

MISTER



Alex Kurtagić
Foreword by Tomislav Sunić

MISTER

By
Alex Kurtagić

MISTER

Copyright © Alex Kurtagić 2009
All rights reserved.

The right of Alex Kurtagić to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First Published in Great Britain in 2009 by
Iron Sky Publishing

An imprint of Wermod & Wermod
P.O. Box 1107
Shamley Green
GU50WJ
United Kingdom

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
A CIP catalogue record of this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-9561835-0-7

Printed by the MPG Books Group,
Bodmin and King's Lynn

<http://www.ironskypublishing.com>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	v
<i>Note on the Text</i>	ix
Chapter 1: Scripted Answers	1
Chapter 2: Economy Class Configuration	6
Chapter 3: Terminal 6	25
Chapter 4: Irving's War	40
Chapter 5: His Majesty's Revenue and Customs	53
Chapter 6: Non-Conforming Behaviour	61
Chapter 7: Airport Taxi Mafia	71
Chapter 8: Cyrus the Great	90
Chapter 9: TRS-80, Model I	95
Chapter 10: El Corte Inglés	111
Chapter 11: Mr. Wermod	132
Chapter 12: Resource Acquisition	137
Chapter 13: Stiffly-Worded Letter of Complaint	143
Chapter 14: Public Service	168
Chapter 15: Dr. Brummagem	174
Chapter 16: Bar de Obreros	179
Chapter 17: Dr. Stumm	187
Chapter 18: Marxist Conman	193
Chapter 19: Misanthropic Photographer	196
Chapter 20: Socrates	212
Chapter 21: Dr. Kevin MacDonald	236
Chapter 22: Occult Sect	244
Chapter 23: Metro	252
Chapter 24: Gu	265
Chapter 25: Power Grid	278
Chapter 26: Debt Collector	290

MISTER

Chapter 27:	No Retreat, No Surrender, No Apology	307
Chapter 28:	Democracy in Action	315
Chapter 29:	Confederate	318
Chapter 30:	Obama	326
Chapter 31:	The Gulag	372
Chapter 32:	Value Added Tax	381
Chapter 33:	The Kingston Champion	393
Chapter 34:	Abo	412
Chapter 35:	Alpha Male	429
Chapter 36:	Government Fiat	442
Chapter 37:	Suit	446
Chapter 38:	Picasso	450
Chapter 39:	Wiped Out	467

FOREWORD

Even the worst of all worlds often turn out, for some, to be the best of all. In judging the quality of a past or present polity, one must use all disposable variables, including one's own vantage point and one's own hierarchy of value judgments. Although the author, Alex Kurtagić, situates the plot of his novel in Madrid, in the year 2022, he could have just as well set it in the year 2000, or even at some earlier date, anywhere in multiracial Europe or America. After finishing reading the book the reader is gripped with feelings of panic about approaching darkness, forgetting that Europe and the United States have been experiencing political darkness, albeit on a smaller scale, since the early 90's of the twentieth century. Alas, symbols of social decay and signs of political distress become visible and audible only when condensed in time and place and only when acknowledged to be irreversible by a respectable number of observers and opinion makers. The crowded times of Madrid in the year 2022, punctured by frequent bursts of violence by non-European residents, in an atmosphere of constant power shortages, must have been a very distant phenomenon for some belated English tourist stranded at the same time in Costa Brava. Similar scenes of primordial savagery must have been simultaneously taking place in Frankfurt, LA, Paris or London. Yet nothing indicates that the hero "Mister", as the title of Kurtagić's novel suggests, anticipated his future predicaments when boarding the Madrid flight at Heathrow.

Throughout his entire previous life Mister had kept himself well insulated, not just from encounters with racially indeterminate species but also from any political involvement. Mister could not care less about what might have been brewing in the immediate vicinity of his Surrey home and what would ultimately befall him in the Spanish capital. Only toward the end of the novel, subsequent to his belated philosophical reawakening after having faced the nightmare

of incarceration and thought police interrogation in Madrid, we learn that his survival was due more to the sloppiness of his jailers than to his high IQ.

Kurtagić's hero is a good-looking, well-to-do, married, middle-age businessman who, prior to his trip to Spain, lived in a plush environment deep in pastoral England. He is more concerned with preserving his pecuniary perks than with a philosophical prodding into the approaching end-times in Europe. He is an apolitical gentleman, with only one concern: how to invest his time and his above-average intelligence into the promotion of his software company. Later on, upon landing at the claustrophobic airport of Madrid, he is plagued by scorching heat and the promiscuous presence of Third World creatures. Subsequently, Mister becomes a victim of circumstances, which are only compounded by his oversensitive personality and his extraordinary sense of observation. He reacts to every outside stimulus as a fine tuned ampere-meter, quickly registering it with disgust and processing it in his febrile mind. But in a world already fully immersed in an advanced stage of involution, his high IQ and his expensive two-piece suit are of little help for cognitive warfare against the insane system. Quite to the contrary: his verbal and racial assets have become by now a dangerous liability, ready to inspire envy and an attempt on his life. Mister reasons with his cortex, whereas masses of non-white creatures he encounters use their paleocortex in order to satisfy their primordial needs. As a refined specimen on the evolutionary tree Mister has little chance of survival in a post-human system in which the only rule that prevails is that of animalistic survivalism.

The system is based on promiscuous multiracial egalitarianism and the incessant uglification of all forms of communication. In an advanced form of racial mongrelization which Europe had been undergoing for more than 70 years, Mister does not yet realize that lower species from the distant antipodes have a capability to better adapt themselves to adverse social and climatic changes. Mister's European kindred, spoiled by the good life, are in any case almost brain-dead.

In his graphic descriptions of the boiling madrilene-like architecture and the fauna of non-European faces surrounding his protagonist, Kurtagić is unsurpassable in his choice of words, he intersperses short and interrupted dialogues conducted by Mister in

the Spanish language with the portrayal of Mister's regular mishaps, thereby providing an additional dose of anxiety for the reader. From the first page the reader is enveloped in the atmosphere of claustrophobia, agoraphobia and constant craving for water. After observing Mister's travails the reader runs the risk of becoming himself thirsty and begins to wonder if there is still running water at his home. This should not come as a surprise as water had become, by the year 2022, a precarious commodity all over Europe.

Without realizing it, Mister ends up in the darkest part of Madrid for the scheduled meetings with his business partners. Yet his business partners are not like him - aloof, haughty and oblivious of pending political turmoil. They are the people who are actively opposed to the system. They are hiding the most wanted fugitive on Earth, who is on the death list of the system, the Monster of Long Beach: Kevin MacDonald - a fictitious character representing an American scholar on the run, and a major taboo breaker who had rocked the founding myths of the System. Thus Mister, already subject to his inborn paranoia, anxiety and boredom, feels additional guilt by his chance associations.

The whole book reads like an antechamber of waiting. And waiting. The system that prides itself on velocity is bogged down by its own inertia caused by an ever-expanding government bureaucracy, super inflation, constant traffic jams, power shortages and Islamic terrorist attacks. The reader can also see for himself the fraudulence of the so-called multicultural conviviality, so often praised by liberal and leftist opinion makers. It is essentially a system where different non-white ethnic groups and races are constantly at each other's throat, each hating desperately the other group and waiting for its turn to scavenge. The book is a successful indictment of the post-modern liberal system, which despite its show of force, similar to the ex-Soviet Union, is extremely fragile. It is bound to implode.

Kurtagić avoids using the hyper-real scenario. Consequently, the most troubling aspects about his novel are its very real and very realistic characters. The last chapters of the novel, captured in lengthy monologues by Mister, could just as well pass off for a sociological treatise in some would-be academic journal. By the time of Mister's civic re-awakening the novel becomes a merciless barrage of fire against cowardly European clerks. "Had he not made himself subservient to his inferiors by making his source of self-esteem depend-

ent on their granting validation?” muses Mister in his crowded cell. It is the paranoid anticipation of being rejected by the masters of public discourse which prompted scores of lucid white Americans and Europeans into placing their inactivity, their passivity, and their cowardice above any social commitment to Europe’s survival. “In short, his obdurate passivity made him a criminal worse than his cellmates,” further muses Mister, “because the magnitude of his crimes was far greater. The differential between his potential and his achievements, between the rarity of his gifts and the pedestrian nature of their exercise, was immense; a myopic and miserly Promethean, he had silently accepted and lived by the rules of his inferiors...”

These words are surely the best and the most succinct summary of European thinkers’ cowardice spanning the time between the Soviet Union’s breakdown in 1990 and the solidification of its neo-liberal twin brothers in America and Europe by the year 2010.

When Mister manages to escape the surveillance system of the thought police’s premises (which are in permanent need of repair), when he finally makes it to the Madrid airport and catches a flight to London, he realizes once again that “his inaction, his silence, his policy of avoidance and adaptation, as opposed to confrontation and resistance, had resulted in the devastation of not only his wealth, but also that of his wife.” Aloof and distant at the outset of his ordeal, Mister seems to have come to his senses now. In the face of the tectonic changes sweeping over Europe, keeping a low profile and a high bank account is no longer an option. The endgame has started for real and the Enemy is there to get us all. As long as deafening silence and self-censorship is the rule among Euro-American thinkers, a small minority of fraudsters in academia and public life will continue with impunity with their social engineering.

But, for how long?

Tomislav Sunic
Zagreb, Croatia, October 24, 2008

NOTE ON THE TEXT

Large numbers are expressed throughout the text using the long scale, whereby one billion is 1,000,000,000,000, or 10^{12} ; in essence, one million million. Accordingly, a trillion is 10^{18} , a quadrillion 10^{24} , and so on; each denomination being a million times larger than the previous one. This differs from the short scale, which was adopted by the government in the United Kingdom in 1974 (following the American usage), where a billion is 1,000,000,000, or 10^9 ; a trillion is 10^{12} ; and so forth; each denomination being a thousand times larger than the previous one. Therefore, American readers and British readers used to the short scale that is in official use for government and financial figures, should interpret the number “1,000 trillion” as meaning for them “1 sextillion”.

British spellings are used throughout, except in sections of dialogue where the speaker is American or, as in the case of certain public figures, is known to favour mid-Atlantic spellings. Archaic forms are also favoured over modern forms, thus economy is spelled *œconomy*, manoeuvre is spelled *manceuvre*, and so on.

Where the characters speak in Spanish, the dialogue has been rendered in Spanish, with English translations supplied at the bottom of the page, where the entire bilingual sections can be read in English. Shoe sizes, when given in Spanish, are translated into their British equivalents, which is half a size larger than American sizes; therefore a Spanish 44 is a British 9.5 and an American 10. Large numbers given by Spanish-speaking characters use periods where an Anglophone speaker would use commas, and commas where an Anglophone speaker would use periods; therefore, ‘€1.220’ in Spanish means ‘€1,220’ in English.

Lastly, the attitudes and statements of characters that are not based on public figures but that may resemble people in real life are fictional.

MISTER

MISTER

Chapter 1

Scripted Answers

‘**G**ood evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is the pre-boarding announcement for the British Airways flight 5898307 to Madrid. We are now inviting those passengers with small children, and any passengers requiring special assistance, to begin boarding at this time. Please have your boarding pass and identification ready. Regular boarding will begin in approximately ten minutes’ time. Thank you.’

By the time the announcement had been made in English, it was almost impossible to hear anything beyond the foreground murmur of human conversation. The gate had by then long disappeared behind a forest of boubous, abayas, burqas, and business suits, rising above a chaotic undergrowth of push-chairs, plastic bags, rucksacks, handbags, briefcases, and screaming children. Of course, the pre-boarding announcement had invited only a fraction of those standing, but it was clear to him that they all thought themselves in competition for space inside the overhead compartments inside the aircraft; their strategising had begun the moment they had entered the departure lounge, their eyes darting towards the front of the enclosure, scanning for empty seats and cunningly calculating optimal positions.

He remained seated, pleased with his own superior strategy. He had checked in no suitcases, and he was carrying no hand luggage. Everything he required for the journey was inside the pockets of his Gieves and Hawkes grey chalkstripe suit. Everything he would require while away he had already sent, two days apart, and six days ago, in two registered parcels to his

temporary address in Madrid, the aparthotel where he had made his reservation. The contents of the first parcel - suits, shirts, underwear, toiletries, and other travel apparel - were duplicated in the second, thus providing him with a backup in the event one of the parcels fell victim to damage, loss, or customs confiscations. Via this method he obviated the need to engage in direct competition with the simian rabble; he could wait in the departure lounge, entirely relaxed, and be the last to board the aircraft, without queues, congestion, or having to stand waiting in narrow corridors inside the aircraft, while peabrains and nincompoops ahead of him pushed their hand luggage into vacuum-packed overhead compartments.

'5468697320706C616365206973207465656D696E672077-6974682070656F706C652E00'

He turned his head partially towards his neighbour, ears pricked. He saw a pointed, black pump resting on the carpet, supporting a pale calf that ended in a knee connected to a thigh, upon which rested what looked like a historical fantasy novel, bound in hard cover. The spine said *Quey's Way* and 'Dawn Bergemann'. His wife competed with this author.

'497420697320626C6F6F647920686F7420696E20686572-652E00,' said the woman, speaking into her mobile.

He looked up and saw the attractive face of a twentysomething with long, straight, brown hair, and green eyes staring into space. Smiling inwardly, he looked away; he knew the language, of course, for he himself had used it to hold private conversations.

Experience had taught him that boarding 'in ten minutes' meant boarding in half an hour, so he used his phone - an ultra-light, paper-thin model with a graphene processor - to access the BBC News website. VAT was to go up to 25%; inflation in the U.S. had reached 10,000%; The Scottish Republic's head of state was to meet the King; new generation National Identity cards were to come with GPS tags; baboon spiders had been seen in the wild for the first time in the U.K.; the agricultural machinery sector was in crisis; commercial shipping routes across the North Pole would be viable in Winter in less than five years. A Wikipedia consultation reminded him that the worst case of hyperinflation had occurred in Hungary, between 1945 and 1946, during which period prices ended up doubling every fifteen hours, and bank notes with the value of 1,000 trillion pengo were printed, though these never made it into circulation. According to an article by the Danish philate-

list, Peter Kr. H. Bech, this hyperinflation was orchestrated by fanatical Marxists, who were specially 'educated in the destruction of national economies', with the purpose of ruining the middle and upper classes in that country. They caused money to lose its value through the 'constant impression of bank-notes'.

A drop of sweat fell onto the screen. His flesh boiled in the tropical heat, and, since looking down to read only aggravated his discomfort, he abandoned his reading. The throng in front of him was only very slowly thinning out; regular boarding was already under way, though of course he had not heard the announcement over the constant jabbering and joking in patwah, Urdu, Arabic, Punjabi, Hindi, Spanish, and broken English. He saw George Galloway's head briefly among the canopy of turbans, ghutras, taguias, jalabib, fezzes, and kufis; the former parliamentarian was conversing jovially with a group of bearded men. Galloway's biography of the assassinated Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez, was for sale in Tesco, in the stealth tax orgy that was still deceptively known as the 'Duty Free' area.

Through dusty windows he saw a beaten bag tug pull up next to the aircraft. Two prognathous leptorrhines of low cranial cubilage then began manhandling the passenger's luggage, carelessly hurling it off the bag carts and onto the bag belt leading up into the aircraft's capacious haul. Were it not because, for security reasons, all passenger luggage was automatically wrapped with a strong thermoplastic polymer, the violence of the loading operation would be causing more than one suitcase to burst open. He observed with contempt that, despite their thoughtless brutality, the baggage handlers' movements were lazy and orangutanaceous, their frequent breaks and listless eyes suggesting a total lack of interest and motivation. It took them twenty minutes to empty the first of a dozen bag carts.

By this time, all fellow passengers (except him and the odd straggler) had boarded, leaving him with a clear path to the gate. He stood up and approached the desk. Behind it stood a gentleman of queer proclivities and a female of Indo-Aryan extraction. He disliked the mien of the former, so he offered his passport and boarding pass to the latter.

'I am sorry, the flight is now closed,' said the attendant, her eyes on her computer screen and her fingers on the keyboard.

'Closed?' he replied, astonished. 'Since when?'

‘We have just closed it,’ stated the attendant.

‘I have not heard any announcements.’

‘We have not announced it yet, but the flight is closed.’

She carried on typing, indifferently.

‘Well, then please re-open it. You have not yet made an announcement and I have a valid ticket.’

‘I am sorry. You will have to book another flight.’

‘No, I will not. The ground crew is still loading people’s luggage.’

‘I am sorry. You will have to book another flight.’

He sighed, exasperated, then scanned his surroundings, hoping for a witness. The lounge was deserted.

‘Madam, the aircraft is clearly nowhere near ready, I have heard no last calls, and you yourself have stated that you have not made any announcements closing the flight. I have a valid ticket, so do whatever you need to do in your computer, and let me through.’

‘I am sorry, Sir. Once the flight is closed it cannot be re-opened. You will have to back to the terminal and book another flight.’

‘You have not followed proper procedure. You have not made last call announcements, you certainly have not made any announcements instructing me to go to the gate, and you have not announced that the flight is closed. As far as I am concerned, the flight is still open and I am boarding that aircraft.’

‘I am sorry, Sir, but, as I said, the flight is now closed. If you will just go back to the terminal, you can -

‘Quite frankly, I do not care,’ he said, raising his voice. ‘I have very important meetings with my clients tomorrow morning. So, please, re-open the flight and let me through.’

Her thelyphantic colleague, a middle-aged man with bleached blond hair, turned towards them, his face quizzical, his homosexual body irradiating an undefinable quality that rendered it to him vaguely seedy and repulsive.

The Indo-Aryan attendant carried on typing, tensely raising her eyebrows, but still not taking her eyes off the screen. ‘I cannot do that, sir. The flight is closed.’

With rising fury, he saw her logging off.

‘Will you please log back on and let me through!’ He demanded, noticing through the corner of his eye, how the homosexual attendant quietly lifted a telephone receiver and murmured something into it, darting furtive glances in his di-

rection. His heart was pounding. He attempted to control himself.

‘Look: I am not here to cause trouble. But you have not made the proper announcements. You cannot close the flight and not let me through. The aircraft is clearly not ready and I have a valid ticket and ID, so there is no reason for you to stop me from getting on board that aircraft.’

For the first time, the attendant looked at him. She then looked away, fixing her eyes in the mid distance across the departure lounge.

‘Sir, as I said...’-

‘No. No “Sir, as I said”. You did not follow correct procedure. You have not made the proper announcements, so the flight is not closed. So, please, log back on, swipe my boarding pass, check my passport, and let me through!’

‘Sir, if you would just go back to the terminal, you can book a new flight at any of the British Airways counters.’

T paid for a service and you are refusing to provide it. If you do not let me through, I will make a formal complaint and sue British Airways for breach of contract. I am a journalist with a syndicated column. I am sure you would rather I had other things to write about than your behaviour this evening. And I am sure your employers would think the same.’

After a frozen pause, filled only by the airport background noise, his interlocutor’s digits sprang back to life, tapping frantically on the germ-infested keyboard. Her gaze fixed on the screen, she showed him the palm of her hand.

‘OK, Sir. Could I please have your boarding pass and passport?’

Chapter 2

Economy Class Configuration

The cabin of the A380 was in full economy class configuration, making him one of 853 passengers aboard the aircraft. Due to connectivity problems, by the time he had managed to check himself in over the internet a couple of weeks ago, all window and aisle seats had been taken. He faced a two-hour flight on a middle seat, sandwiched between fellow passengers, a most undignified seating arrangement for a man of his pedigree. Even this would have been tolerable, however, if his neighbours had been petite, diet-obsessed, young, English women, with narrow hips, thin arms, short hair, and small paperbacks, but fortune had not smiled on him on this occasion. On his right, to the left of the starboard aisle, sat a colourfully attired Afro-Caribbean woman, holding a crying infant on one of her prodigious mammaries, which rested on her giant thigh; she seemed emotionally disengaged from the noisy infant, her eyes glazed over and her mien sphinx-like with boredom. On his left, a Chinese university student, very obese and clad in jeans that were two inches too short, transferred the contents of his stomach into an air sickness bag; the student was squeezed on his left side by a large, canescent gentleman in an expensive Saville Row pinstripe suit. *Gieves and Hawkes*, he thought; recognising the cut. Pinstripe, who was well into his eighties, desired to lean away from the heavily perspiring student, but was constantly frustrated by the flow of traffic on the port aisle, to which he sat adjacent; across his knees he attempted to balance a fat hardback, which he had placed atop a folded newspaper (one of the few still being

printed). The cabin was still unpressurised and the air conditioning was switched off (as per environmental regulations), so with hundreds of bodies generating heat, perspiring, coughing, and exhaling carbon dioxide into a confined space, the sensation was akin to breathing a warm sludge.

He noticed a young man with a yarmulke on a port isle seat drinking an ice-cold cup of Coca-Cola. The cup was covered with newly formed condensation, caused by the refrigeration of ice cubes floating in this refreshing beverage. The latter made him instantly thirsty: his pasty, bitter saliva seemingly refusing to hydrate a throat that felt like hot igneous rocks on the sands of the Saharan desert. Before he'd had time to formulate a conscious thought, his impulsive finger had already pressed the cabin call button. He craned his neck over the sea of turbans, kufis, ghutras, fezzes, afros, and glistening bald pates, and rotated his head in all directions along the plane of the ecliptic, his eyes in predatory mode as he scanned for members of the cabin crew. Of course, and as was habitual whenever urgent service was required, there were none to be seen.

The Chinese student stopped heaving; he sat hunched forward, consputing into the air sickness bag, and wiping the perspiration off his face with paper napkins, until his salivation returned to normal. He then rolled up the top of the bag and looked up and around, hesitating, uncertain as to how to dispose of his lost dinner. At this point Pinstripe, tired of being bumped into by passing passengers, offered the student to switch seats. The student accepted with a nod.

'I suggest you avoid the food in the 'Duty Free' area,' said Pinstripe, squeezing himself into his new seat.

I do not purchase food from airport establishments,' he replied, tersely.

Pinstripe turned to him with a raised eyebrow. He then said, dismissively as he looked away with a frown, 'I thought you were a gentleman. Nevermind.'

He disdained correcting the misperception. Instead, he imagined a factory shed swarming with flies in a grotty industrial estate, ran by a callous criminal gang dealing in condemned meat. He imagined slimy mountains of chicken and turkey carcasses, and workers with Wellington boots and rubber gloves hosing down the stinking flesh, soaking it in brine, and cutting

out whatever pink parts they could recover before re-packaging it for re-sale, while the tainted meat was mixed with good stock, minced, and made available to butchers, restaurants, and supermarkets. Intense competition and the pressure to grow profits provided a rationale that favoured the relaxation of standards, the cutting of corners, and the search for ever-cheaper suppliers and even cheaper labour, desperate enough to do anything, and ignorant enough to know nothing. It was also easy to disguise meat that was unfit for human consumption by covering it with spicy curry, hot sauce, soggy lettuce, and spoonfuls of salt, pepper, and mayonnaise.

Pinstripe used his large, bear-like paw to retrieve his copy of *The Guardian* from under his book (*Irving's War*) and began reading.

No flight attendant came, and none were in sight. He pressed the cabin call button once more. It had no effect. His throat itched with desiccated asperity; it was so parched that he wondered whether he was, in fact, experiencing the onset of streptococcal pharyngitis. He looked again towards the young man with the yarmulke, and witnessed him quenching his thirst with his ice-cold beverage, gulping in succession until he emptied the plastic cup, then letting one of the ice cubes fall into his wet mouth, where he began crunching it with his teeth, and sucking on the ice. Yarmulke looked thoroughly refreshed. At this point the brown-haired woman immediately next to Yarmulke leaned forward and noticed him staring at them. He looked away, touched the screen before him, and began browsing British Airways' digital magazine. The magazine, however, bored him instantly, its table of contents listing a collection of the most banal, trivial, and superficial articles imaginable, all of them written vapidly for uncultured simpletons, and each sentence an insult to his intelligence. With a stab of the finger he switched off the screen and again scanned the cabin for flight attendants: he detected no sign of airline personnel anywhere. He stood up, seeking to expand his horizon, only to notice scores of lit cabin call buttons fading into the distance, patterned like a standard IBM 5081 punch card above a sea of dark, listless faces. He also noticed, as he sat back down, that Yarmulke and his brown-haired companion had fixed their glares on Pinstripe, who had become engrossed in his newspaper. Yarmulke and the brown-haired woman's vocalisations suggested that they knew and had a negative opinion of the elderly gentleman, but the three Jamaican louts

behind him were engaged in such raucous conversation and laughter that he was unable to hear the grounds upon which such opinion had been formed.

As the Jamaicans exploded once again with savage laughter, he lost patience and decided to search for a flight attendant. Deeming his right-hand neighbour immovable, he stood up and turned left, expectantly. Pinstripe and the Chinese student momentarily vacated their seats to allow him out, causing both Yarmulke and the brown-haired woman to follow Pinstripe's head with their murderous glares. The brown-haired woman, in her forties, looked like a cross between Monica Lewinsky and Rosa Luxemburg. Pinstripe did not notice them.

He found two flight attendants standing around in the forward galley on the upper deck, oblivious to the scores of passengers roasting and dehydrating beyond the cabin partition and on the ovens below. One of them was the homosexual gentleman he had studiously avoided at the gate; the other was an English woman with aggressive make up and a face crossed by such a profusion of lines that it resembled one of those confused, multi-layered pattern sheets that used to come in the women's magazines his mother read in the 1970s. The homosexual gentleman fancied himself a comedian and Pattern Face evidently found his crude wit very amusing, for her trachea convulsed with laughter; both were luxuriantly idle and perfectly relaxed.

He cleared his throat loudly. 'Is there any chance of getting a drink?'

The two flight attendants turned to look at him, but slowly and still laughing, unimpressed by his suit and indifferent to his irritation. He avoided making eye contact with the homosexual gentleman, directing his gaze at Pattern Face instead, and making it evident that he did not share her amusement. Noticing he had no intention to quit until properly attended to, she tried to suppress her smile and look professional.

'I am sorry, Sir. How may I help you?'

'I said: Is there any chance of getting a drink aboard this flight? I have been trying to get an attendant to respond to my calls, but it seems we have been forgotten downstairs,' he said, stiffly

'Please return to your seat. This is a staff area. Someone will be with you shortly.'

'I beg your pardon? I have been waiting for the past half hour, without obtaining service. Moreover; it is extremely

warm down there, and I require a drink. My neighbour has been unwell and no attendant has come to collect his sick bag.'

'If you will just return to your seat, one of the attendants on the lower deck will come and look after you.'

'There are no attendants on the lower deck. I have been up and down the length of the aircraft. I am asking *you* to come and provide me with *service*.'

'We have a very full flight today, so we have to ask you to be patient. If you go back downstairs, someone in the lower deck will come.'

'I am not prepared to wait any longer. I have been waiting for the past half hour and I have not seen a single cabin crew-member performing his duties. It is absolutely scorching down on the lower deck and I already have a headache.'

'I understand. But we have a very full flight today and a lot of passengers to look after. If you go back to your seat, someone will be with you in due course.'

'No! This is not acceptable. This is not a budget airline. I am paying extra to get a *serviced* flight. There is no *service* downstairs, and I have been forced come up here. I require a drink and I would really appreciate it if you stopped fobbing me off with scripted answers and just gave me what I ask.'

'We are not allowed to serve beverages to passengers seated on the lower deck. Now, if you will just return to your seat, an attendant on your deck will be with you in due course.'

The look on the woman's face made it clear that his efforts were futile. If he adopted a more forceful manner, not only would he waste his time, but he could be seen as disruptive, in which case safety regulations could be invoked to remove him from the aircraft, under the pretext of cabin rage being a danger to the crew and fellow passengers. Therefore, he opted to desist and simply help himself to a beverage from the nearest galley in the lower deck. Were he to be caught and incur the anger of a cabin crewmember, he would rebuff him stiffly and put him in his place: he had already exhausted conventional channels.

'Very well, then,' he announced, 'I will wait. However, if no one comes within the next five minutes, I will return and I will not leave until I am served. This is ridiculous.' He then added, 'And, by the way, be sure that I will be completing a feedback form, where I will include both your names.'

No sooner had he stepped out of sight that he heard the homosexual attendant utter a dismissive 'Aaanyway...' before car-

rying on with his comedy routine. He was too dehydrated to care about remonstrating with the cretin, so he let it pass.

Back on the lower deck, he negotiated his way past the constant flow of passenger traffic down to the aft galley. He found it, of course, unattended. It was also in a lamentable state of repair. The rubbed aluminium trolleys looked as if they had been involved in a demolition derby. All the stainless steel containers were scratched, bumped, and covered everywhere with layers of blackened glue and the remnants of a million ripped stickers. The phenolic panels resembled an execution wall, blackened by the accumulated grime of thousands of compulsive nose-pickers. Fortunately for him, the absentee flight attendants had left two unopened 150ml beverage cans on the work surface; he did not recognise the brand, but he grabbed them both and slipped one on each of his jacket's side pockets. The cans were warm.

'That will be €40, sir.'

He turned around and saw the homosexual flight attendant looking at him, standing by the galley's port entrance, his self-righteous visage barely concealing a smug smile.

He was instantly angered by the perspicacity of the aging pervert. He considered refusing to pay, arguing that conditions inside the aircraft were unacceptable. Yet, upon noticing the homosexual gentleman's earring (an odiously 1980s anachronism), it suddenly seemed simpler just to pay without issuing a challenge. He retrieved three notes from his crocodile-skin wallet and left them on the work surface, then exited the galley via the port entrance without making eye contact. 'Thank you,' shouted the flight attendant after him, obnoxiously polite but with sanctimonious sarcasm.

The instant his buttocks made contact with his seat, the first of the two cans was opened and its contents poured into his mouth. Three gulps in, however, he found himself doubling up, his free hand a claw, and his face contracted into an expression of excruciating pain. His facial pores erupted with a new wave of perspiration, before he exploded with fit of paroxysmal coughing. Angrily irritant fumes filled his nasal cavity, blinding his eyes with a copious lachrymal discharge his larynx raged like a blast furnace, yet his throat remained no less dry than prior to ingesting the fluid. Although he was unaware of the snack, the fluid tasted like a Bombay Bad Boy Pot Noodle (original recipe), only five times as hot, apparently 90% alcohol, and drier than *brut zero* Champagne.

He held the can up to his face as soon as the coughing had sufficiently subsided, but his blurred vision only recorded a can that was covered with an unidentifiable, exotic script. Clearly, a craven and obsequious import, stocked by British Airways to reflect the tastes of their nowadays typical passenger list. And, clearly, a beverage he did not care to suffer in his mouth any second longer than necessary.

He stood up and signaled to Pinstripe his desire to access the isle. Pinstripe irritably folded his newspaper.

‘I suggest you do everything you need to do now,’ said Pinstripe, stiffly, with a grumpy monotone, while labouring out of his seat.

‘If people...’ he began, before another round of stinging coughs attacked his larynx. He cleared his throat.

‘If people had been minding the shop before the war,’ he tried again, ‘we would still have a first class airline and I would not be having to get up all the time, trying to get some *service!*’ he snapped, outraged that anybody would dare speak to him in such manner.

That would teach him.

‘Just go,’ Pinstripe said, slowly and with quiet menace.

Pinstripe stared at him sternly under his white, cantilevered eyebrows, the fierceness of his mien reinforced by his height and powerful build. Pinstripe was probably the only one aboard who was as tall as he was, and, with his silk tie and polished shoes, cut an impressive figure.

‘I have a very busy speaking schedule ahead of me,’ added Pinstripe, with a darkening frown.

He said nothing, his grunt inaudible.

Attempting to negotiate his way to the lavatory, with people constantly walking up and down the narrow isle, either blocking it, as they leisurely took off layers of clothing, or leaning into them, as they gasped for air (or pulled away from restless neighbours), made him feel like an old salmon swimming up a river of warm Scotch broth. At least the flight attendants appeared to have returned from their lengthy sabbatical, and were, finally, although with carelessness and impatience, attending to the passengers’ accumulated, needs. The passengers’ faces were divided between those exhibiting catatonic boredom, and those chatting, laughing, and joking, so far beyond resignation as to be oblivious and happily immune to any type of inconvenience. In fact, this latter group appeared entirely accustomed to, and patiently acceptant of the normality of,

protracted delays, constant heat, poor service, and unreliable timetables. No one, save for the few aggressive businessmen who had joined in the battle for early boarding, looked impatient to arrive at their destination. But at least these businessmen, like him, knew better than to catch a flight on the day of their meeting; no sane businessman did that anymore, and prudent businessmen typically exhausted all other options before physically displacing themselves abroad: international airports were teeming, the infrastructure generally run down and creaking under the sheer weight of numbers; flights were frequently delayed due to human error, computer glitches, industrial action, or mechanical failure; and it took hours to go through the interminable security checks, for some years now complete with filmed, individual interviews, where each passenger was subjected to a battery of invasive questions while strapped to a polygraph machine, their personal data checked against a total information database.

As he progressed up the rows, he tried to guess whom in that sea of humanity might be what the Americans called a 'sky marshal'; they were initially used by El Al and within the United States on selected flights, but they had since become a fixture of every flight on respectable airlines. The exact number of sky marshals was always unknown and varied depending on the flight, the airline, and/or the destination. In British airlines these sky marshals were undercover SAS agents. He speculated that he might be able to detect the bulge of a concealed weapon, or notice something in a person's manner that betrayed their identity. However, he soon abandoned the game, as there were simply too many people of every age; gender, race, ethnic, subculture, and description present, and the SAS, like all private and public sector employers nowadays, had to comply with government-mandated gender, race, age, disability, and sexual orientation quotas.

When he reached the lavatories, he found them all occupied, and himself in a queue of surly passengers. He took his place behind a tall, athletic young man with short blond hair and filling a black t-shirt emblazoned with a black *sohnenrad*; the t-shirt's fabric was very black, further emphasising the rarity of the young man's complexion. Said young man had brought reading material with him: *Look to Germany*, by Stanley McClatchie.

'I knew it! How many times have you fucked her?'

The shouting came from ahead of him in the queue. A mulatto female with long hair in tight curls stared angrily at a Mestizo male in his thirties. She had her firsts on her hips.

'None. She is a work colleague,' he said.

'Oh, yea? Who do you take me for? What does that slut do for you? Does she take it up the arse? Ah? Does she let you piss in her mouth? Ah? Am I too boring for you?' As the mulatto shouted, clearly for the benefit of everyone,; she rotated her head and shoved her face into her partner, cocking it sideways one way and another in a rhythmical fashion, her display of hostility an animalistic dance.

'Please...'

'Fuck you! Does she lick your balls; eh? Does she like it when you cum on her tits?'

'I don't need to take this crap. Go fuck yourself!'

'Ah, so that's how you wanna play it, prick!'

'Aw, shut up.'

'You gotta problem, bitch? Am I *embarrassing* you? Eh? ANSWER ME!'

He scowled inwardly, with contempt. *Disgusting*, he thought, tightening his lips. It amused him to observe how people around the rowing couple feigned complete unawareness, total disinterest, or utter fascination with the aircraft interior paneling. Where his vantage point allowed a clear view of some of the spectators' faces, no matter what efforts their owners made to appear more interested in the toxicity of a pyrolised poly-ethirimide thermoplastic sheet, nearly-invisible redistributions in their subfacial muscular tension betrayed their gleeful, mean-spirited amusement.

As they were still on the ground, he retrieved his mobile and typed a text message.

Flight appears delayed; of course I am surprised.
Flight attendants - perverts, apes, superannuated
harridans - sit in the galleys telling jokes. Our bodies
roast inside the aircraft like beef joints in a gas oven.
I spent 40 euros on what must have been canned
pesticide.

His wife almost always batted a response within a couple of minutes.

⊗ I am sorry it's rotten in there. Can you not just get a cup with ice? I miss you.

He pitched:

Not a chance. The attendants are useless; it is hard to catch sight of even one.

Then he pitched again, seconds later:

There is a vulgar couple rowing here, shouting and airing their dirty laundry in front of everyone. Typical Hollywood marriage. I really think a serious airline should ban people like these from flying with them. It damages their corporate image.

His wife batted:

I hope they start offering refreshments soon.

And:

XD What do they look like?

He pitched:

She looks like the wife of Andy Garcia's character in Internal Affairs, only half ape. The likes of him can be found in 19th c. primatological literature.

She batted:

XD

He pitched:

Any word from M about the photographer?

She batted:

He has disappeared, apparently. M says one of her guys turned up at Fouad's apartment and it was empty. Re-possessed. It seems he had huge debts and he's fled the country.

He pitched:

So what now?

She batted:

She'll see if she can get hold of this other photographer. French guy. Apparently very good, but elusive.

He pitched:

It seems they all are. I must go. Keep me updated.

She batted:

OK. Speak later. Take care. ☺

Twenty years of marriage had failed to erode the fire of the early days. Even by the standards of their grandparents, who considered death the only valid matrimonial solvent, they were a rare breed. They had first encountered each other in a rural industrial estate, on a sultry August afternoon, the day she and her mother took possession of their new office. Strolling across the car park, he had noticed his future wife leaning against a blue 1999 Rover 45, parked directly before the brick office unit. She had been wearing a red pullover, blue jeans, and wooden-soled sandals. With its boot open, he thought the Rover resembled a blue crocodile with its jaws agape. A woman in her forties, with an authoritative, professorial deportment, had been at that moment in the process of extracting a book-laden cardboard box and transferring it into the building. His interest had been piqued by the pallor of the young woman's toes, and further stimulated by her voluptuous femininity. She had stared at him openly, greeting his approach with an inclination of her head and a whistful smile. He had responded with a stern frown, feigning preoccupation with serious and weighty business matters as he walked past her and into the building.

The first time they had spoken had been on a frigid November Friday evening, when he inquired whether the Rover parked outside, whose interior light had been left on, belonged to her. At that moment she had been inside her minuscule next-door office, stationed at her desk, and surrounded by boxes; she had stared at him for a second with lagoon green eyes, before replying ‘Oh. Thanks.’

In his teens, faced with the mocking sarcasm of classmates who could not believe anyone else’s parents could still be married, he had resolved never to make a permanent commitment based on his feelings alone: feelings tended to rose-tint relationships and, if these feelings ever changed, a relationship built on shaky foundations soon fell prey to conflicting interests and irreconcilable objectives. Avoiding the fate of his peers, therefore, required a scientific approach to mate selection. He had rummaged through the internet, hoping to gather enough information on the girl to build a personality profile; one of her blogs, it turned out, had been left accidentally on public setting, and it contained not only a sufficient number of entries, but also a detailed list of interests and personal preferences, from which to decide whether the girl was worth pursuing at all. To his delight, her blog had demonstrated that she was. He had lived in three continents, and had an interest in languages, philosophy, mathematics, cosmology, astrophysics, and literature. Most importantly, she knew her Greeks. Her blog had contained references to Pythagoras, Sappho, Aeschylus, and Aristotle, and made intelligent references to muses and goddesses in the Greek pantheon. Through critical observation, he had noted her confident stroll in the corridors, her professional attire, and her challenging work ethic. Her mother was a respected professional in her field, confirming the girl’s elite genetic pedigree with a litany of advanced qualifications to her credit, plus fellowships, memberships, and directorships. Armed with this information, he sought to elicit the girl’s interest, not knowing that she had already begun doing the same of her own accord. It took two months before a chance encounter in the unit kitchen, provided a footing on which to begin subsequent electronic communication. He had been preparing refreshments for himself when she had strolled in, greeting him with a friendly smile. Electronic communication was initially amicable but cautious, the girl initiating dialogue with a question, he sending a long and carefully composed response, and

she replying with a hermetic ‘Indeed,’ or ‘Hm,’ or ‘I see.’ In time, however, their exchanges had evolved into improvised cognitive tests: the girl proved singularly sarcastic, and methodically tested his dexterity of wit and verbal skills by relentlessly interpreting his replies in ways flattering to her and demeaning to him, he, of course, enjoyed the challenge and battled with enthusiasm. Emails had led to texts, which rapidly multiplied to hundreds per day. For all his scientific approach, however, the entire process served solely to confirm what the ape in him had already indicated months before, through evolutionary biochemical selection mechanisms, on the unit’s car park, on the day of their initial encounter. A year later they were engaged, and a year after that they were married.

By the time they had ended their text exchange he was first in the queue and lavatory became available. At last! Pointed his mobile phone at the lock (his account would be debited €50 for the first five minutes, then €5 for every additional minute, plus VAT and a climate charge) and the lavatory powered back up. The sights that greeted him once inside were not fit for after dinner viewing: the toilet bowl was filled up to the brim with human faeces, toilet paper, used tampons, and sanitary towels, the sink was covered in dirty soap suds and showed evidence of shaving, the waste compartment was overflowing, packed solid with soiled paper towels and general rubbish, the floor was wet, almost certainly not with just water, and, needless to say, the stench inside the cubicle was all the more pungent because of the sauna temperatures it was maintaining. It had taken no time for the human zoo on hoard to make its presence felt. If he had intended to rinse his mouth with water from the sink, that was now completely out of the question: touching anything in there equaled instant dysentery. He burst out of the toilet just as quickly as he had burst in.

As he was squeezing back into his seat, he looked at Pinstripe, who had by now ceased to even acknowledge him as a person. Mildly disturbed, he decided to dulcify his neighbour: the latter looked like someone serious and important, after all, and a man of his pedigree tended to be on first name terms with men who were serious and important, he dreaded the thought of having misrepresented himself to an important businessman or academic one he might encounter later on to the point where he was dismissed as riffraff.

He said, with genteel sarcasm, yet careful to mask his obsequiousness under a blanket of sober understatement, 'I suggest you add the lavatories to the list of things to avoid.'

'I travel thousands of miles every year,' bit Pinstripe, nearly cutting him off. Pinstripe was clearly unimpressed by him, was not fooled by his humour, and had evidently decided to scare him off from further attempts at conversation.

Suddenly mortified, he said, in a lower, calmer, and more formal tone, 'I apologise for my earlier outburst. It is simply too hot in here to think logically.'

Pinstripe replied, 'You should note that not all people of my generation are traitors to the British cause.'

'Well, I did not mean necessarily...' he began.

'If you are looking for traitors,' continued Pinstripe, ignoring him. 'look at Lord Hailsham, or Mr. Tony Blair, or Mr. David Cameron, or Mr. David Milliband, and their loathsome gangs of stunted dwarves.'

'Absolutely,' he said, emphatically. 'That's what I was talking about.'

Pinstripe took no notice of him. 'They are commemorated by bronze plaques and the statues and the memorials scattered around our capital. The same with the conformist historians who write their authorized biographies sitting in their booklined caves, quoting other conformist historians.'

'Of course. They're all base pairs in the same strand of D.N.A.'

Pinstripe stared at him sternly from under the cantilever of his hoary eyebrows. 'I have been a leading military historian since my first (bestselling) book was published in 1963. I have written over thirty books in sixty years, which have been published all over the world by publishers of the finest pedigree, some going through several editions in hardback before their publication in paperback.'

He smiled, glad to find common ground, and eager now to present his own credentials. 'Well, as it happens, my work has been published in the most prestigious trade and academic journals...'

Pinstripe did not hear him, and carried on, talking over him. 'Yet I am ignored. I am ignored because I am a very independently minded historian of whom the newspapers in this country are frightened, because I have never censored myself or stopped myself from asking questions because they are inconvenient. I used to be rich, I had a house in Mayfair, drove a Rolls Royce, and had I been a

conformist historian myself I would have by now been honoured with a knighthood or an OBE and my books would be standard textbooks in the schools around the country.'

Damn, he thought. It would have been nice to add an ennobled historian to his list of friends and acquaintances. He knew mostly scientists, professors, and CEOs, he was yet to break through into the British aristocracy.

'However I did not choose to be a conformist historian and paid a very heavy price: my books have been pulped, I have been banned from several countries, and years ago lost my house of 38 years.'

'Oh, dear,' he said, donning a mask of concern, instantly conscious of his falsity. Professor Kautonen had faced some heat in his faculty, a few student protestors, uncomfortable moments in the university corridors, minor vandalism, but that was as far as anyone from within his circle had publicly strayed from the mainstream.

Pinstripe was obviously accustomed to speaking before audiences and he was now in oratorical mode. 'But a hundred years from now it will matter not one whit whether or not I was able to pay my child's school fees or our grocery bills, or to live in adequate style, what will ultimately matter is whether mine are the biographies and works of real history that count, or those of the potboiler writers and hacks like John Lukacs, Geoffrey Best, Alan Bullock and Lord Jenkins. If tonight the pilot announces in midflight that the plane will hit the sea in two minutes, unlike the screaming fellow passengers all around me, I shall unbuckle my belt, fold my arms and smile a benign smile: I have written thirty books and fathered five beautiful daughters, and generally done my bit for civilization.'

'Well,' he wedged in, anxious to acquaint the historian with his scientific eminence, 'my wife and I never had any children, but I have produced technological ones of my own. I...'

'No, not all of us are traitors,' said Pinstripe, meeting his gaze with a heavy, admonishing frown. 'not all of us welcome what England, what Europe, has become.'

'Yes, that was my point...' he interrupted, solicitously. 'Normally, he would not care what strangers thought of him, but it mattered very much that the people who mattered, the movers and shakers, the academic intelligentsia, the captains of industry, the prometheans recognised him as one of their own.'

'I regret what has happened to the England I grew up in. I've been saying this for many years now and I will say it again: I wish I

could go to Heathrow airport, take a 747 and fly back ten hours later to find England as it used to be.'

'Yes, I completely agree,' he said, frowning and nodding emphatically.

'I know nothing about your name, or your politics, or your religion. I know however that you are an Englishman, and this is the unifying factor between us.'

Ah, good, so he recognizes it! he thought, opening his mouth and raising his finger, ready to respond with an elaboration of that statement.

Pinstripe was not interested in anything he had to say, however. He continued, 'In the 1950's, Britain was a country at peace. We had defeated a major world power, we were licking our wounds and recovering, and for no perceptible reason we then, through the folly and negligence of the government we had voted into power, inflicted on this country a body wound, which only began at that time. In 1938 when I was born, Britain controlled an empire which covered a large part of the land masses of the globe. We were a nation who could hold our head up high. We were not ashamed of what we were doing. We were a nation with a sense of mission, a sense of purpose, a sense of destiny. On my old office wall off Grosvenor Square I once had a large map that I bought the previous year in South-West Africa, in what we now have to call Namibia. It is an old Collins school Atlas of Africa. Large areas of that continent were under the governancy of the British people, and they certainly fared no less well than they are faring now. In fact I would be so bold as to say that they were doing very much better under British rule in the 1940's and the 1950's than they are doing under the dictators whom we have been encouraged to allow to take command.'

He kept his gaze fixed onto Pinstripe, suddenly mute. Acutely aware of his righthand neighbour's race, he kept his head still, saying nothing, hoping the black woman could not hear them.

Pinstripe appeared unconcerned. 'Of course in the 1950's and 1960's, you heard it said again and again: the empire was going anyway. That is a criminal fatalism. If we had enough strength and manhood to fight a desperate war for six years against a ruthless, determined, brave enemy, then we certainly had the strength to keep an empire together. How can anyone now say that we could not keep a farflung empire, even today, when we have immersive communications, orbiting space stations, and all the other methods

of shrinking global distances. We have gone astray. We have lost our sense of purpose, our sense of destiny, our sense of mission.'

He sported a studious, noncommittal frown, and kept still, his mouth shut. He wondered whether the Afro-Caribbean woman was glaring at them.

'I admit to being born in England in 1938, which was a totally different England. I feel queasy when I look and see what has happened to our country, nobody has stood up and objected to it. England I was born into, which is the England I come from and probably the England your parents came from, was different from the England that exists now. When I talk about English, I am talking about the England I came from. The England of the blue lamp and Jack Warner and when there was no chewing gum on the pavements, and all the rest of it. If we watch the old movies - the Ealing comedies and Edgar Lustgarten movies that were made in Britain in 1940 or 1950. You can't quite put your finger on it: but there's something... It's how Britain used to be, it is how Britain used to be before the foreigners came flooding in. Those were the days, of course, the 1940's and the 1950s, when you could go for a walk down Oxford Street at night without fear of being mugged, or worse, those were the days when around the entire world you could ask any school child, what do you know about the British policeman? And back came the answer: 'He is unarmed.' We were proud of that. We were proud of our traditions. Britain was a haven of thriving industries, of intelligent and forthright people whose word could be trusted. But now it isn't. Britain has become a nation where some people's rights have to be specially protected by law, instead of by one's own natural Christian instincts, a nation where the newest newcomer is given preference over the people who have been here with family and forefathers and ancestors, for centuries. Everything has been stood on its head. And we are baffled and perplexed and confused by it all, because wherever we turn, we English and Scots and Welsh and Irish wherever we look we cannot find any political party or any force or any faction that is prepared to stand up for us. Where are the Englishmen in office?'

Pinstripe was correct, of course, but he now decided that had nothing meaningful to contribute to Pinstripe's reflections. His expertise was in information technology specifically, in artificial intelligence and heuristic semantic matrices not in political science. As a scientist he knew that the decline of Empires (like the decline of

the West) was inevitable: the reasons were always the same. The individual links in the chain of cause and effect might differ, but they altered not the cyclical morphology of history. If nature was cyclical and humans were natural, then humans and that which was human were cyclical too. When it came to human affairs, therefore, it was naive to imagine that one lived in a world of enduring certainties: for all practical purposes, the only certainties were the laws of the universe. Historical macro-trends were beyond the ability of a single individual to control: Hitler attempted it, but ultimately he only accelerated the rate of decline. It was therefore unwise to risk professional reputation by protesting the inevitable. Short of membership of the Bilderberger Club (and this was merely a catalyst), the rational option for individuals was to use their intelligence to insulate themselves from the effects of socialism and cultural decomposition as best they could. Doing so effectively necessitated resources, and resource acquisition was a function of social standing. Eventually, a doomsday asteroid or a thermonuclear holocaust would wipe the slate clean, and if a sufficient number of the more highly evolved humans survived, a new civilization might rise from the ashes. However, that was unlikely to occur in his lifetime, and, having not reproduced himself, the problems of future generations did not concern him.

'It was back in the 1940's, even the 1950's, that Britain took wrong turnings. We have advanced so far now, after these wrong turnings, that it is a road that we can no longer retrace. The clock can no longer be put back. Britain is doomed, and the point has past where a small band of dedicated men can turn the clock back to where it was when I was born, when Britain was a great nation. God knows I did my part in that effort, and paid dearly for it. I have never been politically correct and I am not ashamed of that. As a very independently minded historian, I tried to expose the guilty men. And if you are looking to apportion blame, start with people like Lord Hailsham. He is traitor no. 1 to the British cause. Lord Hailsham and cabinet ministers like him - Harold Macmillan and others of that ilk. Mr. Churchill, Macmillan, Anthony Eden. These and the rest of them took two million pounds in July 1938, to sell their own country, Britain, the Britain I was born into, down the River Moldau. I was four months old at the time. And it was Lord Hailsham who said at a Cabinet meeting in a totally negligent manner that he did not think that immigration into Britain was

going to be a problem and that so far only 100,000 had arrived, and he thought it would not go to more than that.'

He was paralysed. His chest felt tight. He was impatient for Pinstripe to finish his monologue, and move on to some other, less risky topic. They were surrounded by immigrants on all sides - Black, Asian, Amerindian, and combinations thereof, all highly sensitive to racial matters, he had no stomach for an angry scene.

