

Secret

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I put the beans and potatoes on to boil and watched that the sausages didn't burn under the grill. My mum looks after Angie, my daughter, when I'm out and she would be arriving for the evening shift in less than half an hour. After we've eaten, I do the washing up and get myself ready for work. We don't live far from Clapham Junction and every evening I get the 5.30 train into central London. The basic pay is low, but the hours suit me, and I love going against the flow of commuters heading the other way.

I work for a company called 'The Secret Service', which has cleaning contracts with office block owners across London, including MI6. So yes, I am a cleaner. No one knows this, not even Mum. I tell her I work for the 'Secret Service' and that I can't say any more. She smiles, knowingly, proud that I've done so well in life, and glad to look after Angie so that I can develop my professional career.

In fact, I clean toilets, tidy conference rooms and Hoover corridors. As the name suggests, the company provides an efficient, anonymous and invisible service. Working after hours in empty offices, with the lights on low, no one would know we've been in. Depending on the size of the building and the rotas we get a few floors each, and we work alone. I'm often sent to Vauxhall Cross, the home of the other 'secret service'. I like it there. I like the irony of the name, and I like the fact that they take security very seriously. There is a clean desk policy, so it is just a matter of emptying a few confidential waste bins into a black plastic bag. We keep a supply of these in the cupboard, and I have a special key fob that gives me access to wherever I need to go.

We have to sign the official secrets act to work there, and we are not allowed to take anything home or tell anyone what we see. That's not usually a problem, but it is a rule that I broke, just once.

It was a Thursday. The 21st March to be precise. It was dark outside, and raining. I was doing the usual round and a scrap of paper fell out as I emptied one of the bins on the third floor. I stopped to pick it up. Something, I don't know what, prompted me to flatten it out. There was an inscription, hand-written 'cavete viris ollarum florum'. I couldn't make head nor tail of it, but maybe it was in code. I can't explain why, but I put it in my pocket and carried on with my job.

When I got home that night, and after Mum had gone home, I typed the text into Google. The AI response came back in a flash 'Beware the flowerpot men'. And that was it.

MI6 is famed for its social life. On the notice board outside the cleaners' cupboard there are details of a knitting circle, a running club, quiz nights and the results of the annual badminton competition. It took me a moment to work out what the cryptic message meant, but then I remembered that Bill and Ben, from the fourth floor, had just got through to the semi-finals of the badminton league. Someone was sending a secret warning to Guy and Alec, on the third floor, who had won the coveted trophy the year before. The match between these two teams was scheduled for the following week. It all made sense. I put the slip of paper back into my pocket, intending to return it on my next shift. No one would be the wiser.

I was wrong. When I arrived for work on the Friday evening, I was greeted by someone I'd never seen before. 'Hello', she said, 'I'm Blaise. I'm in charge here. Last night the web cam spotted you taking a slip of paper from the 3rd floor.' I blushed red as a beetroot. I knew I could get the sack. 'I'm so sorry, I said, I don't know what came over me, but don't worry, I've got it here, I was going to put it back in the confidential waste tonight'. Blaise looked me straight in the eye. 'Jo, .. it is Jo isn't

it?, could I see it'. I handed over the slip of paper, wondering what I'd say to Mum and how I'd explain my fate. Blaise took one look. 'Bill and Ben' she said under her breath.



All electronic communications are recorded, but a handwritten note, on paper, and in Latin – that would slip through the system.

Blaise quickly came to the only possible conclusion. Bill and Ben were double agents, and someone was sending a coded warning about them. Who was the recipient? Who else was in the know? Who did Bill and Ben really work for? There was only one way to find out.

'Jo', Blaise said 'Don't take anything home with you ever again, but if you promise me that, I'd like to offer you a new role. It would be the same hours but double the money. Would you be willing to work for me? It would be a private contract. Off the record. Of course, you'd still be a cleaner, and you'd still keep your job, but you are the perfect person to check through all the waste bins on these two floors. I'll make sure your key fob allows you access to my office, and if you find anything even faintly suspicious, put it in a plain brown envelope and leave it on my desk. Bill and Ben work on the fourth floor, and I need you to keep a close eye on them'.

I looked at Blaise in astonishment. She obviously didn't know about the badminton league or about the fierce rivalry between the third and fourth floors, but never mind that, she'd offered me a job. I'd be working for the real secret service. I didn't know how long I could string her along, but it would be a good few weeks before the truth came out.

I agreed right away but my success was tinged with sadness. It was such a shame I couldn't share the good news with Mum.