dressing and speaking and walking into an office declared that they were going somewhere. And there were those a decade or so older who had never quite got anywhere. They had been caught by the unexpected falling of some invisible barrier, and for some reason had never managed to work their way round it.

And there were the foreign correspondents. Among them was a magnifico who had recently given up a posting in Washington and was now the diplomatic correspondent: an important job, which in those days meant he was on practically every television and radio bulletin. He was gentle and unpretentious (you spot these things quickly when you're new and utterly unimportant) and I had to nag him to describe what chatting with President Eisenhower had been like, or to retell the story of the day Kennedy had been shot. After Christopher Serpell's death I discovered he had worked under Ian Fleming in naval intelligence during the Second World War: even more glamour. He treated me no differently from the way he treated the head of news or the exalted producers he worked with; and he put up with my dopiness and inadequacy with patience and occasional quiet humour.