'I say in a totally negligent manner,' continued Pinstripe, absorbed in his oration, 'because it is the duty of the custodians of government in this country to look ahead and to try to ward off any kind of misfortunes and tragedies that may otherwise befall the country which is put into their guardianship. These men did not have Britain's interests at heart. There probably hasn't been one politician in the past thirty or forty years who had not been taken some kind of backhander from some slush fund, or some foreign country, or some big business, or some industrial interest in the United Kingdom. Look at the way they die: rich, rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Cap in hand, they can barely afford to fight their election battles, but when they die it's all spelled out there in the Wills & Testaments in *The Times*. Where's all that money come from? It hasn't come from their pay as Members of Parliament. It's come from the cash handouts, from the interests they represent. Not one of those has Britain itself at heart. Those interests are purely petty, insular, self-centred, and not infrequently anti-English at heart. How else do you understand that this country has been flooded by immigrants in the last seventy years?'

By now desiring to shrink to the size of a quark, he made not a sound. He agreed completely, of course, and admired Pinstripe's uncensored courage, but he was a businessman and his clients operated diverse multinational organizations. He could not afford to offend them, or risk an embarrassing incident aboard the aircraft. He could be ordered off the aircraft, arrested, charged with a racial offense - it would be all very difficult to explain.

'Not because we needed them. Big business needed them. Big business did not give a hoot about British traditions, and British style, and British culture, and British civilization. Their shipping lines, their airlines, profited from this influx. It did not matter if the immigrants were totally alien to the culture of this country. The Immigration Problem in this country is a tragedy inflicted on both our peoples, both ours and the peoples of the immigrants.'

At this point the engines powered down and the internal cabin announcement system was switched on. The smiley voice of a Bengali gentleman announced in an artificial singsong, 'Ladies and gentlemen. Sorry for the delay with this British Airways flight to Madrid this evening. We regret to inform you that due to technical problems we will have to delay departure by approximately one to two hours. You are free to stay on board or go back to the concourse, where you will be able to purchase refreshments and additional reading material from the shops near the gate. We will try our best to keep you updated and will make the appropriate announcement when we have resolved the technical problems and are ready to depart. Once again, sorry for the delay. We will try to have the flight ready for departure as soon as we can.'

Chapter 3

Terminal 6

Decades ago an intolerable nuisance, for many years now normal and expected, tonight's delayed flight suited him rather well. Firstly, it provided him with an elegant excuse to flee the historian, secondly, and most importantly, it gave him access to the cafes and the newsagents, in whose direction he was now briskly walking with only one fixed image his mind: a cold, wet, refreshing, sweet, carbonated, non-alcoholic drink. Needless to say that the nearest vendor of beverages fitting that description was many minutes away, beyond a perplexing labyrinth of infinite corridors, broken escalators, and moving walkways that operated on cosmological timescales. Moreover, every corridor, escalator, and moving walkway was teeming with humans of every subspecies catalogued by Western science, although biological anthropologists could have, without much controversy, recommended taxonomies lumping most of the specimens on display with the other great apes. His progress was further retarded by the more highly evolved among the hominids present, for the latter's movements were torpid, hesitant, and laboured, on account of their advanced age and 'or enormous size. If these environmental conditions were insufficient to induce a headache, then certainly the heat and high humidity, aggravated by his suit and tie and heavy-soled shoes, made sure all the conditions for a blinding headache were met: a migraine began to develop above his right eye.

At last, however, his desperate eyes detected a CocaCola display fridge hosted inside a Tesco newsagent. His legs accelerated and, like the bow of an icebreaker boat in the Arctic sea, his decisive shoulder rammed the human ocean separating his dry mouth and

desiccated throat from the Coke bottle he required. Entering the newsagent, ordering the clerk to unlock the fridge, showing his junk food licence, handing over the money, unscrewing the cap, and gulping down the Coke until his throat spasmed was performed in a single movement. As he pulled the bottle away from his smiling lips, he exhaled loudly, his eyes closed with almost orgasmic relief. It was not only the face of someone whose thirst had been quenched, but also that of a sugar and caffeine addict who had just had his fix.

Supposing that he had time, he decided to linger and browse through the magazine racks. The unsmiling face of a man in his late 70's, clad in dark tie and suit, lit from below, peering out of a solid black background, his lined features hardened by digitally-enhanced contrast, filled the cover of Newsweek magazine, it was not necessary to read the title of the lead story covering the man's forehead to see that the editors hated him, and were inviting readers to discover why they had to share in that hatred. He took the bait, not caring that the Sikh clerk was eyeing him suspiciously (after queuing for twenty minutes behind rows of casual magazine browsers, he was resolved to have an in-depth browse of his own). From the article he learnt that the man on the cover was a Dr. Kevin MacDonald, an American evolutionary psychologist and columnist, about to be tried at the Human Rights Tribunal in The Hague for crimes against humanity. His case was significant because he was not a mass murderer, at least in the conventional sense: on the contrary, he was a peaceful, urbane, soft-spoken university professor and author of seven books, who had, until his legal troubles began, lived a quiet life, teaching and writing from his base at California State University, Long Beach. The grounds for prosecution were that through his works - particularly his three books on Judaism - he had developed an anti-semitic analytical framework that provided the intellectual rationale for racist apartheid, persecution, and genocide, Dr. MacDonald was to serve as a test case, which, if successful for the prosecution, would extend the definition of genocide to include academic research intended to, or likely to provide, a theoretical justification for racist or genocidal state policies, even if these were explicitly rejected by the author. Dr. Kevin MacDonald 'the Monster of Long Beach' had already had his tenure revoked with cause on grounds of moral turpitude, been banned from public speaking, writing, publishing, and communicating with journalists, and seen all stocks of his now banned books seized and destroyed. According to the article, Dr. MacDonald had argued in these books that Jews were pursuing a

group evolutionary strategy designed to maintain their racial purity, maximise their racial fitness (eugenics), and advance their collective interests at the expense of those of gentiles. According to Dr. MacDonald, claimed the article, racism had been a defensive response to resource competition with Jews, and a number of 20th Century intellectual movements, like Freudian psychoanalysis, Boasian anthropology, the radical Left, the New York intellectuals, and the pro-immigration movement, had been a Jewish conspiracy fraudulently designed to undermine traditional White, Christian, European culture, via the creation of a culture of radical critique. Because of the bans, Dr. MacDonald had not been permitted to submit his remarks for the article, so the author had kindly summarised his views for him before roundly rebutting them.

He had no means of evaluating the veracity of the allegations against Dr. MacDonald because he had never previously heard of him, and, certainly, now that his books no longer existed and their possession was illegal, there was no possibility for the public to compare journalistic allegations against Dr. MacDonald's actual writings. It was annoying. At least he felt reassured that he himself had made the right decision not to pursue an academic career: he had considered it many years ago as a postgraduate student, but he had quickly found that he had no time for the contortuplications of university politics.

BusinessWeek (cover price \$999) had an article about investment strategies during periods of high inflation. Traditionally, the more clever and farsighted protected their wealth by converting most of their transferable assets into long-term valuable commodities, such as gold, jewellery, and art. Businessmen had borrowed to the hilt and converted the money into fixed plant assets, equipment, and stocks of raw materials, knowing that their debt would be wiped out within weeks.

These strategies, however, were only accessible to the rich. Also in part they no longer applied in a service-based economy, where industrial production had long been offshored or outsourced. A relatively recent development, and an alternative that improved the prospects of common folk, had been the entrance of recorded music media as a substantial category into the antiques market. People did not pay to hear music anymore: music was, like air, free, because overproduction, confusingly enormous catalogues, and instant availability on the internet, had made it objectively worthier. Not worthless, however, were the artists' live shows, memorabilia, and the physical media containing said artists' best recorded

performances. Not all physical media was valuable, of course: vinyl records were valuable if they were exemplars of limited edition, or of a rare or banned version, or had been autographed, cassettes were junk irrespective of version or limitation. As with all collectables, it was all highly subjective and dependent on the object's condition, the artist in question, the genre's fashionability and degree of specialisation, and the broader historical context. This required collector- investors hoping to prosper to possess indepth knowledge of the music as well as a thorough understanding of what made some records valuable and others not - a factor that had a great deal to do with fan psychology and the mythologising mechanisms and processes within popular culture. Typically, collector-investors specialised on specific artists, genres, record labels and/or formats. Astute and obsessive collectors who had hoarded multiple copies of rare versions and limited editions of the right albums by the right artists at the time of their original release, had found themselves wealthy even after their dollar denominated savings and investments had been wiped out.

Sweat was running down his forehead and the sides of his head, and, by the time he noticed, the page containing the article he was reading was soaked to the point of transparency. He put the magazine back on the rack and began negotiating his way out of the packed, furnace-like shop. Once outside he thought of visiting a book store to try to kill more time, only to immediately find reasons to sigh with exasperation: his thirst temporarily alleviated, nature had returned with yet another call. Urination was, in his opinion, a complete waste of time - an inconvenient interruption that disrupted him throughout the day, broke his concentration, and, when not at home, forced him to visit dubious public lavatories. *Damn!* he thought, imagining a pea-sized bladder. He had better things to do with his time.

The lavatories were lost in the labyrinthine terminal, burrowed somewhere among the crazy proliferation of concourses, floors, escalators, walkways, halls, corridors, ramps, shops, bureaux, checkpoints, tunnels, and flights of stairs. Yet, despite the mammoth size of that terminal, it was still choked with the ever-growing flow of passengers, compounded by the constant backlogs and delays arising from mechanical failures, computer glitches, power outages, and paranoid security bottlenecks. It was impossible to walk in a straight line, let alone at a brisk pace, as every area everywhere was vacuum packed with travellers, as if the entire terminal, from

basements to towers, was serving as the venue of a soldout concert gig.

Half an hour later he was amazed to find himself pointing his mobile phone at a lock and walking into a toilet. He was not amazed, however, to find it crammed solid with heavily perspiring men of every race and description, waiting to use the urinals, the toilets, the sinks, and the hand driers. He scrutinised the men around him, and tried to determine whether there were muggers or pickpockets inside, organised gangs of muggers and pickpockets were known to operate in public lavatories. Two tall, muscular, Afro-Caribbean males, casually leaning against a wall near the entrance were his most obvious suspects: they appeared unhurried and relaxed, and their deep voices filled the room with their loud conversation and raucous laughter. They, however, remained engaged in conversation until the door to the stall nearest to him opened and he managed to squeeze in past the exiting gentleman, so he speculated that it was probable - although never certain - that he would leave the Gents in possession of his watch, phone, and wallet.

As he locked the door and turned around to face the toilet, it became evident to him that a possible mugging was not going to be his only source of worries. At some point during the past decade BAA Ltd. had replaced Western-style flush toilets with Japanese-style squatters. He remembered hearing about this innovation several years ago (along with the arguments that had been rehearsed in defence of this design), but this was the first time he had been confronted with a squat toilet in real life.

Most of the fixtures were identical to the Western flush toilet: there was a water tank, piping, and a flushing mechanism. What made it different was the absence of a water-filled bowl: instead, there was a fixture resembling a urinal rotated 90 degrees and set into the floor, with a shallow trough to collect the waste. The instructions on the wall indicated that the user was expected to squat over this fixture, facing the hemispherical hood, evacuate as quickly as possible, and then select between Small Flush (for urine) or Big Flush (for fœces). The instructions reminded the user to squat over the hole, but close to the front, to avoid excrement falling into the rear edge of the in-floor receptacle. Evidence suggested that previous users had not fully read, understood, or put into practice these instructions.

At the time of the refurbishment, BAA Ltd. had been reported in the news as arguing that squat toilets were more hygienic (no splash

on the buttocks after heavy defecation), that they offered added health benefits (elimination in squatting posture protects the nerves that control the prostate bladder and the uterus from becoming stretched and/or damaged, squatting may reduce the occurrence, or at least the severity, of hemorrhoids, and possibly other colorectal disorders, such as diverticulosis and appendicitis), and that they were more environmentally friendly (they required less porcelain, a ceramic material whose manufacture necessitated the heating of refined materials, which consumed energy and increased emissions). However, he was able to identify the real motivations almost immediately: (1) cost-cutting (squat toilets are less expensive, less vulnerable to vandalism, and easier to clean and maintain, also squatting makes elimination faster, which means a faster turnover of paying customers), (2) Grupo Ferrovial, the company that owned BAA Ltd., was a Spanish company, and squat toilets were common in the Middle East, which made the toilets more in accord with the demographic realities in the Peninsula. It angered him to reflect on these considerations. Now he was forced to stand inside that cubicle, having his expensive shoes splashed with waste, because one company sought to save money and another sought to avoid charges of institutional racism.

‘Gimme your fucking wallet!’

The shout came from outside his stall, a few stalls over to his right, near the entrance. More shouting and sounds of struggle followed. He stood still, quiet as a mouse, listening, his hands fastening his belt very slowly, his mind thinking of possible escape routes, in case one was needed. Swearing and the noises of a scuffle filled the lavatory, then he heard the door slamming open and screams, gradually fading. He waited. There was a moment of utter silence before the murmur of men resuming conversation rose and the toilets began flushing and the hand driers began blowing again. He stepped out as soon as he deemed it safe, only to collide with an over-competitive man in his thirties, with olive skin and a neatly trimmed black beard, trying to muscle his way into the stall before anyone else could. He squeezed his way past, too accustomed to such rudeness to admonish it, too relieved to have been spared by the muggings lottery, and queued again to use the handwash basin, and then yet again to use the hand drier. Of course, and as a consequence of the bewildering profusion of climate change levies, the use of these fixtures, like the use of toilet paper, had to be individually paid for.

As he exited the toilet, he heard an announcement that concerned him directly, and which could not have come at a more inconvenient time or location:

‘Attention passengers of British Airways flight 5898307 to Madrid, please proceed to gate 327 immediately for boarding.’

‘Damn!’ he muttered under his breath.

He craned his neck and tried to determine how far he had strayed from gate 327. In the distance ahead of him, he was able to read (during a gap among the ceaseless stream of turbans, kufis, and dreadlock tams) a sign that stated ‘Gate 954.’ That was exactly 626 gates away, each many metres apart from each other, each clogged with ambling and waiting, baggage-laden passengers. What was more, gate 327 was on Concourse I, whereas he was currently on Concourse Y. He was at least an hour away walking from where he hadn’t expected to be.

If earlier he had regarded the travellers choking the concourse as a giant troop of apes, now he regarded them merely as obstacles. Not that this would have made much of a difference from the standpoint of the travellers, as instinctively, in the event of social or even professional interaction, most would have regarded him anyway as either a resource or an obstacle.

He plunged into the crowd with a vengeance, using his shoulders and elbows to machete his way through it with ruthless efficiency. While his body was thus engaged, his mind calculated (a) the likely number of minutes the crew would allow for boarding before closing the gate; (b) the likely number of minutes he was likely to shave off the hour by maintaining his current speed and trajectory; and (c) whether the search for available shortcuts would take as much time as using them would save him on way to the gate. The prospect of having to spend additional hours at that airport terminal, or finding himself forced to come back in the morning to take an alternative flight, was so unappetising, that he crazily considered whether there was a way somehow to throw himself into the luggage and cargo handling system, get onto the tarmac outside, circumvallate the terminal, and find a way back in through a jet-way door. This was, of course, out of the question: the luggage handling system was not like in the 1970s: nowadays, with its powerful X-ray scans, decompression chambers, and delousing and thermoplastic polymer sealing systems, they were positively lethal. More importantly, he had no desire to soil his suit: he was, after all, a serious businessman. Negotiating his way through the heaving human mass around

him was not simply a matter of finding crevices between people walking or standing around: his progress was especially frustrated by a chaotic undergrowth of barrel bags, shoulder totes, rucksacks, shopping bags, children, push chairs, trolleys, prams, wheelchairs, canes, rollators, walkers, crutches, and height adjustable stick seats. It did not help that most of the humans were odiously egotistical and rude, not caring to act on polite requests to move aside or to think of the needs of others. Many stood around in groups, casually chit-chatting in the middle of the concourse, far away from walls and; columns, indifferent to the fact that a concourse was not a sitting room where they could relax and socialise, but was meant to maintain a constant flow of traffic. Boiling hot as it was, Concourse Y was like a river of nearly petrified lava. 'Oi! Watch where you are going!'

He turned towards the source of the remark and saw a frowning, coffee-coloured forehead set against a distant sign that said 'Gate 952'. As he looked below the forehead, he found a pair of black eyes piercing him with barely contained aggression.

'You wrinkled my wife's magazine!'

He saw a frowning, half-cast female trying to smooth the cover of her copy of Hello!, wherefrom the faces of Prince Harry and his Afro-Trinidadian wife smiled back at him.

'I am sorry. I do not have time for this,' he said, stiffly, continuing forward. The coffee-coloured male's face contorted with rage, and a rude; violent hand tried to grab him by the shoulder, but missed and sunk back into the crowd.

He heard the coffee-coloured gentleman scream behind him, 'YOU FUCKING CUNT!'

Remembering the screams he heard while in the lavatory, he used his right hand to discretely pull his wallet out of his breast pocket and drop it into the hole just behind it, which led all the way down to the bottom of his jacket. He did the same with his mobile phone (which was paper-thin, and therefore easier to miss). His other wallet and phone, he kept in his other breast pocket, which had a rusty zipper and therefore could not be picked. This secondary phone was an old model he no longer used, crammed with fake data and viruses he had himself programmed. The secondary wallet contained a few printouts of Euro notes, and pieces of plastic cut to look like credit cards; it was a cow-skin cheapie he had purchased at a Tesco supermarket. This phone and this wallet he carried around to hand

over in the event of a mugging; they looked good enough to satisfy muggers while in the act, and get them on their way.

A gap in the crowd allowed him to see that Gate 949 resembled the grounds of a Funeral Doom edition of the Reading music festival. Hundreds of frustrated, bored, listless, sleeping travellers filled the waiting area, slumped on the seats or lying on the floor, with hand luggage and stuffed shopping bags serving as make-shift pillows. Those who were awake or at least not catatonic, chatted on their mobiles, listened to music, surfed the internet, read the Q'ran, prayed, watched Bollywood films, or followed South American telenovelas. Everywhere around them, it was like the aftermath of a hurricane, with magazines, plastic bottles, snotty tissues, brainless airport novels, bags of crisps, chocolate bars, chewing gum wrappers, sandwich boxes, coffee cups, banana peels, and cans of fizzy drinks filling every available cranny not already occupied by an unwashed human. There was, moreover, not a single clean-shaven man in sight, so it was instantly clear that they had been waiting for permission to board since the beginning of the week.

The human forest immediately before his face parted to reveal two hulking airport security officers, looking at him and for him. They seemed almost extra-terrestrial with their grotesque, laser-equipped, computerised helmets and bulky bullet-proof vests, laden with all manner of ammunition, pepper sprays, hand grenades, ultra sonic mines, microwave generators, stink bombs, electric truncheons, and other hi-tech gadgetry. Both were carrying ultra-fast Metal Storm machine guns, with barrels bluntly pointed at him. Since Islamist global terrorist networks had some years ago gained access to thermonuclear, biochemical, and genetic weapons, airport security consisted of specially trained SAS personnel; one was well advised to avoid arguments and comply with their instructions; all their interactions with members of the public, and certainly with suspects, were filmed and recorded, and relayed in real time to a centralised database.

'ID,' barked one of them.

He dug into the hole in his jacket, extracted his crocodile-skin wallet from inside the lining, and handed over his identity card.

The security officer attached the identity card to a hand-held devise, which checked the data stored in the card's invisible

chip against a centralised national database. The officer looked at the screen intently, scrolling down, and looking at him periodically, in silence, unsmiling, and with suspicion.

'Name?' barked the officer.

He stated his name.

'Address?'

He stated his address.

'How long?'

He told them.

'Owned or rented?'

'Owned.'

'Since when?'

'15 August 2016'

'Paid how much?'

'10 million Euros'

'Mortgage provider?'

He told them.

'Place of birth?'

He told them.

'Time of birth?'

He told them.

'Occupation?'

He told them.

'Employer?'

He told them.

'How long?'

He told them.

'Current salary?'

He told them.

'Main bank account?'

He told them.

'Current balance?'

He told them.

'Wife's maiden name?'

He told them.

'Let me see your mobile.'

He handed it over.

'Give me a few of the names and numbers in the address book.'

He told them a couple. '

'Last call for British Airways flight 5898307 to Madrid, please go immediately to Gate 327.'

Last call? he fumed inwardly, in exasperation. Yet, airport security seemed nowhere near finished checking him up.

‘Empty your pockets,’ he was told.

Now he started to get nervous, and his awareness of getting nervous only exacerbated his nervousness, since it was likely to be noticed and arise suspicion. Worse, he realised he would now have to show them his fake phone and wallet, -he would then have to explain why he had them, why the data on the phone was fake, why it had malicious viruses installed, and this would, in turn, exacerbate suspicions and lead to further questions. If they decided to download the data from his fake mobile, the viruses would probably damage the officer’s hand held, an offence for which he could be arrested. He was too clever for his own good!

‘What’s this?’ barked the officer.

He tried to explain what the fake wallet was for.

‘WHAT?’

He angry shout came from behind him. A third officer had stealthily positioned himself behind him in order to cover the other two. He had not only been listening and closely watching him, but clearly he was also the one playing ‘badcop’. This one was more corpulent than his colleagues, his huge, angry face all the more feral because of his swarthy complexion. The officer to his right, the one who had been interrogating him while examining his personal effects, used his hand to make a calm, placatory gesture to his colleague; he then started taking the plastic pieces out of the wallet’s pockets, looking ever more puzzled and suspicious.

‘What are these?’

He tried to explain, talking nervously and too quickly, despite his best efforts to sound calm and serious. The officer just stared at him with his icy blue eyes, looking thoroughly unconvinced, and not in the slightest amused; his expressionless face utterly unfriendly, remote, unwilling to sympathise or understand anything.

‘You’re forging documents,’ declared the officer.

This was, of course, way off track, nothing to do with the explanation he had given, completely unrelated to any statement he had made; yet the question was devious and calculating, a police ploy designed to ensnare him. He tried, as calmly as he could, to explain once again why he had a superficially-realistic fake wallet.

‘Please look into this eye piece and stare at the dot in the middle without blinking,’ said the officer, holding a retinal scanner up to his face. He did as instructed.

‘We’ll need a DNA sample. Rub this swab against the inside of your mouth.’

He did as instructed..

‘Last call for British Airways flight 5898307 to Madrid, please go immediately to Gate 327.’

Oh, come on! he thought. It infuriated him the airport security were determined to waste his time, fine-combing the private affairs of a law-abiding professional, while an Islamist nutter could very well, right that second, be planting a dirty bomb in one of the lavatories.

The officer checked the retinal scan against the global database, every now and then eyeing him as if he thought there was something not quite right with him. Another old police tactic. (He knew them all; for reasons he never quite understood, his parents loved American television cop shows, so he was familiar with the Hollywood representations.)

With some relief, he saw that the officer appeared satisfied with the verification he obtained on his handheld device, but this only meant that the retinal scan matched the one stored in the global database: assuming that he had told the truth, as an IT expert he potentially had sufficient knowledge somehow to hack into that database and tamper with the records, which, until a forensic examination could be carried out, made him a potential identity thief; in other words, verification did not clear him of the charge of ‘forging documents’ - rather, it potentially substantiated the identity thief hypothesis. Subtle changes in the officer’s facial muscles registered the fact that this hypothesis was under active consideration. And worse was yet to come: the officer had now decided to pay attention to his fake mobile. He realised then and there that he was going to be spending that evening, not packed like a sardine inside an aluminium bratwurst along with nearly a thousand other passengers, but in a police detention cell, packed like a sardine with dozens of nasty criminals.

The officer switched on the mobile: Then, all lights went out, accompanied by the decaying whirl of ventilation systems powering down. With astronomical twilight long past, he was suddenly staring, into a total darkness, and momentarily lost in a crowd suspended in perplexed silence. After a second or so, the enraged murmur of tens of thousands of passengers realising

there had been yet another blackout rose up out of the silence, followed by screams heard in the distance.

The airport security officers sprung immediately into action, their faces covered by infra-red visors, their eyes overlaid with digitised concourse layouts, their mouths speaking into their helmets, all communicating with the airport security command centre. The officer to his right started barking orders to the others, finally handing back his personal effects. 'Do not switch off your mobile,' he said. 'We're watching you.' All officers then disappeared into the crowd.

A total blackout meant there could be no take offs; if the blackout lasted long enough, he now had a chance to make it back to his gate before the flight was closed. Emergency light-emitting diodes had by now come online, but a combination of BAA's ongoing cash-flow problems and incompetent maintenance staff had resulted in their having been imperfectly maintained and replaced, so illumination inside the concourses was patchy and dim. This conferred upon him an added degree of anonymity that left him free to be openly rude: he resumed his race to Gate 327 - this time with desperate violence - pushing and pulling people out of his way, while perfectly happy to step onto people's hand baggage, if that was what what circumstances demanded for him to accelerate his progress. He calculated that if he appeared serious and acted as if he were trying to keep track of the airport security officers, he would be mistaken by an undercover sky marshal or police officer, and not face excessive complaints. The angry 'Oil's he heard he contemptuously ignored.

Fourty minutes later, he found himself reaching Gate 327. He staggered towards the counter, where two flight attendants (this time different ones) had been cosily chatting in a sterile penumbra of plastic, Formica, and Olefin level-loop Berber carpeting, exchanging impressions about the Venezuelan *culebron* they had been assiduously following. They took no notice of him until the lights came back on. He scanned his surroundings as the plasma screens came back to life and the ventilation systems revved up to their standard RPM, as if to assure himself that the power outage was truly at an end. He handed over his boarding pass, passport, and ID card to the flight attendants while the concourse announcement system burst with a barrage of pre-recorded announcements. The flight attendants looked at him somewhat perplexed: rivers of perspiration ran down his face and into his soaked shirt, his soaked shirt

heaved with his heavy respiration; he looked to them as if he had just completed a marathon wearing a tweed suit in the middle of Summer. Only, it was December.

Chapter 4

Irving's War

His shirted back was pressed against his seat as the craft gained speed and finally lifted off the runway. The Afro-Caribbean female to his left stared ahead in a daze, her indifference to the infant's wails unrelenting. Pin-stripe the historian scribbled onto a sheet of electronic paper; it appeared that he had a newspaper column, *A Radical's Diary*.

Hunger eroded his entrails. This was expected, since the various technical issues afflicting both the aircraft and the terminal had pushed him well behind schedule. As snacks would not be offered for quite a while still, he searched his pockets for forgotten pieces of chewing gum. All he could find, however, was a single, caramelised biscuit, nearly pulverised inside a PVDC bag; he vaguely remembered pocketing it at a coffee shop in London a few months ago: it had come with a Cappuccino he had enjoyed with his wife the afternoon of her Summer book launch. His desperate fingers ripped open the bag and shoved the biscuit into his oral cavity, - where it was rapidly masticated and swallowed. Unfortunately, however, rather than mollify his cerebellum, the act diligently stimulated his salivary glands, highlighting even more emphatically the emptiness of his stomach, which had for an hour now been digesting its own lining.

In an attempt to forget his discomfort, he attempted to switch on the television screen before him. The screen remained blank, however. Subsequent attempts, following a thorough investigation of the controls, failed to alter its state. A cursory survey of his surroundings suggested] his screen was

exceptional: it was malfunctioning. The screen to his left was playing a vintage South American telenovela (a very popular category, comprising a mammoth catalogue running into the hundreds of thousands of episodes, with dozens of channels purely dedicated to screening them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week); the screen to his right was playing a film adaptation of Beryl living's *The Dawnchild*. Pinstripe looked singularly unimpressed by it (taking particular exception with the cast, which appeared carefully selected to represent equally people of every race, gender, size, creed, age, and sexual orientation), but Pinstripe watched on anyway, making scores of detailed notes.

Aside from the fact that he preferred serious science documentaries, he considered spying on his neighbours' television screens undignified for a man of his station.

He decided to give the inflight magazines another chance. Unfortunately, the exercise served only to categorically confirm his original judgment. The business magazine patronised the reader through the gross trivialisation, oversimplification, and infantilisation of all manner of micro- and macro-economic issues; and where rare nuggets of real information existed, they appeared thinly diluted in an ocean of insulting irrelevance, skewed opinion, feel-good disinformation, worthless commentary, and pornography. As to the so-called 'lifestyle' magazine, the less said about it, the better.

The egotist in front of him suddenly decided to recline his seat to its maximum extension. Upon boarding the aircraft, he had found the overhead compartments holding a tightly-compressed mass of jackets, handbags, and shopping bags, seemingly at a pressure of twenty atmospheres. As a result, he had been forced to travel with his jacket across his knees.-This had not contributed to his comfort, being already flanked by endomorphs with bodies like radiators and arms selfishly hogging both armrests. The egotist's act of spatial aggression, therefore, exacerbated his claustrophobia and thermally-induced discomfort to within millimetres of an outburst. He now regretted having painted himself into a corner by promising Pinstripe that he would not be disturbed again: a walk down the aisles would have provided welcome momentary relief.

Stilly he remained calm, realising that listening to the inflight radio stations and music library were still available options. He donned the headset and searched for Classical music. Unfortu-

nately, however, he soon encountered problems: although there were thousands of channels available, finding one that catered for his tastes was a laborious undertaking: programming was determined by market demand and these days European Classical music was considered a very niche, minority interest, consigned to a dwindling, ageing, and largely impoverished audience. In contrast, there was a wide selection of music from South Asia, Latin America, and Arab-speaking countries, as from Black artists in France, England, and the United States, covering a profusion of genres and subgenres with an astonishing degree of detail and depth of specialisation. It took him twenty minutes to find an English-speaking station that thought Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner were worth broadcasting at all. He caught the station in the midst of playing the seventh movement of Gustav Hoist's *The Planets, Neptune, the Mystic*. A soothing piece, ideally suited to generate mental space and reduce tension, he reclined his seat and closed his eyes, hoping to abstract himself from the miseries of contemporary air travel. But his explorations of the frigid, trans-Neptunian blackness were soon frustrated by the obstreperous, Bengali voice that exploded in his headphones, propagated by the aircraft's internal announcement system; the volume differential between Hoist's piece and the Bengali voice mathematically expressible only in lightyear-high tower powers.

'Good evening; ladies and gentlemen aboard this, British Airways flight 5898307 to Madrid. We will soon begin demonstrating...'

He ripped off the headphones and waited impatiently for the cabin crew (the new volumetric projectors were not working) to complete running through the life jacket and oxygen mask demonstrations. Choking under a complex and ever-growing mass of regulations, which demanded insufferable prolixity from the demonstrations, the cabin crew required many, interminable minutes to perform their task. Yet more interminable minutes were lost while they indicated, with insulting detail, the location of the emergency exists, and the procedure in the event of an emergency landing. Because the entire text had to be recited in Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, Mandarin, English, and Spanish, twenty-five minutes elapsed before the cabin crew relinquished the audio channels.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen aboard this British Airways flight 5898307 to Madrid. I am your customer service representative and I am pleased to welcome aboard this flight.'

My colleagues and I will shortly be offering you a variety of snacks and refreshments...'

He ripped off the headphones again and threw them forward. They bounced off the television screen before him, landed on the jacket across his knees, and rolled down his shins to the floor. His headphone's destination further intensified his anger, for he regarded bending over to retrieve fallen objects a misuse of his time: it now demanded from him extraordinary will power to not stomp on the headphones in a mad frenzy until they had broken into several dozen pieces. Yes, refreshments and snacks were welcome - and long overdue, in fact! - but he was unable to understand why transport crews invariably had this compulsion to constantly interrupt travellers with their infuriating announcements. If such announcements were necessary because of the potential presence of blind travellers, advisable because modern travellers were unbelievably obtuse, or mandatory because government bureaucracies where pathologically overzealous, could transport crews not do travellers the courtesy of at least minding the latter's eardrums and not grating their nerves and insulting their intelligence with redundant and absurdly prolix announcements? Could they not content themselves with the country's official language, instead of so cravenly and obsequiously attempting to cater for every single ethnicity on the planet? And, lastly, could they not sound like human beings, instead of brainless automatons reciting a formulaic script in a highly artificial and overpolite singsong?

Calming himself down, he retrieved the headphones, and adjusted them back on. The Hoist piece had finished, giving way to Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Because this was hardly a piece he associated with relaxation and lack of tension, he renewed his search for a suitable station dedicated to European Classical music. However, despite broadening his selection criteria to include some lower-brow material, finding suitable music competed with finding a needle in a haystack: he travelled around the world several times in terms of musical styles without hearing a single traditional European voice; the latter had become virtually extinct, *it* seemed, the province of octogenarians who *did* not matter because, although numerous, they lacked purchasing power. The nearest he came to his objective was a cultural review programme where a panel of pompously liberal literati characterised European Classical

music as ‘the oppressive sound of White Supremacism’. He capitulated at this point.

Left without options, and with great reluctance, he tapped Pinstripe’s arm. The historian treated him to a stern frown, staring at him silently over the rim of his reading glasses. Pinstripe made it thus clear that a man of his generation expected promises to be kept. *Dictum meum pactum*, as the saying went.

‘Please accept my apologies,’ he said, with a calm and genteel lilt, ‘Have you finished with your newspaper?’

Pinstripe simply extracted the newspaper from the seat pocket and handed it over to him without saying a word; it was Pinstripe’s gestural equivalent to the absent-minded swatting of a pestering fly that had decided to buzz around his ear. He felt exactly one inch high.

There was ongoing controversy about Nick Griffin, the British National Party MP, who had recently been banned from the House of Parliament’s canteen (an establishment operated by Tosco). The newspaper’s Ahmed Ibrahim reported that Mr. Griffin had criticised the canteen’s decision not to offer pork pies or pork sausages, and to obtain halal certification, in order to avoid offending Muslim MPs. Mr. Griffin had charged that the decision was ‘racist’ and that it ‘discriminate[d] against the indigenous peoples of the British Isles, for not only did it deprecate traditional British fare in order to satisfy the dietary strictures of a ‘foreign’ faith, but it did not take into consideration the views of White, Christian British MPs, who might object to *such* horrific practices’. Contemptibly, according to *The Guardian*, Mr. Griffin had added that ‘we English animal-lovers consider it an important aspect of our values to minimise the animal’s suffering, and we find such horrific practices repugnant to our way of life’. The article attempted to rebut Mr. Griffin’s assertions by stating that, while the fully conscious animal is indeed held upside down, and while its oesophagus is indeed cut with a hand-held knife before being allowed to bleed to death, ‘the animal doesn’t really suffer’. British MPs had responded by first identifying themselves as indigenous to the British isles and then dissociating themselves from Mr. Griffin’s remarks, stating that ‘the notion that Islam or any other faith is somehow foreign and not British is hateful and absurd - this is historically a diverse nation, made up of immigrants from many different cultures; Mr. Griffin’s views are abhorrent, and we deplore them’. The decision to cater for

Muslim dietary laws at the Houses of Parliament was defended by George Galloway, the former MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, a constituency with a majority Muslim population: 'What does this Hitler-loving fascist, racist thug mean by *'our'* way of life?' Muslim MPs now make up a third of all MPs in the United Kingdom. That is our way of life. Get used to it, get over it. Muslim MPs are no less British than Mr. Griffin. Get used to it, get over it.' Mr. Griffin faced being charged by the Crown Prosecution Service for incitement to racial and religious hatred. A new attempt to ban the BNP was in the works. The boundaries of his constituency, moreover, were to be re-drawn, so as to fragment Mr. Griffin's support base in the region should an outright ban of his party fail in the courts. 'That Mr. Griffin was ever elected as a member of parliament is outrageous. We will make sure he does not get re-elected, come the next elections,' promised one MP.

Pork pies, sausages... he imagined quartering a pork pie and eating the pieces with English mustard; he also imagined sausages roasting in the oven, and eating them with buttered broccoli and roasted vegetables - potatoes, parsnips, carrots, onions - all covered with home-made gravy. Toad in the hole also crossed his mind, served with vegetables and gravy, washed down with a pint of West Country cider. Salivating intensely, he shook his head and tried to focus his mind fully on some article or another, one with no references to food. He refused to check the progress of the snack trolleys, because he was sure they were still kilometres away, advancing only millimetres at the time, thanks to the indecision of, and the quadrillions of awkward requests from, row after row of finicky passengers.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen aboard this British Airways flight 5898307 to Madrid. This is the captain speaking. We have now reached cruising altitude at 8,200 metres and...'

He blocked his ears firmly and concentrated his whole mind on the text before him, in an effort to ignore the captain's tediously overlong announcement. Yet, it was not until the latter finally ended, and not before he was on his sixth attempt at leading a single paragraph, that his mind gained a minimum of traction.

'Snacks anybody?'

The trolley with nourishment had unexpectedly arrived. He showed his interest to the flight attendants, a young Anglo-Indian female with hair tied in a bun, and an Essex woman in her late 60s. He addressed the latter.

‘What have you got?’

‘We’ve got sandwiches, chocolate, and crisps.’

Sandwiches meant trouble.

‘What type of sandwiches?’

‘Chicken korma, chicken tikka massala, chicken jalfrezi.’

Spicy flavours placed the chicken immediately under suspicion: strong ethnic spices were a well-known subterfuge to mask condemned meat.

‘Any others?’ •»

‘Mexican chicken, Spicy Piri Piri chicken.’

And why only chicken? He imagined thousands of chickens crammed into a stinking broiler, being intensively farmed.

‘Anything vegetarian?’

‘Vegetarian tandori chicken.’

‘Have you a Ploughman’s sandwich?’

‘I am afraid not.’

He was determined to avoid meat; not because he was an ‘extreme and cranky vegetarian’, but because he had no desire to emulate Pinstripe’s neighbour.

‘How about a cheese and pickle sandwich?’

The attendant’s lined face registered impatience. ‘No. Only the ones I have listed.’

‘In that case, I will take three bags of crisps.’

‘What flavour?’

‘What flavours are available?’

‘Spicy chilli, Thai sweet chilli, and Spicy Tandori Massala poppadom bites.’

‘Have you just plain salted crisps?’

‘No.’

Although famished, he was faced with a quandary. He was contemptuous of the vegalate bars stacked on the trolley; not only did he crave savoury, but alleged ‘chocolate’ bars these days, irrespective of brand or quality, were saturated with Aspartame. (In fact, not even proper chocolate from the Continent escaped from the bite of the Aspartame anaconda.) He knew that 10% of Aspartame consisted of methanol, a chemical that was gradually released in the small intestine when the methyl group of aspartame encounters the enzyme chymotrypsin. Once in the body, methanol oxydised to formic acid and formaldehyde, both toxic metabolites affecting the nervous system. Formaldehyde, in particular, was a known carcinogenic that caused retinal damage and affected DNA replication. Because of its low rate of excretion, methanol was therefore

considered to be a cumulative poison. The drug's approval had been, as usual, riddled with conflicts of interest, and subsequent mutagenic, teratogenic, and carcinogenic research on humans - conducted only because of ever-growing pressure from campaigners - had been deliberately confused by further research openly and secretly funded by Aspartame manufacturers, who had, predictably (not least because the scientists involved were on their payrolls), yielded favourable results for their funders. Under no circumstances would he *pay* to ingest poison.

He also knew that although he would devour the spicy crisps, nausea and feelings of regret were certain to ensue; after all, they were saturated with toxic chemicals. Whatever happened to being served warm food during a flight? He remembered flying in the 1970s - in economy class! - and being served a hot beef stew, roast potatoes, beans, and a side salad, with bread, butter, cheese, and fruit - or even a slice of cake, on ceramic plates alongside steel cutlery. Airlines provided tea and coffee and, considering also that tickets back then were far more affordable, it was all *free*. Soaring energy prices, a crushing tax burden, ever-more-paranoid security measures, and a never-ending proliferation of government-mandated politically correct regulations, had forced airlines to economise and cut ever more services, in order to protect their profit margins. These days, a business traveller was lucky to see even a miniaturised plastic spoon in First Class.

'What drinks have you got?'

'Qibla Cola, Sosyo, Zamzam Doogh, Pineapple Delster.'

At this point a fierce argument erupted behind the trolley. He was unable to follow the dialogue, but the Anglo-Indian flight attendant was clearly having difficulty calming down a couple of irate passengers.

'I am awfully sorry. What were those drinks again, please?' he said.

It was not that he had never seen the drinks - he had, in fact, noticed their being phased in over the past few years; rather, it was that he had never considered them for consumption: until now, a typical airline beverage trolley offered a selection of familiar soft drinks, alongside some the exotic ones.

'Qibla Cola, Sosyo, Zamzam Doogh, Pineapple Delster.'

'Have you got tomato juice?'

'No.'

'Have you got any fruit juice?'

‘We’ve got pomegranate juice.’

‘I will have that.’

‘€20.’

A frown flashed on his forehead: €20 was suspiciously cheap. He handed over the money anyway, if only to ascertain how the airline had engineered this bargain. It was not long before he discovered the airline’s secret: the juice was poured out of a carton and into a miniature cup not much larger than a thimble.

‘Actually, could I have two of those?’

‘I am afraid we are not allowed to sell more than one drink per passenger.’

‘May I ask why?’

‘Those are the rules: only one drink per passenger.’

The ordinary cup of yesteryear had fallen victim to the rising cost of potable water. With Southern England’s reservoirs now in permanent crisis, and water consumption subject to a battery of climate levies, any beverage containing water had become an Oriental luxury.

‘Anything else?’

‘I will take three bags of chips. Thai Sweet Chilli.’

‘I am sorry, but we can only sell one bag per passenger.’

He sighed, frustrated. ‘Are you being serious?’ he said, making an imperfect effort to control his anger.

‘I am afraid so. Those are the rules.’

‘One bag then.’

‘€100.’

As he handed over the money, the flight attendant turned around to look behind her. The argument behind the trolley had escalated, with the aggrieved parties shouting abuse and the Anglo-Indian attendant unable to abate their ire; she-persisted in repeating scripted answers and deploying circular arguments, pushing the air downwards with her arms in a placatory gesture. This, of course, only excited her antagonists, who continued to fulminate with ever-rising fury. Her older colleague objected to one of their assertions, then handed him the bag of crisps before joining the argument. Occasionally, a tense hand would appear above the trolley’s horizon. The Anglo-Indian attendant persisted in attempting to complete a sentence, unsuccessfully; her opponents persisted in machine-gunning her with outraged verbiage. The older flight attendant contributed with mildly patronising statements, which went unacknowledged. Passengers in the vicinity had by now taken notice and

had turned to ogle. He could see the tops of the heads before him turned in the direction of the argument, and, while peeping into the gap between his seat and Pinstripe's he "observed the side of a Nigerian face, its sadistic grin frozen in mid chew, a bitten sandwich held three inches away from the thick, up-turned lips. Pinstripe had laid his pen on the table and was calmly witnessing the scene with arms crossed.

He tried to elucidate the reason for the argument. It seemed it was connected to a particular drink. The young man with the yarmulke stood up at this point, his face red, glistening with perspiration, distorted by hatred. Out of his mouth streamed a torrent of invectives and vituperation, underlined by an accusing finger that pointed alternately between the trolley and the Anglo-Indian attendant. Yarmulke's companion followed suit seconds later, reinforcing Yarmulke's attack with her own stream of vicious reprobation and wild gesticulation. The Anglo-Indian attendant responded with yet another appeal to lower the volume, talking rapidly and gesturing with her right hand in Pinstripe's direction. Yarmulke, who followed the gesture with his eyes, suddenly stopped and looked at the broad, lined face that stared at him from across the aisle, its mask of equanimity betraying a suppressed smile. Yarmulke's anger turned to a confused cocktail of rage, scorn, and fear.

'LIAR!' he screamed. 'LIAR!'

Pinstripe stared back, apparently unruffled, and said, 'You ought to behave better. You are a guest in another country.'

Faced with this statement, the angry couple finally threw their arms in the air, despairing of finding an ear sympathetic to their concerns. It was as if the historian's comment had been so ridiculous, infuriating, and wrong-headed as to defy a logical response. An atmosphere of disappointment washed through that section of the aircraft, as bloodthirsty passengers, hitherto bored out of their minds, realised that the entertainment mutual reassurances and rationalisations, while around them Stunned silence gave way to murmuring and speculation. The Jamaicans seated behind him cared not if they were heard, however, so they laughed and exchanged lively jokes, occasionally emitting high-pitched whines of amused disbelief. When the snack trolley was finally pushed forward, he saw Yarmulke and the latter's companion furiously typing on their

respective phones, focused on how most woundingly to phrase what could only be their twin letters of complaint.

He shook his head, dismissively. That was no way to behave in public.

His eager fingers ripped open the bag of crisps and began transferring its contents into his oral cavity. His internalisation of Taylorist principles was so perfect, however, that within what felt like 3.2 femptoseconds he found himself staring into the metallic lining of an empty bag, the last grains of salt rolling down an incline onto his tongue. It was therefore a few moments before he gained cognisance of the Thai spices cauterising his gustatory glands, or of the truckloads of sodium chloride saturating the oily snack. So *much for the war against obesity*, he thought, thinking of the crisp manufacturers: although the NHS had to rigidly comply with a mass of anti-discrimination legislation, tax payers with body mass indexes in excess of government guidelines could nevertheless be denied NHS treatment and were required to pay higher medical insurance (if insurers agreed to insure them at all); food manufacturers were subject to fines and public health levies if they did not comply with detailed government guidelines regarding fat, salt, sugar, and caffeine content; but neither truly wanted to see the end to the obesity epidemic: to the government obesity provided excuses to cut public services and collect more tax; to the food industry ever-expanding waistlines meant ever-expanding profits, and they depended on the addictive power of fat, salt, sugar, and caffeine (as well as on the higher caloric requirements of fat bodies) to keep waistlines evolving in the right direction. (Aspartame, because it was known to increase sugar cravings, was part of the industry's strategy for growth.) The use of hot spices had a further double benefit for manufacturers: said spices helped enlarge profits by enhancing a product's appeal to the fastest-growing demographics, while they simultaneously helped reduce costs by camouflaging inferior base ingredients. The spicy, salty taste of the crisps he had just ingested elicited a temporary burst of sensory pleasure in his mouth, to the point that he delayed consumption of drink in order with his tongue to search for remnants of that taste around his gums. No sooner had he gulped his allotted millilitre of pomegranate juice, the pleasure gave way to nausea, dizziness, stomach ache, and feelings of regret. A headache appeared and began rapidly intensifying at the base of his skull.

Given the circumstances, he concluded that the best course of action would be to attempt some sleep. He had boardroom meetings scheduled early in the morning, and he would need to be in full possession of his faculties to deal with the Scoptic account.

He closed his eyes.

The Jamaicans behind him had been bumping the backrest of his seat ever since he had sat down. Although this had transformed his cranium into a pressure-cooker of irritation, the initial mildness of the bumping and the apparent lack of malicious intent had secured the dominance of his timidity over the manly urge to protest. By this point, however, the frequency and intensity of the bumping had escalated. Moreover, they had escalated in tandem with the raucousness of its associated voices, until in combination they had both become intolerable. With brusque rage, he finally stood up and turned to glare at the gentlemen seated behind him. This was the first time he had taken a detailed look at any of them. Directly before him he encountered a man in his forties, Black, sporting an unruly beard, an indigo tank top, a gold ring, and a colourful tamtam decorated with concentric circles. Directly before Tamtam wound a snake built with domino tiles, resting on Tamtam's unfolded table. Tamtam returned his gaze with a smile, while one of Tamtam's opponents - a slim Jamaican with hair in twists stuffed under a black baseball cap - elongated the snake by adding a new tile with exuberating enthusiasm. Both Tamtam and Twists were holding a short row of tiles in the palms of their left hands, careful to conceal the pips from prying eyes.

'Will you please, shut up!' he shouted at them.

Tamtam prefaced his reaction by slamming the underside his table with both hands, explosively dispersing the domino tiles in every direction; he then stood up with a violent jerk and communicated his displeasure by glaring back at him within millimetres of his face. The Jamaican's aspect was calm, his gaze darkly menacing, his sclerae yellow. Tamtam's other companion, a corpulent, proptotic Congoid resembling Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, began chuckling with mocking malevolence beneath the rim of his beige fishing hat. An interval of tension ensued. When a vague sensation on his wrist elicited an inspection, he discovered an amputation of his right hand; more puzzlingly, the stump suggested that he was made out of Underwood's Devilled Ham. A horrid chill exploded in his head and coursed down his body, both his mind and muscula-

lure suddenly paralysed with terror. Terror then gave way to corporal awareness: his eyes were closed; he was in a reclining position.

He had experienced a nightmare.

It took a few moments for the residual terror to dissipate, tin ring which he kept both eyes firmly shut. Tactile inspection of his wrists, however, eventually reassured him sufficiently to return to reality, rubbing both his wrists with grateful hands.

The ongoing cheering and the bumping behind him prompted him to peer through the gap between seats. He observed the Jamaicans playing a game of Domino, slapping the pieces down onto the backrest table, smiling and jabbering loudly in their incomprehensible patois, and clearly not mindful of, and casually disinterested in, whether their alacrity was likely to annoy their neighbours. At this point the Idi Amin lookalike noticed him and used a biro to blind him by extinguishing both his eyes. A horrid chill exploded in his head and coursed down his body, both his mind and musculature suddenly paralysed with terror. Terror then gave way to corporal awareness: his eyes were closed; he was in reclining position. This time he opened his eyes with vehemence, and breathed with relief as he found them both still operational. He had experienced a nightmare within a nightmare.

He gripped his arm rests firmly, not daring to touch his eyes, lest the aircraft experienced turbulence, causing an unfortunate accident.

The homosexual flight attendant rushed into the compartment ahead, walking along the starboard aisle. Moments later, he reappeared rushing towards the tail of the aircraft, looking busy. *What now?*, he asked himself, instantly irritated. After ten minutes the Anglo-Indian attendant entered his compartment via the starboard aisle, carrying a stack of leaflets, and artificially throwing alternate glances at the passengers on either side.

'Landing cards? Landing cards?' she said, and then, occasionally, 'EU citizen?'

There were two types of landing card these days: as always, non-EU citizens had to complete one, but as of earlier, this year a new card had been introduced for EU citizens. This represented yet another layer of bureaucracy installed by the Socialist apparatchiks in Brussels. Brussels' stated aims were combating Islamic terrorism and keeping track of so-called migrants; these aims, however, were but a cover for Brussel's real

aims: collecting data for each member state's fiscal authorities and intelligence services, and mollifying White Nationalist voices protesting the continuing Third World population invasion. Brussel's duplicity deceived only educated men who relied on mainstream mass media for their information, for it was evident to critical observers that, not only had Western governments failed to neutralise Islamic terrorism, not only there existed a symbiotic relationship between politicians who depended on big business' party donations and big businesses whose profits depended on access to cheap migrant labour, but that the government seemed always in search of new and more effective ways to detect, monitor, suffocate, and purge political dissidence. Needless to say that, with the introduction of the EU landing card, governments across the EU had taken the opportunity to improve the card's design by widening the scope, intensifying the depth, and increasing the methodological deviousness of the data collection process.

On the surface, the cards seemed unremarkable, leading him to question their early distribution. The moment he discovered their being printed onto electronic paper, and their continuing well past the front page, he found the answer. There were dozens of questions, each cunningly paraphrased multiple times, and grouped under dozens of euphemistic headings. The invasiveness of the questions was outrageous in the measure that their number was bewildering: even an expert form-filler trained in the art of second-guessing the authorities who had framed the questions would need an hour to fill all the blanks. Because he knew better than to simply complete forms with the requested information, and because he knew that replies were always scrutinised by bodies seeking to appropriate more of his wealth, completing even the simplest of forms was always laborious process. Official forms were, to him, part of an ongoing game of cat, and mouse, pitting ordinary citizens against insatiable tax authorities and heavily politicised intelligence services. Were he not to start now and concentrate fully, he was likely to risk a fine or a prison term by landing with an uncompleted form.

Perversely energised by the challenge, and hostile to the self-perpetuating nature of totalising government bureaucracies, he unsheathed the complimentary stylus and began with the first question.

Chapter 5

His Majesty's Revenue and Customs

Primatologists studying the use force among captive primates would have found their interest piqued by the pilot's landing technique. Showing either contempt for, or incomprehension of, the cockpit instruments, the pilot tolerated excessive speed, flapping ailerons, incorrect elevator angles, a plummeting altimetre, and a wildly oscillating attitude, indifferent to the wave of alarm that rippled inside the cabin, even after the brusquely-deployed landing gear slammed against the tarmac. Not content with forfeiting his right to the traditional wave of passenger applause, said pilot then slammed the brakes, instigating a wholesale transfer of the aircraft's momentum onto the 853 torsos stored in its interior. As a result of the pilot's manoeuvres, he was forced to drop his as yet uncompleted landing form in order to prop himself against the backrest before him, lest his fractured cranium wound its way to his list of complaints against the airline. During these turbulent seconds, several of the overhead compartments exploded, disgorging their contents onto the aisles and heads below. The vertiginous rate of deceleration, in turn, conferred upon the deck a steep forward inclination; this caused the disgorged hand luggage and shopping bags to roll chaotically towards the front of the aircraft, turning the aisles into rumbling rapids of consumer goods. One of the rapids carried with it the tumbling body of a Colombian teenager, who had judged it unnecessary to wait for the aircraft to land and come to a com-

plete stop before unfastening his belt, abandoning his seat, and retrieving his luggage.

He shook his head upon noticing the teenager; sadly, however, the teenager was not the only one to allow impatience and competitive egotism to eclipse any safety considerations or regulations. The aircraft was still transferring forward momentum onto its occupants when, in an effort to secure a position near the front of the disembarkation queue, quite a few of the passengers around him suddenly unfastened their seatbelts and stood up (not without a struggle) to retrieve *their* luggage and *their* shopping ahead of everyone else. The compressed lips and dilated pupils of these passengers betrayed their predatory mode: with heightened peripheral awareness and rushed movements, they darted hate-filled glances towards their immediate competitors, assessing their state of readiness, the efficiency of their retrieval, and the quantity of retrievable luggage and shopping, as they attempted to beat them to front of the queue. Among those ignoring the pre-recorded announcement urging passengers to remain seated were the Jamaican trio seated behind him. They leaned onto, and bumped, the backrest of his seat as they fell over themselves in the effort to reach the aisle and lay their hands on their respective duffel bags. Idi Amin was already standing, with his arms in the air, rummaging inside the overhead compartment while trying to steady his large frame; the other two were literally stepping onto the seats, using the backrests around them to pull themselves forward. Barked commands could be heard above the commotion, as friends and relatives worked in concert. The advantage they sought through their early manoeuvres soon disappeared, for by now the aircraft had lost enough momentum to implicitly signal the go ahead to the remainder of the passengers. They virtually exploded out of, their seats mid joined the rumpus, filling the cabin with voices and a symphony of mobile phones detecting local network providers and receiving an avalanche of text messages.

Ho remained seated, and continued filling out his landing form, even though the Afro-Caribbean tussock next to him had already unwedged her bottom off her seat and aggressively positioned herself standing over him, somehow expecting that her doing so would pressurise him into vacating his seat and moving out of her way. Not unexpectedly, the historian also remained seated, patiently waiting with antiquated civility.

He had completed most of the landing form, but there were half a dozen questions that were poorly phrased, so that it was unclear what information was sought by the Authorities; a dozen questions that were ambiguously posed, apparently designed by tax inspectors especially trained in entrapment; and two questions for which there were obvious, expected answers, but which were phrased in a way calculated to irritate the sensibilities those for whom said answers did not truly reflect their system of beliefs: these questions were clearly designed by intelligence officers especially trained in identifying non-conforming political thought and opinion. It was impossible to ascertain whether the first group had been redacted incompetently because of a civil servant's poor command of the English language, or had been conceived deviously by authorities who had decided to conceal their true intent behind nebulous phraseology. How most advantageously to phrase his replies and what vocabulary to use, therefore, was unclear, and he had not enough time to sufficiently analyse their serpentine semantics, obscure terminology, and convoluted syntax to elucidate their true intent before attempting an evasion. Similarly, the form was too extensive to be sure of which among the answers he was considering for each of the second and third group would appear the most innocuous; whether a reply was boring or not to the authorities depended largely on successfully weaving a bland context of internally consistent replies; HM Revenue and Customs, MI5, and MI6 all carefully maintained several zettabytes' worth of databases, and counted with sophisticated algorithms with which to subject any data generated by each and every citizen to semantic analyses in search for circumlocutions, inconsistencies, evasions, ellipses, and omissions that might not be immediately apparent, but which when uncovered might point to concealed assets or unorthodox political affiliations. What was worse, the time pressure increased the unreliability of his judgment with each minute that passed, precisely the situation most welcomed by the authorities, since the performance-related pay of inspectors and officials necessitated a steady stream of in-depth investigations.

'Passengers are reminded to remain seated until the aircraft has come to a complete stop and the engines have been switched off.'

Oh, shut up, he snapped, inwardly, before returning to his form, his focus now absolute and razor sharp for one last attempt.

‘Oi, move up, Whitey.’

He looked up and saw, the fussock towering over him, looking down with annoyed arrogance, fully expecting meek obedience as a response; disappointingly for her, however, he returned to his form resolving to completely ignore her commands. He took a dim view of rudeness and crude ethnic slurs.

‘Oi!’

He carried on working.

‘I said, Oi!’

He heard not the fussock’s hectoring, and only half heard the historian calmly ordering her to be silent, re-take her seat, and wait patiently. Her response consisted of harsh invectives, racist abuse, and indignant vituperation, which he blanked out in their entirety, more concerned with avoiding a tax investigation than with the morbid titillation of an angry scene. Then, realising the starboard aisle now offered an unobstructed exit route, she turned around and clumsily busted her way through to the port aisle, her lachrymose, screaming offspring enveloped by the mountainous flesh of her black arms.

The aircraft taxied its way to Madrid Barajas’ Terminal 4, where the primates in the cockpit parked it with a jerk before switching off the engines. The decaying whir of the engines served only to further enervate the passengers. Their impatience to vacate the aircraft, electrified the obstreperous, calescent, and congested atmosphere inside the cabin, triggering restless limbs, drumming fingers, tapping feet, loud sighing, craned necks, and inquisitive eyes searching for evidence of disembarkation at the front of the aircraft. Raucous laughter and loud jabbering on mobile phones, sampling all manner of languages, dialects, and accents,’ rose above a vast background murmur of conversation. Rival gangs of drunken football fans sang noisily in the distance behind him, one in English and the other in Spanish.

Savages, he thought, superciliously, as he turned around and peered above his headrest in an effort to locate the offending singers. The louts were too far back to be seen, however, so he shook his head in contemptuous resignation before returning to his landing form. He had managed to answer three of the original twenty difficult questions, but the cacophony, the rising temperature, the high levels of carbon dioxide in the air, and the general hustle and bustle of impatient, perspiring, and bag-laden passengers was making it increasingly difficult to lucidly formulate his answers. The constant clinking of bottles

emanating from one of the passengers' duty free hags, further contributed to escalate his irritation. The offending gentleman, a short, hirsute, mediterranean with a prominent unibrow, resembled a cross between Miguel Indurain and Tony Shalhoub; and despite his nervous manner, he somehow managed not to evaporate inside his dark umber jacket. Unibrow kept, rather nervously, inspecting the plastic bag, taking a receipt out, perusing it, checking the bottles, putting the receipt back in, adjusting the bottles, switching hands, attempting to glimpse forward movement at the front of the queue, and so on. He imagined himself jumping up, clambering over the seats, tearing a bottle out of the bag, and smashing it against the cenophile's cranium. However, he soon had a more acute source of irritation, as someone - evidently a non-conformist or an incurable addict impervious to social stigma - had chosen that moment to light a cigarette. When the pungent smoke reached his nostrils, hypersensitive to these obnoxious fumes, a torrent of adrenaline rushed through his veins, causing him to stand, finally, and scan the compartment in search of the offender. The offender was a prematurely aged man in his fifties, a Michael Gambon lookalike (although much degraded), with long grey hair slicked back, thick fingers, and a brown leather jacket. The cancer man appeared perfectly relaxed and arrogantly indifferent to the silent disapprobation of the non-smokers around him. He stared at the cancer man, his eyes throwing odium rays straight into the offender's ashen, sagging face, but the cancer man was too abstracted from his environment, too absorbed in the enjoyment of his filthy vice, to take any notice. And, although the regulations-obsessed flight attendants would have been keen to enforce the non-smoking ban inside the aircraft, particularly since they gained a commission on all fines levied against passengers who flouted the rules, the congestion inside the aircraft was such at this point that it would have been impossible for them to reach the cancer man had the attempt been made. The smoker looked as if he was experienced enough in flouting non-smoking regulations to be able to cannily choose his moment; it was easy to induce that he had calmly lit up his cigarette in the knowledge that the pre-disembarkation congestion made non-smoking regulations temporarily unenforceable. In fact, the cancer man probably regarded such behaviour as his due, given that he already paid for his right to smoke via payment of his ever-costlier government-issued smoking licence.

Acquiescing his impotence, he sat down.

The minutes passed slowly now, despite his working frantically to complete the landing form, and racking his brains for suitable ways to phrase his remaining replies. He imagined part of the form being drafted somewhere in the HMRC fortress in Nottingham, the drafts worked and reworked by cunning men in shirt sleeves, marshalling the expert assistance of psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, legislators, and the most experienced tax vampires, all trying to formulate the most arcane, tortuous, and devious gotcha-questions their brains were capable of conceiving. He imagined these men now rubbing their hands with malevolent anticipation, knowing their questionnaires were impossible to complete within the allocated time, and that the attrition consequent from the sheer volume of questions, even if they had not been so astutely crafted, invariably played in their favour. He imagined them working in their offices, squeezing their neurons for ways to further deepen existing investigations and instigate new ones, safely ensconced in their suit-and-tie anonymity, burrowed somewhere in an oppressively large concrete Structure, its huge mass divided into many floors, its interminable rows of small windows rising dozens of floors above street level, belying the labyrinthine nature of the bureaucracy operating behind them. Although he rationally knew this not to be the case, his irrational mind imagined HMRC's headquarters resembling the Chicago Merchandise Mart, or, perhaps more appropriately (because of its Soviet nature), Ceausescu's Palace of the People.

Even if the HMRC were not as malevolent as he imagined it to be, the staff within the bureaucracy were highly motivated to pursue any and every method, to exploit any and every tactic, to deploy any and every strategy, to collect all the tax money they could get their hands on - as quickly, as much, and as aggressively as possible. Despite continuing demographic growth, for years now the long-term trend was for tax revenues to shrink as a proportion of the population; the; imported labour with which the government had sought to replace, and finance the retirement of, the ageing indigenous population; had concentrated on the unskilled and semi-skilled end of the job market, which generated significantly lower tax revenues for the government, while not covering the cost of social policies designed to promote their access to housing, education, and employment as members of 'historically socio-politically

non-dominant groups'. As a result, the treasury was under constant pressure to bolster tax revenues by any politically, legally, and technically feasible means.

He yanked the hand brake to his imagination. Fear of the colossal state apparatus was causing paranoid thoughts to multiply in his mind like bacteria in a microbial culture. He desperately needed inspiration to tackle the remaining eighteen questions. He looked at the passengers around him: ninety-nine out of a hundred were concentrated on the aisles, standing, entirely preoccupied with disembarking the aircraft, collecting their luggage, and reaching the safety of their homes and hotel rooms, so they may spend the rest of their evenings hypnotised in front of the television. It was exasperating that while most looked as if they had either fallen out a tree or been the offspring of a bestial mating, somehow they had all still managed to complete their landing forms apparently without problems. He, on the other hand, although equipped with a superior brain, exceptional verbal skills, and a penetrating capacity for analysis, took ten times as long to complete this simple task. *How do they do it?* he thought, frustrated. He was then gripped by an irrational impulse to simply to write down whatever first came to his mind and allow the chips to fall where they may. *No!* That was precisely what the tax authorities hoped for: he had no doubt that the tax authorities had obscurely embedded psychological triggers to irrational impulses like these in the design of the form.

The queue suddenly started moving. After a wait of forty-five minutes, for which there was no explanation or apology from the cabin crew, disembarkation had begun. A loud cheer erupted somewhere in the forward compartment. *Damn*, he seethed, quickly browsing through the fiendish form one more time. Inspiration came suddenly and he was able to quickly answer three more questions. Fifteen to go. He looked up momentarily and saw George Galloway moving up the aisle, holding an unlit Cuban cigar in his right hand; the former Marxist parliamentarian looked back briefly and expressionlessly, then looked again upon noticing the right wing historian. The historian was still seated and making time by calmly scanning the inflight magazine. Galloway's intense blue eyes hardened before he moved on.

Ah, yes, the High Life magazine. That's the style I am looking for! He inwardly thanked the historian for the clue, before he let the remaining answers pour out of him without interrup-

tion. Of course, the magazine's bland, contented, pacifying prose that so irritated him as a serious reader, in that it had the complacent tranquillity and intellectual vacuity of muzak, was the best way to 'disappear' in the eyes of tax inspectors; the elegant simplicity and invisible fluidity of Julius Caesar's prose style, combined with the dictional application of Aristotle's golden mean, would render his replies perfectly unremarkable, while systematic enough in their design to sail past the government's algorithms of semantic analysis.

When he finally stood up, rather pleased with himself, he found himself the last remaining passenger in the cabin. He walked towards the front of the aircraft, and offered his completed form to one of the flight attendants standing by the exit.

'No, give it to them,' said the tanned, wrinkled, emaciated harridan, pointing towards a fierce-looking pair of members of the Spanish Civil Guard.

Chapter 6

Non-Conforming Behaviour

First opened in 2006, Madrid Barajas' Terminal 4 now seemed small in relation to modern airports. At the time of its completion it was the largest single terminal area in the world. Because of its enormous processing capacity and the late hour, fifteen years ago it would have been largely empty. Today, the enormous processing capacity offered no relief, because there were more people, and the late hour made no difference, because most were bargain hunters. Tonight, an A380 had vomited nearly one thousand passengers into the terminal, and British Airways was not the only airline using those monster aircraft; between them the other airlines had hundreds of them flying, and, despite naive promises, made a quarter of a century ago, about shopping areas, gyms, and cafes inside these aeroplanes, most had been fitted in full economy class configuration. A380 aircraft were constantly disgorging innumerable cubic metres of travelling humans, laden with clothes and bags, and wearing hair and headgear of every possible colour and design. Since the distance made it necessary to take a train from the concourse to the main terminal building, a consequence of the airline's enamourment with cramming as many passengers as possible inside large aircraft had been his compression inside one of the train's seatless carriages, where he was subjected pressures of up to 16 atmospheres, no thanks to the booming demographic exports from dozens of failed states in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. The train had then exploded its passengers into the terminal, congesting the endless escalators, corridors, and foyers, all the way to the passport control area. There, stuffed inside

their bullet-proof booths, members of the Cuerpo Nacional de Policia had already gained access from their computers to all the data collected by the arriving passengers' landing forms, which in turn had already been checked against the equally voluminous data collected during booking and checking in (the British Airways website had demanded the completion of extensive questionnaires of its own).

If in England the concept of a queue had deteriorated in recent decades, it clearly did not exist in Spain. The passport control area (and the foyers leading to it) resembled the site of a political rally, with people standing anywhere they liked until they noticed their turn coming up ahead. Competition then slowly developed in the final metres before the row booths; typical strategies involved the silent pressing of elbows, legs, and shoulders, calculated to advance positions as the compressed throng was funnelled by cordons and railings down to single adults standing before a yellow line. In a civilised world the spectacle would have been unseemly, but existing environmental pressures rendered civilised behaviour decidedly maladaptive: base egoism and cutthroat competition was the only way to secure the finite resources of health, sanity, and time: the police were under instructions to conduct thorough background checks on all arrivals, irrespective of numbers or length of time required. The only travellers exempt from this inconvenience were those seeking political asylum: these were directed to a dedicated fast-track queue, where they were given information kits and were attended to by friendly immigration officials (usually female, middle aged, and with a softer uniform), before being bused to remote processing centres. These processing centres had grown into miniature cities in their own right, complete with public services, shops, condominiums, and even employment opportunities.

As a non-asylum-seeker, his turn came an hour later, at which point he was accorded the standard treatment. A stern immigration officer, with dark hair and a walrus moustache, look his passport. The passport's magnetic strip was then run through a scanner, causing information to appear on a computer screen, and a suspicious frown to cloud the officer's brow. The officer's thick fingers then operated a germ-infested keyboard with calm deliberation, while hostile eyes switched warily between the screen and his face. Machinegun-carrying members of the Guardia Civil observed him closely from outside the booth; their militaristic faces deadly serious, their eyes

scrutinising him with icy scepticism. He noticed that the traditional patent-leather tricorne hats had been re-introduced, except the new versions were high-tech affairs, complete with communications and video and audio recording capabilities! Clearly, the loopy 'progressive' government had decided to reinstate some of the old-fashioned symbols associated with Spain (as it was in happier times) in order to superficially conceal the accelerating disintegration of Spanish society, and hopefully deflect accusations of being its principal agents by the Esoteric Hitlerist movement. Not that the government disagreed with the accusation; they disagreed only with the terminology: they desperately needed to complete the cultural deconstruction of Spain, so that they may reformulate it in line with their visions of a globalist Utopia; their strategy required that the gradual severing of White Spaniards from their cultural roots be catalysed by rampant consumerism, and concealed under a veneer of nationalism - only the nationalism, as currently applied, was a thin varnish that obscured the government's deliberately oxymoronic interpretation of the term. By making the process gradual, the Left ensured that people who disagreed with the fundamental philosophy directing the process would deem each small¹ concession too small to be worth risking the troubles that attend political dissidence; by concealing the process under a false veneer of economic prosperity and nationalism, the Left pacified the unthinking, confused the literalists, and dampened the anger of the non-revolutionary opposition.

The immigration officer pulled out a corded telephone from under the counter, and used the archaic disc dial to call a single-digit number. The device looked doubly archaic and out of place in that postmodern ocean floor of halogen light, neon tubes, glass panes, cement surfaces, and exposed steel. In the age of organised digital crime, however, mechanical devices were marginally safer. After a pause, the officer read out his passport number, then waited, before proceeding to read out his name, address, and date of birth. Minutes passed while they both awaited verification. Now, of course, the officer had no cogent reason to telephone anyone to verify data already on his computer screen, so it was fair to speculate that unless this was a precaution against the doctoring of information on national databases by criminal hackers, this was pure theatre, designed to unsettle potential drug smugglers and terrorists. Yet, the officer's subtly perfunctory manner suggested the lat-

ter did not really believe he offered good prospects for a preemptive arrest; the officer was probably under orders to ignore instinct and experience, and check everyone's data with fastidious thoroughness, without discriminating for race, religion, age, gender, or sexual orientation. At last, the officer rumbled something into the receiver and hung up; he typed something on his battered keyboard and returned his passport, without saying a word.

As he crossed the baggage reclaim area, he looked towards the battery of conveyor belts, around which hundreds of people waited for their luggage, arms crossed and fists on hips, having swarmed like locusts to get hold of their trolleys. He laughed inwardly with contempt, knowing they were all in for interminable waits, standing, packed like sardines near the start of the conveyor belt, and ready to engage in the undignified spectacle of hurriedly and clumsily pulling their heavy suitcases off the carousel before they zoomed past; his method of sending everything he needed ahead of him by post was undoubtedly superior and stress-free.

He walked towards the arrivals lounge, anticipating problems with crooked taxi drivers and rehearsing in his mind tactics to avoid the expected rip-off attempt. However, after having walked unmolested past many pairs of armed Civil Guards, he was suddenly confronted by one of the *números*, guarding the sliding doors delimiting the vast customs area. Passing through the Customs was now unavoidable for any traveller, as the former EU and Nothing to Declare sections, so frequently abused by organised criminals and third world immigrants, had been abrogated and built up with an extension of the original Customs. This was the main Customs area; some floors up, directly past the Passport Control area, there was a preliminary Customs area too, where random travellers were, without discrimination or bias of any kind, directed to at the behest of the passport inspectors. His opponent was a man in his forties, with a large moustache in the manner of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, wearing combat boots and kaki green fatigues, bullet-proof vest, beret, and heavily armed. He looked like Antonio Tejero; the former Lieutenant-Colonel of the Guardia Civil who had forty years before attempted a coup-de-état by holding the Spanish Congress of Deputies at gun point. The other *número* in the pair stood by, martially serious and all the more severe in appearance thanks to his precise, black beard; a dark

frown glowered above his black eyes, as he pointed his machinegun more or less in his direction.

‘Pare. ¿No lleva equipaje?’ said the first *número*.

‘No. No llevo,’ he replied.

‘¿QUÉ?’ screamed the second *número*, detonating his anger, his eyes wild and wide and his machinegun now aggressively aimed at his solar plexus. Tejero then turned to look at him and used his hand to make a calm, placatory gesture.

‘¿Porqué no lleva equipaje?’

‘Casi nunca llevo. Normalmente lo envío por correo unos días antes.’

‘No estamos de broma. ¿Adónde está su equipaje? Sáquelo.’

‘De verdad que no llevo.’

‘No estoy para tomaduras de pelo. Si lleva equipaje. ¿Adónde lo ha dejado?’

‘En el hotel.’

‘Eso no puede ser. Hemos visto por donde ha llegado. Usted acaba de bajarse del avión.’

‘A ver, eh...’

Tejero lost his patience. He turned to Mr. Angry, ‘Lláma para que traigan a los perros.’

‘Te la has jugado,’ spat Mr. Angry, with a face that promised serious trouble. ‘Ahora veremos como aparece ese equipaje. Espera aquí.’

Minutes passed while Mr. Angry requested reinforcements via his walkie-talkie. All three stood still, waiting, observing people and the surroundings; he, as if in a daze. He noticed at this point that he had not been the only one to arise suspicions. The blond, blue-eyed Nordic he had seen aboard his flight, on the queue to use the lavatories, had been stopped and asked to open his hand luggage; Nordic’s female companion, a Brynhilde type with long, plaited, red hair stood by her fiancée, enjoying the same welcome reception. Next to a number of t-shirts with ariosophical, occult, and modern National Socialist iconography, there was a small stack of books: Miguel Serrano’s *Hitler, El Ultimo Avatara*, Savitri Devi’s *The Lightning and the Sun and Gold in the Furnace*, Julius Evola’s *Imperium Against the Modern World*, and Francis Parker Yockey’s *Imperium*. He had come across the occasional article in the newspapers that had made reference to modern Esoteric Hitlerist sects; Esoteric Hitlerism was a form of Nazi Mysticism, a radical religion that had been taking root among European-descended Pagans (coincidentally, the only indigenous European demographic that was actually growing).

After a wait, another pair of Civil Guards appeared in the distance, pulling a trio of German Shepherds on a leash. They were from the Servicio Cinecológico. As soon as they were close enough the German Shepherds were unleashed and allowed to sniff the totality of his frame. One of them sniffed his genitals, the other his fundament, the last one his shoes. He sighed with impatience, worried about canine snot and drivel soiling his €40,000 Savile Row suit.

‘No llevo equipaje,’ he iterated.

‘¡TU CALLA!’ screamed Mr. Angry, stepping towards him, now genuinely angry. He complied, somewhat taken aback, but finding the whole process tedious, annoying, and completely pointless. While the agents wasted their time on him, a law-abiding citizen and serious white collar professional, simply because they refused to believe that anybody would ever travel without luggage, or that at least he had chosen to do so on this occasion, terrorists could be planting bombs inside the terminal that very minute, and drug smugglers could be smuggling brickfuls of hard, designer drugs. Did they fear that he might somehow be, a terrorist, and that the luggage he claimed not to have had been left either on the aircraft or in the baggage reclaim area, possibly containing a new, undetectable biological weapon? Did they think that he was a smuggler of prohibited goods, like goliwogs, tobacco, or first editions of Tintin comic books?

The dogs tired of sniffing him and wandered off in different directions, sniffing random bags and suitcases in the vicinity, but without much interest or any sense of urgency. The agents from the Cinecológico followed the dogs, pacing slowly, observing them, scanning the unclaimed luggage that had been taken off the conveyor belts and left standing in rows or stacked onto trolleys. Occasionally the agents examined a suitcase or a bag that caught their attention, only to quickly lose interest and move on. After about fifteen minutes, it was clear that neither canine nor human agents had produced results.

‘Venga por aca’ ordered Tejero, gesturing with his hand to follow. He tutted inwardly, but decided that composure and cooperation would offer the quickest route out of the terminal.

He was escorted at gunpoint to a small room, where he was ordered to sit down on a plastic chair. The room was harshly lit with neon tubes and was bare except for a perfectly clear table and another chair. This latter chair was evidently intended for the interrogator, as it was comfortable and ergonomic - a

modern swivel chair equipped with a versatile array of levers and air pumps, product of the most advanced design laboratories specialising in high-tech office furniture. The door slammed shut behind him, making the ensuing silence all the more oppressive. He found he was alone. Clearly, the agents intended to leave him to stew in that timeless, wholly artificial environment of phenolics, urea-formaldehyde, polyvinyl chloride, polycarbonate, neon, linolium, and ionised air, while they agreed on tactics for his interrogation. The air was kept refrigerated at near freezing, so as to facilitate tremours, presumably in the hope that self-conscious interrogation subjects would incriminate themselves by becoming nervous, after realising that tremours could be interpreted as fear. He checked his watch and began worrying about his hotel reservation. He then decided to email the hotel, to alert them to his later-than-anticipated arrival, but found his mobile had no signal; not surprisingly, now that he thought of it, the room had been designed as an electromagnetic black hole.

I hope this is over soon, he said to himself, mentally agitated, as he imagined Marxist lunatics from the ETA leaving a van packed with explosives in one of the car park modules; *At least I don't have a Basque or an Arab surname, or look like I should have one.*

The door opened abruptly and two new Guardia Civil agents burst into the room. One took position by the door, behind him; the other sat on the swivel chair, his body language suggesting irritation, impatience, an authoritarian personality. His interrogator was a man of around forty-five, with a rectangular moustache, a cleft chin, dark eyebrows, and the facial expression of a man with his mind already made up, unwilling to hear explanations, understand reasons, or consider circumstances. Save for the moustache, he looked like a less affable version of Agustin Muñoz Grandes, commander of the Wehrmacht's Division Azul during World War II.

'A ver. Me dicen mis compafieros que usted les ha dicho que no lleva equipaje,' said Agustin. He spoke quickly and decisively, his tone firm, his diction precise.

'Así es.'

'Eso no puede ser.'

'Pues, es así.'

A hand slammed the desk with explosive violence, as Agustin jumped to his feet, almost overturning the table. The swivel

chair was sent racing backwards and crashed against the wall behind.

'¡CABRON!' screamed Agustin at the top of his lungs, crimson with ire.

Agustin's thermonuclear temper froze him completely. After a cardiac contraction that felt like a hammer blow, his heart-beat resumed at high velocity. His hands turned into clumps of ice; a high-pressure pulse drummed in his ears; torrents of adrenalin raged through his veins. 1

'¡Me vas a decir dónde has escondido tu jodido equipaje!'

Agustin stepped round the table and rammed his contorted face into his personal space. 1

'¡DIMELO YA, HIJO DE PUTA!'

Agustin's behaviour was so shocking that he simply could not find his tongue.

'¡HABLA!'

He drew shallow breath, but could not feel his lips.

'¡HABLA!'

'No he traído,' he replied, finally, very quietly.

'¡ESO ES *IMPOSIBLE!*'

He shrugged, unsure of what else to say. His friends, acquaintances, colleagues, neighbours, and passing contacts in his daily life generally consisted of intelligent, middle class professionals; when there was conflict, confrontations tended to be understated, and resolved via veiled threats, stiffly worded correspondence, and, ultimately, solicitors. Although it was not the first time he faced mercurial reactions from strangers, or was stopped by law enforcement personnel conducting routine checks, he was nevertheless thoroughly unaccustomed to being spoken to in such a volcanic fashion. There was no strategic blueprint in his mind ready for negotiating his way out of a situation like this - particularly as the situation was so absurd as to defy belief.

Finally, it occurred to him that it would be possible to verify with British Airways that he had not checked in any luggage or reported any hand luggage; the information would be in their system.

'Lo puede usted comprobar con British Airways?' he said, trying to sound calm and reasonable.

'¡ME ESTÁS TOMANDO EL PELO, CABRÓN!'

'Por favor, compruébelo. Tome nota del vuelo. Verá que no he traído equipaje de ninguna clase. Lo que necesitaba para este viaje

lo he enviado por correo hace unos días. Generalmente lo hago así para ahorrar tiempo y el sobrecargo de equipajes.'

Agustin straightened himself with a resigned, angry sigh, then looked away towards a corner in the room and shook his head, his tense masseter rippling below grey, clean-shaven skin. Agustin then turned to his colleague, 'Toma nota de su número de vuelo y compruébalo en el ordenador.'

He sighed, very quietly, relieved, staring catatonically at the wall in front of him. He noticed its scratches and scuffs on the cement surface, probably the result of scraping pistol butts and scuffles with violent interrogation subjects. Agustin's fierce face then filled his vision: 'Como me estés mintiendo, te vas a enterar, maricón,' he swore, a human pressure-cooker of militaristic truculence.

Chapter 7

Airport Taxi Mafia

Half an hour later, he walked towards the exit. The Guardia Civil had eventually relaxed following confirmation from the airline of his unorthodox travelling arrangements; and, perhaps in compensation, they had attempted to dulcify his release with cordial conversation. Out of interrogation mode, Agustin proved unexpectedly polite, his razor-sharp logic complimented by a gallant, martial charm.

Agustin had lamented that, despite the strong presence of the Guardia Civil throughout the airport, their effectiveness was limited by politically correct government regulations. Their stop and search statistics, for example, had to show a balanced ethnic, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation mix, otherwise they would inevitably be subjected to negative press, independent investigations, new layers of bureaucracy, and expensive sensitivity training programmes. Political correctness, therefore, necessitated augmented deployment. Agustin judged this a stupidly expensive approach to policing: were he to have his way, he would immediately repeal all politically correct legislation, allow law enforcement officers to perform their duties based on actual ground data, and award the Guardia Civil a long-overdue payraise. Plans to block access to the arrivals lounge with banks of steel tables and metal detectors, the agents informed him, were presently under consideration: both the Ministerio de la Seguridad Nacional and the Ministerio de Hacienda had judged it necessary now to harmonise security procedures with that of departures terminals by subjecting every arriving individual and item of luggage to a battery of electromagnetic scans, physical searches, and olfac-

tory inspections. Although these new controls would not match the level of paranoia and degradation already practiced in the United States, he predicted that they would ultimately demand the construction of new and even larger terminals, for, once implemented, the ever-growing fleet of giant aeroplanes, matched against the ever-growing astringency of security restrictions, would significantly increase the differential between the rate of traveller infusion into the terminal and the rate of traveller egestion into the outside world. The ultimate consequence would be, of course, the continued urbanisation of the countryside. (This, however, would not significantly alter the landscape for most Spaniards, for any remaining forest that had not already been concreted over by the Socialist tarmac machine, climate change had by now transformed into a dusty moonscape.)

‘Taxi?’

He turned in the voice’s direction and saw a North African face hoping for a reply. Ahead of him, men of dark complexion, predatory eyes, and unfashionable dress were thronging by the score, forming a barrier that blocked the way to the exit. They were accosting all arriving travellers, swarming around them and fiercely competing for their wallets, hoping that, deceived by their solicitousness, urged by emotional fatigue, and tempted by mental laziness, the naive tourists, and wealthy businessmen among them would accept their unregulated cabbage services. He irritably brushed past the face and plunged into the human barrier, ignoring the confused, high-pressure babbling. ‘¿Taxi?’ ‘¿Taxi?’ ‘¿Taxi?’ Mouths importuned him from every direction, their owners scrambling to block his path and pulling and shoving each other aside in order to make eye contact. He pushed through the rabble as if through corn stalks, holding his gaze imperiously above his accosters’ heads, while firmly and discretely holding on to his wallet.

He then found a second layer of unregulated taxi drivers waiting outside, thronging opposite the sliding doors. These cabbies were even more aggressive than ones inside, more bestial in their appearance, and readier to use force in order to gain his attention. They were also even grimmer-looking in the midst of the glass, steel, and concrete structures flanking the neon-illuminated drive; the multi-story parking module just opposite, now blackened by years of grime of exhaust fumes, provided a landscape that would have inspired authors of science fiction anxious to define the grim aesthetic of their dystopian futures. He rammed his way through the rabble, pushing

firmly, ignoring their multilingual clamour, and shaking off their grabbing hands, until he finally reached the official airport taxi rank.

With an authoritative knuckle, he rapped the cab's passenger window. A small, Black face peered out of the vehicle's interior.

'¿Cuanto de aqui a Reina Victoria?' he demanded.

'Dos mil Euros,' said the cabbie, with a French accent.

He snorted with contempt, angered by the cabbie's criminality, and angrily resolved not to suffer from him an insult to his intelligence. 'Quinientos. Ni un céntimo más,' he replied, brusquely. Airport taxi mafias were notorious for their ruthlessness; brute force was the only language its members understood.

'Vale,' replied the driver.

It pained him to witness the accomplishments of successive waves of both socialist and so-called conservative politicians during the past forty years. His was Franco's Spain: the Spain of the *churros con chocolate* and the SEAT 600, where airport taxi mafias would have been crushed at inception under the jackboot of the Guardia Civil - the Spain he had known in his childhood, when one could walk along the Gran Via in the centre of Madrid without fear of being raped, robbed, and knifed to death by a gang of imported savages. Whether it was because of a belief in Marxist ideology, or because of short-term economic considerations, traitorous politicians had pursued policies - immigration, equality, diversity -, which had inflicted irreparable damage to Spanish society. The cabbie was one of the instrumentally-minded ravagers who, like the legions of poor, unskilled, unemployed that comprised Africa's invading armies, had set foot on Spanish shores to claim a piece of El Dorado. And who could blame him? Bob Geldof's guilt-mongering campaigns had only intensified poverty, famine, violence, corruption, and disease in the Dark Continent; those African states which had not already disintegrated into warring tribes and reverted to pre-colonial economies, had fallen prey to Islam, AIDS, and hyperinflation. And, rather than motivated by a pro-Black discourse, of personal responsibility, the 'migrants' had been agitated by an anti-White discourse of anti-colonialism and reparations. They had been further incentivised by European politicians who, faced with the demographic collapse of the indigenous White population in Europe, and its accelerated replacement by populations imported from the Third World, went from fashion-conscious

proponents of politically correct discourse to terrorised slaves of electoral necessity. Thus, instead of their repulsion and deportation, European politicians had ordered their rescue and integration, heedless of whether this integration was possible, beneficial, or desired by the people who had entrusted them with defending the collective interests of the nation. And, because the peoples of the Third World had been long macerated in an anti-White ideology, they had been happy to abrogate responsibility for their failed states, and assist the non-representative but institutionally-powerful minority of self-hating Whites in the despoiling of Europe, and the destruction of the European genotype.

‘Y voy a exigir una factura con el importe, la fecha, la hora, su nombre, su DNI, su número licencia, y su placa.’

‘Vale, si.’

He opened one of the rear doors and confirmed that there was a rubber mat on the floor. He then rolled down the window, slammed the door shut, and operated the interior door knob to verify that it had not been disabled. It had not. He opened the door again, transferred the rubber mat from the floor to the seat, and entered the vehicle, making sure to sit squarely onto the rubber. The mat was decrepit, and bore signs of never having been cleaned; this was probably a deliberate tactic to deter well-informed fares from insulating themselves from wired seats, but he was not minded to suffer a corrupt cabbie to mould his behaviour - should the need arise to become argumentative, it was preferable to face a soiled suit that he could clean than an electrical shock that he could not control.

‘Apartamentos Villamagna, Paseo de Juan XXIII,’ he ordered, slamming the door shut, feeling like a chicken that had just been placed inside an oven. Ozochrotia permeated the atmosphere of the cab’s interior.

As the vehicle gained speed, a pair of probing eyes studied him briefly from the rear view mirror. He recognised in them the cabbie’s attempt to assess optimal fleecing tactics and degree.

‘¡Eh! Ponga en marcha el contador,’ he demanded, noticing the cabbie’s attempt to initiate an unmetered journey; this was part of the ample repertoire of trickery that was used to overcharge. The amount he had agreed before entering the vehicle was intended as an upper limit; other than that, he still expected the ride to be properly metered. The cabbie glared at him through the rear view mirror and silently complied, press-

ing a button with a lazy finger. The meter began racing as soon as it was switched on, of course, inflating the fare at the rate of five Euros per second.

‘¡Eh! ¡Eh! ¡Pare!’ he shouted. ‘Ese contador está mal. Ponga la tarifa correcta o me bajo ya.’

The rear view mirror reflected another glare. The cabbie then pressed another button on the meter, causing the numbers on the display abruptly to decelerate.

‘Vale. Continue,’ he said, irritably, responding to the glare on the rear view mirror with a sustained, hostile glare of his own.

While the driver navigated his way out of the airport complex, he used his mobile to go online and retrieve a route planner from the internet. The GPS signal immediately identified their location on the map, as well as the optimal route to their destination. Moments later he noticed the flashing dot abandoning the optimal route and advancing in the opposite direction. He slapped the driver’s seat, impatient to gain his immediate attention.

‘¡Oiga! ¿Adónde va? Por aquí no es,’ he again shouted. ‘Dé la vuelta y vaya en dirección a Madrid.’

‘Es por aquí,’ said the cabbie.. .

‘No, no es por aquí. Que tengo un mapa y veo por donde va. De la vuelta.’

The cabbie took the next service exit, but unhurriedly, perfectly composed, uttering not a word. The deception had been detected almost instantly, but the crook had still managed to squeeze in a small detour in order to inflate the fare all the same. His eyes threw odium rays at the cabbie’s elongated occiput.

They were not far along the M40 when a wave of thunder rocked the vehicle. Both he and the driver turned to see a plume of smoke ascending from the airport terminal, where they had initiated their journey. A section of the structure then collapsed, exposing floors on fire. There had been an explosion.

‘Oh, dear,’ he breathed. The first possibility in his mind was terrorism - either the Marxist-Leninist ETA or al-Qu’edah. He observed the devastated terminal, hypnotized, fascinated, unable to reconcile his numbed brain with his sharpened senses. He noticed that the heads inside the vehicles" around him were all turned in the terminal’s direction; the faces he could glimpse in the red and white light were either anaesthetised by

perplexity or animated by rapid speech. He tore his mobile out of his pocket and composed a text message for his wife:

I have arrived to Madrid safe and sound, but part of the airport has been blown up. I was inside the terminal only moments ago, detained by the Guardia Civil. It has been a lucky escape!

He waited for her reply. At this late hour, however, she was most likely asleep. With affection, he imagined her curved head resting on a comfortable pillow, her sleeping brain a biological cinema theatre running ænigmatic films. He composed another message, for her to read in the morning.]

I am presently in a cab on my way to the hotel. The night temperature is high enough to melt lead. I dread to think what it will be like during the day. I will text again on the morrow, provided I have not evaporated.

He then checked his emails. His inbox was inundated with work correspondence, sent both from his and his clients' offices. Fierce competition, and the need to stay above water in a rising tide of taxation and regulation, now made it imperative to work every day of the week, resulting in a continuous stream of electronic communication that respected no time of day or night. Most email only required single-word answers, like 'Yes', 'No', 'OK', or '?'; a few required some consideration and could not be answered immediately; the rest were from cryptic slackers and overly-verbal intriguers, who concealed their motivations, and weaved machinations, inside a mist of technical verbiage, cunning ambiguity, and multifarious wordcages of often highly inventive construction. His response in these cases was to either place the sender in a shortlist of annual redundancies (although circumventing unions and anti-discrimination laws required subterfuges, each year he replaced the most awkward and least efficient 10% of his workforce), or check the Microsoft employee surveyance data for evidence of idleness and prescribe a sharp increase of workload (he carried ready-made to-do lists for this purpose).

Traffic along the motorway had now come to a halt. The cabbie switched on the radio and the ceaseless jabbering of talk

and news programmes began emanating from the dashboard. News bulletins on the explosion they had just witnessed he expected to begin within minutes. In the meantime, however, he tired of studying the smouldering structure in the distance and, after confirming that the cabbie had not seized on the opportunity to re-activate the 'turst' tariff, lie turned his attention to the vehicle's interior. The latter was in a poor state of repair; the seats and panelling were dark, the plastic fittings cracked, the upholstery stained, and the ashtrays broken and overflowing with rubbish; moreover, the whole of the interior was dusty and littered with sweet wrappers, cinema tickets, soiled tissues, lost pens, dry leaves, dirt crusts, and empty plastic bottles and cans of alcoholic and carbonated beverages. The backrest pocket before him was stuffed with folded-up newspaper sections and disintegrating magazines. He pulled out one of the newspaper sections. He knew that for the cabbie this was an invitation for mischief (and, in fact, that was probably why the cabbie so kindly provided his fares with a wide variety of reading material), but he promised himself that he would keep the cabbie in his peripheral vision, and the meter under his constant supervision.

The government was hoping to invite foreign investment of 30 milliard Euros to complete construction of the Monument to Democracy on Cuelgamuros, in the Guadarrama Valley. This monument was the intended replacement for the Benedictine Abbey that had once occupied the site, and which a Socialist government had demolished. (The Socialists had been uncomfortable with Franco's homage to the fallen during the Civil War, and had invoked the Ley de la Memoria Histórica (the law of Historical Memory), which called for the removal of all emblems from the Franco sera, to justify the destruction of Franco's monument.) The Holocaust Museum in the site had been open to the public for quite some time, but its companion, the aforementioned Monument to Democracy, had been mired in controversy, and fallen victim to delays, financial irregularities, budget overruns, shrinking tax revenues, energy shortages, union disputes, poor construction materials, and stalemates between the various government bureaucracies involved. Five years ago construction work had ceased. The hulking monstrosity at the site had been abandoned to the elements, while the design of the intended monument (like its self-righteous, Left wing architect) had elicited universal contempt. Moreover, the uncompleted structure had since deterio-

rated, and the site had become unsafe; it was most likely that said structure would be dynamited and the site once again re-developed. He found it ironic that one of the arguments given in support of bulldozing the Valle de los Caidos was that the monument was grim, because the Holocaust Museum that replaced the basilica once containing Franco's tomb hardly inspired sentiments of joy.

A cacophony of horns suddenly erupted around them. The cabbie had decided to abandon the lane, but a driver on the target lane, a Mestizo in his thirties wearing a cowboy hat, had been determined not to allow him access. The cab and Cowboy's vehicle were now almost wedged together: if either of them moved, no matter in which direction, they would not be able to do so without damage. The cabbie and* Cowboy kept exchanging hostile glances as they battled for - supremacy. Eventually, a pop was heard, signalling the crumpling of the front fender in Cowboy's motor. Cowboy reacted violently: he rolled down his window to inspect the damage and then exploded out of his vehicle, slamming his door against the cab half a dozen times, then reaching in and pulling the cabbie's shirt towards him, in order to line up his fist with the cabbie's face.

'¡Te voy a matar, negro maricon!' screamed the Mestizo, with an Ecuadorian accent.

The cabbie used his right hand to slam Cowboy's head against the dashboard. Cowboy's hat fell onto the gearshift, where it was retrieved by the cabbie and defenestrated with a spin. Cowboy responded by grabbing's the cabbie's face, as if to rip its flesh; however, he was in an awkward position, and the cabbie was able to grab Cowboy by the hair and once again and repeatedly slam his attacker's head against the dashboard. Angry horns flared around them, followed by angry shouting from the motorists behind. He turned to identify these motorists, and witnessed them aggressively throwing their arms in the air and performing all manner of obscene gestures, their faces contorted, with rage as their mouths articulated their invectives. Cowboy managed again to grab hold of the cabbie's shirt, and, holding the two-way radio's microphone by the cable, smashed it against the cabbie's forehead as hard as he could. The blow was weak, however, because Cowboy's torso was still in a horizontal position and there was not enough room to properly swing the device. Realising this, Cowboy then decided to pull his torso out of the vehicle and rip the microphone out

of the radio. The cabbie was unable to prevent Cowboys vandalism, and, before he had time to think of an appropriate act of retaliation, witnessed Cowboy climbing over the cab's bonnet, and repeatedly kicking the windscreen with his high-heeled boot. The cabbie burst out of his vehicle and jumped onto the bonnet, where he pushed Cowboy with violent force. Cowboy landed on his back, slamming against the bonnet of his car.

At this point, two racially-indeterminate men materialised, running in to join in the brawl. Turning once again, he saw an empty Ford, parked at some distance behind, with both its front doors open. Between the Ford and the cab there were a great number of vehicles with heads protruding out of open windows - some of the faces were angry, others gleeful, all radiated with vicious fascination. The racially indeterminate men began attacking the brawling duo, delivering blows over their heads and torsos, before forcefully pulling them apart. The four men struggled, precariously balanced on the bonnets of the two wedged vehicles, before the racially-indeterminate men finally lost their balance and pulled the other two with them onto the tarmac. As the brawling continued, he was able to see parts of their bodies rising above the edge of the front grills. A man riding a Vespa 125 motorcycle then crept up towards the brawl, revving his engine with random bursts, obviously hoping to witness sufficient spilling of blood, rupturing of septa, and loss of teeth to titillate his cruelty. Vespa propped the motorcycle, switched off the engine, took off his helmet, and began smashing with it any limb, ribcage, or cranium that got in his way. He, still observing from his seat on the back of the cab, could not help but wince at Vespa's contribution to the unfolding battle - although, not unlike the motorists around him, he could not help but watch with horrified fascination. The scene, however, became rapidly less fascinating to him upon realising that, should the cabbie collect injuries sufficiently serious to disable him from driving, he would be stranded in the middle of the M40 - he, an expensively-attired businessman, alone, on a dilapidated motorway, surrounded by grim housing estates, replete with convicted criminals and angry Marxists.

He noticed that a number of men had by now stepped out of their vehicles and taken vantage positions in order to better observe the violence. Some stood leaning on their open doors, others stood next to their vehicles, with their hands on their

hips; all shouted and bellowed their instructions, eager to witness their chosen champion inflicting their favourite blows and fractures. Headlights and tail-lights revealed their primitive faces, alternately betraying sadistic amusement or truculent fury. He remained seated inside the vehicle, procrastinating a decision in hopes that the outcome of the brawl would obviate having to reach one. Wandering on foot on the motorway, in his polished shoes, looking to catch a late night Ws or an unregulated taxi, would not only be undignified for a man of his standing, but would also result in automatic robbery and evisceration.

Vespa lost his balance and was pushed back by one of the racially-indeterminate men. Vespa staggered backwards, flailing his arms, until he stumbled on his motorcycle and both fell onto the ground. By this point, the racially-indeterminate men managed to separate the brawling motorists, who then turned against them. Cowboy used his elbow to repeatedly slam his assailant in the ribs, causing the racially-indeterminate man to double up in pain. The cabbie slammed his elongated occiput against his own assailant's nose, rupturing the septum and causing its owner to stagger backwards, hands on face. The cabbie then ran to the boot of his vehicle, extracted a crowbar, and acquainted his racially-indeterminate assailant with its bone fracturing properties. Having already caused his assailant to flee back to his Ford, Cowboy stood by, his face and arms glistening with sweat, his chest heaving. The cabbie soon turned to look at him, at which point Cowboy showed his opponent the palms of his hands, holding them in the air.

'Ya, ya. Déjalo,' pleaded Cowboy.

The cabbie, still holding the crowbar aloft, watched Cowboy closely as the Mestizo returned to his Renault, slammed the door, and began reversing. This caused the motorist directly behind Cowboy to honk his horn and blast the Mestizo with a rude torrent of invectives.

Satisfied, the cabbie collected his rubber sandals and returned to his vehicle. There, the Black man sat behind the wheel, regaining his breath for a few moments as Cowboy dislodged his vehicle from the cab's front bumper. He, who had grown fearful of an inconvenient outcome, exhaled with relief, once again able to imagine himself enjoying a silent end to the evening in the safety of a well-equipped hotel room.

Damn, the reservation! he thought, as his nostril's filled with the cabbie's body odour. He retrieved his mobile once again and dialed the hotel's telephone number. Unfortunately, despite his patience, the telephone rang and rang, without a reply. He then opted to send them a preventative email, advising them of his later-than-anticipated arrival, before making a new attempt to telephone the reception desk. The latter, however, proved unresponsive. He imagined a dimly illuminated, deserted reception desk, with a rotary dial telephone under the counter, ringing and ringing and ringing into eternity, unheard, the reception staff nowhere in the vicinity. He sighed with frustration. It was impossible, it seemed, to obtain any standard of service from the hospitality industry these days.

Traffic on the motorway remained still. So far, no news had been forthcoming on the radio concerning the explosion at the airport terminal: instead the radio station remained steadfast in their determination to offer an unadulterated diet of sports. The station's entire news cycle seemed to consist of 0.1% of infantilised weather reports; 5% of heavily spun, crassly partisan, low-calorie news; 10% of frivolous, cute, sentimental human interest stories; and 85% of sports, covering every game, and discussing every match, athlete, and decision from the various governing bodies, in obsessively microscopic detail. It was as much a blessing for the sports aficionado as it was an insult for any serious listener demanding to be kept informed about important events and developments around the world. Since he was obviously in the latter group, he burnt with continued rage as the radio station swamped their listeners with a hyper-abundance of sports-related data, quotes, statistics, analyses, perspectives, opinions, reactions, reactions to the reactions, opinions about the opinions, perspectives on the perspectives, analyses of the analyses, statistics of the statistics, quotes about the quotes, and data about the data - all made exquisitely annoying by the hyperactive enthusiasm of the young, brash sports editors, and the preposterous erudition of the panels of former athletes and learned commentators. A vicious terrorist had just blown up one of the worlds' largest airport terminals, presumably killing hundreds of befuddled consumers and inflicting billions of Euros in structural damage, yet it was more urgent to discuss Real Madrid's line-up in the Champion's League Final.

He suddenly - and at last - heard helicopters flying overhead, in the direction of Barajas. Sirens soon followed, approaching in the

distance. He retrieved his mobile one more time and browsed through the ABC, the El Pais, the BBC News, and the Sky News websites, hoping to find them ablaze with the breaking news. None contained items on the Barajas explosion: they were too busy manufacturing political rows or obsessing about frivolous celebrities. It was as if the media inhabited a parallel universe propelled by trivial events.

What is wrong with these people?

He checked the meter, and noticed that its accounting had once again accelerated.

‘¡Eh! Vuelva a poner la tarifa normal. ¡Que le he pillado!’

‘Es la tarifa nocturna,’ argued the cabbie, nonchalantly.

‘¿Ah, sí? ¿Yporque antes no y ahora sí? ¿Es que no era ya bien de noche cuando me subi?’

With perfect equanimity, as if he had simply been asked to switch on the air conditioning, the cabbie performed the requested operation. The numbers immediately decelerated.

Fire engines, Guardia Civil jeeps, and police cars forced their way through the traffic, their sirens urgently wailing as they headed towards Barajas. Once sufficiently distant behind them, congestion eased up and they started moving in short bursts. This only exacerbated his impatience to end the journey. He imagined himself entering his apartment at the hotel and surveying an orderly space with soothingly atmospheric illumination, containing a comfortable double bed, made up with clean, white sheets; and a well-equipped bathroom, with marbled tiles, immaculate white porcelain, and vast luxurious towels. He imagined himself standing under a sparkling showerhead of chromed steel, the layers of sedimentary sweat being blasted away by a purifying jet of hot water; then, clad in a long bathrobe, sinking into the embrace of a plush armchair and elevating his feet, next to an ice-cold beverage and a large jar of salted cashew nuts. Finally, he imagined depositing his head onto a soft, fresh, mildly scented pillow, the last remnants of tension silently dissipating between the cool sheets as he drifted in the darkness towards a deep, restful slumber.

These images were somewhat removed from his present surroundings. The motorway crawled along the bottom of a canyon, the walls of which consisted of colossal batteries of Soviet-style apartment blocks - ominous, grim cubes of blackened cement and red brick, crammed with cheap accommodation, teeming with all manner of human refuse, and tightly clustered inside monstrous, crime-ridden housing estates. He could

sense the hatred of the disenfranchised radiating from behind the rows of crumbling facades and minuscule windows, the unsavoury hordes of chronically unemployed scroungers, drunken wife beaters, convicted pædophiles, compulsive hoarders, emaciated pensioners, unmedicated psychopaths, diseased prostitutes, eco-terrorists, pimps, freaks, kinks, weirdoes, loners, oddballs, bigamists, multiple-identity fraudsters, Marxist fanatics, and Islamic terrorists, all imprisoned in their cramped flats, gobbling fast food and watching brainless television, while their proliferating progeny of truanting vandals, murderous drug dealers, ethnic gangsters, drifting runaways, lousy squatters, and evil bullies terrorised the confused network of tunnels, passage ways, and derelict playgrounds that characterised these modernistic housing estates. Such was the legacy of the visionary architects of the 1960s, their brutalising Modernism now the pressure-cooker wherefrom the spawn of progressive social engineers would explode forth to one day devour the whole world.

An ancient medium-sized truck bullied its way into their lane, its exhaust pipe farting fuliginous clouds of carcinogenic diesel fumes. The truck's cage-like bed was laden with un-
 11 killed manual labourers - fruit pickers, most likely — of obvious Amerindian extraction. In the lurid sodium vapour light, the craniofacial anthropometry of these workers suggested that they populated the most atrophied branches of human evolution: sloping foreheads, supra-orbital ridges, orangutanaceous prognathism, limited cranial cubicage, Pan troglodytic dolichocephaly - their visages were bestial, grotesque, aberrant; I heir torpid manner left no doubt that that these specimens comprehended only the most rudimentary of commands, and were motivated solely by base instinct and violent sanction.

These archaic humans, who had clearly been urged out of their beds by their rumbling stomachs, entertained their small, slow brains by vacantly observing their surroundings.

He made a third attempt at telephoning the hotel. As before, the telephone rang numerous times; only, on this occasion, there was someone at reception to answer the call.

'Apartamentos Ciro el Grande,' said a male voice, with polished politeness and precise enunciation. The man's accent betrayed his Madrid origins.

'Disculpe. ¡Cómo ha dicho?' he said, perplexed; then quickly checked the number displayed on his mobile. He had dialed correctly.

‘Apartamentos Ciro el Grande,’ repeated the voice, confidently, louder, and enunciating more slowly.

‘¿No es este el número de los Apartamentos Villamagna?’

‘Hasta hace un par de días sí. Pero ya no. Tenemos un nuevo propietario y ahora nos llamamos Ciro el Grande.’

‘Ya veo.’ *¿Ciro el Grande?* ‘Bueno, a ver...’

He stated his name, mentioned his reservation, gave his reference number, and explained his predicament.

‘No se preocupe. Le guardamos el apartamento,’ replied the voice.

He inquired about the parcels he had posted to the hotel’s address. Had they arrived?

‘¿Dos cajas? Sólo nos ha llegado una. Es una caja cuadrada con su nombre y está toda cubierta con celo marrón. ¿Como era la otra?’

He explained that the two parcels were identical.

‘Pues no. Sólo nos ha llegado una de las cajas, aunque, mientras usted llega, voy a ir mirando por aquí a ver si alguien la ha puesto a un lado, o la ha dejado debajo de otra, y no la he visto,’ promised the voice.

‘Vale. No creo que llegue yo antes de una hora. Si la encuentra, pongamela junto a la otra y las recojeré ambas cuando aterrice por allí,’ he instructed.

‘De acuerdo. Hasta luego.’

He sent himself an email reminding himself to slap the Royal Mail with a claims form. It was, of course, irritating that a delinquent chimpanzee had helped itself to his belongings; but all the same he could not help but experience a certain self-satisfaction at his own foresight and ingenuity: none of the shirts he had sent himself had been particularly expensive; while the neckties had all been hand-painted with a unique design, a characteristic that would enable him to immediately identify the thief - and therefore to confront him - should they ever coincide during his visit. He thought it improbable that a petty thief would possess enough industry to sell a few neckties.

While engaged in these reflections, he noticed that he was about to learn the cause of the congestion: the reason vans, trucks, and lorries were forcing themselves in front of the cab was that their lane had been closed. Members of the Guardia Civil Trafico stood behind rows of blinking cones. A concentration of rotating lightbars flashed in the distance ahead. He fixed his gaze in their direction, trying to appear dignified and Indifferent as the cab advanced along the rows of cones, while

in reality anticipating the morbid excitement of a horrific automobile demolition. Conscious of the cabbie's corruption, however, and of the opportunity any external distractions afforded the crook to tamper with the meter, he made sure to check the latter, as well as the distance separating it from the cabbie's fingers, at regular intervals. And as expected, he found the cabbie's eyes carefully observing him in the rearview mirror. He glared at the eyes, silently warning the cabbie against I'd filler ethical transgressions. The cabbie's right hand, which by this time had gradually drifted in the direction of the meter, slowly returned to the steering wheel.

The accident was spectacular, just as he had hoped, but not for the reasons he had anticipated. Its cause had been a superannuated Mercedes dump truck, so dilapidated that one of the deeper potholes on the motorway had managed to dislodge its rear axle, sending it on a collision course against a brown Fiat. The Fiat's driver appeared to have attempted an evasive manoeuvre, which had knocked a motorcycle and sent it spinning against an oncoming white van. The van, together with the motorcycle already embedded under its front bumper, had then slammed into the Fiat, transforming it into a giant horse-shoe. All three vehicles were total write offs, reduced in part or in their entirety to a hideous mass of twisted metal and shattered plastic. Millions of glass and polycarbonate particles littered the tarmac, along with the shattered, shiny remnants of tens of thousands of antique CDs, which had been disgorged by the white van when its rear doors had exploded open. What was fascinating, however, was the truck. It was grotesquely overloaded, literally buried under a gigantic mountain of bags, piled up so high it towered several metres over the roof of the cab, and layered sideways, bulging so far outwards that the truck required three lanes to displace itself on that motorway. It was as if the inhabitants of an entire village had packed all their belongings, using every suitcase, rucksack, barrel bag, blanket, rug, curtain, bed sheet, and tablecloth they could lay their hands on, piled it all up as high as gravity would allow, and then, when it was no longer possible to continue vertically, continued layering their luggage horizontally, using lengths of rope to attach as many items as possible to and around the vehicle. Except for the cab and the wheels, the truck had all but disappeared under its phenomenal load. What was more, this hulking motorised mountain was covered in its entirety with dust, dirt, and caked mud. How or why such a truck had been

allowed to circulate on the M40, unchallenged by the traffic police, was mystifying, because there were CCTV cameras all along the motorway, constantly filming, recording, tagging, querying, and databasing everything and everyone everywhere, every time, without exception, all of the time.

Once past the accident, traffic gradually accelerated, finally reaching an astonishing cruising speed of 60 kilometres per hour - a highly unusual velocity on most contemporary motorways. At this point, however, the meter suddenly added €100 to the running fare. This was not the result of yet another contrived overcharge - at least, not one contrived by the cabbie: the cab had simply passed through one of a milliard secret toll points, detected by the vehicle's black box, which had relayed the corresponding road charge, pollution charge, and climate levy (plus 33% VAT) directly on to the meter. Not that all these charges and levies played any role in combating climate change: apart from simply penalising motorists (instead of incentivising motor manufacturers to offer vehicles equipped with emissions free technologies), less than 1% of the funds thus raised by the government was ever allocated towards emissions reduction schemes: they were, as with all fashion-conscious 'social' taxes, simply one of battery of desperate and spurious excuses used by bankrupt Western governments to extort yet more tax money from their enslaved subjects.

About an hour later, the cabbie parked his vehicle in front of the hotel. Or, rather, as near to the hotel as he could park his vehicle. The entrance to the lobby was situated on an elevated courtyard. To get to that courtyard it was necessary to walk along a paved footpath, about a hundred feet in length, and up two flights of steps. The footpath was lined with dead trees, their roots buried in caked dirt. Once upon the time, the footpath had cut across a verdant lawn; Spain's desertification, however, brought about by ever-rising temperatures and ever-more-acute water shortages, had relegated verdant lawns to images on photographic albums and coffee-table volumes.

The cabbie stopped the meter, turned down the radio (still no news about the explosion at the airport), and declared, without looking at him, 'Quinientos.' The meter had read €465 before being hastily switched off.

He extracted a €500 bank note out of his crocodile-skin wallet and handed it over.

The cabbie then inserted the note into his creased, Kebab-like wallet, and extracted, from among a thick wad of well-worn notes, one with a €50 denomination.

‘Se ha equivocado Son quinientos,’ said the crook, showing him the €50 note. The cabbie exhibited the blasé composure of a conman who had performed that same trick a million times.

‘No me ande usted con tonterías. Le he dado quinientos, y lo sabe perfectamente. Adios,’ he said, opening the door, fed up, and perfectly ready for a verbal confrontation. |

No sooner had he finished uttering his contribution to the dialogue, the cabbie exploded out of the vehicle - grabbing his crowbar - and slammed the rear passenger door against his chest before he had finished alighting. Thus, he found himself standing, sandwiched between the half-open door and the body of the vehicle.

‘¡PAGA!’ screamed the Black man, his eyes wild with rage, his skin glistening with perspiration, the crowbar held aloft by a long, muscular arm.

He was momentarily perplexed, but he was also hungry, thirsty, sleep-deprived, and, by this point, having endured delays, fetid crowds, high temperatures, interrogations, filthy squat toilets, obnoxious flight attendants, claustrophobic cabins, grumpy old men, crying infants, overzealous Domino players, poisonous food, malicious landing forms, suspicious customs officials, congestion, frivolous news programmes, lackadaisical hotel staff, a kleptomaniacal post office, and now this, a violent, thieving, deceitful cabbie - by this point, in short, he was no longer disposed to patience or tolerance.

Firmly resolved not to capitulate, and entirely careless of the consequences, he declared, ‘Caballero, usted se puede ir a la mierda.’

The cabbie, frustrated by his defiance, found only one response inside his brain. Brandishing the crowbar above his head, he screamed again, ‘¡PAGA!’

It was evident to him that the cabbie was equally prepared to take his money or smash his skull. Yet, he was indifferent: the threat of violence was so imminent that it failed to inspire fear; moreover, his contempt for the thug was so absolute that he felt as if he were dealing, not with a fellow citizen, but with an animal, or a child, who needed training and discipline. This Outlook afforded him the emotional detachment necessary to neutralise his opponent. He understood that, while fear would only inflame the latter’s bloodthirst, as long as he appeared

calm and handled the situation with confidence, he would be able to engineer an outcome advantageous to himself.

'Si quieres que te pague, vas a tener que darme espacio,' he said, calmly insolent.

The cabbie hesitated for a moment, then stepped back. The Black man, however, was endowed with a high self-concept, and assumed that his victim would attempt to escape - like all Whites, a coward, overwhelmed by a Black man's masculinity. The cabbie, therefore, darted a sideways glance, in an effort to anticipate his victim's likely escape route; the Black man resolved to grab his victim and rain blows on the White man's head, over and over, with his iron crowbar, until he cracked the White man's colonialist skull. He, however, had other ideas. As soon as the cabbie allowed some distance between them, he retrieved his wallet, wherefrom he extracted a selection of bank notes. The cabbie's eyes registered pleasure at the sight, and betrayed the belief that his victim had capitulated with a mixture of arrogant scorn and appetent greed. But instead of handing over the money, he held it before the cabbie, looking at the Black man straight in the eye, before quickly and suddenly ripping the notes to pieces.

He had retrieved his cow-skin wallet, of course.

'¡Maricon!' screamed the cabbie, enraged with disbelief.

This disbelief resulted in a moment of hesitation, in essence all lie needed. He lurched forward, rapidly leaning as he grabbed the cabbie's left arm by the wrist, and, using his own body weight while continuing his forward motion (so that the cabbie's arm was pushed backwards beyond the shoulder line), pulled the captive wrist downwards towards a point on the ground immediately ahead of him. The cabbie lost his balance and fell backwards, his protruding posterior landing hard onto the cement pavement. Without releasing the wrist, he then twisted the cabbie's arm while abruptly changing direction, causing the cabbie to roll over. He completed the manoeuvre by kneeling onto the cabbie's coccyx and continuing to twist the arm, around and up towards the cabbie's guava-like occiput, until the captive limb would go no further. The cabbie's screams of pain filled the darkness.

'Es usted un ladrón,' he informed the cabbie.

The cabbie simply screamed - screamed and screamed, as long and as loud as his lungs allowed, both in excruciating pain and in an effort to get attention. The cabbie was clearly aware of anti-racist legislation; as a Black man, he knew that as far as

any potential witnesses were concerned, there was a helpless Black man on the ground, with a White man on top, twisting the Black man's arm and making him scream with terror. This, in the early hours of the morning, and within walking distance of the bar-infested Moncloa: as far as any potential witnesses were concerned, therefore, a drunken racist attack, whose perpetration was their duty, as law-abiding citizens, to report to the police. As to the chain of events leading to the present situation, the Black man thought (correctly) that it would take longer to explain, and would require more effort from third parties to believe, than simply assuming that his attacker was vicious White racist - a White racist, who had refused to pay his taxi fare, and who had then assaulted the hard-working cabbie, simply because of his race. Having succeeded in averting a mugging and serious injury, and having educated the cabbie as to the virtues of doing honest business with his fares, it was now opportune to swiftly conclude the transaction, before neighbours became interested, and third parties became involved. Noticing the cabbie had let go of the crowbar, and not yet releasing his opponent's wrist, he stood up, and kicked the crowbar out of reach. He then released his captive, knowing the cabbie would be in too much pain to have use of his arm or an appetite for further violence.

The cabbie greeted his release with a torrent of invectives, many of which had unpleasant racial overtones.

'No sea usted tan racist,' he advised the cabbie, before walking away.

Chapter 8

Cyrus the Great

Ciro el Grande bore little resemblance its previous incarnation. Where he had been expecting to find dark oak wall paneling; textured, peach-coloured wallpaper; and bronze doorknobs and fixtures, he found ogee arches, arabesques, marbles, glazed ceramics, and Persian carpets. Crammed into a relatively small, dimly illuminated lobby area, the Oriental luxury and decorative profusion favoured by the new proprietors overflowed with pretentious excess. This excess, however, extended not as far as the staffing levels, because, in the midst of all that obsequious splendour, the reception desk was perfectly empty.

He rang the desk bell, and listened nervously as the sound-waves slowly lost their amplitude - nervously, because by the time he had finished crossing the courtyards and entered the building, the adrenalin had drained from his cerebral cortex, allowing it space to reel about the incident he had just been involved in. It was an incident that, once revised without the intoxication of the moment, was of sufficient gravity to trouble any serious and reputable businessman. Anti-racist legislation was draconian everywhere in Europe, and even minor transgressions of inter-racial decorum, particularly when the transgressor was White, entailed severe prison sentences. Given the manner of their application favoured by the courts, and given the power and influence of the ethnic activist organizations that had redacted the legal text and campaigned for its adoption, abundant precedent had accreted in recent decades where it was not unusual for Black on White crime to reward the attacker and punish the victim. As a result, he was now recognising that it would be highly desirable if his negotiations with the

cabbie concerning the fare had been performed entirely without witnesses, undetected by CCTV cameras. Were there any around the area? With luck they were all broken, vandalised by truanting children and disgruntled infractors. He would have to check tomorrow, by daylight.

His nerves were not tranquillised by the receptionist's reading preferences. Below the marbled counter, the receptionist in question had left a novel by Harry Stephen Keeler, titled *El Libro de Piel de Tiburon*, whose cover depicted a White gentleman, plumbing the depths of despair as he sat locked inside a prison cell.

He rang the desk bell again, his ears now hypersensitive to the sound of boots and sirens. Disappearing in the anonymous uniformity of the doors and corridors above, had suddenly acquired an urgent appeal.

Footsteps approached behind him. As he turned, he saw a man of middle age, clad in a dark suit. The man went past him and through a door, then reappeared behind the reception desk.

'Buenas noches,' he rumbled, with effortless aplomb, his head set against a background of oaken pigeon holes.

'Buenas noches. Tengo una reservacion a nombre de...' he said, concluding the sentence by stating his name.

The man consulted a computer, retrieved his reservation details, checked him in, and issued him with a plastic card - the key to his apartment.

'Es usted con quien he hablado por telefono, hace mas o mentis una hora?' he asked.

'Si, soy yo.'

'Ha encontrado la segunda caja?' -

'Ha, si. La caja. Espere un momenta.'

The reception desk was flanked by walls on either side, each wide enough to house a door. Facing the pigeonholes, the door on the left led to the lobby via an antechamber; the door on the right was closed. The receptionist turned towards this last door, and disappeared into the room behind it. Quickly! he thought, half expecting to hear the boots of Guardia Civil agents stomping behind him; he had to exercise, considerable will power to remain apparently casual, keeping his movements calm and his speech unhurried. A moment later the man returned, carrying a cardboard box of about a foot and a half per side. The box was in a lamentable condition, squashed, loose, and held together with a superabundance of buff tape: it

suggested the postmen had used it as a football for two weeks, before re-commissioning it as a stool for their pet elephant at the local sorting office. The man placed the box - what was left of it - on the counter.

‘Está es la unica que he encontrado por aqui. Si ha mandado otra, no nos ha llegado. He buscado por todas partes, a ver si acaso algun colega mio la dejo en algun otro sitio, pero no... por aqui no hay ninguna otra. ¿Cuando la ha enviado?’

‘La primefa os la envie el Lunes pasado. La segunda el Miercoles. ¿Cuando os ha llegado está?’ he spoke quickly.

‘Está... lleva aqui unos tres o cuatro dias.’

‘Entonces es la primera. ¿No ha dejado nadie una nota?’

‘Pueees... no,’ the man said, shaking his head. ‘A lo major no ha llegado todabia.’

‘Hm,’ he replied. ‘¿Y está caja ha llegado asi?’

‘Pues si. Como dije, lleva aqui tres o cuatro dias, y no la he visto de ninguna otra forma. Está claro que le han dado una paliza en el correo.’

‘Si, ya. Pero la segunda ya deberia haber llegado tambien. Desde donde las he enviado, los paquetes tardan normalmente tres dias.’

‘Pues estára en el correo todabia. A veceslos paquetes tardan mi dia mas un dia menos, dependiendo si lo paran en aduana, o se equivocan, o hay huelga o... Bueno, ya se lo puede usted imaginar. Aunque es todabia pronto; puede que todabia llegue mañana.’

‘Espero que si. Como han dejado está...’

‘Bueno, si la otra llega mañana, yo o alguno de mis eompaneros le avisaremos.’

‘Vale, de acuerdo.’

‘Su apartamento está en el septimo piso, de aquel lado, a la derecha,’ explained the man, extending his arm to point to his loft, then bending his wrist to point forward.

‘Vale, gracias,’ he said, grabbing the box, noticing how it was soft and much lighter than expected, its contents loose.

‘Buenas noches.’

‘Adios.’

A cursory inspection while in the lift revealed that the parcel had been opened and re-sealed with transparent tape; there was, however, no sticker informing him that Customs had selected the parcel for a random inspection. Once inside the apartment, he deposited the box on the round dining table, and inspected his surroundings. The new decor afforded him

no hint of what he remembered from his previous stay: the beige wallpaper, plain orange carpets, dark oak wood doors, dim tungsten lighting, and polished brass fittings of yesteryear had given way to arabesque wallpaper, modernistic Persian carpets, ornate lamps, and ostentatious drapery. The emphasis was on colours from the desert: beiges, creams, gold, blue. The lighting relied on CFL technology, set at 3000 degrees Kelvin, irradiating a warm milky glow. Because he had consciously selected the same size apartment he had stayed in with his parents in 1987, its configuration was familiar: the front door led to a long, narrow corridor, along which, on the right hand side, were two lavatories, and at the opposite end of which, stood a small, square kitchen; to the left of the corridor, just before the kitchen, were two pale wooden doors, one leading into a square double bedroom, equipped with closets and a large internet-enabled flat-screen television, and the other leading into a combined lounge-dining room area, equipped with a round table, four chairs, a sofa-bed, a pinewood entertainment unit, two arm chairs, a small glass-topped round table, and another flat-screen television. Having the establishment lost a star since changing management, none of the materials were particularly expensive: this was without a doubt two or three steps down from the type of accommodation a man of his prestige ought to be renting.

Anyway, he thought, dismissively, glad to at least have made it in one piece. I will save money and no one will know.

He used a knife from the kitchen to cut the box open. His shirts, ties, and underwear were intact, and so were the emergency victuals, but his articles of personal hygiene - toothpaste, toothbrush, shampoo, deodorant, shaving cream, shower gel, razors, nail clippers, comb - had all vanished. Why? Worse still, his shoe polish and the accompanying cloths and brushes were also gone. That's a low blow. He sighed, his stomach suddenly acid with annoyance, the apartment filled with the local bar's cacophony of pulsing music, drunken brawls, and riant conversation. He resolved to replace the stolen items first thing on the morrow, but the tediousness of the task, the waste of time involved, the idea of having to locate a vendor in the vicinity, of having walk to and from a shop, of having queue in front of a till, of having to carry a plastic bag, of having to waste his valuable time in this trivial manner - all while unshaven, unwashed, and looking like a homeless alcoholic, as opposed to a serious businessman consulting with clients - only

compounded his annoyance, and raised it to the power of a gugol, a gugolplex times.

It was too late - and he was too tired - to search for a suitable restaurant, least of all when the streets, already perilous in broad daylight, were in the hours of darkness unsuitable venues for human society. He theorised, however, that the lack of toiletries would not significantly reduce a shower's ability to minimise his discomfort. Unfortunately, the million illegal borehole operations that aggravated Spain's chronic water shortage, prevented him testing this theory: upon entering the lavatory, he was confronted by a bold-lettered sign informing him of the establishment's daily water schedule: running water was available only for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. Moreover, the installation of squat toilets (aesthetically more harmonious with Ciro's Orientalist decor) had been an integral part of the establishment's water-saving strategy.

He uttered an expletive.

A moment later, the telephone rang.

He turned to look at the bedroom door, his brow clouded by its frown of suspicion. He was not expecting calls, certainly not at that hour, on a landline, in an hotel, in Madrid; and no one, save his wife and the receptionist downstairs, was aware of his accommodation arrangements.

Perhaps they found the missing parcel.

'¿Diga?' he said, after picking up.

Silence.

'¿Diga?'

Silence. Then the person at the other end, the owner of an old-fashioned corded telephone, hung up. He groaned. Idiot.

Seconds later, the telephone rang again.

'¿Diga?' he said, more forcefully this time.

'Is this the Guildford Conservatives?' the voice suggested a pensioner - a pensioner old enough to have been contemporaneous with Hitler's Munich Beer Hall putsch.

He frowned, perplexed. 'The Guildford Conservatives?' he said.

'Is this the Guildford Conservative Association?'

'Er, no. I am afraid you have dialled completely the wrong number. This is a number in Spain.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You've dialed a number in Spain. You have dialled the wrong number.'

'Is this not the Guildford Conservatives?'

'No. Certainly not.'

He opened the bedside table's top drawer: Ciro's management had sought to further flaunt its XXIst Century credentials by helpfully equipping each apartment with a copy of the Qur'an.

'Is this 01483...?'

'No. This is a number in Spain!'

He closed the drawer.

'I beg your pardon? What game? Who am I talking to?'

He lost his patience, 'THIS IS A NUMBER IN SPAIN! YOU HAVE DIALLED THE WRONG NUMBER.'

'What is sombre? Is this the Guildford Conservative Association? Who are you?'

'I am hanging up now.'

'I beg your pardon?'

He hung up, amazed that there were Englishmen out there, old enough to remember the old England, who were somehow still interested in the modern Conservative party. What were they hoping to conserve? Firstly, the latter was virtually indistinguishable from the other two mainstream parties, differing only in that the other two were fractionally more efficient, marginally more sanctimonious, and somewhat more dogmatic, in their capacity to dismantle the country and betray and exploit its people; secondly, the status quo was so deplorable that it was not worth conserving at all.

Reminded by these political reflections, he composed a text message addressed to Professor Kautonen. Professor Kautonen, a respected conservative scholar, was scheduled to attend an academic economics convention in Madrid that week, where he would be giving a presentation on the Black Metal scene as a decentralised virtual trust network. Professor Kautonen was an old friend and occasional correspondent; they rarely ever met in person.

The rattle of a machinegun echoed in the distance outside, followed by screams of terror, the screech of tires, the roar of an engine, and more screams. He switched off the bedroom light and parted the curtains to peer through the dusty panes of the balcony's sliding doors. By this time the screams had faded, subsumed by the street music and the lager louts shouting and singing their tedious football songs. He could see neither violent activity nor the offending bar: only tiled rooftops, grey facades, and recessed windows, drowning in a sea of neon, sodium vapour, and tungsten light.

Chapter 9 TRS-80, Model I

‘**B**uenos dias. Tengo una cita con el Dr. Oker a las nueve.’
There were two people manning the reception desk. He had addressed the Ethiopian woman with the lip plate. Her colleague, a kyphotic gentleman with telescopic glasses and old enough to have seen Mussolini’s march on Rome, he had deemed probably too slow a telephone operator not to test his patience. He surveyed his surroundings while Lip Plate scanned his passport, swiped it through the magnetic reader, and checked the police information on her computer screen. The marble lobby was dominated by a magnificent, wide arch, which allowed Madrid’s searing daylight to inundate the building’s interior. The minimalist geometry of Minoru Yamasaki’s Picasso Tower was made all the more alienating by the lack of human traffic, and all the more brutalising by the abundance of weaponry attached to the security personnel posted everywhere. There was more security personnel that there were office workers in circulation.

‘Puede subir.’

He took the first available lift, which arrived empty and took him straight to his destination. When the doors opened, near the top of the tower, he found that Scoptic was the floor’s sole occupant. Behind the reception desk he found a plump woman in her fifties, with greying hair, blue eyes, sagging face, ample bussom, and obvious Irish ancestry; the lilies on her face, the product of many years of hyperbolic miming and gesticulation, betrayed an active sense of humour. He winced inwardly when he noticed a battered copy of *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley next to her computer: a former friend of his,

dead for many years, had slated the novel in 1989 as an obnoxious example of feminist historical revisionism, replete with perverse characterisations of the protagonists of the Arthurian legend; his former friend's sister, who subsequently became a restaurant reviewer for a local newspaper in the United States, had been reading the novel not long before that time.

'Buenos días. Tengo una cita con el Doctor Oker a las nueve. Me está esperando.'

The woman answered him with an American accent, 'Si. Sigame, por favor.'

He followed the woman as she walked him to a meeting room. Soptic had created a truly disorientating labyrinth of cubicles, wherein they had shoved their workers and left them to get on with their assigned tasks. It was clear that the company's office planning had fallen victim of yet another trendy organisational theory. A theory that, as was usually the case with theories that assumed a blank slate view of human nature, had already failed- the test of practical reality. Except for a quadron female with a 1970s afro, who appeared to be composing an email, everyone else sat hypnotised in front of their screens, surfing the internet and visiting websites that, given their sports- and celebrity-orientated content, had little or nothing to do with their respective job descriptions.

'El Doctor Oker estará con usted en cinco o diez minutos,' said the woman, as they reached their destination and she held the door open for him. '¿Cafe?' she added.

'Si, por favor. Con leche y mucha azucar.'

'¿Leche desnatada?'

'No, no, natada. ¡Entera!'

'La leche entera es ilegal. Medidas del gobierno para combatir la obesidad. Semidesnatada como mucho.'

'Vale, semidesnatada entonces.'

'¿Y azucar blanca o marrón?'

'Blanca, por favor.'

'Me temo que se ha acabado.'

He frowned, irked by the logical lapse, '¿Pero, entonces porqué me ofrece azucar blanca, si no hay?'

'Usted parece que tiene un problema con las mujeres, ¿no? Vaya que cara tiene el tío.'

He stared, uncomprehending.

'Le voy a traer su café. Pero como me vuelva a hablar de esa manera, le voy a meter un pleito. Así que andese con cuidado, señor génio, que aqui no toleramos machistas de ninguna

clase.'

'I beg your pardon?' he said, outraged. He would not be spoken to in such manner.

The woman stormed off, ignoring his astonishment.

The decor of the meeting room provided ample evidence of Dr. Oker's vanity. Occupying an entire wall, from floor to ceiling, was a mounted, framed jigsaw puzzle. It must have been the largest commercially available jigsaw puzzle in the world, because it dwarfed the largest one he had ever previously seen. It was a shame the manufacturers had chosen, instead of an appropriately classical painting - like, say, Pieter Brueghel the Younger's 1621 Village Lawyer - an overly colourful, puerile, saccharine painting by a faceless, talentless, and - without a doubt - grossly over-rated contemporary artist. What a waste! As much as he liked the idea of solving a jigsaw puzzle of such colossal magnitude, given the choice between serving forty years in Nairobi Prison in Kenya, or hanging that aberration anywhere in his house, he would have to think about it. Had he chosen a different career path, he would have enjoyed producing the world's largest jigsaw puzzles, all of them depicting serious, high-quality art, and driving his clueless competitors into bankruptcy - as quickly and as thoroughly as possible, completely and forever, without exception.

The Irish-American woman returned with his coffee. She set it down on the conference table with an imperious air, eyed him up and down as if he were a criminal, and flounced off in a huff.

He glanced at the cup, and noticed that the feminist harridan had an original recipe for making coffee, no doubt inspired by her general rapport with men: she had heaped the cup with moscavado sugar, and then carelessly dropped in a spoonful of cheap instant coffee, followed by a dash of skimmed - and almost certainly stale - milk. She had not bothered to stir the concoction, nor condescended to wipe off the milk that had spilled over the sides.

'Good morning!'

Dr. Oker entered the meeting room, smiling offering his hand; Dr. Oker looked like Alec Baldwin in the film *Glengarry Glenross*, only ten years older. Two men followed behind him: the first one looked like Noel Ignatiev - middle aged, balding and bearded, with a serene, self-important air about him; the other looked like a 50-year-old Carlos Andres Perez - swarthy, arrogant, and dead-eyed with receding black hair, and 1970s

balcarrotas - or sideburns.

'Did you have a good trip?'

'Er, no. Not really. A terrorist nearly blew me to pieces last night,' he replied, matter-of-factly.

'Oh, dear. Were you at Barajas when the bomb went off?'

'No. I was riding a cab. The bomb went off ten minutes after I left the terminal.'

'Ah, well, you are here. This is Dr. Stumm, the Systems Head.'

'How do you do,' he said, shaking the bearded man's hand; the subtly smiling eyes beneath Dr. Stumm's dark, arched eyebrows suggested he thought himself very clever.

'And this is Dr. Brummagem, our Finance Director.'

'How do you do.'

The meeting lasted several hours, during which time he became unsettled by Dr. Stumm's manner and took a dislike for Dr. Brummagem. The project under discussion, however, was highly unusual and interesting. They needed him to develop a systems architecture that could automate their inscrutably convoluted accounting regime. The architecture had to be based on the adaptive heuristic juro-linguistic matrices he had developed back in England, so that the system could constantly monitor, intelligently analyse, and automatically respond to changes in tax and VAT legislation in real time" and in the manner that most effectively exploited new and existing loopholes. Because the voracity of the Ministerio de Hacienda caused legislation to be in a constant state of flux (presenting a constantly-moving target was, in fact, part of the Ministerio's strategy to thwart creative corporate accounting), an accounting system programmed with artificial intelligence that was capable of automatically reducing their tax liabilities by advantageously re-interpreting their financial records every time the system detected legislative changes, would prevent the tax authorities from being able to bite them with sudden, retroactive, and/or unannounced modifications of the tax code. What made the project especially challenging, however, was the fact that this highly sophisticated system was to run on an obsolete platform, installed on antique hardware. This was intended as the companies' second line of defence. It was hoped that by making their accounts system electronically impenetrable to the tax authorities, the latter's system of monthly targets and commission-based incentives would encourage inspectors to focus their energies investigating organisations with less op-erose financial records. This strategy was viable because the

Ministerio de Hacienda could only prescribe that financial records be presented to them in an accessible format, but could not specify that they be in a digitally accessible format (apparently, this would discriminate against certain religious sects opposed to modern technology); technically, not being member of any such sect, the company could be asked to do so, but it would have to be argued in court, which the Ministerio knew would take years and not guarantee a favourable outcome; therefore, it was possible for the company to fulfill their legal obligations by simply presenting printed records. And, of course, the printed records were so daunting in their voluminosity, so opaque in their jargon, and so contortuplicated in their organisation, that a thorough explication would necessitate more resources, and more time, than were available to the Ministry.

The company had acquired a dozen TRS-80 Model I micro-computers, which they had loaded with TRSDOS, VisiCalc, and Superscrispit. The TRS-80s had 4 kilobytes of RAM, and used a Zilog Z80 processor clocked at 1.77 MHz, mounted on a motherboard housed inside the keyboard unit. There were no hard drives; instead, the data were stored on cassette tapes via a standard monaural audio cassette deck. Modified RCA XL-100 black and white television sets served as display units; the screens came with a P4 phosphor display, which could only render white on black upper case characters, 64 across, 16 down, thanks to a video memory system of one kilobyte. Obtaining these relics must have not been easy, for only 250,000 copies were ever manufactured before Tandy Corporation discontinued them forty years ago. For him, the TRS-80s was a childhood memory; seeing a dozen TRS-80s sitting on desks, fully refurbished and ready to use - in an office where computers were paper thin and people wore them on their clothes - felt as if traveling through time.

He met with Professor Kautonen for lunch. The chosen restaurant was operated by a five-star hotel near Castellana, but rather than meet in the lobby, Professor Kautonen, having observed 'scum' congregating outside the hotel, had suggested to meet inside the restaurant itself. Upon reaching the hotel, he noticed (with distaste) a most unsavoury throng as he approached the revolving doors: it appeared to consist of a rainbow coalition of bromidrotic Marxists, butch Feminists, vulgar homosexuals, self-righteous multiracialists, unemployable benefits scroungers, and disturbing hybrids, combinations,

and hybrids of hybrids. Even the most normal of these specimens appeared to have escaped the captivity of a freak show or a human zoo; and this was a flattering characterisation, for a subcategory among them were too far below the threshold of humanity to qualify for metropolitan life: these creatures belonged in the wild or in a zoo, locked up in a secure cage. Keeping well apart from this repulsive ethnological display (lest some of their lice jump on his person), he read their placards; they said, 'No al rasismo', 'Camara de gas para Irving', 'Irving Mentirozo', and 'David Irvin Antisemita'. He was too distracted by the evidence they provided of the continuing decline of educational standards to think about the name.

The restaurant was rectangular and located on the ground floor. Two of its walls consisted of giant panes of bullet-proof glass, which faced the street and afforded a blinding supply of daylight into the restaurant. Following recent renovation, the establishment's decor left much to be desired—painted walls, Persian rugs, and baroque armchairs had given way to coffee-coloured paint, grey linoleum tiles, and what seemed like little more than stools with broomsticks for backrests; worse still, in order to maximise revenue, the management had halved the size of the tables, and doubled their number, forcing diners to sit with their chests pressed against these tables and their elbows pressed against their ribcages. As to the staff, the management had ruthlessly purged the payroll and hired arrogant replacements, mindful, of course, to adhere to government mandated diversity quotas. His eyes scanned the area with stiff disapproval: to him it was yet another illustration of how refurbishment and modernisation were cynical disguises for the lowering of quality and the relaxation of standards; in postmodernity, McDonaldisation was king.

He found Professor Kautonen sitting at a table near the back of the restaurant, roasting under direct sunlight, and looking impenetrably serious as he looked out the glass wall to observe the fauna outside. A Borreby Nordid type in his mid forties, the bespeckled Finn revealed only a faint smile on the corner of his mouth when he noticed him approaching. Professor Kautonen stood up and offered his hand, which he shook firmly, as was expected of any serious businessman.

'I barely recognise you,' stated Professor Kautonen, in an emotionless, guttural monotone.

'You look serious,' he stated, unemotionally, raising an approving eyebrow: Like him, the Finn was clad in a suit and tie.

Professor Kautonen replied, ‘You look like a scientist from Project PX.’ This was the Finn’s way of returning a compliment. Project PX was the progenitor of ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer), the first general-purpose, Turing-complete, programmable, electronic computer, built between 1943 and 1945 (only one other Turing-complete computer had preceded it: the Zuze Z3, built in Germany in 1941). John Mauchly and J. Presper Eckert looked like serious men, engaged in serious science.

‘Did you have a good flight?’ he asked. The Finn had flown in on Saturday.

‘No.’

‘Usual reasons?’

A voice interrupted their dialogue, enunciating fastidiously, ‘Buenos días señores. ¿Van a tomar algo de beber?’

They both turned and saw a quadron in his late twenties, with hair cut to the latest fashion, a trendy uniform, and holding an electronic notepad; he looked like a negrified, modernised version of the 1999 Ernst Malmsten.

‘Agua mineral con gas para mi, por favor,’ he requested.

‘¿Y para usted, señor?’ said the waiter, looking at Professor Kautonen.

‘Agua.’

‘Muy bien. ¿Con gas o sin gas?’

‘Sin gas.’

‘Vale, de acuerdo.’

The waiter walked away, his gait prissy. He followed the waiter with his gaze, frowning with disapproval.

‘You might be interested in my current project,’ he said, now turning to look at Kautonen. ‘Unfortunately, I’m limited as to how much I can tell you, because of client confidentiality. However, apart from the fact that it’s a fascinating technical challenge - and I’ll tell you about this in a moment -, I think it would make a very interesting case study. Especially from the point of view of trust and governance and institutional economics.’

‘So they don’t want to be crushed by the taxman,’ said Professor Kautonen, incisively, with deadpan sarcasm.

He offered a subtle smile. ‘Like all businesses. What is different in this case is how, but, unfortunately, I’m not at liberty to discuss this with you. What I can tell you is that they are seeking to run an accounting system with artificial intelligence - the heuristic semantic matrices I developed - on TRS-80 Model I microcomputers. Do you remember them?’

Professor Kautonen frowned, scanning through his mnemonic suspension files.

'I never thought I would see the day,' he continued, his eyes widening. 'I remember those computers from the early 1980s. My father had one. It was the very first personal computer he owned, although, back then, they were known as microcomputers - computers used to be divided into three classes, by the way: mainframe, minicomputers, and microcomputers...'

'My father had a Commodore 64,' stated Professor Kautonen, unresponsive to his enthusiasm.

'No,' he said, quickly, sweeping Professor Kautonen's comment aside with a lateral hand gesture. 'The TRS-80 Model I was much more primitive. The C64 came with graphics and sound and 64 kilobytes of RAM. The TRS-80 had a monochrome screen - text only, 16 by 64 - *16 by 64 characters, would you believe it!* - and came initially with 4 kilobytes of RAM. The C64 was mostly for games, like the Atari. The TRS-80s competed with Apple II, which was the business microcomputer at the time - this is because VisiCalc ran on Apple first and an electronic spreadsheet was the *one* thing that businesses really needed.'

Professor Kautonen narrowed his eyes slightly. 'Was VisiCalc similar to Lotus 1-2-3?'

'No, no. Lotus 1-2-3 was a successor to VisiCalc. If Lotus was the Bronze Age, VisiCalc was the Lower Paleolithic. Very, very primitive.'

Professor Kautonen raised an eyebrow, subtly amused by his analogy.

'The TRS-80 also ran Scriptsit,' he added, raising a lecturing finger. '- a *very* rudimentary word processor - you were almost better off with a typewriter, believe me.'

'Why didn't your father get an Apple II?' asked Professor Kautonen, crossing his arms.

'Good question...' he replied, looking away, thoughtfully. 'I will need to ask him next time I see him.'

Professor Kautonen uncrossed his arms; the temperature inside the restaurant made a crossed-armed position unsustainable.

'I do remember the day he arrived home with that computer,' he continued, eagerly. 'It was in January 1980. He'd been away on business, in the United States. I think it was a conference in Boston. At any rate, as far as I can remember, at the time most corporate businesses still relied on mainframes with dumb

terminals, which communicated with the mainframe via an RS-232 connector - by the way, do you know what each of the pins did?’

‘No,’ replied Professor Kautonen, his face expressionless as he aligned his cutlery.

He formed a fist with his left hand, holding the thumb aloft to begin an enumeration. ‘Most people don’t think about this, but it is in fact very interesting. They came with 9 pins and 25 pins, and then there was the RS-232D, which used RJ45 type connectors - you know, like the telephone lines... these are also known as 8P8C...’

‘Anyway.’ Professor Kautonen was more interested in wiping the sweat off his brow with a paper tissue.

‘OK. The point is,’ he carried on, unfazed, ‘these TRS-80 Model I microcomputers were extremely primitive. In January 1980, all I saw was a very risky and very awkward typewriter. You had to programme *everything* from zero - I mean, *everything*.’ He gesticulated emphatically, his eyes about to spring out of their sockets. ‘When you switched it on, all you saw was a black screen and a white cursor flashing at the top left hand corner. Nothing else. It was essentially a hobby for technophiles. If you were a serious organization, you had a IBM System 370 in the basement, like the petrochemical my mother worked for around that time - a basement full of cabinets, reels of magnetic tape rotating back and forth, punch card consoles.’

Professor Kautonen blinked repeatedly, his body was rigid as his face was blank, despite the obvious onset of somnolence.

‘Now, these TRS-80s came with an 8-bit processor, which was binary compatible with the Intel 8080, which ran at 2 MHz. Space Invaders was built around that processor, and the TRS-80 had a similar game, called *Defense Command*... Now, this 8-bit processor, the Z80, had 40 pins...’

‘I don’t need to know about the pins,’ interrupted Kautonen, suddenly alert. ‘

‘Well, the pinout is rather important, because...’

‘I really don’t need to know about the pins.’ The Finn was adamant!

‘I can explain it very quickly...’

‘No. Please,’ said the Finn, raising his voice.

‘But, if I don’t explain the pinout, you will not be able to understand the magnitude of the technical challenge -

Professor Kautonen frowned sternly and showed him the

palm of his hand, as if to stop his progress. 'I can imagine.'

'Señores, lo siento, pero se nos ha acabado el agua. ¿Les apetece alguna otra cosa?' said the waiter, suddenly materialising.

He could not believe it. '¿Se os a acabado el agua?'

'Si,' confirmed the waiter, cocking his head slightly sideways, 'lamentablemente, es consecuencia de la sequia y la escasez de agua.'

He shook his head, visually communicating his irritation to Professor Kautonen, before turning back to the waiter. 'Vaya. ¿Que teneis?'

'Os puedo traer cerveza, o el menu de vinos.'

How convenient, he thought. They had exhausted their stocks of mineral water, but they were able to offer an ample selection of imported beers and vintage wines. The only credible conclusion was that the fraudulent manipulation of supply was an integral component of the restaurant's business model: with alcohol subject to 156% duty, ordering even one beer would inflate the bill, and by extension the waiter's 'gratuity', which was fixed by law at 20% of the final tally. The waiters' polished manners served only one function: to disguise the establishment's rapacious capitalism, and, therefore, to distract customers from the establishment's links to the *Organizatsiya*.

'No. Para mi no. Qué teneis sin alcohol?'

'Tenemos Sinalco, Sip-It, Fayrouz, Salatoma, Plussy, Ginseng-Up...'

'¿Teneis Coca-Cola?'

The waiter concealed his scorn under a mask of politeness.

'No, las bebidas Norteamericanas ya nos las traemos.'

'¿Y podria explicarme usted porque? ¿Es por la situacion economica en los Estados Unidos?'

'Si. La situacion está muy deteriorada. Coca-Cola ha suspendido operaciones en Espana.'

A long negotiation ensued. Most of the beverages were of African or Middle or Far Eastern origin; he knew none of them, so each exotic name required a full description. Professor Kautonen took coffee; the Finn's addiction to caffeine, and the headaches that attended deprivation, argued in favour of this beverage. Due to the lack of mineral water and the severe water rationing, however, Professor Kautonen was forced to accept a hot milky coffee. He, on the other hand, initially opted for the Sip-It, the Malt drink, only to then reconsider: the AIDS epidemic had reached such apocalyptic

proportions in Africa, that unless factories in that continent could be trusted to maintain stringent levels of health and safety standards, the drink could potentially be lethal. His safer option, still decided upon not without trepidation, was a glass of Sinalco, a Malaysian carbonated drink.

‘Did you ever get the rights back for that American edition?’ he asked Professor Kautonen, deciding to change the subject.

‘The one on microbusiness trust networks? No,’ replied the Finn, irritably. ‘Those bastards have not been in touch. They have continued to send me royalties, but always late. They know that the longer they wait, the less their dollars are worth, so the cheaper it is for them to pay me. It is a standard hyperinflation strategy. Borrow as much money you can, which is what they effectively do when they agree to pay royalties for the sales of previous year on 90 or 120 days terms, and then delay repayment. The more they wait, the faster inflation wipes out their debt. It’s pointless to sue them because any amount they owe will be virtually worthless by the time it goes to court.’

‘You should have self published,’ he said, using a paper napkin to dry the rivulets of perspiration running down his face. I won’t be seen as relevant unless I am published by mainstream publishing companies and on mainstream journals.’

‘Are there any publishing companies and journals still willing to publish you?’ he asked, intrigued. ‘If I remember correctly, you have been receiving death threats and last year you had your car vandalised.’

Professor Kautonen shook his head. ‘When I can no longer publish, then I may self-publish or go underground. But as long as I can get my work published by mainstream publishers, I will pitch my work at them.’

He considered his friend’s position, raising an eyebrow. ‘I don’t know how you manage to get past the censors.’

‘Not all of my work can be interpreted politically,’ indicated Professor Kautonen, mopping the perspiration below his mandible. ‘The book about Black Metal is apolitical, for example. But, otherwise, it’s a question of realising that even politically-motivated analytical frameworks can be used to show internal inconsistencies within the ideology that motivated those frameworks, and that once you have exposed the fallacies upon which they have built their intellectual edifice - which is not based on science anyway but on

humanistic philosophical judgments - you can make a case based on hard science even while appearing to pursue the same goals as your enemy. It is not difficult to create the illusion because when you use their vocabulary and, for the purposes of your thesis, strategically adopt their assumptions, the enemy will read into your text what they want to read - they will assume that it is one of them critiquing them from within in an effort to refine their theories - and will not notice the ellipses, omissions, ambiguities, and the multiple possible interpretations where you have hidden your actual argument. It is a form of stealth scholasticism - the same stealth scholasticism they have insidiously practiced and propagated for the past hundred and fifty years in order to advance their agenda. They have designed and cultivated a form of scholasticism that functions like virus. What I do is disguise myself as a rat and inject an anti-virus. The ensuing commentary and discussion, and the commentary on the commentary and the discussion about the discussion that follow form a cascade reaction that gradually begins to break down virus' DNA. Eventually, it will not be able to reproduce any longer, and the disease will be wiped out.'

'You still had your book on development banned,' he pointed out, raising his index finger. 'All stocks destroyed without even informing you of the fact.'

'Yes, but I am not famous - or infamous, rather. I work in obscurity. I am just one of thousands lost in the catacombs of the academia, writing in jargon about a boring subject. If there is any controversy it quickly dies down, because I write too theoretically for it to make good articles in the tabloid press. All they see is that I have a solid publishing record on mainstream economic journals, and that my work is cited by other scholars. They are all friends of mine and we all cite each other's work the way enemy scholars quote fellow enemy scholars, of course, but the publishers don't know that; all they see is lots of citations, and that is all that matters: recent publishing, good journals, lots of citations. This is the weakness of a system where ideology prevails over empirical evidence and quality of research.'

The waiter returned with the menus, which he handed to to each of them with a telyphantic flourish.

'Have you had Cocido Madrilenos?' he asked, without consulting his copy. 'It is a Winter dish but I recommend it.'

Professor Kautonen opened the ornate leather binder and

scanned through the list of dishes. 'Where is it?'

He consulted the menu, expecting to find the dish listed under main courses, without success. 'Well, if they are not doing it, the other recommendation is a Paletilla de'Cordero,' he said, finally.

A moment passed.

'I cannot find it,' said Professor Kautonen, his icy blue eyes piercing the menu under a stern frown.

He joined Professor Kautonen in a detailed scrutiny of the dishes on offer.

Another moment passed.

'I cannot make heads of tails of this,' said he.

Confronting them was a masterpiece of human creativity, product of a conceptions literary mind that, in conspiracy with a new wave of trendy experimental cuisine, had found the way to transpose the paradigm of Harry Stephen Keeler - freak-show genius, love of convolution, disdain for readability - into a less than modest restaurant menu. They had previously come across mention of the aforementioned wave of trendy cuisine in conversation and in the Sunday magazines, but neither had yet encountered the opportunity to experience its audacious juxtapositions of flavours; like all such social phenomena, it was an exclusively urban concept that had propagated through a circumscribed network of tufthunter restaurants. Needless to say that neither he nor Professor Kautonen would have consciously put their palates on a collision course with pleasures of that sort any more than they would have cherished being seen among the sort of ultra-liberal, cosmopolitan riffraff that frequented such establishments.

Even the most basic of the culinary acrobatics awaiting their go ahead in the kitchen posed a number of compound challenges: having to decide whether a particular gallimaufrey of ingredients was, in fact, edible, and not a procacious concoction that only a small circle of ou-la-la competitive snobs would ever pretend to like, already made each dish a riddle within a riddle; if to this was added the fact that the elaborately-contrived descriptions for nearly each dish were sprinkled with exotic diction, fugacious neologisms, macaronic alliterations, adscititious references, pompous spellings, anfractuous syntax, hebephrenic terminology, and ridiculously vainglorious pleonasms, then vacating the restaurant and purchasing Doner Kebabs from an oleaginous and a rat-infested establishment became by far the less troublesome solution:

The waiter returned, notepad in hand. '¿Están listos para pedir?'

'¿Este plato, "Traicion a la Raza Blanca es Lealtad a la Humanidad", tiene benzoato de sosa?'

The waiter, who had until now been gallivanting around the restaurant with a frivolous, know-it-all type of arrogance, felt suddenly out of his depth.

'¿Mm... Benzoato de sosa? A ver...'

'Sí, es una sal del ácido benzoico, blanca, cristalina o granulada. Conjuntamente con el ácido ascórbico, puede formar el benceno, un agente carcinógeno conocido.'

He waited hesitated for a moment, confounded. 'Pues no se. Espere un momento, que pregunto al chef.'

'No se moleste, si usted no está seguro, no me voy a arriesgar. Tráigame un filete a la plancha, con sal normal y nada más.'

'Uf, no se si...'

'Asegurese de que la came es de comercio justo. No voy a tolerar la explotacion de seres humanos.'

'Ah, eso si que se lo podemos garantizar,' stated the waiter, suddenly in familiar territory.

'Vale, entonces tráigamela.'

Professor Kautonen lacked patience to outwit the waiter - his contempt for the type was absolute. 'Carne roja,' he droned. '¿LLo mismo que su compañero, entonces?'

'Sí.'

At this point there was a violent surge of activity on the pavement, on the other side of the glass wall. The unwashed rabble that had hitherto been in the process of congregating, and who had spent the past half hour engaged in laughter and casual conversation, had suddenly stiffened, ceased socialising with one another, and turned their heads in the same direction, as if to listen to something or someone, situated some way in the distance. What or whom they were listening to it was not possible to ascertain, as the source of the sound was out of view, while the restaurant was sound-proofed, its interior filled with faint music and animated conversation. The crowd listened neither in silence nor for long; after spending a few minutes shouting, hooting, jumping, and throwing fists in the air, they disappeared from view, running towards their agent of agitation. Their presence outside the restaurant was then quickly replaced by the clamour of commotion inside the lobby. Initially, the waiters ignored the clamour; yet before long, as ruckus of destruction was added to the cheering, the

shouting, and the sound of running footsteps, they found themselves unable to continue repressing their curiosity. The more inquiring customers turned their heads towards the front of the restaurant, and with their eyes followed the waiters as they briskly walked towards the entrance, which was adjoining the lobby; the waiters then took stationary positions, observing, with their heads cocked and either one or two fists on their hips, the events unfolding on the lobby. For a few moments, nearly everyone in the restaurant sat or stood with their ears pricked, attempting to elucidate the slogans being chanted and the orders being shouted. Then, without warning, a gentleman of indeterminate age, filthy garb, and a visage obliterated under a mess of tattoos, pins, and silver rings, irrupted into the restaurant, clutching a hardcover volume. The gentleman ran towards the nearest table and jumped onto it with sufficient violence to send food, china, and cutlery crashing onto the floor; he then screamed a rude phrase in incomprehensible pidgin, stuck out his tongue, Gene Simmons-style, lifted the book above his shaved head, used one of his hands to frantically rip as many pages as he could off the binding, and finally threw the defaced book's remnants across the restaurant, over the heads of half a dozen customers. The waiters, who, in the face of such behaviour, had been too taken by surprise, and had been slow to react, failed to knock the gentleman off the table before the latter made his escape, jumping over their heads and running back into the lobby, filling the air during this final manoeuvre with a crazed, juvenile hoot.

The book had landed onto a plate of beetroot and Colgate soup on a table diagonally opposite to Professor Kautonen's right elbow. Said book, once a thick tome of over one thousand pages, had caused the soup to splash onto the Che Guevara t-shirt worn by the bearded, long-haired, middle-aged artsy type that had been fashionably slurping the concoction. Professor Kautonen recognised the author, since a friend of his had years ago presented him with a copy of that same author's infamous Hitler biography. He, completely baffled, yet morbidly fascinated by the incident, observed the faces of the customers seated nearest to him, before turning to Professor Kautonen. Professor Kautonen, on whose lined forehead had flashed a frown upon registering the book's title, then turned to stare back at him, his serious face not entirely suppressing his bewildered amusement.

'I know the author,' Professor Kautonen said.

Chapter 10

El Corte Inglés

He parted with Professor Kautonen by the hotel's front entrance. The stinking rabble had by then dissipated, leaving behind, strewn everywhere, dozens of broken placards, defaced books and posters, fast food wrappers, beer cans, smashed bottles, and the odd item of informal footwear, which was invariably decrepit. While traversing the lobby on their way out, he and Professor Kautonen had noticed a vandalised conference area beyond a set of double doors. It was evident that the dozens of chairs therein had been used as missiles and to deliver blows with which to destroy the display table, the refreshments table, the podium, and all the audiovisual equipment. The greater part of the rabble's fury and venom had been channeled into the destruction of a stock of books, the presentation or sale of which appeared to have been the subject of a conference entitled 'Real History'. He had noticed five or six different titles by the same author. Titles like *Hitler's War*, *Nuremberg: The Last Battle*, *Rommel: The Trail of the Fox*, *Churchill's War*, and *Irving's War*, had suggested to them both that said author was a military historian whose theories on the Third Reich were not warmly welcome by everyone. The police had been interviewing an elderly gentleman with shelf-like eyebrows and a large frame, filling a dark and magnificently expensive Savile Row suit. He recognised the gentleman: the gentleman had been sitting next to him aboard his flight the previous evening.

Just as well, he thought, suddenly glad he had antagonised his pinstriped neighbour. That David Irving was obviously a revisionist historian and he desired nothing to do with people

of that ilk: they were toxic, and any link to them, real or perceived, was bad for business.

Although curiosity had prompted him to order - and sip - the garlic Capuccino (which had come with powdered Aspirin and chopped onions), it was the apparently harmless steak that had begun troubling his stomach. At once he cursed himself for his own foolishness: there was, of course, no way to know where the restaurant sourced their meat; he had subconsciously assumed that it would be a reputable butcher, the hotel boasting five stars to their credit, but, for all he knew, they could just as easily have been sourcing it from a local supermarket - an option that was not inconceivable, after all, since supermarkets were sharply more price competitive. As he walked along the Paseo de la Castellana, hammered by the merciless sun, blinded by the blazing concrete, in a mist of exhaust fumes, and amid the clamour of traffic, his pounding head filled with images of walk-in freezers piled up to the ceiling with condemned meat, ready to enter the human food chain via scam operations where tainted sausages, a year and a half past their use-by date, were bought ostensibly for pet food but were then passed off to supermarkets, wherefrom they were sold to the public at high prices under premium brands.

He left the pavement and plunged himself into the stationary traffic, barely able to keep his eyes open as he proceeded to negotiate his way through the dusty, mechanised herd traversing the seared landscape of cement, tree stumps and burning tarmac. Although it was Monday, the Madrileños were still in their lunch hour, and the office buildings in the vicinity had not yet regorged the seething mass of shopaholics and starving office workers that they had vomited an hour earlier. Many of these Madrilenos were on route to El Corte Inglés, the sprawling department store commanding the opposite side of the avenue. He was, therefore, not surprised to find himself navigating a compact human river, polluted with all manner of handbags, carrier bags, briefcases, and back packs - each of them stuffed to capacity, stretched to bursting point, sharp-cornered all around, and with a nagging proclivity for getting in his way. Neither was he surprised to find the human river becoming progressively congested in the approach to the department store complex: access to El Corte Inglés was blocked by several layers of anti-terrorist security, complete with barriers, blocks, and fences, and equipped with a vast array of anti-privacy technology, such as X-ray scanners, metal detectors,

infrared sensors, electric sniffer dogs, and ID magnetometers, operated by the sternest agents of the Guardia Civil. Unsurprising as it all was, however, it was at that hour singularly inconvenient, for, with a putrid steak fermenting in his stomach, the scorching sun was rapidly aggravating his nausea, to the point where he was beginning to doubt whether his stomach would allow him sufficient time to reach the nearest chemist inside the department store before capitulating on his lunch. Profuse perspiration, shivers, and an abnormal increase in his production of saliva did not augur in his favor. Matters were not helped by the fact that, in addition to the human obstacles, there were a number of vexatious structural occlusions, in the form of awkwardly placed street furniture, and a proliferation of dubious small businesses. The most legitimate among the latter was a newspaper kiosk, which took up three quarters of the pavement, thanks in part to the fact that it offered a bewildering selection of newspapers and magazines, sampling scores of languages and non-Roman scripts; said kiosk, also offered a broad selection of pornography, documenting every perversion that was anatomically possible between a human and any other species in the animal kingdom. The majority of the businesses, however, consisted of a disparate assortment of shabby wares displayed on a blanket spread directly onto the pavement. The entrepreneurs involved in this form of trade did not exactly inspire confidence: in fact, their asymmetrical features, shifty eyes, cocksure smiles, and slovenly attire - the very caricature of the crooked merchant of the Middle Eastern bazaar - suggested honesty, transparency, and fair dealing where not integral to their business models. In fact, it was quite likely that a subsidiary aspect of their activity consisted in the deployment of professional beggars and pick-pockets, intended to provide a back-up revenue stream. Despite his increasingly febrile state, he was able to observe, in passing, two convincing demonstrations of their skill, which prompted his swift discretion to slip his cow-skin wallet and mobile into the secret pocket inside his jacket's lining.

No sooner had he performed the aforementioned operation than he found himself surrounded by hostile faces. From an evolutionary perspective, XIXth century physical anthropologists would have deemed the faces to have evinced a number of archaic traits: prominent supraorbital ridges; maxillary prognathism; strongly proclined upper and lower incisors; projecting zygomatic arches and alveolar ridges; and low, sloping

foreheads, fronting brachycephalised skulls with negligible cranial cubicage. These traits appeared in a chaotic array of inharmonious configurations, suggesting that they were the product of irresponsible miscegenation among devolved subspecies of humanity, and, within that category, among the most degraded, and least promising, specimens from Central America. Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso would have found in their traits - the atavistic stigmata affecting their physiognomical, phrenological, and craniometrical characteristics - brutal and unequivocal confirmation of his theories on the heritability of criminality. And if their atavistic stigmata did not render the gentlemen's appearance bestial enough, the gentlemen had compounded the sorry result of their ancestors' grotesque mating habits by disfiguring their faces with a mess of intricate tattoos that extended to the rest of their bodies. Based on this evidence, and on tattooed slogans like 'Salvadorian Pride' and 'No confio en nadie y mucho menos en ti', he quickly realised that he was facing a gang of *maras salvatruchas*.

He had been aware of the mara pestilence having spread to Spain in recent years, but this was the first time he had actually seen any specimens in the flesh. He found the encounter failed to modify the uncharitable opinion he had of them; he also found that his contempt for the vermin, assisted by his having more urgent matters to attend to at this time, superseded any inclination to fear. They, in turn, wasted no time in disclosing the purpose of their meeting: pistols were produced and pointed at him, and this act was followed by a coarsely-worded demand, courtesy of the most arrogant among them, for all his portable assets. Outnumbered and too weak now to defend himself, he meekly reached into his jacket's breast pocket and handed over his mobile telephone and his crocodile-skin wallet. His muggers, however, were not content with such meagre loot, and insisted that it be increased by the addition of his watch. Yet, they quickly lost interest when he revealed a wrist sporting a truly modern - and for them entirely worthless - device, which exploited the flexibility of printed electronic technology and consisted of no more than a thin film strip with an electroluminescent display. Rather than confiscate the item for resale in the black market, where it was likely to elicit scornful laughter, one of them opted to destroy it by cutting it loose from his wrist with a knife. He waited patiently while they satiated their puerile desire intimidation before

moving on, the chills, the rising fever, the nausea, and what by now had escalated into a violent headache, having allowed him to only half register the incident.

Images of a slimy, grey steak being pulled out of a stinking refrigerator, and then tossed onto a pan, greased with the fat of stale bacon from the previous evening, flickered in the projection theatre of his mind. His imagination painted a tiny, hot, cluttered kitchen - its tiles glutinous with layers of grimy fat; its floors wet, strewn with rubbish, crawling with vermin, littered with droppings, and tangled with human hair. He imagined every available space piled up with dilapidated cardboard boxes, storing hundreds of tins marked with sell-by dates going back months and years. He imagined every recess housing dirty Tupperware tubs, scummy buckets, overflowing bins, burnt pans, organic droppings, crusty jars, cigarette butts, blunt cutlery, broken utensils, and e-coli-infested chopping boards. He imagined the refrigerators solid with decomposing leftovers, mouldy cheese, and cartons of eggs and caseated milk crawling with Salmonella. He imagined some of the meat being sourced from underground criminal networks trading in bush cuts, derived from monkeys, gorillas, giraffes, and other agrest animals. He imagined the rest of the meat being sourced from illegal slaughterhouses, dealing in beef from old, emaciated cows, with a history of icterus, aseptic fever, septicemia, myocardia lipofuscinosis, osteohemochromatosis, spongiform encephalopathy, aedema, peritonitis, pleurisy, renal amyloidosis, tumours, neoplasms, telangiectasis, gastro-enteritis, melanosis, and a horripilating catalogue of other diseases, deformities, and conditions. He imagined, finally, a crooked chef, sporting waist-long black hair, a wild handle bar moustache, unshaven cheeks, a flacid double chin, a swarthy complexion, and grimy finger nails, saying to himself, 'Pah! I don't care,' as he handled the steak with the same unwashed hands he had used moments before to aim while urinating in the lavatory.

His case of food poisoning was flagrant enough to rouse the anger of an otherwise extremely temperate and patient man. In a sane world, the obvious response would have been to demand his money back from the restaurant, and threaten the management with litigation. Unfortunately, he no longer lived in a sane world - in fact, it was questionable whether he ever did in the first place; the courts were perpetually swamped with law suits, and when these did not consist of a maddening profusion of frivolous cases (brought about by an equally mad-

dening profusion of vexatious litigants), they consisted of mammoth contests of stupefying complexity, requiring the expertise of a meandering network of lawyers, witnesses, experts, researchers, assistants, and assistants to the assistants, and involving - and in turn generating enough documentation to wipe out the entire Amazon forest, were it all ever to be printed on actual paper. Were he to instigate litigation against his poisoners, the suit could very well sit in the system for a generation, progressively devouring all his assets and demanding a crippling investment of his time, with no guarantee of an outcome bearing any resemblance to justice. This was because of the abstruseness of the modern legal code and the contumacious sinuosity of the legal arguments that could be contrived by the defendants to pervert a just claim for compensation. The idea of bankrupting the restaurant with a catastrophic fine was satisfying to imagine, but not one that could ever prosper in the real world.

So preoccupied was he with his symptoms and these reflections, that he suddenly found himself inside El Corte Inglés, with only a vague recollection of having passed through security. The department store was teeming with shoppers; if there was ever a hope to find the evolutionary missing link, it existed somewhere inside that crowd, above whose loud jabbering in Arabic, bastardised French, Spanglish, and dozens of Equatorial tribal dialects it was impossible to hear the store's Middle Eastern muzak. Robert D. Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, would have been exasperated to find in that highly diversified crowd confirmation of his most unwelcome theses, for it was a study in the dog eat dog paradigm, with ramming shoulders and nudging elbows constituting the sole means of communication between the tight crush of mutually distrustful strangers looking past each other. With no common history, metaphysics, or heroes to link them together, they were but animals pitched in pitiless competition against one another through their primal need for limited resources. They had no attachment to the store, as they were ignorant of its history and, from the majority's perspective, it had been founded by foreigners - alien-looking natives of a country that they viewed as little more than an El Dorado to be despoiled of its wealth. Ordinarily, in a general, vague, and inarticulate way, he would have understood this and plunged himself into the crowd with venomous zeal; in his present debilitated state, however, it was painful to think aggressively, let alone act, so he simply joined

one of the various human streams coursing through the crush and, like driftwood, allowed himself to be carried in the general direction of the in-shop chemist.

Since the Castellana branch opened many decades ago, the shopping mall had expanded well beyond its original building; much larger ones had been erected abroad and in what was once Madrid's peripheral towns and villages, but the Corte Inglés in the Paseo de la Castellana was still a sprawling complex of inter-connected buildings and parts of buildings, all of different shapes and sizes, high and low, new and old, taking up an entire block, and continuing deep beneath the surface. Because of its history of progressive agglomeration, the flow of human traffic encountered a myriad obstructions within a succession of crammed spaces; none was worse than inside the original building, of course, but the subsequent additions were decades old, and had not been designed to sustain the huge volume of visitors characteristic of modern times. Visitors - please note! - not necessarily shoppers: the Castellana branch was still the most important shopping mall for the Grupo El Corte Inglés, if no longer in terms of floor space, certainly in terms of turnover; however, the expenditure per person ratio had been progressively eroded by punitive taxation, falling wages in real terms, and the rising cost of living; this had caused each square metre of floor space to become progressively less efficient generating cash. The savvy management had attempted to adapt to the demographic explosion of low-wage, new arrivals from poorer, Third World countries by altering their stock mix towards a greater range of cheaper products and by packing them in as tightly and as high as possible on the available floor space. Even so, with the once wealthy indigenous Spanish population either in the grave or well past the age of retirement, their investments and estates decimated by high inflation, taxation, and collapsing markets, most visitors to the department store (younger, high-fertility arrivals from North Africa and South America) either only browsed or made relatively small purchases. The end result was chronic congestion: slow-moving visitors, daydreaming of what they would like to be able to afford one day, or else seeking bargains or cheap essentials matching their ethnic lifestyles, pushing and shoving their way through a maze of narrow isles, crammed display areas, stacked-up shelves, overflowing racks, and painfully slow escalators. Matters were not helped by the fact that El Corte Inglés was presently in Christ-

mas mode - or Winter Holiday mode, rather - and that it was operating in a highly inflationary economic environment, both of which meant exacerbated competition for space from higher than normal volumes of visitors and stockpiled inventory.

Under these conditions, aggravated by the air conditioning system's inability to cope with the quantity of carbon dioxide being produced by thousands of human lungs, his stomach soon made it apparent that his excursion to the chemist would require a prior detour to the lavatory. It was most fortunate for him, therefore, that he detected the sign Aseos overhead not far from where he stood. Profusely perspiring and salivating, he scraped together what remained of his will power in order to delay retroperistalsis until he gained access to a more appropriate receptacle for his lunch. The prospect of relief sufficiently motivated him to jump the queue by resorting to deception: noticing the marble floor, he caused a momentary distraction by dropping coins; as soon as heads turned in the direction of the sound, he quietly and swiftly squeezed past the baseball capped Moroccan at the head of the queue.

Inside, all the stalls were occupied. Most notable among the occupants was the gentleman loudly singing in operatic style while relieving his bladder. What were obviously his companions stood outside, waiting their turn, chuckling among themselves. This was doubly amusing to them because the stall next to that occupied by the aspiring Pavarotti was the site of unmentionable activity, involving more than one gentleman of dubious proclivities. These proclivities were fashionable and celebrated in contemporary society, and their advocates had, through the diligence of a vast array of interlocking liberal-egalitarian pressure groups, successfully argued for the conferring of its public practice the status of an inalienable human right. Therefore, as much as the ever-intensifying, and ever-radicalising fringe conservative voices denounced the vulgarity with which gentlemen of such persuasion persistently proclaimed their sexual orientation to the world, for the moment, until a conservative revolution swept away the liberal-fascist establishment and dismantled the latter's Byzantine legislative apparatus, such practices in public lavatories could not be challenged invoking anti-obscenity laws. Consequently, a law-abiding citizen wishing to avoid trouble was best off simply pretending not to notice any such activity.

Unwilling to compound the cost of a toxic meal by paying for the use of a stall, he directed himself to the nearest sink, unoc-

cupied only a second before by a stocky, square-jawed Lybian wearing sandals. There, he purged his stomach of all of its contents. His emergency emesis elicited revulsion among those in his immediate vicinity, as well as unkind laughter among a pair of brown teenage gargoyles. He ignored them all, understanding the former, and dismissing the latter as of no consequence, since he did not value opinions from such quarters. Once he finished retching, his shirt and hair drenched in sweat, his vision blurred, his mind still focused on recovering, he retrieved his mobile phone from inside his jacket's lining, in order to pay for a unit of tap water. As the sensor on the tap did not appear to be working, however, he was eventually forced, after several attempts, to postpone washing his mouth and abandon his intention to rinse the soiled fixture. It did not seem strange to him that the sensor on the tap had suddenly stopped working, even though it had worked without problems for the sandalled sink-user just before him: after all, such was the world he lived in: frequently, thanks to incompetent engineers, cheapskate electronics, and lack of funds for the correct maintenance and replacement of aged components, technology failed.

Since he now also required some form of mint or sweet as well as bottled water, he decided to abandon his search for the chemist and purchase analgesic pills from the in-shore hypermarket. The hypermarket, however, was the only area within the department store where visitors were determined to rid themselves of their liquid assets as quickly as possible, and where, consequently, most of the store's internal traffic was coming and going. Since a large proportion of the shoppers were of African and South American origin, they had ample experience and folk knowledge of how to survive during periods of high inflation; they knew that any delay in converting their pay into tangible assets equalled to the rapid erosion of their purchasing power; their motivation to spend all their money as quickly as possible and to stockpile basic provisions was doubly motivated, therefore, by the fact that the savvy management of El Corte Inglés had done their homework and invested in technology to ensure their prices remained precisely indexed to the rate inflation: their price tags and stickers were printed onto electronic paper and flexible electronic labels programmed to constantly monitor said rate of inflation via the internet and adjust the displayed price in real time. It was, therefore, possible for a shopper to grab a loaf of bread and see the price on the sticker change as he rushed from the

shelf to the till - a phenomenon which, in turn, made queuing exasperating enough to instigate aggressive competitive behaviour among shoppers, as well as between them and the personnel manning the tills. The consequence of all this was that, if it felt like an ongoing version of Harrod's January sale on the non-food shopping areas, inside the hypermarket it was as if a swarm of locusts had blackened the skies and descended upon the extended shop floor, determined to devour everything in sight, shoving, pushing, insulting each other in a yammering frenzy, desperate to get to the shelves and clean them out of whatever they contained before the other dozens of grasping hands could get to them. The cacophony was deafening, the stinking air molecules hyperactivated by the constant bleeping of tills, the multilingual yabbering of adults, the piercing screeches of children, the angry shouting of males, and the urgent screaming of females; the clapping of running flipflops, the hiss of hurtling trolleys, the thunder of ripping cardboard; the crash of tins, the clink of bottles, the crackle of PVC; the constant staff and customer announcements, and the barked commands of the stackers and the shelvers, struggling to keep up with the enervated customers.

As he was not immune to inflation, and there was no other solution to his discomfort, he had no choice but to join the human marabunta. Like death, this was the grand leveller: there he was, reduced to a primate, forced to compete with his inferiors, the brutal logic of get-it-first and get-it-all supreme over any other skill or qualification; doctors against peons, males against females, straights against gays, Whites against Blacks, adults against children, tall against short, fat against thin, strong against weak - all competed for rapidly-disappearing resources, in a race against time as their money lost value by the second.

He battled his way into the hypermarket, then to the relevant shelves, and, finally, to the nearest till, where he found himself, panting and only half alive, ready to pay for his purchases in cash. Before he could reach for his wallet, however, he was instructed by the clerk manning the till hand over the exact amount.

'¿El cambio exacto?' he asked, troubled.

Apparently, coins had disappeared from circulation. As was the case during the Weimar Republic in Germany, both national governments and the European Central Bank were in denial mode concerning the gravity of the economic situation,

and, specifically, of the inflation problem. Of course, the inflation problem was one of their own making: promises made by the welfare state, combined with the longer life expectancy and below-replacement fertility among indigenous European populations, had by the 2000s caused future liabilities to exceed predicted economic output. Around 2005, Professor Lawrence Kotlikoff, of Boston University, had warned that, unless taxes were raised by 80%, and the welfare state cut in half with immediate effect, the United States was already technically bankrupt. His essay on the subject was dismissed as alarmist, and their welcome reception among gold bugs, white nationalists, and conspiracy theorists, further contributed to its being largely ignored. Lawrence Kotlikoff had accurately predicted a lack of political will to tackle the problem through decisive (Economic reforms. Since there had been no stomach for his proposals, politicians had hoped that mass immigration would solve the problem. Mass immigration, however, only compounded it. The replacement population they encouraged into Europe consisted mainly of low-wage, underskilled economic refugees - as well as criminals - from the poorest regions of the Earth, with conflicting religions, ethical codes, dietary habits, national histories, social organisation, gender politics, and personal lifestyles; moreover, the need to integrate them into, and manage them within, a host society that never asked for them, never wanted them, and was never allowed to vote or speak freely on the issue, caused expensive diversity and integration programmes and non-productive racial relations bureaucracies to proliferate; combined, these factors caused the imported labour to cost more than it produced, thus deepening the already serious economic crisis. In the face of this predicament, the only resort left was for governments to inflate, and therefore devalue, their way out of unpayable debts. This they did through pumping credit into the system, and, as in the Weimar Republic, obfuscating the fact with all manner of obscurantist jargon, excuses, and rationalisations - until they themselves, unwilling to face or admit to reality, became convinced of their own bogus arguments. Their self-delusional psychology, and their fear of uncovering to the public their deceptions and self-deceptions, had resulted in a refusal to act decisively when the nominal value of coins began approaching the value of the alloys onto which it was engraved; withdrawing them from circulation and issuing new coins with higher denominations and on baser metals would have constituted an

admission they had not been prepared to make. This had afforded organised criminal gangs an opportunity to move in and appropriate hundreds of millions of coins in order profit by reselling them at melt value. By the time national governments had finally decided to act, it was too late.

Of course, the cashier did not provide him with' this much information. She only said that criminal gangs had been melting the coins for their metal. He, however, was knowledgeable and well informed enough on macro-economic matters to put it all together in his mind; he had known since 1999 that there were hidden problems in the system, and he had heard of cases (or the dangers) of coin sequestration more than once – was that not one reason why Spain had deprecated the silver 100 Peseta coins issued in the 1960s?

He had change from the Coca-Cola bottle he bought at Heathrow the evening before, so he used it up to pay the exact amount. He bagged his paracetamol, his water, and his cube-shaped apple, without allowing himself to be harried by the impatient stares shooting from the moaning queue behind him.

Cube-shaped apples: yes, by now polyhedral fruit had become quite common. The fad had begun in Japan twenty years before, where cube-shaped melons first reached outdoors market stalls. After reading about it, he knew it was inevitable that growers would eventually experiment with other fruit, and that supermarkets would eventually come to prefer polyhedral fruit to round fruit, since polyhedrons were easier to stack, did not require cartons to hold them in place, used up space more efficiently, and were not prone to roll off display crates, getting bruised in the process. Spheroid fruit was now grown in cube-shaped moulds, whereas pyramid-shaped moulds were used for fruits like pears and papayas. In any event, a cube-shaped apple seemed more fun, and was certainly healthier, than the mints, sweets, and chewing gum he found: they all had aspartame or other artificial sweeteners, and he refused as a matter of principle to pay for poison.

Chapter 11

Mr. Wermod

Scoptic had contracted a small firm, Tron, to develop the hardware enhancements, that would make his state-of-the-art programmes run on TRS-80 microcomputers. He was to visit Tron and meet with their project leader that afternoon.

As the Metro station disgorged him (completely drenched in sweat) the merciless December sun flogged him. The Plaza del Sol was a scorched malebolge of brick and cement, choked with taxis, busses, cars, vans, and Vespas, all of which competed for tarmac with fierce disregard for human life. Their drivers tried to bully their way through the dark hordes of welfare scroungers, gypsies, tourists, muggers, weirdos, drunks, pimps, kinks, gays, maras, smackheads, and paedophiles, all of them scrambling for resources in the nethermost regions of the human ecological niche - and none with brains capable of distinguishing between a road intended for cars and a pavement intended for pedestrians. A smattering of revolutionary Communists and paranoid schizophrenics, who perambulated with plastic bags, ranting angrily about the columns and the bourgeoisie, completed the human zoo on display that morning. Save for a few elderly pensioners, he was probably the only White person in the area. This, combined with his suit and tie and martial bearing, immediately made him a target; he had not finished stepping onto the pavement directly outside Metro station when he was accosted by a lusing loafer with a mop of greasy hair, begging for change so that he could pay for a bus ticket to Seville. He brushed past the loafer, pretending

he did not exist, and began walking towards the Plaza de Santa Ana.

Tron's address was unexpected for a high technology firm, and he wondered whether the area had been demolished and redeveloped as a business park since he had last visited the city; as far as he remembered, the area where he was headed was better known for its sordid tascas, begging smackheads, and once trendy jazz bars, than for its being the Iberian Silicon Valley. When he reached the street where Tron was supposedly headquartered, he found it greatly changed indeed: it had become much worse than he remembered it! The street - or alley, rather - was claustrophobically narrow, and the houses old and in serious disrepair. Some, even, appeared dangerous, no longer fit for human habitation, sporting crumbling balconies and disintegrating brickwork. (Then again, the area was completely swamped by malformed, r-selected, apelike creatures - stunted, dull, disease-ridden, with predatory eyes and a criminal swagger; the sooner the houses collapsed with them inside, the better.) One out of five windows was either shattered or boarded up, victim of the female population's dysgenic fertility. Because the houses opposite each other were so close together, the alley was plunged in gloom twenty-three hours a day. The pavement was covered with litter, bullet casings, vomit, and hypodermic needles; bags of decomposing rubbish piled up around dead lamp posts, swarming with rats, maggots, and bluebottle flies; ragged, brutalised humans of semi-simian ancestry, slumbering the day away onto filthy cardboard mattresses, had made of several portals their permanent abode; all of the street furniture had been vandalised and covered in graffiti. He noticed that on a smashed up telephone exchange box someone, long ago, had spray-painted a swastika and written 'Hitler tenia razon'.

When he reached Tron's house number, he felt compelled to double check the address on his phone: before him rose a crumbling facade, zigzagged with deep subsidence cracks, its paint desquamating, its friezes as if made of disintegrating Alka-Seltzer, its antique portal half-blocked by bin liners stuffed with rubbish and reeking acridly of urine. Yet, the intercom system - a battered, loose-fitting contraption, held together with tape and chewing gum, with exposed wires from the days of Alfonso XIII - bore a typewritten label with the name of the firm - 'Tron, S. L.'. He rang the doorbell.

'¿Que?' grunted a surly voice, barely discernible behind the

intercom's infernal crackle.

'Mr. Wermod?'

'Yeah.'

He stated his name.

'Top, left,'

There was a buzz and a reverberated snap as the front door's locking mechanism disengaged. He pushed the heavy door and advanced into the darkness, inhaling the musky scent of cool, monastic stone. The antediluvian light switch at the base of the staircase activated an insect-caked bulb so far up above him that its moribund photons managed only feebly to impact the stone floor beneath his polished shoes. He found himself in a German Expressionist film set, wrapped in long, lugubrious shadows, spied upon by the lurking Nosferatu. With vertiginous steepness, the sagging stairs rose up and around the dark green walls, whose peeling, stained, and clumsily graffitied paint revealed underneath a dozen earlier coats of drab colour. The crumbling cement steps were delimited by a creaking, wrought iron banister, dangerously loose and missing spokes. He ascended, fearful that a section of the stairs would suddenly collapse under his feet the moment he was high enough for the fall to fracture his spine. The worst section was half way between the fourth and the fifth floor, where a crack had separated two steps from one another, leaving a half-inch gap. Why had the building not been condemned by the municipal authorities? Obviously, the local government had completely given up, and surrendered the area to the law of the jungle.

To his mind, the building provided unsuitable premises for a serious business. There were four possibilities: Scoptic had given him the wrong address; Tron was organised as a decentralised virtual structure, with staff working from home, and all Scoptic ever saw were a slick website and men in suits coming to their offices; Scoptic did not care about Tron's infrastructure, and based their contractor decisions on a proven record of results; Scoptic were a dubious outfit dressed up as a legitimate business, and contracted firms accordingly. Whatever the answer was, Scopic's questionable judgment made him nervous. He could not wait to complete his assignment and return home in England. He daydreamed of being enveloped in his wife's soft, luscious body; of them lying on a picnic blanket in the garden, feeling the cool night breeze as they watched a meteorite shower in the sky; of them (sitting in their lounge, with a digital fire roaring and reading scientific literature; of him sitting in his study, on his

computer, developing cutting-edge algorithms with artificial intelligence, while his wife typed away in her study, working on another, voluminous manuscript. There was nothing he wanted more right then than to find himself walking out of his car and into his well-furnished XVIIth century cottage in the woods of Surrey Hills, into his wife's loving embrace, and out of this corrupt, broken world.

On the top floor he found two facing doors with eyebrow arch mouldings. The one on his right looked as if it had not been opened in years; the layers of dust on the naked floorboards before it confirming that the flat was uninhabited. The shrunken, 900-year-old pensioner that once lived there must have died of a heart attack, back when Zapatero became Prime Minister; a thuggish bailiff, sent round to seize assets after bounced direct debits had resulted in county court judgments, probably found the pensioner dead on a decrepit arm chair, eighteen months later, completely desiccated and attached to the defunct TV set before him by a network of cobwebs. The door opposite, behind which Tron (or part of Tron) apparently operated was equally worn and dusty, its black paint faded and desquamating. When he pressed the doorbell, an old-fashioned bell buzzed in distant recesses of the flat beyond.

Moments later, the door cracked open, revealing a hostile frown.

'Scoptic?' asked the frown.

'Yes,' he replied, stiffly.

'Come in.'

The gap widened, revealing a broad man in his 30s, with a Lew Wallace goatee and a long, brown mane of straight hair. The man had the gruffness of a Viking, the intensity of a fanatic, the manner of a misanthrope, and the verbe of a recluse.

'Careful. There's a lot of stuff,' the man warned.

'You are Mr. Wermod, right?' he asked, with consternation, straightening his silk tie.

'Yeah.'

Stepping into Mr. Wermod's flat was like stepping into a cave. Or an oven: it was hot enough inside to poach an egg. The entrance's walls were lined with shelves from floor to ceiling, all groaning with music CDs; the shelving carried on inside the flat. In front of these shelves were towers of books, hard backs and paper packs, piled up chest high, and packed tightly together; these towers carried on inside the flat as well, leaving only a narrow corridor through which to gain access to the in-

terior. Everything was covered in dust and giant, rag-like cobwebs, hanging from the ceiling and abutting every perpendicular; they reminded him of *The Munsters*, the TV series from the 1960s. The dominant smell inside, unsurprisingly, was that of dust; it was the smell of an antique and rarely visited library. He had to make a conscious effort to appear circumspect.

'I have two prototypes to show you,' grunted Mr. Wermod, without turning around, as he led him deep into his hoarder's cave.

'I am curious to see how you managed to get any speed out of those Z80s,' he intimated, careful to sound polite.

Mr. Wermod did not answer. As they passed the kitchen, he saw it was cluttered beyond use with early to mid XXth Century kitchen equipment: toasters, tenderisers, colanders, coffee mills, chopping boards, scales, blenders, mixers, timers, kettles; cleavers, mashers, funnels, and hundreds of other items, piled up two feet high on every counter, and uniformly covered with dust and cobwebs. Who knew what crawled beneath that graveyard! The living room consisted of a book maze, mountains of volumes leaning against the walls, and elsewhere stacked up on every surface, blocking every window, stuffed into every nook and cranny, invading even the seats of sofas and armchairs, all recklessly defying gravity. It was as if there was an avalanche of books burying the flat in slow motion. All of the books appeared to have been published within the last 100 years, but many appeared obscure and printed by underground publishers. Mr. Wermod obviously did not bother to cook, but he certainly read the books he collected, as they were worn and mostly clear of dust - unlike his television screen, which had almost disappeared behind several skyscrapers of hardback tomes. Littered around the area were also electronic book readers and a dozen vintage desk lamps, propped precariously atop towers of paperbacks; they provided the sole source of illumination.

Mr. Wermod led him into a small room. Like (the rest of his human mole hole, it was so cluttered from floor to ceiling that there was barely any space for the two of them) to stand. The room was Mr. Wermod's workshop, or laboratory: the desk opposite the door was overflowing with mountains of advanced computer electronics, parts, and tools. The walls were lined with racked servers. Much of the equipment was cutting edge, but there were also a number of museum pieces, not least of which were a number of partly eviscerated TRS-80s, from the

classic Model I to the PC-compatible Model 2000. From the debris left around the area, he discerned that Mr. Wermod survived on a diet of sandwiches and beer, although he also appeared to like energy drinks, like Red Bull. Mr. Wermod stopped in front of his main work surface and gestured him to come closer and take a look at one of the Model Fs exposed motherboard.

'The one on this motherboard has been fully tested,' said Mr. Wermod.

He had to admit that Mr. Wermod's work was first class, and Mr. Wermod's a truly exceptional brain, his problem solving abilities comparable only to the likes of Archimedes, Leibniz, Swedenborg, and Goethe. His solutions to technical puzzles were not only highly original, but stupefying in their elegance; they appeared insultingly obvious upon implementation, but few could have ever conceived them. What is more, once he was drawn out of his shell, Mr. Wermod was an inexhaustible source of information, no doubt product of his incurable bibliomania and superhuman capacity for absorbing (and accurately recollecting) exact facts and figures - facts and figures within which he was able to discern and understand underlying patterns, concepts, and ideas normally too large for most people to ever notice. Mr. Wermod's mind, in short, was one that could comprehend complexity and discern simplicity, cutting across disciplines in the best tradition of a Renaissance polymath. It was not surprising, therefore, that hours passed like a knife through butter, and that before he knew it, the late evening hours caught them still engaged in conversation. It was with regret that he put an end to the session.

On his way out, he threw a curious glance at some of the books towered up immediately around him. Mr. Wermod's collection appeared eclectic, yet it clearly clustered around well-defined subjects. They suggested a mind in tune with tradition and revolution, averse to liberalism, impatient of democracy, and offended by egalitarianism. Although he was not political (to him, the lone citizen was impotent before the state, so invisibility was more profitable than confrontation), he instinctively sympathised with these sensibilities; he knew that he would have less of a bunker mentality, and be more civically engaged, if the world around him were more in harmony with his own predispositions and personal values. Recognising the author's name, he pointed at a tome sitting atop of one of the piles on the dining room table.

'I see you have books by Kevin MacDonald. I remember seeing him on the cover of Newsweek at Heathrow Airport yesterday evening.'

'Yes. *The Culture of Critique* was his best book. But that's the third volume of a trilogy and it's best to read all three.'

'Are they worth reading? To be honest, the hostility of the media in general is so insultingly obvious that it actually makes me want to read each and everyone of his books. I did not know it was still possible to get them. Did they not destroy them all?'

'Yes, he got the David Irving treatment: all unsold stocks were pulped and all extant copies were removed from public libraries. But you can find copies underground - only you have to be careful, 'cause some of the sources are sting operations set up by the secret service.'

'Sting operations?'

Mr. Wermod clarified. 'Sting operations - to try to flush out dissidents. You can tell, because they tend to offer his books and other, let's say... provocative titles at very high prices, only they don't have any. They just want to collect names and addresses so that they can keep track of dissident types.'

'The secret service,' he repeated in a half whisper, alarmed. Getting involved with Dr. MacDonald, or his theories, suddenly seemed a dangerous occupation, What if he bought a book, and suddenly he found himself thrown in prison? What if the secret service ever found out that he had talked to Mr. Wermod?

'It's all political,' said Mr. Wermod, shaking his head. 'He's simply a normal academic asking questions. Absolutely a normal guy. They don't like him because he debunks Freud-Marxist scholasticism, among other things. So, they want to scare people away from his writing.'

'I never had time for Freud, to be honest,' he interjected, raising an eyebrow and eager to steer the conversation away from Dr. MacDonald. Just in case. 'Freud always struck me as a charlatan.'

Mr. Wermod smiled and nodded. 'Indeed he was. Freud engaged in scientific fraud. Take his Œdipal complex theory as an example. His so-called case studies consisted of seduction stories, constructed by Freud, who then took his patient's distress at hearing his constructions as confirmation. He obscured the fact that his patient's stories were constructions and retroactively altered the identity of non-family members to fathers

when his Œdipal theory required it.'

He frowned, mildly shocked. 'Really?'

'Yes, and it is not just MacDonald pointing this out; the Œdipus fraud was demonstrated by Allen Esterson in a book he wrote some thirty years ago called *Seductive Mirage: An Exploration of the Work of Sigmund Freud*. And you would enjoy Frederick Crews' *The Memory Wars, Freud's Legacy in Dispute*.'

'Unbelievable,' he said, looking away, shaking his head.

'It's not surprising that his papers have been sealed until the XXIInd century.'

'XXIInd century!' he exclaimed, blinking with disbelief.

'Yeah. And still, nearly 130 years since he invented it, Freud's Œdipal complex, his theories on childhood sexuality, and his sexual etiology of neuroses remain without any independent empirical validation. But that's the point: they cannot be tested; they are completely unfalsifiable. Yet psychoanalytical journals still quote him and *Hysteria* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* is still used in current instruction, even though they are over 120 years old. You'll not find this in any serious scientific discipline. As MacDonald has pointed out, it'd be like using Darwin's *Origin of the Species* as a standard university text.'

It has the potential to become like the theory of the four bodily humours,' he said. 'It took two thousand years until someone came along and deprecated the Hippocratic typology. Freud was obviously not a serious person.'

Mr. Wermod nodded in agreement, stroking his oversize goatee. 'Except Hippocrates can be forgiven, because he lived at a time when most of the sciences had not been invented; what was known as philosophy back then also involved incipient forms of mathematics, astronomy, biology, and so on. You could argue that Empedocles was a fraud, because he thought himself a god, but you can forgive him, because he lived at a time when he was not the only one entertaining such delusions, and the pagan gods of his time were closer to humans. But you cannot understand or forgive Freud. He knew better. Science knew better - maybe not about the human psyche, but certainly about collecting empirical evidence and formulating a testable theory, rather than making it all up and distorting patient's stories to make them conform to an untestable fancy.'

'It amazes me that he remains so iconic'

'Not only iconic, but, together with Marx (and MacDonald

deals also with the radical Left in this book), the foundation of an intellectual tradition that has in modern academia become monolithic in its orthodoxy. Just look at majors like Cultural Studies: pure Freudo-Marxist scholasticism. All its various approaches, whether it is postmodernism, feminism, critical theory - it all rests on the same foundation. Critical Theorists from the Frankfurt school, like Erich Fromm, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, were early synthesisers of the Freudo-Marxist virus. The Authoritarian Personality, the study they produced, is pure pseudoscience, by the way - no less pseudoscience than Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Then you have Claude Levis-Strauss: influenced by Marx and Freud. Jacques Lacan: influenced by Freud and Levi-Strauss. Then you have the Postmodernists, like Jean Baudrillard: influenced by Marx, Freud, and Adorno. Slavoj Zizek: influenced by Marx and Lacan. They have all built upon each other's theories. The poor university students see nothing but. Like MacDonald said - although he was referring only to Freudian psychoanalysis - their theories form a closed cognitive matrix, that claims to represent a universal truth, that cannot be refuted because it interprets damaging evidence on its own terms, and where criticism is about the critic's motives.'

He shook his head. 'And the poor students eventually grow up to become journalists, politicians, film and television producers, etc. No wonder they all sound the same.'

'Exactly. And once they become politicians and legislators, their brains infected with all that poison and knowing nothing else, they push to change society and change the laws of the land accordingly. Which is exactly what these Freudo-Marxist scholars wanted, because they were, as MacDonald argued in this book, ethno-political activists masquerading as scientists.'

'Ah,' he said, raising his index finger as he identified an important point. 'That's what the media have been saying all along - that MacDonald thinks there is a Jewish conspiracy to subvert Western civilisation.'

'Indeed, they have,' replied Mr. Wermod, widening his eyes, 'but don't believe any talk about conspiracies!'

'Good. Because I don't have time for things like that,' he added, quickly and stiffly, the back of his mind entertaining the possibility that the secret service might be listening in - it would have been easy for them to hide microphones inside that flat.

'It isn't. And MacDonald never said anything about a Jewish

conspiracy. In fact, he argued here that anti-Semites exaggerate, and that Freudian psychoanalysis, Boasian anthropology, the radical left, the New York intellectuals, the immigration reform movement, and Neo-Conservatism in the United States were Jewish movements only in so far as they were led by small cliques of Jewish who sought to advance, and saw them selves as serving, collective Jewish interests - in other words, not all Jews were involved, many did not know anything about some of them, and some Jews were even critical of these movements.'

That sounds like a reasonable position, he thought, though he dared not say it.

'That they became so successful and attained the status of academic orthodoxy - of secular religion, if you think like Bob Whittaker - is due partly to the outcome of the Second World War,' continued Mr. Wermod, 'and partly to the fact that the Left was well-funded and effectively organised - remember the Bolshevik revolution was funded by Wall Street bankers, who saw themselves as world improvers. It was also informed in the West by the writings of Antonio Gramsci.'

'I'm afraid I've never heard of him.'

'Gramsci was an Italian Communist. Mussolini threw him in a dungeon and forgot the key. While in prison, he wrote his Prison Notebooks. There he explicated the reasons why Communist revolutions had failed in the West, when they had been successful in the East. He argued that the West was too rooted in its history and its Christian worldview; in other words, the Christian - Capitalist order maintained control not through violent coercion but through a hegemonic culture, where bourgeois, Christian values were accepted by everyone as common sense. It is an extension of the Marxian false consciousness. For Gramsci Communism would not triumph in the West until people had been dechristianised and cut off from their history and their traditions - only in an uprooted, spiritually evacuated state would people be receptive to new ideas. The process would have to be slow and take many decades, during which Communists would need to infiltrate institutions, rise through the ranks, and force gradual cultural change, until their ideas became so pervasive as to be seen as common sense. By the time the process was over, the whole of Western society, they way people thought, would have been so radically transformed that the last step, setting up a Communist government, would have constituted a natural and logical step, welcomed by everyone.'

Prison Notebooks was very popular among Leftists in the 60s.'

'Well, that makes a lot of sense. If that's what they did, it explains a great deal.'

'And now consider this: a Hitler victory would have driven the Left underground - the Left would have been delegitimised the same way that the Right - and by this I mean the true Right, not camouflaged liberals like the Neo-Conservatives of twenty, thirty years ago - was progressively delegitimised after the war. The dominant paradigm in the academia today would probably be an intellectual tradition based on Darwin, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. In turn, disciples of Freud, Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, etc., would be completely discredited - their work would be deemed as falling below the threshold of minimally acceptable professional scholarship. Marxist and Freudian historiographies would be dismissed as elaborate conspiracy theories. The valid insights that have come to us via Freudo-Marxian scholasticism would have reached us via different theorists and in the context of evolutionist analytical frameworks.'

He wanted to say that he had never been entirely convinced that a world with a victorious Germany would have been worse than the world he was living in today, but he checked his impulse, lest the secret service was listening. Instead, he camouflaged himself in someone else's opinion. I remember reading a book by Pat Buchanan years ago, where he argued that the Second World War had been unnecessary.'

'He was right!' exclaimed Mr. Wermod, his eyes wide. 'Hitler admired the British and wanted an alliance with the Empire. He said so in *Mein Kampf*. It's only because Chamberlain lost control of the government that he is now referred to as an appeaser. Imagine: if the British Empire had not gone to war against Germany, Germany's borders would have eventually stabilized; the Jews would have emigrated, but there would not have been a Holocaust, because it was the war that provided the cover; the British Empire would still exist; and British-controlled areas of Africa, like Rhodesia and South Africa, would now be industrial economies, feeding the whole region; the British Empire would be third largest economy in the world, after the United States and Germany; and the United States would have prospered under Charles Lindbergh; thanks to its manufacturing. In fact, he might have repealed the Federal Reserve Act, which his father had opposed - in which case

they - and we - would not be facing a complete monetary and economic meltdown.'

'It is very interesting,' he said, with expression of a scientist examining a theory.

Mr. Wermod continued. 'Meanwhile, Communism would not been allowed to enslave half of Europe for fifty years. Hitler would have died before 1960. Over time the National Socialists would have relaxed, with an eventual transition to democracy.'

'Like in this country.'

'Like in this country,' echoed Mr. Wermod. 'David Irving would not have cared about Adolf Hitler then - he would be infamous and controversial like he is now, because he loves the attention - but he would have found some other way. David Duke and William Pierce would have been scientists. David Duke a sociobiologist, maybe, and William Pierce a physicist.'

'David Irving - that gentleman was seated next to me on the flight over. I discovered his identity earlier today.'

Mr. Wermod raised his eyebrows. 'Is that so?'

'Yes. I had lunch with a friend and Mr. Irving was holding a conference at this hotel near Castellana. A mob of rather odd-looking individuals raided the conference room and vandalised his stock,' said he, wrinkling his forehead with distaste.

'His autobiography has just been published in Spanish translation,' replied Mr. Wermod, frowning with a half smile. 'That must be why. His first wife was Spanish and a couple of his daughters live in Madrid.'

'He seems to have angered quite a few people. A Jewish gentleman gave him a piece of his mind aboard the airplane. But Irving didn't seem particularly bothered.'

'He enjoys the controversy,' said Mr. Wermod, grinning, 'and what could have been more controversial in the post war world than questioning aspects of the Holocaust and humanising Hitler? If he is right, it will be his books that are read in schools in a hundred years' time, and not those of what he calls "conformist historians".'

'I think I saw a couple of those Esoteric Hitlerists at Barajas when I arrived last night.'

'Esoteric Hitlerists. or Ariosophists? The media doesn't distinguish between the two.'

'To be perfectly frank, I couldn't tell you. What's the difference?'

'Esoteric Hitlerists follow the tradition of Savitri Devi and Miguel Serrano. The two are slightly different. Savitri Devi's

Esoteric Hitlerism is a blend of Hindu mythology and National Socialism. She asserted that history is cyclical, as in Hinduism; that history goes through four progressively degenerative ages. The last age is the Kali Yuga, the age of chaos. Savitri Devi believed Adolf Hitler was Kalki, Vishnu's tenth and final avatar, meant to destroy the world and bring the Aryan man to a more perfect, earlier time. This is why she referred to Hitler as "the man against time" - he fought against the downward flow of history. For Devi, Hitler came too soon, and failed because he was not ruthless enough - if sun was cosmic wisdom and lightning was force, he was too much sun, not enough lightning. Devi's man against time possesses cosmic wisdom and is willing to use force in its service; failure results from an imperfect balance of sun and lightning. Her best-known text was *The Lightning and the Sun*; the original was published by Temple Press in Calcutta in 1958 (I've got one of the few surviving copies - it's a very rare book!), but the most widely circulated edition is William Pierce's condensed version, which he re-published in book form in 2000 via National Vanguard. The Savitri Devi Archive re-published the unabridged version some years ago.

'Serrano's brand of Esoteric Hitlerism blends Vedic Hinduism and Nordic mythology. He believed that Hitler had escaped Berlin in 1945 and established a secret base in Shambhala, in Antarctica. There Hitler was in communication with the Hyperborean gods - they, the Hyperboreans, like the Aryans, the Lemurians, etc., come from Helena Blavatsky's theosophical cosmogony; Hyperboreans had fallen through miscegenation with the bestial creatures of the Demiurge; the South and North Poles had then reversed positions; to regain their ascendance the Hyperboreans needed to repurify their blood. Serrano believed that Hitler would one day return with a fleet of UFOs to fight a final battle in the Kali Yuga.'

'Ah, yes, I have heard his before,' he interrupted, recollecting, 'in shockumentaries on some of the history channels. That Hitler could have escaped from Berlin, that some say he had plans to come back and take over, and that the Israelis had bombed the site, but it was all secret and all evidence had been destroyed and it was therefore impossible to prove such a theory.'

Mr Wermod smiled, nodding slowly, and resumed ' - a final battle against the forces of darkness, which inevitably included the Jews.'

‘Sounds like a form of apocalyptic euhemerism,’ he commented, causing Mr. Wermod to raise his eyebrows, impressed by his diction.

Mr. Wermod continued. ‘This is because Serrano’s Gnostic theology saw International Jewry as the agents of the Demiurge, black magicians, manipulators, and spawners of primitive hominid stocks and the rationalist, materialist, and mechanistic modernity - the dissolutive force with which they intended to disinherit the Aryans from their birthright to a higher cosmos. The forces of darkness would be defeated and Hitler would then inaugurate a new Golden Age - a Satya Yuga - in the form of the Fourth Reich. The military defeat of the Third Reich was for Serrano only an external loss. Serrano’s books were not easy to find until recently, but the Esoteric Hitlerist sects do their own publishing and have since disseminated Serrano’s writings.

‘As to the Ariosophists—’

He interrupted again. ‘I take it you own the original first editions of Serrano’s texts.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ replied Mr. Wermod, with gruff satisfaction. I have a copy of *Hitler: El Ultimo Avatara*, published in Chile by La Nueva Edad, as well as the other two in the Hitler trilogy, *El Cordon Dorado* and *Manu*. The first editions are worth a small fortune these days.’

‘The couple I saw at the airport were carrying a copy of the Savitri Devi book and a modern version of the Serrano book you just mentioned. The Guardia Civil had stopped them.’

‘Hmm.’

He suddenly worried about the weight of Mr. Wermod’s book and CD collection, remembering that he was standing on the top floor of an old house in poor structural condition. He imagined his feet supported by floorboards concealing thaumasite-infested cement, riddled with salt efflorescences and scaly detachments. He imagined this cement slowly caving in under the weight of the hoarder’s tonnage of possessions - maybe a fraction of a millimetre a year, but caving in, nonetheless, inexorably, inevitably. He suddenly feared he might at any moment hear a crack and find himself falling through collapsing floors all the way down to the basement, to be buried alive and never found.

‘Very well. It’s been a real pleasure, Mr. Wermod. I am afraid I can’t stay any longer. We’ll be in touch.’ he said.

‘Alright,’ replied Mr. Wermod, evenly.

He resumed squeezing his way to the front door.
'Just one thing,' said Mr. Wermod.

'Yes?' he replied, turning around, the image of Lt. Columbo suddenly in his mind.

'Careful with Scoptic. Best not to mention them in your website.'

Chapter 12

Resource Acquisition

As he walked, he found before him, in the distance head, two dark figures loitering near an off-duty taxicab, parked near Giro el Grande, on the same spot where the airport cab had dropped him off the previous evening. Silhouetted against its weak orange light, the sole working streetlamp across the road highlighted the masculine body language of criminals engaged in casual conversation. One of the figures was lean and of average height; the other was corpulent, like a silverback mountain gorilla. The skin of their long, muscular arms glistened with perspiration. Despite the figure's deep voices, festive Salsa, booming out of a nearby Latin bar, and the loud murmur of drunken outdoor conversation, punctuated by the shouting of brawling louts and the screaming of their skinny girlfriends, drowned the import of the figures' dialogue. The Latin bar was somewhere around the corner, ahead of him, or perhaps behind him; it competed in the torrid night's city air against a retrogressive gay leather bar, which pumped its Industrial Techno into the neighbourhood, for the benefit and edification of all. Accordingly, there was graffiti on nearly-every wall, signs, of vandalism on every item of street furniture, and a mottled blanket of paper napkins, plastic cups, beer bottles, condoms, chewing gum, hypodermic needles, fast food wrappings, and pools of urine all over the pavement - indicating that the street cleaners had been on strike for a couple of days, due to a wage dispute with the council.

The taxi he had hailed near Gran Via had stopped for him (probably on the basis of his suit and refined manner), but the

elderly driver had then adamantly refused to drop him off before *Ciro el Grande*, or to drive anywhere near the area. Following a heated discussion, they had agreed that he would be dropped off at the neighbouring *Ciudad Universitaria*, wherefrom he would walk the remainder of the distance. The cabbie's intransigence had angered him sufficiently, however, to cause him to deny payment of his fare, arguing breach of contract. He taxi had driven off in a huff, and he had shortly afterwards discovered (with increasing alarm) why the cabbie had designated the area a no go zone.

Besides the noise, the refuse, the brawls, and the general dereliction, the stench of alcohol - before and after passage through the human body - permeated the atmosphere. Such stench not only provided an efficient explanation for the creativity with which the neighbourhood motorists were able to interpret the precepts of the highway code, but it also demystified the motor dysfunction and speech impairments afflicting so many of the pedestrians. Were it not for the success and high concentration of aethyically-orientated establishments in the area, his blonde hair and fair skin would have proven a more serious liability while traversing those streets and alleys: the hominids around him were, thankfully, too inebriated or too high on smack to see anything but a spinning blur of vague shapes and neon light. More dangerous were, perhaps, the children residing in the flats piled up in the tower blocks around him: following the sudden impaction of a wet substance on the shoulder of his Saville Row suit, he noticed small, grinning faces looking down at him from small windows seven or eight floors above him; bored of their shoot'em up video games, said children were very interested in perfecting their understanding of gravitation by consputing on moving targets.

He carried on walking, impotent, yet resolved to deny the children the pleasure of his annoyance. Their cruel cackles echoed above him as he looked for a fallen leaf with which to wipe the sputum off his jacket once he was out of their line of sight; exasperatingly - but not surprisingly, perhaps, since any trees that had once grown there had been long since cut down - there was not a single fallen leaf to be seen anywhere.

He realised now that it had been somewhat naive of him to base his choice of accommodation on the memory of a previous stay, without considering that the area's geodemographic classification might have changed during the past thirty-five

years. Apartamentos Villamagna, as it had been known back then, had been suitable for businessmen on temporary contracts lasting more than one month. His father had rented an apartment there during the mid 1980s, while on *one* such contract. At that time, nine years after the death of Franco, the Villamagna had been located in a safe neighbourhood, complete with dry cleaners, art shops, stationers, newsagents, a health club, and a Guardia Civil station. He, of course, was presently scheduled to stay for one week, but the Scoptic account was difficult, and he expected problems to arise, which might either necessitate a prolongation of his stay, or require frequent unscheduled visits for the next two months. It made sense, therefore, to rent an apartment, as opposed to make repeated hotel bookings. However, and as usual, he had been too absorbed by the project, and too preoccupied with keeping tabs on his other on-going contracts, that he had overlooked one trivial practical consideration.

The two figures ahead noticed him and assumed hostile postures, their heads still and turned in his direction as they awaited his approach.

Muggers, he thought, tensing.

His adrenal gland responded by secreting epinephrine and releasing it into the bloodstream; this caused a warm sensation to explode at the top of his abdomen and quickly to propagate outwards. For a moment he considered turning around, pretending that he had left something behind somewhere, or simply crossing the street, since it was not possible to change direction; but he promptly suppressed the urge, aware that betraying fear would be the most efficient method of signalling his submission. Moreover, betraying fear was likely to encourage his potential opponents to escalate their aggression and begin a chase, a scenario that was certain to end in an assault: the same physiological factors that enabled Blacks to dominate athletic sports, rendered any attempt at outrunning them futile: narrow hips and longer legs gave them a longer and more efficient stride; a lower sitting height gave them a higher centre of gravity and therefore better balance; muscles with a greater presence of fast twitch muscles gave them faster reflexes; and higher levels of testosterone, in bodies with less fat and more muscle, gave them more explosive energy. There was no contest. The most tactically sound option was, therefore, to force himself to continue forward, walking as casually as he could. Casual or not, the two Black men wasted no time in confirming

his theory by revealing their weapons the moment he was within their reach. The lean one, wearing rubber sandals, held a crowbar; his hulking friend, wearing a faded navy polo shirt and hair shaved into a checkered pattern, held a loop of heavy chain.

'Eh, tu. Me debes mil Euros,' said Crowbar, apparently the leader. He was wearing a Real Madrid t-shirt.

'¿Mil Euros?' he replied, feigning amused sarcasm.

'Sí. ¡Del taxi de anoche, racista de mierda!' said Crowbar, with a low voice.

The cab from last night? He looked at his opponent's small, dark face; although the gloom only vaguely revealed the thug's features, he was able to recognise the airport cabbie. The cabbie had come with reinforcements, to make a new attempt at robbing him (now with interest) and presumably also to exact revenge for last night's humiliation. If it were not because the situation looked rather serious, his stomach acid would be presently boiling with frustration. Upon exiting Tron's headquarters, he had endured a very tense fifteen minutes trying to slip out of Sol, unnoticed by its bizarre nocturnal fauna. He had then wasted ninety minutes of his life in a Metro system afflicted by delays, signal failures, line closures, and train cancellations. Those ninety minutes had been equally tense, since the Metro had been crawling with drunken louts, muggers, gypsies, nutters, creeps, beggars, and pickpockets, all on them scanning for victims. He had eventually alighted, and resurfaced near Castellana, where he spent another twenty minutes attempting to hail a taxi. A further hour had been wasted in traffic; a quarter of an hour in an argument, and another quarter walking. After such an adventurous journey, a mugging cabbie was not what he had in mind for evening relaxation.

This did not happen under Franco, he thought angrily: Franco's Spain exported labour to, and brought in tourists from, Northern Europe, rather than exported jobs to, and imported criminals from, the Third World; moreover, the streets of its towns and cities were safe, and in an age of silver coins, it was possible for an unaccompanied woman to walk these streets unmolested in the dead of night. Between 1959 and 1973, at a time when Spain's population was yet to discover the joys of multiculturalism, economic growth had been the fastest in the world, just after Japan - and Spain's the ninth largest economy on the planet, after Canada. Obviously, Spain had modernised a great deal since then.

‘¿No se acuerda usted de lo que hice con el dineros?’ he asked the cabbie, defiantly polite.

The cabbie’s face tensed in anger, ‘Entonces vamos al cajero.’

His sidekick took this as an invitation to start revolving his chain, his face alight with bloodthirst; Chain could not wait for the argument to escalate, or to be met with resistance, so that he could start delivering blows. Nothing would please Chain more, it seemed, than to hear the crunch of fractured bone. The cabbie’s attitude really made him nervous: it was clear that monetary predation had now been relegated to the status of added bonus, the primary aim having since become his hospitalisation. If there was an intelligent way out the situation, it was fast receding; nerves were paralysing his brain.

A white Honda Civic drove by, too fast, and hit a pothole, sending one of its hubcaps spinning off along the pavement.

He thought of his wife and felt sorrow at the sadness news of his injuries would cause her. For her sake, he was willing to swallow his pride and do whatever was necessary to satisfy the thugs and send them on their way; yet he knew the two would perceive compliance as weakness and that this would in turn only further whet their appetite for violence. Moreover, he did not like the idea of being seen as another yellow-bellied, middle class White man who was willing to suffer any humiliation rather than stand up for himself. Since he faced a severe beating, he concluded that he might as well be brave, demonstrate that not all Englishmen were guilt-ridden cowards, desperate to apologise for themselves and their Imperial past. Blocking the sound of louts singing football songs across the street, he tried to think of the most outrageous statement lie could throw at his opponent’s face.

A moment later, he looked at the cabbie straight in the eye and opened his mouth, ‘I -’

‘¡Eh, tu! ¡Negro maricón!’ The shout came from across the street.

The two thugs immediately turned around, to face a new troop of drunken apes that were now standing directly opposite to them. There were about fifteen louts, some carrying I urge bottles of beer, others gorging themselves on Doner Kebab, all seemingly the spawn of Lemurian bestiality. Most significantly, the majority of them sported t-shirts and headgear fliguarding their fanatical allegiance to the Barcelona football club. The racist shout had originated from the mouth of a coffee-coloured gentleman in his twenties; he had black curly

locks and stood looking at the cabbie with his chest puffed, his eyebrows arched, and his chin raised in a gesture of rude belligerence.

'¡El Madrid es una puta mierda!' screamed Curly Locks, intonating savage laughter from his fellow hoodlums.

The cabbie began walking towards Curly Locks, followed by his sidekick, '¿A quién llamas maricón?'

The troop of apes, delighted by the cabbie's response, readied themselves for violent fun by adopting a semi-circular formation. He stood there long enough to observe the cabbie's chest nillking with Curly Locks' sternum, and to hear the two contenders shout abuse into each other's angry faces, surrounded by a raucous audience of gleeful grins and avid orbs.

He then made a quiet exit.

Chapter 13

Stiffly-Worded Letter of Complaint

He entered the lobby and found the middle-aged man from the previous evening manning the reception desk. The man was so absorbed by his book, that his entrance went unnoticed until he point where he reached this desk and placed his hands on the counter.

‘Disculpe. Buenas noches,’ said the man, clapping the book shut. It was another convoluted novel by Harry Stephen Keeler, in Spanish translation. He inquired about his parcel.

‘Pues no, ho nos ha llegado todabía,’ said the man, half baffled, half apologetic.

He sighed, irritated. ‘Esta claro que lo han robado. Vale. Aviseme si es que llega por casualidad.’

‘De acuerdo,’ replied the man, returning to his book as he walked away, headed for the lifts. He did not expect him to, nor did he see any logical or commonsense reason why the man should, care, but the man’s breezy indifference was nevertheless annoying.

One of the polished brass position displays in the lift bank urea indicated there was a lift already on the ground floor. He pressed the call button, entered when the doors opened, pressed the button to the seventh floor, and positioned himself with his back to the No Smoking sign emblazoned on the car’s rear wall. Slow seconds passed in silence before he saw the doors closing. At this precise moment, however, he heard approaching steps and observed how at the very last second, a pair of beefy hands appeared in the gap between the nearly-closed doors. The hands then forced the doors open, revealing it fat, bald man in a navy blue suit and holding a lit Cuban cigar

between his lips. Cigar entered the lift and positioned himself next to him before pressing the button to the eighth floor.

Within seconds, a pungent mundungus replaced all breathable air inside the car. He incandesced with instant fury: the timoker's selfish disregard for the people around him was completely outrageous, not to mention illegal. He lasered a hate-ill led stare at the smoker, who nevertheless carried on smoking with perfect equanimity, his movements calm and indifferent; had the smoker's skull been the Earth's crust, his hate-filled stare would have matched the Kola Super Deep Borehole operation in the former U.S.S.R.. Yet, no level of visual violence appeared to have any effect on the smoker. Once he accepted I he futility of an appeal to the smoker's sense of civic duty, he suspended his ocular drilling in favour of quick and dirty methods.

'Caballero: En los ascensores no se pueden fumar puros. ¿No ha visto el signo de no fumar?' he said, uptightly.

Cigar smiled, 'Es solo un momento. No esperara que apague mi Habano solo para subir en el ascensor unos segundos...'

'Sí, sí lo espero. Y si usted no es capaz de contener su vicio, por favor suba por las escaleras.'

Cigar simply chuckled and ignored him. He pressed the button for the floor immediately coming up. The lift stopped.

'Bájese del ascensor,' he spat, as soon as the doors opened. '¡No sea imbécil!'

He was horrified. How dare that swine speak to him like that? Who did he think he was? He went nuclear. 'Muy bien. Pues voy a averguar sus datos y denunciarle a la-policía,' he replied, reaching for the mobile inside the lining of his jacket. The lift was fitted with a CCTV camera, but there was no way of knowing whether it was working, and he could not be bothered to ask the hotel's management for a copy of the security video file, which he would need as proof when reporting Cigar to the police; it was simpler to record the offender in the act with his mobile phone's video recorder.

'Averigüe todo lo que quiera. A mi me da igual,' said Cigar, pressing the button to his floor again, causing the lift's doors to close.

Annoyingly, his mobile proved difficult to retrieve, and the lift reached his floor before he succeeded. More annoyingly still, the opening doors soon revealed he had more immediately pressing matters at hand: the lift had stopped in between floors.

‘iJoder!’ said Cigar, with an infuriatingly jovial chuckle.

He stabbed the button to his floor again; machinegunning it with his finger about eight times. The doors closed, the lift resumed motion, then stopped on the next floor, except again in between floors. Once more he badgered the button to his floor. However, this time, the lift made a humming sound, and the doors began to repeatedly open and close, in irregular spasms. They were stuck.

Cigar’s mountainous abdomen rippled once again as he emitted his infuriating chuckle. *What is so funny about being stuck in a lift?* his mind fumed.

He tutted. *Whatever.* He then lifted himself up to the upper floor, crazily imagining, for a moment, while his legs dangled inside the car, his legs being guillotined as the lift suddenly initiated a descent. Cigar stayed behind, too obese to attempt the same manoeuvre or its alternative, jumping onto the lower floor. He, noticing that a crass boor had deposited a can of Coke onto the carpeted floor right by the lift doors, considered kicking the can into the lift, causing the dregs of glutinous beverage to splash onto Cigar’s suit. Instead, he reached for his mobile. He would squat before the lift, and point the mobile’s lens towards the recalcitrant smoker-, ensuring he captured him cigar in hand and enveloped in a carcinogenic mist, his heliport-size pate directly below the prominently displayed non-smoking sign. Cigar, however, having taken notice of his earlier threat, and divining his intentions, erupted with a pyroclastic flow of foul-mouthed protests, hoping that intimidation would prevent a recording. None proved as effective, however, as the fact that his mobile appeared to have lodged itself somewhere in the lining of his jacket; he exhausted his patience before he was able to retrieve the device, and, considering it undignified to remain in the hall, fumbling his jacket Columbo-style, opted to desist.

His floor was immediately below, so he directed himself towards the door giving access to the staircase. The latter echoed with voices, one male, the other female, both engaged in an agitated argument. His descent revealed a man in his forties standing before a rubbish chute, about to feed into it a pair of expensive brogues, while his female companion, probably his wife or his girlfriend, attempted verbally and physically to prevent him. The man had a cardboard box piled up with assorted magazines, towels, and DVDs, which had been hastily thrown into their container. The man was perspiring and the woman

was clad in jeans and a t-shirt, her lack of make up and pony-tail suggesting that the couple was in the process of moving out. It transpired from what he heard of their exchange that he man was exasperated by the move, was frantic to complete it as soon as possible, and had decided - in a bout of wild-eyed fury - to simplify the clearing-out operation by disposing of miscellaneous possessions without discrimination; whatever clutter he found inside their apartment's closets and cupboards, he was chucking down the chute, irrespective of value or utility. Clearly, his wife (or girlfriend), had objections to this procedure, and was attempting to reason with her partner in order to save at least some of the more valuable items; her partner, however, insisted in uniformly classing everything in the box and elsewhere as rubbish, so as to proceed with its rapid elimination.

'¡Pero, mira, estos zapatos están nuevos!' the woman pleaded. |

'¡Deja! ¡Deja!' fumed her partner, furiously stuffing brand new towels into the chute.

The woman now grabbed the towels with one hand, still holding on to a pair of polished brogues with her other hand, and leaned backwards, pulling, 'Es que te has vuelto loco? Esas toallas son muy caras. ¡Y ademas es que están nuevas!'

'¡Anda! ¡Da igual! ¡Compramos nuevas!' said the man, pulling the towels towards him, and forcing them into the chute.

In their tug of war, the woman lost some ground, '¡Pero que es una tontería!'

Her partner now raised his voice even more, '¡Hay demasiados chacarros! ¡Es media noche y quiero terminar de una vez para salir de aqui!'

The man managed to rip the towels off his partner's hand, and, having chucked them into the chute, now looked at the box, aiming for the DVDs. The woman reacted quickly, however, and, still without letting go of the brogues, she grabbed one side of the box and dragged it towards her, walking backwards, towards the hallway, as quickly as she could. '¡Mira, ya esta bueno! ¡Componte!'

The man chased her, shouting, '¡Dame los zapatos!'

'¡Ni hablar!' she said firmly. 'No vamos a empezar a tirar zapatos y películas. Zapatos asi ya no se hacen. ¿Cómo vas a tirar los zapatos de Sergio Rossi? ¡Los DVDs costaron un pastón y me niego a tirar el dinero!'

The man grabbed his side of the box. Pulling it towards him, he shouted, enraged beyond all reason, '¡Dame la caja!'

'¡Que no!' shouted back the woman, bending her knees and using her body weight to keep her partner from dragging the box back towards the chute.

This only exacerbated the man's furor. '¡Hay que tirar cosas! ¡NO TENEMOS TIEMPO!'

'¡PUES HACEMOS TIEMPO!' the woman screamed. '¡NO VAMOS A TIRAR EL DINERO!'

The man responded by pulling the box towards him as hard as he could. This, however, only caused the cardboard to rip, which sent the DVDs flying across the landing, filling the area with an obstreperous clatter as dozens of plastic cases tumbled down flights of stairs and rained down the central stairwell, bouncing their way -to the basement. After a moment of stunned silence,, the man started furiously stomping on the DVDs around him and throwing the pieces down the chute, ranting about being fed up of clutter between a manic stream of curses. The woman reacted with equal fury at first, demanding that he stop, then with sadness, as she noticed particular DVDs they had enjoyed together being thus eliminated from their collection.

He quietly walked past the couple, sidestepping the mess, and opened the door to the hallway. There, he was greeted by the stench of booze, loud peals of laughter, and the* sound of Samba, booming from inside one of the apartments. Suddenly, a door opened ahead of him and a young couple of bestial appearance emerged out of one apartment. The male primate was nude, save for a pair of floral swimming trunks; his large hand held a bottle of rum, nearly full; a smile pushed up his cheeks below a forehead that was only one inch high. His female counterpart was clad in but a white towel, stumbling and giggling; she too looked as if she had been an extra in *The Planet of the Apes*, only that, for her simian part, she would not have required additional make-up. The couple walked diagonally across the hallway and disappeared behind the door of another apartment. It was out of this latter apartment that the Samba was booming from. It was unrealistic these days to expect to find even in reputable hotels the standards of behaviour that were the norm forty years before, but these zoological, semi-pornographic, drunken shenanigans went well beyond what he, as a *serious* professional, in town on *serious* business, was willing to tolerate; he resolved to register his displeasure with

reception, and lodge a stiffly-worded complaint with the management of the hotel.

When he entered his apartment, he found a further irritant in the shape of a circular that some anonymous individual had slipped under his door. He picked it up, wondering, as he stood under the warm CFL light in the hallway, why the hotel management had felt the need, or allowed a stranger, to invade his privacy in this fashion, rudely walking right up to the door to his apartment, instead of leaving the pamphlet in the appropriate pigeonhole behind the reception desk, where any item of written communication addressed to him ought always to go. He soon discovered the reason: the circular was from the police, who were investigating a racist attack that had taken place around the area the previous evening, involving a White offender, who had fled the scene, and a Black victim, who had been violently attacked; the police were requesting for any witnesses to come forward and make a declaration. *The bastard*, he thought, knowing exactly who had reported the incident to the police: the cabbie - like most of his brethren these days, a man probably sold on anti-racist ideology and on its attendant victimhood culture, where Black dysfunction was invariably interpreted as a product of White racism - had decided that he had been victimised by a White racist, and, seeing there was mileage in attempting to extract compensation, had filed a report with the police. And the police, of course, being under constant "government scrutiny for any possible sign of race bias, had swiftly sprung into action. . . >

His morning reconnaissance had proven inconclusive, but that did not mean there were no CCTV cameras in the area. He did not want to think about it. He scrunched up the circular and archived it in the kitchen bin.

The kitchen being bare of comestibles, and the restaurant downstairs again closed for the evening, he decided to order a pizza.

Upon dialing the number, he was greeted by an electronic voice, offering a list of options. He pressed the hash button repeatedly, then the star button, then random buttons, but this failed to confuse the IVR, which had, by then proceeded to enumerate the options. This it did with infuriatingly slow enunciation and pleonastic prolixity, supplying an abundance of irrelevant information and structuring it in the most repetitive manner that was grammatically possible. Naturally, since the telepizza number was one of those premium numbers, it

was in the financial interest of the pizza firm to artificially extend the duration of the call, not only by redacting and delivering its options menu this way, but also by placing the most frequently used options at the end of each list.

‘Buenas noches. Bienvenido a Cyberpizza. Por favor indique en que idioma le gustaría escuchar el menú de opciones. Good evening. Welcome to Cyberpizza. Please indicate in what you language you would like to hear the options menu...’

The recorded voice repeated the statement in French, Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Swahili, Sotho, Nguni, Ciluba, Hausa, Tamazight, Mandarin, Cantonese, and a bewildering array of unidentifiable languages, until, finally, under option 87, it offered English, ahead of Spanish.

He made his selection, prompting the IVR to take him to the next tier of options. ‘You now have forty-five choices. Please press one if you would like to...’

The thermometer of his anger quickly rising, he sighed impatiently, his rumbling stomach, salivating mouth, and primitive brain enervated by the thought of a piping hot, thin crust pizza, covered with pepperoni; double mozzarella, chilies, spicy beef, onions, and Tabasco, sauce. He had decided that he needed it *fast*.

Slow minutes passed, until finally the IVR read out the option he required.

‘You now have eighteen choices...’

Aw, COME ON NOW!

To order a pizza, press eighteen,’

He pressed keys one and eight, hard.

‘You now have fifty-seven choices. To order a margarita pizza, containing tomato, mozzarella, basil, and baked on a thin crust, and costing €89 press one; to order a margarita pizza, containing tomato, mozzarella, basil, on a medium crust, press two; to order a...’ |

He waited and waited and waited. As accustomed as he had become to these obnoxious IVRs, with their ridiculously hyper-inflated hierarchical menus, they never failed to eventually infuriate him. He owned a device that short-circuited these menus and sent the caller directly to a human customer service operator, but he had not expected to be reduced to ordering pizzas, so he had left it at home.

‘...on a thin crust, and costing €99, press fortyfive...’

He keyed in forty-five, fast.

There was a click, then five alternations of long tones and long pauses, which ended with an explosion of archaic rap music. Menace Clan's "Kill Whitey" played loudly for thirty seconds; it was then pushed down to make way for a recorded male voice, speaking in an artificial, over-polite sing song, which kindly informed him that he had now been allocated a place in a queue. He was in position one hundred and twenty six.

By this time the irrational urge to violently and repeatedly slam the receiver into the cradle, rip the telephone off the wall, and hurl it into the night over the balcony was applying serious pressure on his psyche, the adrenalin lava soaking up his frontal lobe turning it into a biological Krakátoa, quickly destroying his remaining safeguards against violent eruption. He repressed the urge with a supreme invocation of will, knowing that every pizza company would be exactly the same, and visiting them in person would nearly guarantee a mugging, but not faster service.

Finally, he was greeted by a human operator.

'Good morn - evening, how may I provide you with excellent customer service today?' said the voice, in a contrived, well-rehearsed sing-song, with a heavy Indian accent. The ethereal jabber in the background placed him in a large call centre.

'I would like to order a pizza,' he said, tensely.

'Just a moment, Sir, while I try to transfer you.'

Menace Clan was put back on.

Niggas in the church say: kill whitey all night long... the white man is the devil... the CRIPS and Bloods are soldiers I'm recruiting with no dispute; drive-by shooting *We're sorry to keep you waiting. Your call is important to us, and we will connect you to the next available customer service advisor as soon as possible. Thank you...* on this white genetic mutant... let's go and kill some red-necks... Menace Clan ain't afraid *We're sorry to keep you waiting. Your call is important to us, and we will connect you to the next available customer service advisor as soon as possible. Thank you...* I got the .380; the homies think I'm crazy because I shot a white baby; I said; I said; *We're sorry to keep you*

waiting. Your call is important to us, and we will connect you to the next available customer service advisor as soon as possible. Thank you... I said: kill whitey all night long... a nigga dumping on your white ass; fuck this rap shit, nigga, We're sorry to keep you waiting. Your call is important to us, and we will connect you to the next available customer service advisor as soon as possible. Thank you... I'm gonna blast... I beat a white boy to the motherfucking ground...

'Good evening, Sir. Welcome to Cyberpizza. How may I provide you with excellent customer service today?' The voice was different from the first one, except that it also spoke with an Indian accent.

'I would like to order a pizza.'

'OK, Sir. Thank you for your confidence in our excellent range of authentic Italian pizzas, made with the best ingredients and baked according to traditional baking methods. May I ask if you have you ordered from us before?'

'No.'

'OK, Sir. Please wait a moment while I transfer you to the right department.'

Menace Clan returned to rap the final verses, before giving way to another, equally edifying artist.

Kill the white people; We're sorry to ^keep you waiting. Your call is important to us, and we will connect you to the next available customer service advisor as soon .as possible. Thank you. we gonna make them hurt; kill the white people; but buy my record first; ha, ha, ha We're sorry to keep you waiting. Your call is important to us, and we will connect you to the next available customer service advisor as soon as possible. Thank you.

'Good evening, Sir. Welcome to Cyberpizza, and thank you for your patience while you were being transferred between departments. My colleague has advised me of your desire to order one of our excellent Italian pizzas, made with the best

ingredients and baked according to traditional methods. I am now ready to take your details before proceeding with your order. May I first of all have your name?’

He told the operator his name.

‘Thank you, Sir. Now may I please have your address before we proceed with taking your order?’

He replied, enunciating with angry precision, ‘Apartamentos Ciro el Grande, Plaza de la Ciudad de Viena, número 6, Madrid, Spain’

‘I am sorry, Sir. Can you please repeat that address for me one more time? It is showing differently on my computer screen.’

‘Apartamentos Ciro el Grande, Plaza de la Ciudad de Viena, número 6, Madrid, Spain.’

‘I am sorry, Sir. That address is showing differently on my screen. Could I please have your postcode?’

‘What is different? Is it showing as Apartamentos Villamagna? They are not called that anymore. They’ve changed proprietor and now call themselves Apartamentos Ciro el Grande.’

‘I am sorry, Sir. I am just going by what says on my computer screen. I need you to kindly provide me with your full postcode so I can verify your address on my computer screen before we can proceed with taking your order this evening.’

‘Wait,’ he went to the desks opposite the bed and fumbled around, looking for a brochure or letter-headed stationery or anything with the hotel’s full address printed on it. He then stated the postcode, ‘28004.’

‘I am sorry, Sir. Can you please repeat that number?’

‘28004.’

‘I am sorry, Sir. Let me confirm I got your postcode down correctly. It is two... eight... oh... oh...four. Can you please confirm, sir, whether this is the correct postcode at your address?’

‘Yes.’

‘Thank you, Sir. I will now need a few additional details to complete taking your address details before proceeding with taking your order. Could I please have your telephone number, including your country code and area code?’

He gave him the number showing on the telephone label, tapping his finger on the bedside table. A drop of sweat splashed onto the carved arabesques.

‘Thank you, Sir, for supplying us with your full address details and telephone number. I will now take your credit card

details, including the sixteen digit number across the front, the valid and expiry dates, and the security number on the back, which are the last three digits showing on the signature strip, below the magnetic band.'

His stomach rumbled. '4539...'

'I am sorry, Sir. It seems my computer screen has frozen. If I could ask you to bear with me while I put you on hold while I attempt to identify and correct the problem.'

More angry rap, as intellectually profound as that of the preceding artists.

Twenty two minutes later the operator returned. By this time his hand was in pain, his ear red hot, and the telephone receiver covered with perspiration.

'I am sorry for the delay in getting back to you, Sir. We were experiencing some technical difficulties, but they have now been resolved and I am happy to continue offering you excellent customer service tonight...'

Fourty minutes later, with his pizza presumably baking in an oven somewhere out there in the urban maze, he called his wife. After the day's events, he desired her tender affections and amicable humour. These were forthcoming of course; but so were, unfortunately, unwelcome news.

'I'm afraid we've had a bit of a run in with Revenue and Customs. They have taken €570,000 out of one of our accounts,' she said, hesitantly.

The news hit him like a bolt of lightning. 'What?'

'I found out today -'

'€570,000!'

'Yep. €570,000,' she said, with a mixture of resignation and annoyance.'

'What happened? How did you find out?' he demanded, his eyes wide under a frown of sudden concentration as he sat on the edge of his bed, staring into the carpet, his elbows propped on his knees.

'I wasn't able to top up my electronic purse on the mobile, so I phoned the bank and they said the money had come out this morning,' said his wife, simply.

'Just like that?' he exploded, exasperated. 'Without explanation?'

'There was a letter from Revenue and Customs, which I found when I got home.'

'What did it say?'

‘It said they had found an under-declaration in last year’s tax return.’

This made no sense. He was well versed in tax law and he had been absolutely thorough, giving very precise instructions to his accountants. Is that all? What was the exact wording?’

‘Wait. Let me get it.’

He heard the clunk of heels on wooden floorboards; they faded and stopped, partially drowned out by a mellow blare of television (his wife was watching an old silent film: F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu*); his wife’s shoes then clunked a few times in the distance, then stopped again for a moment, before resuming decisively, the clunking this time growing louder and clearer. The sounds reminded him of when he used to call his mother while a student at university in the early 1990s; around that time his mother still had a chorded telephone, as they did now: while his wife had picked up the one in their lounge, a 1947 Bakelite 312 he had once bought in an eBay auction.

‘Let’s see. It says...’ she began, as he inspected his brown €4,000 Church’s shoes. An oafish clodpate had stepped on one of them while riding the Metro that morning. He would now have to polish them thoroughly.

The letter was long and written in stern and convoluted language, citing Sections, Acts, Schedules, Groups, Items, and Notices right, left, and center. Essentially, HM Revenue and Customs had decided that there had been an under-declaration and taken what they thought was owed, citing the part of the existing legislation that conferred upon them the power to do so, without prior notice.

‘The bastards!’

This was extremely upsetting for him. Several of their friends had fallen prey to the money-sucking vampires of HM Revenue and Customs, but he had always prided himself in being cleverer than the taxman, and in having organised his finances - absolutely within the law, of course - in such a way as to appear perfectly boring and unpromising to the Chancellor’s ghouls. That they had eviscerated one of his bank accounts, without warning, when he least expected it, and while he was away on business, was blow to his ego.

His wife continued, ‘The letter says that if you think their calculations are incorrect, you can appeal their decision. You have to request a form, which will take up to 28 days, to request an appeals form, where you will need to outline why you think

their decision was wrong. The appeal itself can take up to a year to be considered.'

'Twenty-eight days to get a form to order a form!' he fumed. 'A year to consider the appeal? Aw, why bother! We may as well burn everything we own and kill ourselves. This is naked slavery.'

'I know. I am really sorry,' said his wife, softly, in an attempt to console him.'

He was furious. 'They act as if as if our money - as if *we* - belonged to them. They appropriate *our* money, the wealth that *we* earned through our talent and hard work, and spend it on things we did not and would not have ever voted for, and then they presume us guilty until proven innocent, in tax courts which are of course run by them. Guilty of *what?* Of not wanting our labour stolen by the government, so that it can fund its bureaucracies, service its debts, finance its deficits, pay for its mistakes, and *give it to scroungers, criminals, and foreigners?*' |

His wife tried to be positive, stating gently, 'At least we avoid most of the inflation tax.' |

'Which account did they take the money from?' he demanded, suddenly remembering that none of their accounts were maintained with high balances. Most of their savings were in physical gold and silver, laundered through intermediaries so as to leave no paper trail for the government to track down.

'They took it from our joint current account. They made it go overdrawn by hundreds of thousands over the limit. The bank has already debited their unauthorised overdraft fee and charged interest on the overdraft.'

Damn! 'How much was the fee?' he did not really want to know. •

'€900, plus 10% of the amount overdrawn, with interest running at 0.1% daily.'

He fulminated Barclays Bank with a stream of expletives.

'All other banks are the same,' she said, knowing that she would not be able to pacify him; he had just gained intelligence of it, but she'd had all afternoon to come to terms with the government robbery.

'Is the account still overdrawn?' he asked.

'No. I transferred money from the other accounts, so it is fine now -'

He sighed with relief.

‘- only we are... somewhat poorer.’ .

Yes. Poorer. €570,000 was by no means all he owned, but it was a significant sum, which he would much rather have used to grow their post-retirement income. They had chosen not to have children, and they were not about to have them now, so survival in their old age really depended on being able to amass capital while their earnings were peaking, and on having a sound investment strategy. It was infuriating that at every turn, no matter what he did, it seemed the government was hell-bent in making it impossible for talented people to make material progress in life.

‘These people have no scruples at all!’ he riled, his face red and streaming with perspiration. ‘*Any* excuse to take our money as quickly as they can, *any* excuse to make it as difficult as possible to get it back. They engineer the whole process so that people are put off and appeals fail. And not only is it our money, which they treat as if it were theirs and we had to prove it isn’t, but we get *nothing* in return - our government does *not* work for our benefit!’

‘Don’t worry. We are intelligent people. We can make more money,’ she said, with an affectionate, soothing tone.

‘And even if we are successful,’ he continued, ‘by the time they pay it back the money will have spent years in their bank accounts, earning interest! I bet you anything the bank offered us a loan, or an extension of our credit limit.’

‘They did,’ said his wife, sardonically. ‘I turned down the credit limit extension, but took out the loan and used it to buy gold.’

That was a good response. It was pleasant to see that the two of them were well synchronised in their treatment of their finances. Of course, in a high-inflation and debt-crippled economy, and with the ECB painted into a corner, unwilling to raise interest rates for fear of causing a recession or instigating another credit crunch, taking out loans to buy gold was a way of acquiring inflation-proof assets for a fraction of their cost, since inflation would decimate the debt within the term of the loan. This calmed him down somewhat. *Yes*, he thought. *We are intelligent people. We can make €570,000 and more. To hell with them. Next time we will be cleverer and better prepared. Besides, an occasional win will keep them quiet for a while.*

He knew he was grasping at straws, of course, for Revenue and Customs would always find a way; but he had no desire to think about that.

‘Well, I guess this is part of the give and take,’ he said, with a philosophical tone. ‘Sometimes they win, but we will win in the long run. How big was the loan they offered?’

‘€600,000. Pre-approved,’ she said, with a trace of light-hearted sarcasm.

‘Hmm. They make less and less of an effort to conceal the fact that they are in cahoots with Revenue and Customs.’

That made sense, did it not? The debt-based monetary system typical of modern developed economies was one where money was created *ex nihilo* through fractional reserve banking techniques, in which banks loaned out more money than they actually held in reserves. Because the total debt (principal plus interest) could not be repaid without the creation of yet more money by the same process, the consequence was the continuous growth of the money supply and ever-greater indebtedness, as more and ever greater loans were required to pay existing loans. This essentially meant that debt-based monetary systems had the characteristics of a pyramid scheme, where collapse was averted so long as it was possible to access credit and the newly indebted could induce others into debt on a sufficient scale to pay off their loans. A government with unpayable debt obligations was therefore compelled not only to squeeze every possible cent out of every tax-paying citizen, but to ensure that banks continued to pump credit into the system, to both guarantee a steady supply of tax revenues and inflate their way out of their debts.

‘I wonder what triggered it,’ his wife said, referring to the tax assessment.

‘I hope it was not that landing form,’ he replied, his annoyance rekindling as he remembered the accursed document, and the troubles he’d had completing it.

‘The landing form?’

‘Yes. They’ve now made it longer and more convoluted, so it’s easier to trip up and impossible to complete in the time that they give you,’ he explained, bitterly. ‘It’s obviously designed to get people like me to make mistakes.’

‘Do you think it’s because of the way you filled it out?’ she asked, concerned, but obviously desiring to let him talk it out.

He turned to look at the balcony to his left. The night flight position lights of an aeroplane flashed in the distance, as it

crossed the sodium sky. 'I cannot be sure,' he said, suddenly in a daze. 'As you know I have worked out a system for filling out these forms. So far it's been effective because we haven't had this type of situation before. I was happy with my replies. But maybe they have found a way around them.'

'Maybe the best thing will be not to travel,' his wife suggested, with a blend of disappointment and resignation.

'It seems it has finally come down to that,' he said, not really meaning it. As a consultant, traveling could not be entirely avoided; his skills were highly specialised and his bespoke systems required a thorough understanding of the contracting organizations: his presence would always be required during the initial stages of design and development.

'Did you make a copy of the landing form? Maybe you can study it when you get back and update your system.'

'No, I couldn't copy it. It was copy protected. Pointing the mobile lens at it made the electronic paper go blank until I moved it away.'

'Figures.'

Afterwards, he switched on the television, hoping to hypnotise himself while he waited for his pizza. *Maybe*, he thought, *there will be finally some concrete information about last night's explosion at Barajas!* He selected the option to watch the 9 o'clock news on TVE 1, broadcast three hours earlier. If he remembered correctly, the hour-long programme prefaced the sports round-up with twenty minutes of 'news', which were essentially frivolous human interest stories with a couple of apparently serious reports thrown in; this brainless format would serve his purposes because the end of the 'news' segment would coincide with the arrival of his dinner. His selection instigated an explosion of flash graphics on the screen, accompanied by an eruption of urgent headline statements, their sensational wording almost shouted over dramatic, thundering, rhythmic music, calculated to suggest relentless, hard-nosed journalism. This had been the case with all news programmes ever since he could remember, but in this case he noticed that the producers had recently re-vamped this particular programme, exaggerating these aesthetic devices to the point where he could not decide whether to laugh (because they had gone well past the point of self-parody) or rage (because they so blatantly patronised the audience). The headlines were followed by a series of reports, all shorter than expected, and read more quickly than he was used to, exaggerating and oversim-

plifying the issues with childish abandon, and supported by footage and graphics edited so quickly as to contest with Cyber-Grindcore music videos. Amazingly, the frantic torrent of syllables and stroboscopic profusion of images somehow managed to convey even less substantive information than the programme's slower-paced earlier incarnations. Worse still, after only ten minutes, when the news section appeared to be at the half-way point, the Afro-Amerindian newsreader ceded way to the sports editor. He frowned in disbelief when he saw a Sino-Hispano-Zambian woman hit the ground running with her comprehensive sports round-up, the news already forgotten and clearly not set to return, as the stern urgency of her colleague was replaced by her own, cheerfully hyperactive delivery.

'Unbelievable,' he said to himself, outraged.

The sports roundup went on and on, cramming each minute with mountains of highly-detailed (and mostly irrelevant) information, where no sport or match or score was left unmentioned or without commentary. Every detail, every score, every gesture made on the court or the pitch, seemed to the programme editors of vital importance, and their zeal was made all the more comical by their need to have the teleprompter speeded up almost beyond the threshold of what it was possible for the anchorpeople to read. Eventually, and none the wiser about world events, he decided to change channel, and try his luck with one of the twenty-four news services.

BBC News 24 had a panel on discussing the latest opinion poll results tracking the three mainstream political parties in the United Kingdom. He rolled his eyes; he had no time for such contrived logorrhea: as far as he was concerned, the three parties were virtually indistinguishable, offering what was fundamentally the same manifesto packaged in three different ways; discussing the parties' performance in the opinions polls, therefore, meant discussing minutiae, generating a lot of noise about very little to obscure the meaninglessness of the electoral process. Labour, Conservative, or Liberal Democrat, meant more taxes, more inflation, more immigration, more crime, more spin, more surveillance, more laws, more prisons, more gay pride, more dumbing down; it was a question of proportion or nomenclature, not of seriously questioning the need for any of the above; their policies were founded on the same first principles.

CNN was obsessing about an American politician's recent 'anti-Semitic' remark, where he had not quite gone along with a fellow politician's equating of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's tract, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, with the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Although the offending politician had by now issued his third public apology, booked himself into a psychiatric clinic, and vowed to donate \$100,000,000 to the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee, this appeared to have only encouraged more vociferous demands for greater and more radical signs of contrition. Said offending politician had at no point gone so far as to criticise Israel, or accuse a prominent Jewish leader of stoking anti-Semitism, but his case bore resemblances to Der Fall Móllemann (the Móllemann Case) of nearly twenty years before, where a mainstream German politician did just that, and ended up losing his position, being expelled from his party (the FDP), being subjected to media hate reports, being investigated by the tax authorities, and, finally, losing his life in a suspect parachute accident. In the American case, the same voices making furibund references to Hitler and the Nazis, were already suggesting that their target's financial affairs, such as his sources of funding, be subjected to scrutiny, if only to rule out dubious links to the Far Right or international Islamist terrorist organisations.

CNN followed this story with an update on Dr. Kevin MacDonald, the 'anti-Semitic' American evolutionary psychologist awaiting trial for genocide in The Hague. Guards had noticed that Dr. MacDonald's cell* was empty around midday. No signs of forced entry or violent breakout had been found. Talking heads speculated with agitation about this being an inside job, orchestrated by the neo-Nazi International - likely by members of an Esoteric Hitlerist cult. An international search and capture operation was currently unfolding. The so-called Monster of Long Beach was not thought to have left the EU. One of the talking heads commentating on the breakout - a rabbi - vehemently asserted that Dr. MacDonald's writings were poisonous and extremely dangerous: it was vital that he be captured before he gained the opportunity to access a computer or the internet. Others, citing literature by - and obviously intellectual heirs of - Leon Kamin, Steven Rose, Richard Lewontin, and Stephen Jay Gould, uniformly attacked Dr. MacDonald's assumptions, conclusions, methodology, use of sources, influences, motivations, and research interests, each of which, according

to them, was flawed, defective, biased, tendentious, absurd, notorious, controversial, discredited, and beyond the pale. All the while, images of a bespeckled Dr. Kevin MacDonald, wearing a suit and in handcuffs, being escorted by heavily armed police, played on the screen again and again.

Sky News were preoccupied with David Irving's arrest in Madrid earlier that day; the Right wing historian was shown in handcuffs, surrounded by agents of the Guardia Civil, and holding a fountain pen; the hotel, in whose events room he had attempted to hold his talk, was also in trouble, but the hotel claimed they were unaware that David Irving was holding a talk within their premises because the booking had been made via layers of innocuous-sounding intermediaries. Irving was shown speaking to reporters holding out microphones, but his voice could not be heard. Instead, the voice-over quoted a selection of Irving's alleged statements, which appeared to have been selected at random and were seemingly designed to shock and outrage for no reason at all. The report was followed immediately by the hourly sports roundup.

None of the twenty-four news channels contained an item on the explosion at Barajas the previous evening. The Telediario on TVE-1 had run the story, but as a tiny item that appeared expressly designed to gloss over the incident, minimising it and obnubilating its possible causes by simply stating that the police were 'investigating'. In the old days, such explosions would have been linked to E.T.A., and saturated the airwaves with sensational reporting, abrim with speculation, interviews, discussion, and expressions of condemnation. However, the E.T.A. had disbanded during the previous Socialist government, following the secession of the Basque Country, so if the explosion was the result of terrorism, it was clearly foreign terrorism, and terrorism of a kind the mediocracy did not wish to discuss. This could only mean terrorism that violated one of the sacred cows of the government-media-academic complex. He imagined the internet would be ablaze with conspiracy theories by now, some genuine, some dreamt by kooks, others red herrings, covertly manufactured and propagated by the EU government, and designed to debunk conspiracy theories with explanatory power in particular while discrediting conspiracy theories in general.

He switched off the television, irritated by the absence of real news. His intention was to surf the net with his mobile for a while (maybe this way he would find out what important

events took place in the world that day), but a burst of raachinegun fire echoed in the distance, causing him to forget this intention; the stream of bullets was immediately followed by individual shots, then screams. He turned towards the balcony and waited, his ears pricked, himself tempted to switch off the bedroom light and crawl on the carpet over to the balcony wall. There were several additional bursts of machinegun, followed by the screech of tires and the receding roar of an internal combustion engine; then only the sounds of Salsa and a drunken brawl coming from a nearby alley down below.

Unnerved, he switched the television back on. He rummaged through the films submenu, hoping to identify entertainment worth his time. Unfortunately, despite the availability of thousands of channels, with films starting every ten minutes, the programming (and the films themselves) had been collated by Programme Directors who viewed his demographic as mostly irrelevant. Certainly, said Programme Directors appeared obsessed with gay Westerns, each competing with the next for hedonism, narcissism, and sexual content, all with highly improbable plotlines, cobbled together so as to provide the flimsiest of excuses to show as many explicit scenes as explicitly as possible. The material, gleefully contrived to inspire discomfort among heterosexual males with traditional conceptions of gender, and sadistically targeting the sensibilities of the pastors of the Black Regiment (for whom programme makers had a peculiar contempt), was kept aloft, hovering above the threshold of vulgar pornography, by sheer dint of critical praise. Such praise, in turn, had evidently encouraged Hollywood and New York studios to open the floodgates ever wider, swamping the planet with their ever more colossal output of such films, pushing every one of them with stupefying marketing campaigns, and ruthlessly applying their leverage in favour of such material through aggressive pricing and draconian lock-in clauses in all their distribution contracts.

The doorbell rang.

When he opened the door he found a long-haired, helmeted man in black leathers, holding a pizza box in one hand, and showing the palm of the other, with brazen and insolent expecration. The pizza was twenty minutes late, so he ignored the palm and reached out for the pizza. The delivery man, however, pulled back the pizza and brought his palm closer to him, giving it a brief and vehement shake.

‘Ha llegado tarde. No le toca propina,’ he declared, addressing the pizza man drily and uptightly.

He despised the modern entitlement culture, where workers dealing directly with customers in certain services industries regarded tips as an inalienable human right, and not as a discretionary reward that was conditional - and dependent - on quality of service.

The pizza man entertained modern - nay, avant garde - conceptions of tipping, however, so his response was to simply drop the pizza box onto the floor and walk away, saying not a word.

‘¡Oiga! ¡Usted!’ he shouted, incensed, ‘¡Vuelva inmediatamente!’

The pizza man simply continued calmly walking, then turned the corner, headed for the lift bank.. .

He swiftly pushed the pizza box inside his apartment and locked the door, before pursuing the offender. . . ‘

‘¡He dicho que vuelva!’ he demanded.

The pizza man did not acknowledge him, approaching the lifts.

He said nothing, but accelerated his pace.

Before he was able to reach the pizza man, however, the door to one of the apartments to his right burst open, vomiting two tan women in their twenties. The one that emerged first, a size-o ectomorph clad in denim shorts and a red t-shirt, attempted to run, but was quickly caught by her pursuer, who, with a face screwed into feral grimace of jealous rage, grabbed arid pulled her by the hair. The pair soon collapsed into a heap of horrifying shrieks, vile insults, scratching nails, and clumps of hair. He and the pizza man, taken aback, stood still and observed, the pizza man’s body language suggesting, misogynistic amusement; he irritated by what was yet another example of the establishment’s declining standards. The attacker scratched one of her opponent’s cheeks as hard as she could, ripping the skin and leaving four deep, bloody canyons. Her opponent, screaming in fury, retaliated by grabbing the attacker’s ear-ring hoops and yanking them both towards her, seeking to rip the earlobes. The attacker grabbed her opponent by the hair and pulled her towards the door, until her opponent’s head was next to the doorframe; her opponent struggled to stand, but was nailed down by her attacker’s stiletto heel, with which the latter had punctured her left breast. The attacker then grabbed the door knob and slammed the door

repeatedly against her opponent's head, until the people in the room, a combination of degraded humans, male and female, and of dubious ancestry, ran towards the fighting pair and attempted to put a disorderly stop to the confrontation. Their hearts were not in it, however, as some were laughing while others shouted instructions without getting physically involved, more interested avoiding spillage of their Rum and Cokes than in preventing injury. A muscular man with tan skin and black hair did, finally, hold the door open with a moccasined foot while grabbing the attacking woman by the waist and pulling her back into the room, screaming placatory commands; the woman held on to the door and kicked and screamed in a hysterical rage. By this time her opponent was back on her feet and going on the offensive: she ran toward her attacker, brushing past the others, who were too distracted cackling or holding on to their drinks to stop her, grabbed one of the empty rum bottles lined up along the wall on the floor, and hurled it at her attacker's face. The muscular man managed to swing sideways just in time to prevent the bottle from hitting its intended target, hitting his neck instead; the collision, however, altered the bottle's trajectory, sending it in a spin towards the small round table ten feet behind him, where it landed with a loud crash, clearing the table's surface of its boozing paraphernalia, and sending shards of broken glass flying in the air. The spillage of booze proved too upsetting a loss for the others to tolerate, and they howled their disappointment with pained faces and exaggerated arm gestures, before deciding that they now had a good enough reason to stop the catfight. With the attacker neutralised in the muscular man's arms, they chased after her opponent, who had already grabbed a broken glass, with which she was hoping to disfigure her attacker's face. This is the last he and the pizza man saw, because a straggling boozer noticed them staring and slammed the door shut behind him.'

The pizza man, instantly bored, turned back towards the lifts and pressed the call button.

'¡Oiga!' he shouted. '¿No se da cuenta de le estoy hablando? Vuelva a mi puerta y entregúeme esa pizza como Dios manda.'

The pizza man simply waited for the lift, motionless, his helmeted head, obscured by the mirror visor, inscrutable.

He walked towards the pizza man, intending to stand in front of him, order that he remove his helmet, demand an honest apology, and direct a re-delivery, his pizza, this time performed

correctly and without expectations of a tip, because none was deserved. He had no opportunity to enact his plan, however, because as soon as he took the first step forward, one of the lifts disgorged ten drunken, stumbling, hyperactive university students, all Hispanic Americans, with smiling faces pointed in the same direction. That direction was the catfighters' apartment, where the catfight was still unfolding, the sound- of which they had obviously overheard through their own apartment's ceiling, and which they had resolved immediately to witness, anxious to indulge in their cruel delight. The drunken students staggered towards the apartment and rang the doorbell, barely able to suppress their sniggers, their giggles, their laughing, and their guffawing as they jabbered away in an incomprehensible Latin American slang. The sweet smoky scent of cannabis enveloped the lot, perfuming the hallway.

He followed the students with hostile eyes, irritated by the presence of so many young people; he did not like the feeling of being in a college dorm, with young twentysomethings boozing, copulating, and hallucinating every single night. He took visual note of their antics so as to mention them in his letter of complaint. But, then again, was there a point in even bothering? If management standards had dropped to such chthonic depths, was it not likely that his letter would receive but the most cursory of skims, before its simple destruction? He imagined that both management and proprietor had secretaries instructed to intercept such letters and re-direct them toward a complaints department that consisted of a single individual operating a small paper shredder. Small, because customer expectations had declined to near complete apathy in the face of decades of evanescent public trust, deteriorating public services, loss of manufacturing quality, massification, increasing reliance on cheap labour, corporate fraud, political corruption, water shortages, power outages, market crashes, and the uncertainties of a high inflation, debt-crippled economy.

The sound of lift doors closing snapped him out of his distraction, reminding him of his unfinished business with the pizza man. The pizza man, however, was gone; the long-haired tip-collector had taken advantage of the distraction to slip into the lift unnoticed and was currently descending toward the lobby, without a doubt congratulating himself on the smoothness of his evasion.

'Damn him!' he thundered, in a whisper.

He decided to return to his apartment and check his pizza, suddenly certain that the pizza would not match his order.

He entered his apartment, picked up the pizza box from the floor and took it to the kitchen. There, he laid the box atop the short refrigerator, opened the lid, - and found before his eyes the wrong pizza.

Chapter 14 Public Service

He raised his hand to hail the cab. The Seat's right-hand indicator switched on as the vehicle slowed down. *A Seat 1500!* he thought, identifying the model upon approach. Of course, this one was not painted black, like the Madrid taxi cabs he remembered from his childhood, but it was the same make and model; he would have never imagined that there was a single cabbie left in the city driving one of those 1960s relics. The sexagenarian Seat could not have less than three million kilometers on the odometer, or up to ten engine rebuilds: The cáb pulled over in front of him and he looked inside. His blue eyes were confronted with filthy seats with cracked leather, pornographic magazines, old paper cups > dirt, dust, and a cabbie who, improbably, looked like Colonel Attar from Planet of the Apes. A pungent body odour, and the smell of burnt rubber and diesel permeated the vehicle's interior.

'Bruselas,' he told the cabbie, feigning earnestness.

The cabbie drove off without a word. Nothing would have ever persuaded him to ride a cab in such condition.

He used a paper napkin (stolen from the bar at the hotel), to wipe the perspiration running down his heat-stricken face. It was crucial that he kept the sweat off his starched white collar.

Although Eton shirts were virtually uncreasable, it would make no difference that he paid €1,200 for his, if he arrived at his client's office with a stained collar.

The avenue was completely choked with slow-moving traffic. His ears heard only the rumble of revving engines, the buzzing

of motorcycles, the honking of road-ragers, the blowing of air-brakes, the shouting, of van drivers, and the blare of Arab Pop, emanating from vehicular stereo systems. The pavement was in turn choked with a mudflow of pedestrians, so closely packed together as to render the concept of personal space a vaporous utopia. Many of the pedestrians were homosexual men; most were foreigners from Africa and the Middle East. All competed for space with a remarkable absence of civility, none above using elbows and shoulders to force or ram their way through. Above them, the sun beat their heads without mercy, burning their skins, blinding their eyes, scorching their scalps, melting the tarmac - so strong was the light that it bleached out the grey urban landscape of cement and baked brick; the trees and bushes that had once adorned the avenue had long been dead, desiccated, and cut down, their past existence only evident through the stumps that had been left on the pots and circles of caked dirt lining the pavement. The street thermometer read 46 °C. It was 8 o'clock in the morning.

All the cabs were taken, and he "suddenly realised it might take him up to ninety minutes to reach Castellana in that congestion. However humiliating and beneath him, if he was to arrive at Soptic in time to his 9 o'clock meeting, he would have to ride the Metro. He began walking in the direction of Metropolitano, the nearest station, a hundred yards away.

If it was teeming above surface, there was no room for an atom beneath the surface. Commuters were packed into the Metro system at a pressure of -1.1 megaPascals, or approximately 11 atmospheres. The queues were interminable, and moved at geological time-scales. It took millions of slow-moving seconds to purchase a ticket, just as long to get to the ticket gates, and again as long to get past security. This entire interval he spent with his feet burning, in a standing position, with his chest pressed against a warm commuter's back, and someone's warm chest pressed against his own back, his nose never more than two inches from someone's head. Since relative humidity was running at 90%, this meant heavy perspiration, and therefore wrinkles on his Saville Row suit and embarrassing stains on his constricting collar. The air had the consistency of lentil soup, and the stink of body odor and halitosis. Presumably because of the incident at Barajas, security was even more paranoid than usual, complete with blocks, dogs, metal detectors, X-rays, manual searches, and biometric ID

inspections; he was requested to remove his watch, his belt, his shoes, his tie, and his jacket, and to have them all passed through the X-ray machine and the metal detectors. At least he was glad to be rid of the last of his change: pockets bulging with jingling coins caused trousers to look cheap, and men to look unprofessional.

In theory, there was a train every minute, but in practice, only a fraction were usable: the first was out of service; the next two were human sardine tins; the one following exploded with screaming children, but re-filled with angry commuters before he got near the edge of the platform; a distorted voice then reverberated across the station, announcing, in unintelligible pidgin, something about delays and there being a man under a train in Ciudad Universitaria (the gory remains of a suicidal student, in other words); this was followed by a long interval of time without trains; the trains that ended the wait, were again so full that it would have been impossible to force himself in without crushing several commuters' ribcages. At last, however, a train arrived with carriages that had room for three to five people to squeeze themselves in, provided they were willing to employ ruthless force and kept their respiration shallow for the duration of the journey. He, standing right by the edge of the platform, and about to be pushed off it by the continuous heave of commuters behind him, saw no choice - and indeed was by now desperate enough - to forget his dignity, his decorum, and his manners, and do whatever was necessary to secure a place inside the carriage. Barely averting a nasal amputation by the arriving train, he used his shoulder to wedge himself between two commuters, pushing as hard as he could. The man to his right, a bald endomorph with a blood-curdling comb-over, ended up with his face pressed against an airport novel; the woman to his left, a leathery brunette clad in *tech chic*, was forced to sandwich her handbag between her legs; the gentleman in front of her found his nose inside a Jupiter-sized afro, half of which had been flattened against a glass pane dividing the seats from the standing area.

The interior of the carriage felt like a volcanic caldera, filled with a fetid sludge that passed for air. The smell of humanity was so pungent that he felt compelled to force the gaseous sludge out of his lungs; this he did, surrounded by the loud murmur of conversation, the constant coughing, and the angry hiss of white noise blasting out of nearby headphones. Heaving, sudorous chests pressed against his torso; a teenager bur-

rowed somewhere inside the carriage gobbled a McDonald's meal. It was numerous pointless minutes before the doors finally closed, and the train began moving.

Fearing a panic attack, he read a fellow commuter's newspaper, in an attempt to abstract himself from his environment. The newspaper was that day's issue of *El Pais*, and the commuter an office worker with curly hair and a checkered suit. He had no time to rue the fact that, of all the news items there were to read in that newspaper, Checkered Suit considered the sports page to contain the ones of greatest urgency: as soon as his eyes saw the title of one of the articles, he train came to a halt and the carriage was enveloped in darkness.

There had been a power failure.

The power cut was initially greeted with silence, save for the Father Christmas chuckle from the obligatory cretin who somehow always found power cuts, delays, and cancellations a source of hilarity. As long minutes passed, however, without an announcement from the conductor, silence gave way to impatient conversation, sighing, tutting, tapping of fingers, and mumbled curses.

'iABRAN!' screamed a voice, echoing from a few carriages ahead. 'iABRAN!' The screams were accompanied by urgent banging noises.

He rolled his eyes and shook his head, momentarily amused, despite his claustrophobia, and welcoming the distraction: there was always a freak who panicked.

With the air-conditioning out of order, the temperature inside the carriage began to rise rapidly. Within moments he found his collar drenched in sweat. *Damn!* he thought, asking himself why he had not been more pessimistic and left the hotel an hour earlier. The egg-poaching heat prompted commuters near the sliding doors to attempt to pry them open. Their attempts were vigorous, but ultimately unsuccessful; the only relief came from the slam doors at the front and back ends of the carriage, which had by then been opened: Relief for him, however, was scant, because the slam doors seemed kilometers away and the carriage was too crowded for the apertures to be sufficient: the hundreds of bodies packed into the carriage generated more heat than the slam doors were able to dissipate.

He thought of checking the time, but he found his arms firmly pinned to his sides; he could tense his muscles, but his arms would not move: he felt like a Greenpeace activist who

had concreted himself up to his head in a crowded highstreet in the centre of town. He joined others mumbling curses about the delays and lack of information from, or visible activity by, the conductor. Just as he had begun to despair at making it to his meeting, however, the lights blinkered back on, greeted by cheers that drowned the ascending whir of the engines, as the latter came back online. Within moments, the train jerked back into motion.

Yet at no point there was an apology or an explanation from the conductor. Either the train's internal communication's system was out of order, or power cuts had become so routine that the conductor felt no need to remark on them. The answer came soon enough: the moment he found alternative reading material nearby (a young lady was reading Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, disguised under a dustjacket taken from an old copy of Jackie Collin's *The Bitch*), the internal communication's system began sniping at his concentration with an interminable litany of frequent announcements, all of them superfluous, pleonastic, repetitive, overly prolix, and exquisitely, irritating. Like the station signs and the ticket machines, the announcements were multi-lingual; the Arabic and Spanish versions recited side to side, in an infuriatingly contrived and over-polite sing-song.

Chapter 15

Dr. Brummagem

The lift stopped on the fifteenth floor, where the doors opened to reveal two waiting women, both very serious. One of them, a curvaceous, pale-skinned brunette in her mid thirties, moved confidently and looked vaguely familiar; the other one was in her late fifties and had a robust, intimidating presence, supplemented by large and piercing blue eyes. Both were smartly dressed, the younger one clad in a black suit with a short jacket and a white shirt, the older one in a leaden suit with a long jacket, a striped shirt, and an indigo necktie.

'It's so annoying. We've been having problems with our emails since February. Every time they say they will look into it, nothing gets done. And when they finally do get the engineer to come in, that *pillock* - excuse my language - tries to blame it on *me!*' the older woman fumed, her eyes wide, her lips tight, as she and her companion took positions in front of him, facing the doors.

'For frick's sake! It's just like that office we used to have in Surrey. The emails *never* worked in there!' answered the younger woman, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

'I know! And it's exactly the same in the Frankfurt office, the London office, the New York office...'

'It's because I'm a woman. If it was a man complaining, they would sort out the problem right away!' The older woman gesticulated with emphatic deliberation.

'Why? What did he say?' prompted her companion, frowning in anticipation of a horror story.

The older woman switched on the sarcasm: 'Tell him we are still having problems with our emails, and he goes, "Aw, perhaps you need to check your anti-virus". No, I don't *need* to check my anti-virus. Do you *think* that because I am a *woman* I don't *know* how to configure an anti-virus programme? Prick. It's so insulting!'

'At least he is not trying to blame it on your keyboard anymore. Or to the fact that your registered office is in Barcelona.'

'I am *sick* and *tired* of being patronised and having to deal with this *shit* - excuse my language. He's 33 and he knows *absolutely nothing* about TCP/IP. He knows *absolutely nothing*.'

'And it's not as if you can just find another office. You tried that before and it didn't work.'

'But I shouldn't have to *move* to have my email *working* in the first place,' snapped the older woman, widening her eyes even more and gesticulating with her head. 'They *need* to sort it out.'

'Pff. Whatever.'

Silence.

'Have you heard from your agent?' asked the older woman, turning her head towards her companion, with her chin slightly raised, her lips still tight.

'Yes. Xi have accepted the manuscript for the re-write of *Eden's Atlantis* and they have now come back with an acceptable offer for the sequel. But they still insist in paying their royalties in dollars. They say that it's because the original contract stipulated accounting done in dollars, blah blah blah blah.'

The older woman tutted, 'That's *bullshit*. Who do they take you for? You've got a *PhD in business*. Dollars are *no longer acceptable!* *Everybody* knows that.'

'I know! That contract was signed fifteen years ago.' Then: 'was no frickin' hyperinflation then!'

Ping.

The lift stopped and opened its doors. The two women exited the lift, continuing their heated conversation as they turned right and disappeared from view.

Eden's Atlantis. He remembered getting his niece a copy of the rare first edition for her 14th birthday last year; she was an obsessive fan of Dawn Bergemann's historical fantasy novels, he made a mental note to inform her niece next time he saw her that there was a chance that Dawn Bergemann was plan-

ning a sequel for *Eden's Atlantis* - provided, of course, in case she did not know already: she most likely did.

'iSu café!'

Miss Cotter slammed the cup onto the conference table, causing the coffee to splash onto the polished surface. He stared with astonishment as the harridan stormed out of the meeting room, her floral dress more at home in a Laura Ashley shop fifty years ago than in a modern office. Dr. Brummagem did not react to the scene, save perhaps for a near-imperceptible tensile redistribution in his facial musculature that suggested suppressed amusement; this, in turn, suggested that Ms. Cotter's brand of mercurial feminism was for her the norm, and a behaviour that the management there tolerated with benign condescension.

His negative first impression of Dr. Brummagem was confirmed that morning. The CFO affected the language of integrity, moral rectitude, and transparency, yet his phraseology, ellipses, omissions, gestures, and pregnant pauses maintained a subtext indicative of opposite qualities, suggesting that his stated fiscal aims for the project, and his real aims, were divergent: while his stated aims were to minimise the company's tax liabilities, his real aims were, in fact, to exploit tax loopholes as a method of generating new revenue streams, taking advantage of some of the peculiar effects the utilisation of fractional reserve banking techniques had in a high-inflation economic environment. This subtext he maintained with exquisite subtlety, with the effortless ease and seamless execution of an accomplished dissembler. Of course, this was quite normal, for in a surveillance society, characterised by punitive taxes and predatory tax authorities, no CFO worth his salt could afford to not be a consummate master in the art of corporate double speak: tax authorities were known to plant spies inside management consultancy firms, and, although he was a recognised computer scientist and consultant, with an impressive publishing record and the most prestigious credentials, paranoia had become part and parcel of the culture of large organizations; Dr. Brummagem, therefore, regarded it prudent to suspect him of being a potential tax mole. It was evident, and perfectly logical, that Dr. Brummagem's attitude was to assume that he was talking to a mole, that every conversation was being recorded, and likely to be read out as evidence in a court of law, pitting the Ministerio de Hacienda against his organisation. He found this irritating, not only because he was not, would never

choose to be, and could not imagine a normal person ever choosing to be, a tax inspector (what kind of person did that?); but also because having to operate in an atmosphere of constant dissembling and suspicion was inefficient, and should, in a sane world, be completely unnecessary: as far as he was concerned, the government had no moral authority to confiscate any part of a person's earnings, and much less to use intimidation, coercion, and punishment in order to force a person to relinquish the fruit of his labour.

He observed Dr. Brummagem's *balcarrotas* while the latter leafed through a report in a brand-new, blue ring binder. The report was voluminous, two inches thick, in tight print, written in an esoteric financial jargon calculated to obfuscate rather than elucidate. The report, moreover, was one of dozens, since for tax, VAT, and banking purposes, Scoptic existed as an intricate web of nominal companies, their financial years in sequences designed to either abscond profits or conceal debts, depending on whether Scoptic required avoiding taxes or raising finance. Profits (or debts) could and would be transferred from one company to another, sometimes in a carousel scheme, sometimes in a Ponzi scheme, as needed to escape the taxman, the VATman, the creditors, or the banks.

'The ideal would be...' began Dr. Brummagem.

Suddenly, the fluorescent tubes above them all went dead: another power failure. He and Dr. Brummagem looked at each other; it was bright outside, but the conference room windows faced North, meaning the tower's entire facade was in the shade, making the offices on that side of the building too dark for reading small fonts.

'We'll carry on in the Radio Shack room; that one faces East and is bright,' said Dr. Brummagem, standing up.

Upon exiting the meeting room, Dr. Brummagem signalled to one of the younger workers in the open plan area. '¡Sacramento! Tráete el carrito y lleva estas carpetas a contabilidad.'

'Vale. En seguida,' said the young man, slightly too officious, and making sure to close his browser window, erase all cookies and temporary files, and empty his recycling bin before leaving his desk.

The Radio Shack room was the area where Scoptic had set up the TRS-80s. It looked like an open plan office, surrounded by cobalt blue cubicles on three sides, the fourth consisting of columns and windows. None of the cubicles immediately

around the area could be accessed from within the Radio Shack room, and the Radio Shack room could only be accessed via a serpentine corridor that wound its way through the disorientating labyrinth of cubicles. Entrance to these cubicles could only be gained via an alternative corridor, camouflaged behind a concealed entrance. The corridor leading to the Radio Shack room had occasional cubicles left and right, each containing TRS-80s, and grimly decorated with decrepit 1980s office furnishings: there were worn out chairs with tired springs and stained, threadbare fabric; plastic boxes of 8½ inch floppy discs; grey, rotary dial telephones; Atari 830 acoustic modems; and shelves lined with TRS-80 manuals, consisting of brown, imitation leather ring binders with photocopied wheels in typewriter script. These cubicles were all vacant, except for one. He surmised this layout had been designed to trick tax inspectors hoping to catch the management with their trousers down during surprise visits.

'Have you been having many of these power cuts recently?' he asked, feigning indifference.

'They have become gradually more frequent over the past ten years, but it has got pretty bad in the last two,' replied Dr. Brummagem.

'Isn't it the national grid? It can't cope with population growth?'

'Population growth, yes, but also the shanty towns that have colonised the periphery of Madrid.'

'It's been a few years since I've visited, though I used to come regularly. I did notice the motorway is now lined with vast housing estates. It's like Soviet-era housing compressed into a small space.' |

'The shantytowns are just beyond those estates. You can't see them too well at night because they are relatively dark - one lightbulb per hovel - but there are millions of people living in there, getting their electricity supply by illegally connecting to power masts. When you include the shantytowns around the other major cities, it adds up to a major power drain.'

'Franco would have never allowed them to flourish,' he said, feigning that he was joking, but really meaning it.

'Doing a Mugabe would only send the hordes running down the hills,' observed Dr. Brummagem, smirking. 'We need to integrate them so we can turn them into proper consumers. Bigger market: more profits.'

He chose not to respond. Dr. Brummagem was obviously a globalist, for whom humans were all interchangeable units of

production and consumption; the likes of him *believed* that given the right environment and equal opportunities, any featherless biped could be turned into a Western-style consumer. For them it was a matter of equivalence and repetition, where humans were blank slates ready to be inscribed by social engineers - and, in his case, by capitalists seeking to replicate consumers and perpetuate a pyramid scheme of ever-growing consumption, funded by ever-growing debt. This mentality put a premium on quantity over quality, on mediocrity over excellence, on expediency over principle, and he despised it accordingly. Alas, that was the way of the world: like everywhere and always, the banausic came ahead of the beautiful and the inspired; the individual was powerless to change it. Therefore, the most rational life strategy was to insulate himself from the world as best he could. He had no children and would be dead in less than fifty years, so worrying about events beyond that horizon was a pointless waste of energy.

Sacramento entered the area pushing a trolley loaded with ring binders. 'Adonde le dejo las carpetas?'

'Cerca de la luz. En aquel escritorio de la esquina,' directed Dr. Brummagem. Dr. Brummagem then turned towards him, his sideburns ridiculous. 'Every second we stand here is a second Hacienda dreams of ways to suck our blood.'

Chapter 16

Bar de Obreros

‘**U**n bocadillo de chorizo y una caña, por favors,’ he ordered. Two men in blue overalls entered the establishment. Both wore their dust-and-plaster-soiled garment rudely unzipped all the way down to their navels, exposing hirsute chests and beer bellies. "El Barrigón Cervecerero" had been aptly named, if its proprietors had sought to source their clientele from local building sites.

‘¡Manolín!’ came the cheerful shout, from somewhere along the bar. The shout was acknowledged with a grin by one of the arriving builders, who then walked past him and took positions at the far end of the bar, joining three rough looking men. Said three men had three dimple steins half full with beer for company. The new arrivals were greeted with bumptious amenity by the barman, an overweight man in his fifties, with a calm yet tough, authoritative manner; the new arrivals shouted happy demands for beer.

Following the digestive challenges of the previous day, he'd had no inclination to test the limits of his palate with rococo culinary experiments. Builders' bars were a practical lunchtime solution that had traditionally yielded acceptable gastronomic results, in adequate quantities, and at a low cost. A further advantage was the speed of service: inside ten minutes he had a quarter of a baguette filled with slices of chorizo on a plate in front of him. Disadvantages? A TV set propped up on a shelf in a corner near the ceiling, blaring away hyperactive interviews with footballers and sports commentators; scowling middle-

aged women playing on the noisy fruit machines; and, of course, the fact that such an establishment was unsuitable for a man of his standing. The framed photograph of Franco hanging on a wall had somehow compensated for these deficiencies; perhaps the likeness of *el generalísimo*, Caudillo de España, was the reason why the clientele was indigenous (and therefore not below forty five), at the exclusion of the young Moroccans that made up 95% of brickies these days. In the photograph, Franco stared icily ahead, serene and authoritatively transcendent, above the misery of day-to-day life. If only he knew what professional politicians had done to Spain after him! *He must be spinning in his grave like a dynamo*, he thought.

‘Cuarenta euross’ said the barman.

He reached down his jacket for his wallet.

Unfortunately, he was there confronted with a problem.

The wallet was made out of cow skin.

He retrieved it, at which point he obtained visual confirmation of what his digits had already told him: it was the mugging wallet, with the photocopied notes and imitation credit cards.

He cursed inwardly, forcing himself to remain circumspect, but immediately scouring his brain for explanations. He realised what had happened moments before he was prepared to admit it: while experiencing the effects of food borne illness the previous day, he had kindly handed over his real wallet to the muggers, the *maras*, no doubt much to their subsequent delight; he had obviously mixed up his wallets at some point during the day (probably at the restaurant where he had met with Professor Kautonen, possibly before, since the lunch had been Professor Kautonen’s treat), and in his febrile state during the mugging the wallet’s expensive crocodile leather had gone unnoticed by him. This meant that the mobile phone currently stuffed inside his jacket was also suspect.

‘Un momento, por favor,’ he said to the barman, who waited patiently.

With calculated calm he retrieved the mobile from his jacket, only to have his hopes crushed and his fears confirmed: it was his old, virus-ridden mobile, the mugging mobile.

‘Vallas. Lo siento mucho, pero parece que me he traído la billetera equivocada. Voy a tener que dejar el bocadillo y la cerveza,’ he said, politely, with no other choice. |

‘Joder. ¡A ver si se fija! ¡Que este es un buen chorizo!’ rumbled the barman, gesticulating and clearly annoyed.

Indeed, he remembered noticing how the barman had handled and sliced the chorizo with great care, depositing each slice on the eventrated baguette section as if it were a precious gem.

‘Oiga, de verdad que lo siento. No se ponga asi,’ he replied. ‘¡Pero es que esta riquísimo! Me da pena tirarlo,’ insisted the barman.

He tried to think quickly of a solution. Not only was he famished, but he loved good chorizo, and, like the barman, hated the idea of its being binned.

‘¡Eh! ¡Otra caña! ¡Que estamos secos!’ shouted one of the merry builders.

‘Va,’ thundered the barman, gesturing with his arm, before looking back at him, with angry expectation. ‘A ver. Vaya a por su billettera. Que guardo el bocadillo hasta que vuelva.’

Under different circumstances, he would have been grateful for the offer; under present circumstances, however, it compounded his difficulties. His mind imagined him the king in a game of chess, and rapidly anticipated a succession of moves leading inexorably to an embarrassing social checkmate.

More merry shouting from the far end of the bar, ‘¡Eh! ¡Que pasa con esa cerveza! ¡Que nos morimos de sed!’

He looked in the direction of the builders, and saw a group of smiling faces, expecting the barman’s response. The one demanding another beer had a prominent jaw, curly hair, and carterpillar eyebrows.

‘Que si, que va,’ thundered the barman, impatiently.

Explaining that he had two wallets, that they were different, and that there was a reason why they were different in the way that they were, would take too long, would involve convoluted explanations and unorthodox assumptions, supported by excursive background information, which the barman would neither understand, want to understand, or have the patience to even hear. He imagined that to the barman the equation was simple: barman supplies sandwich, customer pays - end of discussion. Well, in fact, no discussion. Customer pays and that was it: no caveats, no qualifications, no ifs or buts: sandwich, payment; then thank you and goodbye. If customer did not pay, then customer was at best a waste of time, at worst a conman, in which case the baseball bat hidden somewhere under the counter would be retrieved and promptly put to good use, its strength tested against that of customer’s skull. What was more, other customers, and particularly and without a

doubt the builders at the far end of the bar, would join in, anxious to demonstrate their feelings of solidarity with the barman via their work boots, fists, hammers, and nearby chairs, which would be quickly smashed against his curved back, as in any good, old-fashioned Western film. Telling a porky pie was, therefore, the sane, normal, and rational thing to do. Yet, this he could not bring himself to do: to someone attempting to gain illicit advantage over him, he could; but to someone who meant well, who sought to offer him honest food of high quality, and who cared about his product - all rare qualities in the postmodern age - he could not. His only option was to find the way to compress his explanation in as few and simple words as he could.

‘Pues, evidentemente, me la han robado,’ he stated.

‘¿Cómo que se la han robado? ¿Y esa billetera que tiene usted, no vale?’ asked the barman, leaning on the counter, perplexed and obviously thinking he was being taken for an idiot.

‘No. La compré recientemente. Sólo tiene tarjetas de cartón y billetes fotocopiados. Supongo que así daría el pego en la tienda. La billetera con las tarjetas y el dinero de Verdad me la han robado,’ he explained, his speculative assertion calculated to satisfy the barman while averting falsehood (he detested lying).

‘¿Y ahora me lo dice? ¡A mi no me gusta que me tomen el pelo!’

‘¡Pero joder, Benito! ¿Qué pasa con esa cerveza? ¡Hoy hace mucho calor!’ shouted one of the builders again, always in good humour.

He wondered whether Benito was the barman’s real name, or a pseudonym, because, without a doubt, the barman looked like Benito Mussolini. He knew well enough because he and his wife were still half way through a crateful of wine from the Italian company, Lunardelli, whose Historical Line of wines, included bottles featuring, among other historical figures, Benito Mussolini. He had ordered a crate of Mussolini-labelled wine for his own amusement, as well as a satisfying symbolic gesture against the liberal democratic political establishment.

This time the barman ignored the builders, and continued to stare at him, demanding with his eyes an excellent explanation.

‘¡Eh, tío! ¡Paga el bocadillo de una vez!’⁶⁴ shouted one of the builders, this time at him.

'No puede,' said the barman, at the builders.

'¿Cómo que no puede? ¡Si le veo con una billetera con un puto fajo de billetes como un ladrillo! ¿Qué cono son? ¿Pese-tas?' taunted one of the builders, causing an explosion of laughter;

'Le han robao,' shouted back the barman. Another explosion of laughter.

'¡Oye, no vas a tirar ese bocadillo! ¡Tráelo pa' 'ca!' shouted one of the builders.

'Venga. Ahi va,' replied the barman, walking towards the far end of the bar, transporting the chorizo sandwich on a white ceramic plate, calmly relieved the chorizo would now go into an appreciative stomach, as opposed to a plastic bin.

'¡Joder, tío, no sabes lo que te has perdido!' shouted one of the builders, directing the statement at him. The builder then bit into the sandwich and pulled a face of paradisaical delight. "¡Mmm! ¡Qué bueno esta!" he shouted, cueing in yet another explosion of raucous laughter.

He looked at the builders, unsure of what to say, or what to do.

'¡Parece que tiene hambre!' shouted the builder, pointing at him, giving him a wink, and looking at his comrades. The latter stared at him with cheeky grins on their faces, hoping for a reaction.

'Le ha comido la lengua un ratón;' said one of the builders, detonating more laughter.

He simply stood there, frozen. Then made to leave.

'¡Eh, tío! ¡No te pongas así! ¡Que es un día y uno de mili!' shouted the builder with the fishing hat, the one who had been doing most of the shouting. '¡Benito! ¡Prepárale al tío otro bocadillo, que le invito yo!'

The hot sun slammed him as he stepped out of the bar, its light so intense it bleached the lifeless alley and turned the chromed grills of parked vehicles into a blinding fulgor. He stepped off the pavement and onto the tarmac, intending to cross the street and look for a telephone booth along the Paseo de la Castellana. He quickly abandoned this route, however, upon finding the tarmac's temperature hovering just below melting point, making his shoes feel like molars chewing on licorice. As he walked along the pavement, he scanned the cars parked along the row of digital parking metres, almost expecting to see melting dashboards and steering wheels. If it had been like an oven side the bar, out in the street it was much worse; he had

removed his jacket and slung it across his arm, but it still only took ninety seconds for the sun to soak his head and shirt in heavy perspiration.

The implications of the - now obviously successful - mugging had revealed themselves while manducating his sandwich. It was infuriating that on the one day that he had happened to eat at a dubious restaurant, at the very moment that he had been suffering from food poisoning, a troop of aspiring maras (upon reflection, they could have only been counterfeit: real maras would have killed him) had decided to test their virility by robbing a middle-aged white collar professional. Fortunately for him, and unfortunately for the mugging scum, when travelling abroad he never took with him any of his main credit cards: he took only a selection of secondary cards with relatively small credit limits, enough to cover his expenses and a possible emergency, but too little to bring any joy to muggers, thieves, pickpockets, conmen, or fraudsters, or to make a noteworthy dent in his current bank account balance (which he kept low and without overdraft facilities anyway). His main credit cards he usually left at home, locked up in a safe, hidden in a secret chamber, located at the bottom of a shaft, accessible via a concealed manhole, and situated in a remote corner of the garden, which he and his wife kept deliberately obscure and agrestial, protected by nail-spitting rotating sprinklers. The safe in question also held their hoard of gold coins and ingots (electronic gold could be tracked, and could not be trusted). He would now have to call his wife, tell the tedious tale of the mix-up with the wallets, have her cancel the stolen cards, and have her courier one of the main credit cards, along with a Post-A-Phone, using the fastest courier service available. Until they arrived, he would not be able to hail taxis, use public transport, or purchase food, drinks, or aspirin: he had no change left.

The chorizo had been first class: it had been made with genuine ingredients, prepared with traditional methods, and cured for the correct length of time: the chorizo - and for that matter, also the Serrano ham and any other cured sausage or ham - that was nowadays sold at delis and in supermarkets was, in contrast, produced in a hurry and cutting corners, because meeting demand and adhering to traditional methods were in the age of quantity mutually exclusive propositions. While proper chorizo was made in Spain, by Spanish farmers, with regional ingredients, and enjoying the benefits of conscien-

cious expertise, national pride, and a small production scale, supermarket chorizo was mass produced, overseas, by foreign workers, in mechanised factories, with truncated recipes, cheap ingredients, and expedited processes, and enjoying the expertise of multinationals focused on economies of scale, Fordism, value engineering, and profit maximisation. For these multinationals taste was, of course, a matter of choosing strong enough spices and eliminating comparisons by setting up a monopoly. The results were, of course, dire. He remembered once being tempted by a chorizo sausage at the Hipercor in Pozuelo some twenty years before and taking it back to England, where he had used some of it to make himself a sandwich. The one bite he had taken had lasted in his mouth less than a second: the gross chunks of fat, lazily ground cartilage, and incompletely cured meat had repulsed him the moment they had been identified by his tongue. Following that lamentable incident he had discovered that the only places where a connoisseur could find chorizo of quality comparable to what he remembered from his childhood was in traditional, family-owned establishments - although not all of them.

By the time he reached Castellana he found himself afflicted by blinding migraine. It had not been a good idea to drink alcohol on such a hot day; the beer and the salty chorizo had completely dehydrated him; pickled his brain, and cured his entrails. Wading through the congested strips of pavement along the Castellana, teeming with elderly, slow-moving, diffident White Spaniards, propped on canes, crutches, and walking frames, and young, swaggering, confident Black Africans, pushing prams and surrounded by children, compounded his irritation. Interest was added on this compound by the complete absence of shade: long dead due to chronic drought, and the corpses rendered dangerous by the frequency of violent storms, all trees along the avenue's congested carriages had been cut down. To make things worse, the first telephone-box he found, one with two phones facing in opposite directions, had been viciously vandalised: in one case the receiver had been smashed to pieces, in the other the receiver, had been ripped out altogether; ancient layers of graffiti, stinking rubbish, and grimy surfaces suggested that the vandals had perpetrated their act years ago, only the council authorities had not cared, or had not enjoyed the funds to, repair the appliances. Looking across the paralysed river of cars, he saw that the telephone box on the other side of the avenue had suffered a simi-

lar fate (it had been burnt), and that local shops and residents, frustrated by the impossibility of ensuring a normal rubbish collection by the council binmen, had re-commissioned the telephone box as a fly-tipping site: recycling and waste-reduction rules and regulations governing rubbish collections were so profuse and contortuplicated that it was almost impossible to ensure perfect compliance; most of the time, residents who left bins with rubbish out for collection ended up attracting only a fine.

A more detailed ocular inspection revealed no additional telephone boxes in any condition anywhere. If they had existed in the past, they had fallen victims to the universality of mobile telephony.

Chapter 17

Dr. Stumm

Ms. Cotter gave him a glacial stare as he approached the reception desk. ‘May I ask a favor? I’ve lost my phone and I need to make a collect call,’ he said. He hoped his euphemism would not be tested by uncomfortable questions; robberies were as common as mosques and mosquitoes, but confessing to having been victim of one would imply confessing to having been outwitted by illiterate criminals. This was embarrassing, considering his intelligence was for him a primary source of self-esteem: he knew from his reading of Herrnstein and Murray’s *The Bell Curve*, that low IQ was the strongest predictor of criminality, ahead of socio-œconomic status or lack of education; Herrnstein and Murray’s argument, that low IQ led to diminished academic performance, and therefore to diminished career opportunities and socio-œconomic status, was to him more convincing than the socialist argument, that poverty resulted in low IQs – after all, only a fraction of the poor engaged in criminal behavior, but the greatest concentrations of low IQs were found among prison inmates; and he had never encountered a mugger who looked capable of adding double digit numbers in his head.

‘Ah, I see. So I am your slave now. Very well,’ said the harridan. ‘I am going to show you a phone you can use because I am a nice person. But don’t think for a moment you are going to be able to just waltz in here and ask me any favour you like, Mister!’

He noticed, as she so charmingly agreed to his request, that she had well-used copies of Andrea Dworkin’s *Ice and Fire* and

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. He made a mental note to look up those authors, in an effort to try to understand where Ms. Cotter's virulent misandry was coming from.

Ms. Cotter took him to the TRS-80 area, stomping angrily as she led him through the winding corridor, and showed him a telephone.

'That one works,' she said, pointing at the device with a varnished fingernail, before abruptly walking away.

He dialed to make a collect call. His wife accepted the call.

'Hi. What happened?' she said.

He sighed in frustration, 'It seems I have been mugged. Yesterday, when the maras accosted me, I handed over what I thought was my fake wallet -'

'Oh, no,' his wife sighed.

'Yes. I gave the gentlemen the real one,' he said, imagining the restaurant's chef, the waiters, and the owners, lined up against a wall before a shooting squad.

'You want me to cancel the cards,' she anticipated, in a monotone.

'Yes, please,' he replied, looking at the baked urban landscape outside, 'And I need you to have the network send me a Post-a-Phone and you to send me the main Mastercard the fastest way you can. Today.'

'Do you have any cash for now?'

The question irritated him; he picked up a pencil. 'No. I used what I had left this morning paying for the Metro.' He thought the Metro ticket had been a perfect waste of money.

'How are you going to eat?' she asked, worried.

'I've had a sandwich and it's too hot to eat anyway. I can hold out until tomorrow.'

'Ask your clients for plenty of iced teas, then. With plenty of sugar.'

'Yes, OK. I'll call you tonight,' he said, somewhat abruptly, eager to end the call. He knew she meant well, but his wife's concern underlined his underperformance, the fact that dim-witted, half-ape, degenerate humans had out-maneuvred him.

Holding it in his fist, he applied pressure on the pencil with his thumb until his nail went white.

Sensing his sentiment, she changed topic. 'I'll be going to drop by the photographer's studio this evening. Every time I've tried to call him I've got the answering machine. As you know I hate those things, so I've decided instead we'll pay him a visit, and see if we can arrange the shoot at short notice.'

'He is obviously not interested. Otherwise he would return your calls.' The pencil snapped.

'Well, the agency knows him and apparently he works well.'

'What time will you be back?'

'Around nine.'

'I'll call you at ten.'

During his meeting with Dr. Stumm that afternoon, he confirmed to himself how he also disliked Scopic's CIO. He had occasion, during his meeting, to cement the dislike with specific reasons, furnished with concrete examples, none of which, unfortunately, had anecdotal value. He had, during the introductory meeting, *sensed* that Dr. Stumm thought himself very clever; he had, during the present meeting, now *concluded* that Dr. Stumm thought himself very clever. Moreover, he was also a charlatan. Misuses of terminology, imprecisions in his definitions, misapplications in his nomenclatures, obscure to Dr. Stumm, obvious to him, and incomprehensible to the consumer, indicated that the foundations of Dr. Stumm's body of knowledge did not rest on a bedrock of binary code. It exhibited the classic symptoms of a reverse epistemological trajectory, where the subject's descent from broad generalities to specific information had been determined by practical necessity, and limited by practical application. The further the descent into specifics, the more Dr. Stumm's understanding deteriorated into vague inferences, borrowed phrases, nebulous notions, and hearsay. His own epistemological trajectory, in contrast, had been built from the bottom up, from quantum detail to cosmological overview. To him it was a matter of professional pride that he possessed the cosmological vision required for grasping complex information systems, and yet was still able to roll up his sleeves and manipulate these systems at the subatomic level. He could read memory dumps in hexagon decimal code - and of course also binary - the way ordinary humans could read a comic book. He doubted Dr. Stumm would recognise in 01110011 01110100 01110101 91001101 01001101 his own name. Pathetic.'

Yet Dr. Stumm thought himself very clever, and acted accordingly.

Dr. Stumm's desire for an increase in his departmental budget emerged as a subtext during the meeting. Within fifteen minutes it became clear that Dr. Stumm sought to use him as leverage to persuade Dr. Brummagem that his budget

allocation was far too restrictive, and that in a world where competitors were probably investing much more in AT systems than they were, the company's very existence depended on the IT department being adequately funded. Starving the department of resources would consign the organisation to irrelevance and them personally to the humiliations of the dole queue. And once in the dole queue, always in the dole queue: no one hired losers. The company would go bankrupt, its' assets auctioned off as scrap for nothing. In a ruthlessly competitive business ecology, thinking big and acting fast, and going for the kill, without pity or hesitation, was essential for survival. It was kill or be killed. You do not tell a country they have to fight with bows and arrows because the nuclear weapons their rival has are too expensive. Dr. Brummagem's prudence was, of course, perfectly reasonable and understandable, but Dr. Brummagem was not an IT man, he did not keep himself up-to-the-minute with developments at the cutting edge of technology; he naturally failed to see the hidden implications of certain recent developments. Dr. Oker was out to make as much money as possible as fast as possible; he had no patience for ditherers and losers; he did not care about explanations, or reasons, or circumstances - he only cared about results, the bottom line; if he did not like what he saw on the bottom line, the following second heads were rolling on the floor, kicked like footballs, out of the company, out of the building, out of the industry, out of the job market, and out, completely and forever, of the human race: for Dr. Oker a loser was no longer human, a loser was vermin, a cockroach, a spider, a carpet beetle, to be stomped out of existence, as fast and as thoroughly as possible. Dr. Brummagem had no desire to find himself explaining loses or even squeezed profit margins; to Dr. Brummagem, technology was often a gamble - it might or it might not work, it might or it might not be important, it might or it might not drive growth - he could not control it, but he could control costs! The competition understood the importance of perfect symbiosis between the CIO and CFO, had already identified this year's key technological developments, and were no doubt already working day and night trying to implement the new technologies; the competition was intelligent, sharp, and vicious; they were willing to take risks, to be agile, to see be-

yond the obvious; if Dr. Brummagem really wanted the organisation to survive, it was vital that he understood the importance of making some sacrifices now to reap bigger rewards later on. A business was more than just overcharging whenever possible and penny pinching at every opportunity.

Dr. Stumm did not make explicit statements to this effect, but he deftly implied his preoccupations through a cleverly crafted pattern of ellipses, pauses, adverbs, adjectives, gestures, In [lections, phraseology, and word selection. He, however, coolly ignored Dr. Stumm's agenda: he was only concerned with the technical problems of making AI work on obsolete systems, with whether Dr. Stumm would supply the tools and Information he needed, and with whether Dr. Stumm or his people would be able to use and maintain the system once he flew back to England; office politics were the undignified province of blatherskites with soap-opera mentalities, drama (queens with parasitical schemes, and microcephalous nincompoops who concealed their professional mediocrity behind preposterous webs of petty bureaucratic intrigue.

'Well, let's see what Tron have come up with. I know you say this is a virtue, but the very simplicity of their approach is also a risk, in that it can be easily duplicated,' said Dr. Stumm.

'From what I have seen it has taken a very exceptional mind to think of that very simple solution. It is unlikely that they will be able to duplicate that, unless they hire Mr. Wermod himself, and you probably already had him sign a confidentiality agreement,' he replied.

'Indeed we have,' stated Dr. Stumm, with a steady gaze and threatening emphasis.

'Plus' he added, choosing to ignore Dr. Stumm's attitude, 'the very fact that you have chosen to run an AI accounts system on the most unlikely of hardware - hardware that was discontinued forty years ago and the last remaining copies of which you probably already own - will protect your firm from retro-engineering by the competition.'

'Well, you can never be too sure.'

'Unless they have planted a mole within your organisation,' he continued, with suppressed irritation 'and stage a burglary targeting the equipment, you can rest assured they would most likely laugh this project off as a byzantine and impossible scheme. Which is what I suspect you had in mind.'

'Indeed, it was my idea,' underlined Dr. Stumm, with overt self-satisfaction.

'I'll see you on Thursday.'

Chapter 18

Marxist Conman

He exited the building and began to make his way back to the hotel. The Castellana avenue was completely paralysed with rush-hour traffic, the cars nose to tail, immobile, its angry drivers stewing inside. The second their watches had marked the end of the working day, they had all raced out of their offices, crowded themselves inside lifts, and swarmed subterranean car park complexes, where they had been gobbled up by cars, which had been vomited into the streets. The space they had freed on the pavements had been swiftly replaced by more exotic pedestrian traffic, abundant in ragged garb, animal features, sinister leers, intimidating swaggers, rude shouts, and raucous laughter. Muggers had by now woken up and left their lairs; beggars had crawled out of sewers and cardboard homes; university students had left their verminous accommodation. The muggers had by now infiltrated the crowd; the beggars had begun rummaging through bins; the university students were on their way to bars and terraces. Many of the street lamps were dead or broken, so most of what illumination there was came from the rivers of car headlights. Given this landscape, and given the unrelenting heat, he decided it would be wise to remove his tie, lest it tempt any muggers, attract beggars, and confuse university students.

‘SIEGHEIL’

Four men wearing balaclavas suddenly ran past him, pushing and shoving their way through the crowd. They were clad in black from head to toe, and held axes and crowbars. The four

men forced their way into the art gallery immediately to his right, currently advertising an exhibition of photographs by Andrés Serrano. Once inside, the men began smashing the photographs to pieces, pulling them down, and stomping on them with their combat boots. The security men posted inside the gallery did nothing except look away, pretending not to notice. Before dispersing, one of the four men spray painted a message on the wall:

LA VENGANZA DE LA GENTE NORMAL:
CONTRA LA PERVERSIDAD Y LA OBSCENIDAD

The chaotic scene they left behind brought the shiny, antiseptic gallery into harmony with the squalor directly outside. He recalled who the artist was when he caught a glimpse of one of the photographs: this Andrés Serrano was the same half-Honduran, half Afro-Cuban pornographer for whom a crucifix submerged in urine was art. He decided he supported the destruction. In fact, the more violent, the better. One thing was vandalising genuine works of art, the way Taliban fanatics had blown up the Bamyán buddhas in 2001, or suppressing inconvenient knowledge, the way governments had pulped Kevin MacDonald's monographs, and quite another was exercising one's right to defend Western culture from malicious vandalism. He supposed there would be art critics who would attempt to defend their protégé by problematising conventional definitions of art ("What is art?" What is degenerate? Who decides?); claiming - with teleological disingenuousness, cloaked by feigned open-mindedness - that it was all subjective and relative, an arbitrary category, a non-existent essence, a discourse, a random convention, the product of choosing from an array of interchangeable meta-narratives, none better or worse than the other, etc.; and presenting, in the process, contrived strawman, ad Nazium, and "slippery slope" arguments - all false, of course, but always couched in the language of enlightenment and progressiveness. He did not care what the art critics might say - he knew, as they knew, that it was all sophistry: Andrés Serrano was an art criminal, a cultural vandal, a corrupt cynic, a foul pervert, a Marxist conman, who sought to damage society in the name of tolerance and freedom.

Unsurprisingly, the police officers parked in their patrol unit not ten feet away from the incident did nothing; they stood by their vehicle, engaged in trivial conversation, smoking. With

the price of crude at over €1,750 a barrel (\$250 in 2010 dollars), and the ever-present threat of terrorism, it was not worth initiating a chase. They probably thought it sufficient that the incident had been captured on the CCTV cameras; its microphones would have recorded the anti-pornographers' voices, their characteristics would have already been analysed by a computer somewhere, and the computer would have already found a voice match in the government database, where all citizens' information was held; the anti-pornography activists would no doubt receive a letter in the post within the next few days, informing them of their fine, confirming that the amount had already been taken from their bank accounts, and outlining the procedure for appeals. The incident, moreover, would be reported in the news as vandalism and blamed on the underground neo-Nazi subculture. Neo-Nazis were, after all, the biggest threat to civilisation, ready to take over the world, enslave women, exterminate anybody without blond hair and blue eyes, and plunge the world into a dark age of barbarism at any moment, if the media were to be believed. One of the most popular and enduring examples of media-sponsored historical revisionism was that story of the so-called 'weather balloon' found in Roswell, New Mexico, USA, in 1947: the conspiracy theories spun and circulated ever since, asserting that the weather balloon explanation had been an attempt by the American government to cover up the fact that they "had found an alien ship was in itself an attempt to distract the boobs from the real cover up: the 'alien' ship had, in fact, been a Nazi UFO, one of a fleet of flying saucers that Adolf Hitler had built in Antarctica, wherefrom he was planning to return, when least expected, to conquer the world, exterminate the Jews, and found the Fourth Reich. Now, of course, he knew that the producers had spun this tale for propaganda purposes, and based it on the esoteric Hitlerist writings of Miguel Serrano. 'Psst!'

A weary-looking White man furtively held out to him a scrap of paper, folded in half. Normally he would have ignored such offers, assuming he was being offered drugs. However, the White man was well groomed, with a conservative haircut, and clad in suit and tie.

'Feliz Navidad,' the White man said, speaking so softly as to be barely audible.

He took the scrap of paper from the man's hand, wearily, saying nothing, and walked away. When he unfolded the scrap he

found it was a hand-written leaflet, advising him of a clandestine sale of Christmas decorations and greeting cards. Christmas paraphernalia was, of course, illegal to display, and Christmas itself illegal to advertise and celebrate in public spaces. Breaking the so-called 'religious tolerance' or 'separation of church and state' laws, which had been enacted in an effort to promote diversity and multiculturalism, was punishable with stiff fines and immediate confiscations. This had driven the Christmas industry underground, and placed it in the hands of Christian fundamentalists. The period formerly known as Christmas was now called the Winter Holidays period; any religious references or connotations had been expunged and replaced by a strictly secularist message promoting consumption. Ironically, however, all other faiths were permitted to celebrate their religious holidays: the rigour of the law applied only to Christians.

He disposed of the leaflet discretely as soon as he passed a bin.

Chapter 19

Misanthropic Photographer

He entered the lobby only to find, once again, the receptionist's face in a novel by Harry Stephen Keeler. 'Buenas noches,' he said to the Keeler fan, formally and stiffly. He then added, finally conceding defeat to curiosity, 'Veo que le gusta ese autor.'

The receptionist's face lit up, missing his irony. 'Sí. De verdad. Tengo su bibliografía completa - cincuenta y siete novelas, todas en primeras ediciones. Un genio, muy mal apreciado en su día.'

The man's enthusiasm piqued his curiosity, although mildly; the idea of an obscure literary genius was sufficiently appealing to him to transcend genre (he had often, in the past, read fiction technically: that is, purely because their authors were eccentric and their style was arcane and elaborate, rather than because the story or the genre appealed to him); but he was really very busy these days, and had little time left for frivolous reading. 'No he oído nunca hablar de él,' he said, flatly.

'No me extraña, pero es una pena. Si le gustan las novelas de usted, no ha leído una novela hasta que no haya leído una novela de este señor.'

'Interesante,' he said, unemotionally.

'Más que nada tenía unas tramas super densas y un estilo rebuscadísimo. Hay que concentrarse y leer con cuidado para poder seguirlas.'

He was skeptical: what most people found dense and complex he usually found light reading. 'Hm.'

'Léalo en español o en inglés, como mejor le venga,' insisted the receptionist. 'Era de Chicago.'

He took note of the novel, if mostly out of politeness. It was

titled, *El Hombre de los Tímpanos Mágicos*. He then asked '¿Ha llegado mi paquete?'

'Pues, no. No ha llegado nada todavía,' said the man, pursing his lips, as if casually baffled, but in reality so only very superficially; the receptionist would stop thinking about his parcel the moment he walked away.

'Joder,' he murmured, inaudibly. He imagined two Afro-Turko-Nicaraguan gentlemen standing next to a sorting machine in one of the mail distribution centres, intercepting his parcel, opening it with a Stanley knife, extracting its contents, and splitting the goods among themselves after first testing their relative status to one another through a heated exchange of threats, blows, and invectives. He imagined that during the scuffle, one of them might have lost his rubber sandal or his worn trainer (manufactured by a random cheapie peddler of repulsive brands or by an unscrupulous imitator), and been forced to end his shift and walk home barefoot; avoiding the broken glass, hypodermic needles, fast-food wrappers, animal excrement, human vomit, and puddles of urine decorating the pavements leading to his grim tower block estate. 'Vale,' he added, turning and walking away irritably. 'Gracias.'

'Sí ha llegado una carta para usted,' the man suddenly called out, before he reached the lifts.

'A ver,' he said, stopping calmly, but surprised. Who would send him a physical letter there?

He went back to the reception desk, where the receptionist handed him a DL envelope. It had no postage impression and no addresses. Since this suggested that the envelope had originated from a rapacious charity organisation hoping to guilt-monger him into making a donation, and that, therefore, it was likely to contain a pamphlet calculated to inspire racial self-hatred and revulsion at his own affluence, he decided file it, unopened, in the bin inside his apartment. He had no time for such poison.

Cigar smoke had transformed the lift into a gas chamber, indicating that the odious smoker staying the floor above him had been the last known user. The stench was, of course, completely toxic - not like tar and black coffee, but rather like the fuliginous belches of a corroded exhaust pipe, connected to an ancient internal combustion diesel engine of high cubicage and low efficiency. It was clear to him the smoke had been produced by a dark brown cigar, one vehemently manufactured to surpass the lung-blackening, eye-watering acidity of a Bolivar, from which range the odious smoker had no doubt selected the

darkest, fattest, and longest variety available. He first imagined the manufacturers of that vegetable poison ordering their chemists to find the most extreme formula molecularly possible, to find the way to create the most amorous, potent, and pungent concentrate of black tar and nicotine that it was possible to cram into any 200 grammes of combustible material. He speculated that the manufacturers must have slammed the resulting mix with a pile driver to increase its density, so that it would compete with the sturdiest of hardboards. Such a cigar, he imagined, would have required at least fifty matches to light, plus all the butane of three or four lighters.

He then imagined the fat man shoved inside one of the bedsits, slumped on a sofa, brain dead in front of the television, drinking rum, sucking on his cigar, completely lost in a poisonous, carcinogenic fog. Adolf Hitler would have been reminded of mustard gas attacks, were he a witness. As a normal person - and normal, by his definition, meant not an average based on majority practice, but, rather, on what he considered objectively sane, healthy, and rational - he could not for the life of him comprehend the appeal of smoking: he equated the self-administering of self-destructive, recreational drugs with weakness, insecurity, incontinence, lack of intelligence, and absence of personality. As far as he was concerned, all smokers were defective humans, insensible even to the most violent of psychiatric treatments. Electroshock, straitjackets, padded rooms, beatings, drugs, medication, confinement, humiliation, sleep deprivation - none could or would ever reform a smoker. They were all obdurate blockheads, full of excuses, explanations, and rationalisations, none of which made any sense, because their brains were impervious to reason. He inwardly cursed the tobacco addict, and wished him a comprehensive tax inspection.

He reached his apartment just in time to catch the last of the water before it was cut off for the evening. Remembering the water cut-off time just as he walked in through the door, he ran to the kitchen, evacuated every pot, pan, glass, and bowl from the cupboards, opened the tap, full on, and filled as many containers as he could before the water stopped. Unfortunately, it was clear that everyone in the building and in the area was doing the exactly same, because the water pressure was weak, the moribund flow gradually thinning out into a brittle thread before it broke into ever more infrequent drops; the end result was that he only managed to fill the first pot three quarters of the way up. That would be sufficient to keep him hydrated

throughout the night.

He was able to access the internet via the TV set, which meant he could check his email, do research, download a book, or play a game; but he was too tired to read his email, too fed up to do research, too hungry to read a book, and too irritable to play a game. Consequently, and all the same cursing Hollywood for their cunning predation on human weakness, he decided to while away the next two hours watching television.

The news programmes had the usual raft of frivolous stories. A haul of illegal Christmas decorations had been seized that day by the Guardia Civil, product of Operación Playa. The screen showed hills of Christmas decorations - glass baubles, lights, tinsel - being crushed with a steamroller, while the newsreader's voice related how the clandestine gang of Christian fundamentalists associated with the haul had also committed massive VAT fraud, concealing their operation from the VAT Office. The reporter never explained how or why vendors of an outlawed product category would register their business activity with the VAT Office. He changed the channel, concluding the report was an insult to his intelligence.

TVE-1 reported congestion at Barajas, due to the partial closure of Terminal 4, which was undergoing 'repairs'. There was no mention of the fact that the repairs were due to an explosion and no explanation as to the cause of the explosion. The most obvious explanation - and the one that probably any remaining thinking person would have formulated on their own - was that the explosion was the result of an al-Qu'edah attack (the European political class would not alter its Zionist-financed Middle East policy, so European citizens (only a small minority of whom voted for the politicians claiming to represent them) were al-Qu'edah targets); the explosion had not been reported as what it was, however, because, with the rapidly-multiplying Muslim population, with radical Islam's growing political and infra-political organisation, and with the vision of universal Mohammedanism piledriven relentlessly into the brains of the faithful, the Spanish government could not risk igniting the volatile Mohammedan constituency: all the politicians could do is minimise the incident, allowing the media to suffocate it with sports and entertainment news; confuse the public with speculation about faulty wiring, gas leaks, or industrial accident; install more surveyance equipment, road blocks, and checkpoints; and both raise taxes and generate inflation to pay for it all. That, in the short term; in the long term: more emphasis on secularisation (therefore, the crimi-

nalisation of Christmas and Easter), harder promotion of intermarriage, and a further escalation of the media and consumer culture: a population of racially-indeterminate, soulless, materialistic consumers and placid couch potatoes, obsessed with celebrities, ball games, and sitcoms, was less likely to have an interest in politics and revolutions. The price was, of course, the collapse of trust and community engagement, and a larger health bill, but this could be solved with more laws and higher taxes, and, in any event, was this not preferable to terror or civil war? *Insultan a la inteligencia de las personas*, he thought, this time resisting the impulse to change the channel.

The following story supported this badly hidden subtext: Brussels was planning the introduction of National Service at European level. Individual countries within the EU had abolished military service, beginning in the 1960s. However, it was deemed that circumstances had changed during intervening decades. Indigenous populations were declining in number and degrading in quality, thanks, on the one hand, to the popularity of voluntary sterilisation among university-educated twenty-somethings, and; on the other, to the sedentary lifestyles and poor diet favoured by everyone else; indigenous Europeans were also less interested in a career in the army, since patriotism, discipline, and martial values were scorned by the media and the hedonistic youth they had raised. Immigrant - and mostly Muslim - populations, meanwhile, although growing rapidly, felt less loyal to Europe than to their culture of origin: the mother of all cash cows, they had come to the continent to milk its money, not to fight Europe's Zionist wars; immigrant-descended populations, also growing rapidly and also mostly Muslim, felt exactly the same way. The result was chronic army personnel shortages across the entire EU; which compounded the long-standing overstretch,- due to overwhelming homeland security and permanent crisis-management commitments. The supra-national EU government saw mandatory National Service for all men and women aged 18-40 as the solution. Should it become law, National Service could take the form Of military service or civilian service, and there would be no university deferments. Moreover, those undergoing National Service would remain available for conscription in the event of a military conflict.

He never had to do National Service: he was born after its abolition in the United Kingdom. He was quietly relieved that he had never had children, because, otherwise, they might have demanded that he explain why National Service had been re-

instated, and his ensuing explanation would have pointed culpability's accusing finger at his generation. He would have argued, of course, that blame belonged more firmly to the post-WWII generation, because it was they who created the world they were in, and they who designed the system in such a way that by the time he was old enough to realise that it was not inevitable it was too late to reverse it, but it was not likely that his children would have been satisfied with such an explanation, or accepted his advice to insulate themselves from the world and make the best of a bad job, rather than do something about it. On the other hand, had he and those of his generation had children, perhaps the re-instating of National Service would not have been put on the table in the first place, because the population deficit upon it was predicated would not have developed. Even without a population deficit, however, to avoid the re-instating of National Service it would also have been necessary for his generation to raise a replacement less preoccupied with short-term considerations of lifestyle and comfort. Like many of his coevals, he had not reproduced himself in order to maximise his leisure time, his personal freedom, and his material comfort, but it was gradually becoming apparent, given the way the world had gone, that the long-term price for these short-term gains had been the very leisure time, personal freedom, and material comfort he had sought to preserve. Now, in his middle age, when there was less time and fewer options available, he was wasting more time than he would have ever imagined in a technological future enduring the inefficiencies of a system where no one trusted anyone or felt they had a stake in society, and therefore necessitated ever more draconian policing and regulation and bad faith in order to keep itself running; having every aspect of his life monitored, inspected, recorded, and taxed by an ever more bureaucratic and invasive state apparatus; and facing a future with less material security than he had expected, because the regulation, the monitoring, the inspecting, the recording, the taxing, and the bureaucratising - altogether astronomically expensive and a non-productive drain of national resources - had been unfunded liabilities, which could only be paid through predatory taxation and the inflationary expansion of the money supply. These considerations were rapidly encouraging his conviction that if any indigenous Europeans were having children today, they were almost certainly planning a revolution.

He decided it was time to call his wife.

'Hello?' she answered. The phone had rung exactly three times, as always.

'It's me,' he said, in a monotone, but glad to hear her voice.

'Hello,' she replied, relaxing into a friendly manner.

'Did you manage to sort out the credit card and the Post-A-Phone?'

'Yes. They are on their way.'

'Great. Any news about the photographer?'

'Well...' she said, chuckling.

'What happened?' he asked, frowning.

'Rather, what didn't happen. Marisol could not get hold of him on the telephone, so we went to his flat - Pierre, his name is - and rang the doorbell. As I feared, we had no answer. We rang several times and still nothing. We could hear a television on in the distance, but we assumed he'd left it on - you know, to discourage burglars.'

'Like we do.'

'But then, just as we were about to give up, we heard footsteps approaching! We waited, but the footsteps calmly continued past the door and into another room inside the flat. We rang the doorbell again, this time pressing long and hard. Nothing. Then we heard footsteps again, like before, calmly approaching and going past the door and into another room, this time directly to the left of the door, behind the wall separating the flat from the main staircase.'

'How very strange...' he said, frowning, 'Maybe he had headphones on and couldn't hear you.'

'That's what we thought. So I banged the door, hard and shouting "Hello! Hello!" But did he open? Not a chance! The footsteps inside continued pacing, up and down, slowly, unhurried, completely unruffled by our knocking and shouting.'

'Is he deaf?'

'Why would he have a doorbell if he was?'

'Maybe the bell is for the benefit of the person ringing it, and he sees a light flashing at his end, or feels his watch vibrate.'

'Well, I don't think so. After I got tired of knocking his door I decided to ring his number from my mobile, thinking maybe we got the wrong address and we got a deaf pensioner.'

'And you heard his phone ring? Inside the flat?' he asked, anticipating a confirmation.

'Yes! I heard it ring, and I heard the answering machine kick in too, with the same message I have been hearing for the past couple of days!'

'So what happened?' he asked, deciding Pierre was not a se-

rious professional.

'We heard the tap running! Right behind the wall in front of us!'

'The tap running?'

'Yes, the kitchen tap! We could even hear a glass filling up and water splashing!'

'And then?'

'Footsteps again. This time moving away. Then music, playing in a room deep inside the flat.'

'Are you sure it was coming from this gentleman's flat? Could it not have been from an adjacent flat?'

'No way. The music began where the footsteps ended. The footsteps went in that direction. And there is no other flat on that floor. His flat occupies the entire floor. It was his music playing.'

'So he obviously heard you and did not care,' he proposed.

'Well, yes. Obviously.'

'How strange,' he prodded, frowning as he imagined the scene.

'He heard us and did not even pretend he wasn't in. He just carried on normally, doing whatever he was doing, entirely relaxed and indifferent.'

'What did you do?'

'Well, we gave up. We left.'

'And you are sure it was the photographer's flat and you had been ringing the right number all along, and the message you heard tonight was clearly the one you have been hearing this last few days.'

'Yes. Absolutely. Beyond any shadow of a doubt.'

He was fascinated, but said nothing.

'When we left the building we looked up to his flat from the street. We could see his windows running all along the third floor, all lit, and we could see the flash of his camera going off again and again. He was there, watching the telly, drinking water, listening to music, taking photographs.'

'Hm. What a strange person. What was his name again?'

'Pierre. He's French.'

'Do you know what he looks like?'

'No. I haven't seen a photograph of him anywhere.'

'Did you try leaving a message on his answering machine? Maybe he was working and the footsteps were from a model.'

'A model would not switch the photographer's stereo on as if it was his property. It was him and he heard.'

She was obviously annoyed she had wasted the journey, but

the annoyance was light-hearted and, like him, she found the incident amusing. 'I see. Hmm. Why don't you try and leave a message in his answering machine. Maybe it is that he screens all his calls and calls people back.'

'I hate those things.'

'Is this Pierre good?'

'Yes, I've seen his work. He's be perfect for the publicity shots. He's got the right style and he's a publicity photographer.'

'Well, in that case do try leaving a message before you give up on him. For one I am curious now to see what this gentleman is like in real life and the only way to find out what happened behind that door and why he acted as we think he did is if you get to talk to him.'

'Yes, I suppose.'

'Do it. Let me know what happens.'

She sighed, answering, like a child who had been told to eat her greens, 'OK, I will.' She then changed to a more casual tone. 'How's Madrid? Has it changed much since the last time we visited?'

'It has deteriorated,' he said, simply.

'Oh. How depressing.'

'Yes. In fact, if I had not known the city at all, if I had been drugged with chloroform, and flown to Spain, and dumped on the streets, I would have thought I was in Khartoum. It's hot and dry and run down. It's a zoo. The street signs are now bilingual everywhere, Spanish and Arabic'

'Well, we knew that was going to happen eventually. They already had bilingual signs on the motorways down in the South twenty years ago.'

'They did. And now it's much more obviously the Reconquista in reverse. The Arabs have taken over, basically. The Corte Inglés looks more and more like a Middle Eastern bazaar. They will someday rename it El Corte Magrebí. The Villamagna is now known as Ciro El Grande. Can you believe it? Ferdinand and Isabella must be spinning in their graves.'

'Ciro el Grande? Cyrus the Great?' she laughed. 'It makes me think of a Persian palace - something big, like the Taj Mahal, but Persian - all marbles and encrusted with gems and gold.'

'Well, the new owners have redecorated it accordingly, but on a shoestring. And the clientele here is not what it once was. There are rowing couples and drunken orgies and door-to-door leaflet distributions and cigar smokers who don't have any respect for the law or anybody.'

‘Oh, dear.’

‘And the South Americans! New Spain conquers Spain. The gold now flows the other way.’

‘Yeah, well. They probably think it’s justice being served.’

‘Well, without a doubt Spain made a big mistake in the New World. Instead of treating it like a house to be burgled, they should have done what the English did in North America: wipe out the natives and stay. They should have sent their best and brightest to stay and build there.’

‘They would have gained their independence anyway.’

‘Yes, but even if they had eventually seceded from the empire, we would not have ended up with one half of the American continent endemically poor and corrupt. I’ve said it all before: the United States grew into a prosperous region because it was built with premium human capital. The Englishmen who migrated there were intelligent and hard-working Protestants; they went there because they wanted to build a new life - they were idealists, men and women of conviction. This was not the case in South America. If it had been, South America would have been like North America - like the North America of before the 1960s - and North America would not have ended up resembling today’s South America. The entire continent would have been prosperous and well run and technologically advanced. Instead the Spanish sent their refuse, there and the refuse mixed with the savages. Savages who were in the Bronze Age, and who in some cases had not even invented the wheel. The result is what we got. Now Spain’s bastard offspring have come back, seeking restitution. And because they were befuddled by socialism and short-term greed, the ruling class here has repeated on home soil the mistakes they made overseas five hundred years ago. The former conquerors now behave like the conquered, and the former conquered are devouring their former conquerors.’

‘I still wonder what the world would be like today if Spain had chosen to leave the New World alone,’ she said, resuscitating an old topic of speculation between them. ‘If Europe had left the American and the African continents alone.’

‘I still think there’s no way it would have happened,’ he quipped. ‘It would have been impossible to curb human greed in the face of such spoils: with so many resources available and defenseless, the temptation would have been too great. For the continents to’ve been left untouched it would’ve been necessary for them to’ve been as inaccessible as Antarctica - as Antarctica used to be, before the ice started melting.’

‘And Europe would have ended up being led by Germany. We would all have German as our second language. Africa and America would have remained sparsely populated by prehistorical tribes. Europe - if they ever got to know of it - would for them have been like Olympus, or Asgard: something they spoke about in their myths and legends, a land inhabited by gods and magic, extra-terrestrial.’

‘Yes, and I think we would probably be richer than we are now if we’d never had them. The tribes from the Caribbean never attempted to cross the ocean and in Africa they stayed put as well, so they would not have been com-’

‘I think I will ring this Pierre and leave a message,’ she interrupted, raising her voice slightly to indicate her recommendation for him to abandon the subject. Telecommunication networks were monitored automatically by intelligence services, and specific combinations or words instantly activated dormant programmes capable of conducting (as applicable) sophisticated sonic and semantic analyses of verbal and written exchanges. This was never mentioned or discussed in the media, but it was widely known, since organised crime, paedophile networks, and terrorism had been invoked years ago as excuses to pass legislation that justified the electronic surveillance of private citizens by the police and by government agencies without accountability and without a court order. Besides criminals, paedophiles, and terrorists, ordinary citizens afflicted by illegal thoughts - and particularly those qualifying as racist and anti-Semitic - were also targeted. That they were targetted was also known, although only via anecdotal evidence, blogosphere prattle, and unofficial rumour put out by the government agencies themselves. Less well known was the monitoring of citizens’ conversations by government agencies working for the treasury; these were instructed to look for references to undisclosed taxable wealth and for evidence of ongoing tax evasion, tax avoidance, accounting fiddles, cooking of books, and undiscovered fiscal loopholes. They had already made a number of technically illegal statements, pointing further to an extensive web of illegal thoughts; the evidence would remain stored and ready for retrieval in a government-controlled database out there, somewhere, but it was just as well she had terminated the conversation before mi5 upgraded them both to a higher political risk category; a higher risk strategy might lead to, among other things, a tax inspection: tax inspections were one of the tools used by the government to keep political dissidents - meaning, anybody to the right of

the modern Conservative Party, which meant anybody to the right of Trotsky - bogged down and in check.

'Yeah, do it,' he said, stiffly, cursing his lapse. 'Do it now, after we end the call. Oh, and by the way,' he said, half smiling with devious amusement, 'I saw Dawn Bergemann at work today.'

'Ah, great,' she said, sarcastically.

He opened his eyes to find himself underwater in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by potato crisps; what was left of the aeroplane could be seen sinking in the distance. The scene reminded him of a dream he'd had before, except in the previous dream he had seen biscuits. He then heard voices, engaged in a heated exchange, one male, the other female. The voices were muffled; it was difficult to discern complete statements. He opened his eyes a second time, this time to find himself lying on a bed, in a darkened bedroom. The net curtains to his left, billowed inwards as a warm breeze blew in from the open balcony. The hiss of a lone car driving past in the streets below reverberated against the ceiling. The agitated voices came from behind his head. Initially, he remained motionless, not caring, expecting the voices to die down. The voices grew in intensity, however, and the female voice became hysterical; this finally piqued his morbidity: he changed position and pressed his ear against the wall-mounted headboard. The voices were still too muffled to discern their import, but their tone was eloquent enough: the woman thought the man was being selfish, the man thought the woman was being irrational; in other words, this was the typical modern row, where, instead of the parties attempting to reconcile their differences of opinion via a civilised discussion, the parties hurled degrading and sarcastic statements at one another, all lifted straight out of degenerate Hollywood dramas and neurotic New York sitcoms, and none productive in any way other than exacerbating vindictive emotions. No wonder people changed partners like they changed underwear these days: they learnt the art of rowing from the television screen, forgetting that rows on the television were dramatisations, scripted for effect, designed to amuse and make viewers go 'ouch!', rather than be a social model; they never listened to the other party or offered rational arguments: they went on autopilot, cut-and-paste monkeys turned melodramatic sophists, egocentrically concerned with scoring points rather than arriving at sensible resolutions. Life had imitated television, arid television had finally imitated life.

The scene took him back nearly thirty years, when an identical row had roused him from his slumber in the wee hours of

the night. He had opened his eyes to face a ghostly ceiling, feeling as if he were falling on his oundy mattress. His squalid bedsit had been located on a ground floor, facing an A road, in a dilapidated house ran by a semi-criminal landlord, where his neighbours consisted of eco-terrorists, drop-outs, drifters, scroungers, multiple-identity fraudsters, and anonymous loners with precarious occupations and obscure personal histories. The rowing couple had been passing by; he had heard them, sensed their presence, but never seen their faces or known their names; they had vanished a few months later. He had been: a drifter himself, an unemployable genius existing on the margins, with talents which could not be written down on a CV and for which the world had no obvious use. The bedsit had a carpet from the 1970s, with undulating bands of clashing colours; he wore flip-flops when using the umbrageous shower down the hall. His only link to the wider world had been a 9-inch TV set, where later that year he was to see temperatures above 30 degrees Celcius beating the South East of England day after day for four months in a row. 30 degrees Celcius - back then a punishing heat wave - were now Wintertime temperatures..

The row he had heard thirty years ago had ended with female tears and a surly male mumble. The one he was hearing now escalated almost the moment he thought about it: the shouting became screaming, the screams became shrieking; objects crashed and china shattered; the thudding and tumbling of a scuffle followed; a door slammed, banging ensued, demented bellowing quaked the walls. He listened on, at once horrified, contemptuous, and fascinated. The bellowing was followed by yet more bellowing, more demented than before; the man, whomever it was, had completely lost the plot. After a while, however, it appears the man grew bored. There was a brief silence; then a door slamming; then nothing. He laid there, motionless, breathing quietly with his ears pricked, attempting to penetrate the sepulchral silence. His ears were unable to detect any further sounds behind the headboard; the general ambient noise coming mainly from the open balcony facing the city, took over his senses; he became aware of cars gliding past in the streets below, of police sirens and gunfire popping in the distance, of drunken footsteps kicking a bottle in the pavement, of homosexual Techno music pulsing nearby.

Tontos, he thought, imagining the rowing couple now sulking in their respective bedrooms, mumbling insults through gritted teeth, each rationalising how they were right and the

other party wrong, and resolving to irritate the other with tit-for-tat gestures as soon as they completed their sulking.

Chapter 20

Socrates

The following morning he almost waited for the Post-a-Phone and credit card to arrive. He quickly remembered, however, that courier companies were still incapable of giving even an approximate delivery time, despite having all the technology available to do so; their standard answer, if asked, was, as it had always been, the ever-infuriating 'Any time between nine and five'. For a moment he had forgotten because he was impatient to have the matter resolved. His time precious, his brain costly, his patience nonexistent, however, he would carry on with his day as normal and delegate dealing with the courier to reception: he was a terribly busy man and that was what reception staff were there to do.

(Fortunately, the latter seemed honest, so, on this occasion, it was still possible for him to have these otherwise rapidly obsolescing attitudes.)

Once in the lobby he gave the concierge - a fuzzy-haired septuagenarian with a rubbery mouth - Scoptic's telephone number and precise instructions to inform him the instant the courier arrived. Not that it was likely to arrive at a time when he would be reachable: since he was scheduled to spend the entire morning testing Mr. Wermod's modified Z80 at Tron, it was as certain as night followed day that the courier would arrive precisely during that time. His pessimism proved refreshingly wrong, however. While in the process of asking the concierge to order him a cab (he intended to have the hotel pay the fare and then add it to his bill), a Chris Eubank lookalike with a DHL uniform walked into the lobby. He noticed the DHL man was carrying a small packet.

'Ese paquete debe ser para mi?,' he said, walking towards the

delivery man and reaching for the packet.

‘Tiene el DNI?’ replied the deliveryman, looking cocky and relaxed. His uniform was impeccable: crisp and brand new.

He looked around quickly, then discretely and in a low, quiet voice handed over his passport, saying, ‘Pasaporte. Aquí tiene.’

A man of his stature should not to have his identity questioned and checked as if he were a potential conman or criminal, he thought; but he realised that modern times forced upon businesses ever more security checks.

The Black man looked at his photo on the passport and then at him. ‘No es usted?’

He frowned, perplexed. ‘¿Cómo que no soy yo?’ He said, keeping his volume down, his mien serious, and his body language rigid and formal.

‘No.’

‘Pero...’ he stumbled, incredulous, but barely audible. ‘¿Qué pasa, no me reconoce en la foto?’

‘No es usted,’ answered the deliveryman, calmly and loudly, starting toward the reception desk.

He was at once embarrassed, angry, and exasperated. The deliveryman’s replies defied reason. Said deliveryman was also precipitating a scene, treating him like riff-raff; like an anonymous, non-descript, random person of no visible merit or power; like someone whose manner and appearance fell short of conveying superior status, and which consequently, failed to inspire the measure of awe and respect that he expected and was entitled to receive. Besides, on what scientific basis could this random DHL employee claim the man in the photograph was not he? Did he look like a criminal, or a conman? Certainly not! He remembered sitting inside a photobooth and having that photograph taken as if it were yesterday. It was inside the Underground station in Kensington High Street? And the event had not taken place so long ago that he would have aged beyond all recognition.

He adopted a more consciously authoritative tone, though still keeping his voice low and even. ‘Oiga, espere un momento. ¿Cómo puede usted pensar que no soy yo? Este soy yo. Mire la foto con cuidado.’

‘Usted lleva gafas. El señor de la foto no las lleva. Es otra persona,’ said the Black man, his eyes half lidded, his manner perfectly composed.

‘A ver. Me quito las gafas,’ he said, darting a quick glance back at the reception desk, hoping he was not being observed (the receptionist standing but with his head down, busy shuf-

fling and trying to make sense, of out stacks of papers; they looked like printed forms or brochures). ‘¿Soy o no soy yo?’

‘Así se le parece bastante,’ said the Black man, smiling.

‘Pues venga,’ he said, gesturing with his hand,, relieved. ‘Entregúeme el paquete y dígame adonde debo firmar.’

‘Pero no es usted,’ argued the deliveryman. ‘El señor de la foto no lleva gafas. Usted sí. Así que es otra persona.’

He sighed, temporarily at a loss for words, his lips tight, the adrenalin rushing through his veins. He considered snatching the packet off the deliveryman’s hands and walking out of the lobby. This, however, could cause the Black man to try to snatch the parcel back from him, which would lead to a scuffle, which would be observed by everyone, and during which the Black man would shout and scream, causing armed security personnel to intervene, thus compromising his image as a serious and eminent professional. He restrained himself.

‘El señor de la foto lleva gafas,’ he explained, as patiently as he could, through gritted teeth. ‘Se las tuvo que quitar para la foto porque en el Reino Unido las fotos para los pasaportes se sacan así.’

The Black man raised his voice, as if he had caught him in a lie. ‘¿Ah; sí? ¿Y cómo lo puede saber? Usted no estaba allí.’

He darted a tense glance at the lobby, hoping no one was paying attention. Many of the sofas were occupied by men of North African, Middle Eastern, and hybrid descent. A middle-aged Arab man, clad in a dish-dash-ah and wearing a white gutrah, was observing him from one of the nearby sofas, situated before a marble-topped coffee table; his companion to the right, reaching, for his coffee, was not; but his interlocutor across the table, an olive-skinned Jordanian with a round face and intense black eyes under caterpillar eyebrows, turned around to look at him and the deliveryman at that moment.

He tried to appear relaxed and serious, as if having a normal business conversation. ‘A eso voy. Sí lo estaba,’ he said.

‘Además, no ve,’ added the delivery man..

His frown deepened. ‘¿Cómo que no veo?’

‘Lleva gafas. Usted no ve. Así que no puede saber si el señor de la foto se quitó las gafas o no.’

His suppressed voice now acquired a vehement edge. ‘¡El señor de la foto soy yo!’ he said, in an angry whisper.

‘Se ha referido a él en la tercera persona,’ explained the deliveryman, loudly and clearly, not ceding an inch, ‘No puede ser. Si él hubiera sido usted, hubiera dicho yo y no él.’

‘Bueno, ya esta bien. Esta claro que usted no es una persona

seria. Déme el paquete de una vez.'

'No puedo entregarle el paquete a una persona extraña,' retorted the phlyarologist, pulling the packet away from him. 'Las normas son las normas.'

He raised his voice only a few decibels, but now spoke with suppressed force. 'Las normas son: usted llegarle entrega el paquete al destinatario, y se va a paseo.' Sin dar el cañazo con gilipollices, he thought of adding, but stopped himself.

The Black man read his mind nevertheless. 'El language soez no va a cambiar la situación. Usted no ve. El señor del pasaporte sí ve. Portanto, sois dos personas distintas. No puedo entregarle el paquete.'

He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and index fingers, feeling like a pressure cooker now seconds away from an explosion, and intensely aware of the growing number of eyes fixed on his person. Through gritted teeth and very tensely he barked, in a near whisper, 'Ese soy yo porque se lo digo yo y nada más. El paquete, por favor.'

'Simplemente porque usted lo diga no hace que el señor de la foto sea usted,' answered the deliveryman. 'Usted tendrá que demostrar que ve.'

He sighed in despair, looking at the ceiling, and all the while attempting to appear unruffled and calm. To save face, he forced himself to act as if he were treating it all as a game, and attempted to reason with the deliveryman. He said, with as close to a normal, even voice as he could muster, 'No existe otro pasaporte. Este es el que hay. El mió. Con una foto mia, sin gafas. Sin ver.'

'Si no hay otro pasaporte en donde se ve que usted no ve, no hay paquete. Es para otro señor,' said the deliveryman, loudly.

'Eh, Sócrates,' called out the concierge from behind the reception desk, a few metres away; from his benevolent tone it was obvious he knew the delivery man well enough. 'Deja de darle la lata al señor. ¿Ese paquete para quién es?'

Sócrates, the catosopher, looked at the packet and read out the name. He, mortified, pretended to check his watch, studiously, noticing, with embarrassment, that his wrist was bare.

'Vale. Ese es el señor que tienes delante. Te lo dijo yo porque se aloja aqui. Entrégale el paquete y vete a darle dolores de cabeza a otro.'

Sócrates handed over the packet, and offered his eletronic GPS pad so he could sign. He then asked, '¿Su apellido?'

He spelt his surname.

'¿Usted no es de por aqui, verdad?'

‘¡Sócrates!’ admonished the receptionist. ‘¡Ya esta bien!’

Somewhat disappointed, but still smiling and obviously pleased with himself, Sócrates finally desisted and left.

He looked at the receptionist, his face an expressionless mask.

‘No le haga caso,’ advised the concierge, ‘Sócrates es asi con todo el mundo. Se cree filósofo.’

The bar was part of *Ciro El Grande*; it was right next to the hotel, but had to be accessed from the outside. He sat at the bar and ordered a cup of coffee and a croissant.

‘No hay croasans,’ said the barman, a corpulent Egypto-Moroccan gentleman with a dented scar across his forehead.

‘¿Cómo que no hay? ¿Qué tenéis de comer a esta hora?’

‘Pan.’

‘Vale. Entonces, pan,’ he snapped, resigned.

While he waited, he called his wife to confirm reception of her packet and tell her about Sócrates. While the phone rang, he noticed the vile cigar smoker sitting on the other side of the bar, wearing a blue suit, nursing a glass of Cognac, and reading a tabloid-sized newspaper. The newspaper had an unflattering photo of Dr. Kevin MacDonald, next to an article further reporting on his disappearance. The headline screamed MÓBUS: DID HE BANKROLL MACDONALD’S BREAKOUT?

Mobus! he thought, rolling his eyes. Ever since the Haunebu attack in Jerusalem (a proven fraud), Hendrik Mobus was always blamed for everything. Whether it was the dynamiting of the Holocaust Mahnmal in Berlin, or the arson attack at Auschwitz, or the rise of Esoteric Hitlerism, or 9/11, Mobus was somehow behind it. He, of course, did not believe a word of it; no one had seen the controversial German industrialist in years - he was probably dead, held in cryostasis in Neu Schwabenland, or, like Bin Laden, never even existed: it was all a fiction, a ruse to justify more state surveillance.

The cigar smoker did not notice him staring.

‘That is so funny!’ his wife said, her trachea rippling with laughter, once he finished treating her to his account of his exchange with Socrates.

‘I am glad at least someone is amused,’ he said, sarcastically. ‘Did you call Pierre the photographer?’

‘Yes! And he called back at around two in the morning!’

‘Two in the morning?’ he said, raising an eyebrow. What an inappropriate time to make a business call. ‘What did he say?’

‘He said we can see him tonight.’

‘Did he explain why he did not open the door?’

‘Yes. He said he will not see unannounced visitors. He thinks it’s incredibly rude and an invasion of his privacy when random people just show up at his residence, and knock on his door, during his private time, expecting him to simply drop everything and let them in.’

‘Really?’ he said, thinking about it.

‘So,’ she continued ‘if anybody does that he will not even pretend he’s not home. He will just carry on doing whatever.’

He chuckled, both sympathising and yet finding it hard to believe that this Pierre had expressed his own thoughts in as many words. ‘Actually, it is a good idea,’ he said. ‘Why did it not occur to us?’

‘Because nobody can find our address.’

‘Well, that’s the way it should be. We don’t want dubious door-to-door energy salesmen showing up with their slicked back hair and silly electronic pads.’

‘They wouldn’t stay long enough for any of us to get to the door, with that doorbell we have,’ she quipped. (Two years ago he had installed a doorbell that exploded with pre-recorded Doberman barks; he had wired the doorbell to speakers painted onto the doorframe.)

‘Better safe than sorry,’ he stated.

‘And that is, provided they make it that far, with the nail-spitting sprinklers you installed last year.’

He laughed, saying nothing.

‘Or the quicksand pits you made in front of the ground floor windows,’ she added.

‘Which will prove much more effective at catching potential burglars than any police constable. I guarantee you that,’ he predicted, pleased with the idea.

‘Or the mirrored windowpanes,’ she added.

‘We don’t want nosy people looking around,’ he affirmed. ‘Or do you?’

‘Hmm.’

‘So what time will you be meeting this photographer?’

‘He said he’ll see us at 3 o’clock.’

He smiled, ‘Tell me what he looks like tonight. I am curious.’

‘No. It’s going to be 3 am.’

‘Three in the morning!’ So it was confirmed and official then: this Pierre was nor a serious professional.

‘He works at night, apparently.’

‘I see.’

There were three cabs waiting at the taxi rank. He entered the first one. Before his buttocks made contact with the seat, how-

ever, a pungent odour offended his nose: the driver was smoking a cigar. Said driver, a man in his sixties, White, balding, and with grey hair, looked at him askance in the rearview mirror, awaiting instructions.

‘Me bajo,’ he said to the driver, getting back out.

‘¿Pero, porqué?’ asked the driver, perplexed.

‘Porque usted fuma puros. Y yo no puedo ir en un taxi asi. Si usted apaga su puro y ventila la cabina, le cojo la carrera,’ he stated, firmly.

‘Joder,’ said the driver, looking away, calmly taking a drag from his cigar; only an inch was left to smoke.

In view of the cabbie’s response, he walked to the next taxi in the rank.

‘Santa Ana,’ he said, as he boarded the vehicle.

‘¿Porqué se ha bajado usted del taxi de enfrente?’ asked the new driver. The new driver was a man of about seventy, slim, also White, with olive green-tinted square shades.

‘Porque el conductor de enfrente es un fumador de puros, y yo no puedo ir en un taxi asi,’ he explained, firmly and irritated.

‘Joder. ¿Adonde ha dicho?’

‘Plaza de Santa Ana.’

‘Ah, no. Yo no voy alli,’ said the cabbie, shaking his head vigorously.

‘¿Cómo que no?’ he asked, frowning.

‘Ni hablar,’ iterated the cabbie, shaking his head with increased vehemence.

‘Pero, ¿Porqué?’ He was now also flummoxed by the cabbie’s display of determination.

‘Eso se ha convertido en una selva salvaje.’

‘Pues por lo que veo todo Madrid es asi ya.’

‘La Plaza de Santa Ana es peor. Ni hablar.’

‘Vale. ¿Y entonces qué se supone que debo hacer?’ he asked, staring at the cabbie’s head, with impatient expectation.

‘Si quiere, intente ver si el taxi de atrás le coje la carrera. Pero lo dudo. Lo mejor sera que coja el Metro. ¿Lleva pistola?’

‘¿Hace falta pistola? ¡Estuve alli el otro día!’ he said, now finally angry, yet also worrying. The area around Sol looked threatening indeed, but... had he been just lucky to get out of there alive? Was it wise to risk life and limb re-visiting the area?

‘Pistola, navaja, bate, manopla, lo que le venga bien,’ said the cabbie, angrily sure of his position. The cabbie’s vehemence made him feel recklessly ignorant. Should he research

the area's crime statistics on the internet before actually going?

'Pues tengo una reunión allí,' he pleaded, now actively considering in his mind re-scheduling the meeting and asking Mr. Wermód to bring the modified processor to the Picasso Tower.

'Cancélela. No vale la pena.'

His feelings towards Mr. Wermód, initially positive despite eccentricities, suddenly turned negative: Mr. Wermód now struck him as a sinister, dangerous individual; a genius, without a doubt, but in all probability also psychopathic; a person who, in the immortal words of Niklas Kvarforth, Black Metal musician and mass murderer, had 'something wrong with [his] psyche' - otherwise, who would choose, with the means to avoid it, to live in a lethal neighbourhood, in a derelict house, in a condemned flat, replete from floor to ceiling with fascist books and Black Metal CDs and vintage kitchen utensils, and crawling with baboon spiders?

Maybe he is a government spy - from the tax office - or a government tool.

'Veo que esta usted muy seguro. Vale. A ver si a la tercera va la vencida,' he said, alighting.

He approached the third taxicab in the rank, a superannuated Volkswagen Passat missing all the hubcaps. This time he did not board the vehicle but stood outside by the driver. The latter was a young man with black curly hair of mixed origin - probably a Moroccan-Lybian-Spanish-Ghanan-Ecuadoran hybrid. '¿Me lleva a la Plaza de Santa Ana?'

'Si,' answered the cabbie.

'Venga,' he said, boarding.

He regretted sticking to his original plan the instant his glutei touched the seat, but he suppressed his apprehension and said nothing as the vehicle pulled out and began gaining speed.

The cab had only advanced fifty yards before the congestion brought it back to a standstill. From there on, progress was slower than John Cage's *Organ2/ASLSP*: it seemed, in fact, that entire geological ages passed before the Passat crawled forward an attometre. Cooped up in their vehicles, with their air conditioning units at maximum (to little avail), motorists' sweat-glistening faces all betrayed deathly boredom and catatonic despair; the compact mass of chaotically diverse humans overflowing the pavements on either side moved at the speed of light in comparison - although never as fast as the pickpockets in their midst: these were faster than time. Against this background, the cabbie's flowery air-freshener and relentless playing of Arab Pop on the car radio had eventually frayed

his nerves. He had politely requested that he switch stations, and strongly suggested that he put on the news, to which both the cabbie had complied, surprisingly for him, without saying a word.

Radio Expansión reported that the Federal Reserve in the United States had re-issued their \$10,000 notes. Notes of this denomination had not been in circulation for over sixty years, after Richard Nixon had halted their circulation in an effort to combat organised crime; the new issue of said \$10,000 note still featured Samuel P. Chase, but had been upgraded with the latest anti-counterfeiting technology. The reporter speculated that it was a matter of time before the \$100,000 note, featuring Woodrow Wilson, was re-issued. This latter note had existed originally as a gold certificate and had never been released to the general public; its use had been confined to transactions between banks, and became illegal to own after 1933, when Wilson ordered the compulsory purchase (i.e., the confiscation) of gold. Mobile phones had over the past ten years replaced cash for many transactions, but cash remained an important - if not the main or sole - method of payment within certain areas of the economy; inflation had rendered denominations below \$10 virtually meaningless, and \$100 would nowadays barely buy someone a packet of gum; people rarely bothered to pick up the change when breaking a \$100 note. Would the eventual legal issue of a \$1,000,000 note by the Federal Reserve prove the adage that reality imitates fiction? The Dollar Index had fallen below 10 in overnight trading. The DJ was up by 435 points.

He chuckled with inward self-satisfaction upon hearing this news: he was glad that he had seen it coming twenty years before and had converted his dollar (and Euro) savings into gold, silver, and collectable commodities.

The news about the U.S.'s economic woes marked the end of the hour. After a barrage of hysterical advertisement, Radio Expansión went to their news desk in China to report the latest from the world's largest economy.

A young North African face filled the driver's window. The face had a listless look and jabbered at the cabbie in bursts of Arabic, frequently looking around, staring in the distance, or throwing indifferent glances at him; the cabbie obviously knew him at some level. The face belonged to one of the innumerable ambulant entrepreneurs who patrolled the corridors between lanes in the ubiquitous congestion, determined to tempt drivers with their wares. Face was selling packets of tissues; Face's col-

league on the other side, some way ahead, was selling air fresheners; most of their fellow entrepreneurs in the vicinity and all over the city were offering anything that could be associated with travelling inside a car, and which could be stacked on a tray or stuffed into a plastic bag: fans, crisps, maps, mints, sweets, shades, fruit, water, fizzy drinks, pepper spray, baseball bats, baseball caps, and chewing gum; some, however, were also selling more specialised services, such as negative licence points, female company, window cleaning, and food runs, where hungry motorists would be offered by a 'runner' to have food from a nearby fast food restaurant, kiosk, or stall brought to them while they sat in the traffic jam. He imagined that in certain areas of town, those abandoned to their fate by the police authorities, enterprise of a more edgy type replaced at night that of the more conventional daytime vendors: usually, it was based around weapons and narcotics, but children were also offered.

Face and the cabbie remained engaged in a long conversation, during which they appeared to update each other on a number of fronts and exchange gossip and stories. Face eventually managed to sell the cabbie a packet of tissues, but not without furiously engaging in a lengthy haggling exercise.

By the time Face had moved on, the vendor with the air fresheners caught up with the cab. The cabbie brushed him off with a lazy wave of the hand and a shaking of his head, his patient gaze fixed on the traffic ahead; but this vendor was pushy; the latter also spoke in Arabic, only the cabbie either did not know him very well or was in less amicable terms with him. After a few groaned refusals, which were only greeted with loud insistence, the cabbie opted to simply ignore the vendor. The vendor did not retire; on the contrary, he saw in the cabbie's indifference a need to escalate his tactics. He went round the front of the vehicle and positioned himself at the driver's window, holding a fan of scented cards of different shapes and colours only inches away from the cabbie's face.

This was a breach of the congestion street vendor's unwritten code of practice: if you were a congestion street vendor, you did not switch sides, let alone change lanes, and much less change direction or street or neighbourhood; if you had to, it was only to close a sale: and you had to move on before the next vendor reached the car whose driver you were selling to; if you failed to do so, the approaching vendor would use force to eject you from his patch. The congestion street vendors operated as informal networks, based on extended family relations,

country of origin, language, type of trade, neighbourhood, and so forth. Each network's stomping ground was fiercely protected; challenges, contests, and infractions resulted in knife fights, sabotage, and generational feuds. Since their activity was not formally regulated, constituting a quasi-underground economy, laissez faire capitalism reigned supreme, resulting in ruthless network competition and frequent confrontation. The worst internecine confrontations, however, occurred between the various vendors and the organised beggars, who were primarily gypsies. The latter group operated a range of grisly rackets, the most vicious of which was that where children either were crippled by their parents, or crippled themselves, in-order to beg more profitably. They constituted a gruesome sight: pathetic beings with cringe-inducing deformities, hobbling along and accosting motorists with aggressively extended hands and feral faces. Even the pushiest of vendors were very welcome in comparison.

The cabbie pulled his face away from the scented cards being offered to him, silently avoiding eye contact. Such evasion was not about to deter his accoster, however; the pushy vendor first attempted to follow the movement of the cabbie's head, in an effort to shove his scented cards into the cabbie's line of sight; he then decided to escalate his marketing by opening the door, presumably in order to interpose himself between the cabbie and the steering wheel. The cabbie responded quickly by grabbing the door and slamming it back shut before the vendor had managed to open it beyond a crack. A struggle for control of the door ensued, with the vendor repeatedly essaying any and all conceivable means to get the door open, and the cabbie frustrating each and every attempt with forceful determination. Eventually, and despite the intense heat, the cabbie decided to roll up his windows. This gave the vendor's movements added urgency: he applied force with both hands in an effort to prevent the window from going up; then he tried to block its progress with a wooden block (all vendors had one); when the cabbie knocked out the wooden block the vendor rammed both his arms into the vehicle and manhandled the cabbie's head in order to push the cabbie's body away from the door. His tactic proved too little too late, for within two seconds he found his arms squeezed between the surging motorised glass and the window frame. The vendor first screamed in pain, then began flailing his arms wildly, trying to grab a clump of the cabbie's hair or a nose or an ear with his grimy claw. The cabbie evaded the vendor's claws and leaned side-

ways to retrieve a baseball bat from the space before the front passenger's seat. This baseball bat he squeezed into the gap between the glass and the window frame and rammed into the vendor's throat; the cabbie followed this up by applying pressure and rolling down the window just enough to free the vendor's arms; by this method he pushed the vendor away from the vehicle. The vendor tumbled backwards onto the side of the van directly behind him just as the cabbie finished rolling up his window. As soon as the vendor saw the window sealing him out of the cab his face contracted into an expression of rage. The cabbie used his left arm to wave an annoyed dismissal at the vendor, who immediately kicked the driver's door, bursting-with violent gestures and all manner of crude epithets.

He, having observed the entire episode in silence from the back of the cab, caught sight of the next approaching vendor. The swarthy gentleman (most likely a Romanian gypsy) was offering carbonated drinks; he held a couple of cans in one hand, and a Tesco plastic bag with more in the other. He was about to roll down his window when he remembered his lack of cash, so he desisted. Damn, he cursed, inwardly, using a paper napkin-stolen from the hotel bar to mop up the perspiration on his face and neck. The superannuated air conditioning unit either broken or ineffective (the Passat was a 1990 model), the interior of the cab resembled a clay oven, where he was being baked like a round of bread. He resolved to draw cash the moment he found an automated teller safe enough to use. The vendor had made eye contact, but lost interest when hailed by a passenger in the adjacent lane. The passenger, a woman in her mid fifties with brown hair styled into a large sphere purchased two cans inscribed with Arabic script.

‘¿Cuánto estima que tardaremos a llegar a la Plaza de Santa Ana?’ he asked the cabbie, suddenly concerned by the nearly-petrified flow of traffic.

‘No sé,’ came the reply.

Fine, he thought, annoyed at the cabbie's lack of precision.

Many minutes passed, during which time he scanned the area for an automated tiller. The traffic was moving so slowly that he would be able to alight, queue, withdraw cash, and return to the cab without the latter having moved more than a yard. This would have been possible even though it was mid December, and therefore payday for some. Unfortunately, the cabbie's chosen route relied on secondary alleys plentiful with homosexuals, íbut devoid of ATMs; he was,: therefore, only

likely to encounter one in the vicinity of Sol, an area where using an ATM - provided it had not been vandalised, was working, had cash in it, and was not operated by either organised criminals or one of the many of Islamic banks mushrooming all over Europe - equalled getting mobbed by gypsy children or robbed and knifed by a mara thug.

By the time they reached the Palacio Real, past security and emissions control checkpoint 'p5 Sur (Superficie)', his surroundings had substantially deteriorated. The Calle Arenal, as well as the adjacent alleys, teemed with humans, of which evidently nine in ten had not known employment, or even had a relative in employment, for four generations. The few remaining brick-and-mortar businesses still operating consisted of fast food restaurants, bars, hair salons, nail salons, and cheap convenience stores; everything else had been long liquidated and boarded up. There were, however, a myriad unregulated micro-businesses operating on the pavements, offering thrills (in the form of gambling), second-hand goods (harvested by burglars), and petrol (syphoned off parked cars and sold in plastic bottles); these were, of course, the more legitimate businesses. Both these and their more daring counterparts navigated in a suffocating miasma of exhaust fumes, rotting refuse, melting tarmac, vomit, sweat, and urine. From his protected observation point, he was able to realise now, for the first time, the exact level of squalor of the area and the frightful bestiality of its inhabitants; he had been in too much of a hurry to absquatulate on Monday night to pay attention: now he realised exactly how fortunate he had been to escape with his life. While it was already not the safest of areas in 1990, it now reminded him of Escape from New York. All of the street furniture had been vandalised out of existence; every wall was a riot of graffiti and like a colander with bullet holes; the site of Joy Eslava looked as if it had burnt down a decade ago; mountains of uncollected rubbish clogged the pavements - and, naturally, wild dogs had feasted on, and fought over, much of the refuse, spreading it all over the asphalt. Alarm was gradually mutating into suppressed terror. He began darting glances in all directions, now entertaining serious doubts as to whether or not to cancel his meeting with Mr. Wermod - not even telephone him: just cut and run, think of an excuse, and reschedule a meeting at the Picasso Tower. How Mr. Wermod had managed to stay alive in this area was a puzzle: it was no wonder he was a fascist and a recluse - probably all Whites around the area were by now. Either that or he was protected by membership of a fearsome support network, with both the

balls and the means to inspire terror and respect among even the most degraded of local gangsters. He held the order for the cabbie to stop and turn around in his throat, torn between his manly sense of correctness and his realisation that honouring his appointment was not sufficiently vital to pay for it with his life.

‘¿Sigo?’ asked the driver, unexpectedly. The driver’s black eyes stared at him via the rear view mirror. ‘¿Discúlpeme?’

‘¿Sigo?’ The driver had clearly been observing him and had read his mind.

‘Siga,’ he said, pride suddenly getting the better of him. He was not going to allow the cabbie to think that all Whites were cowards. He resolved that he was going to get himself dropped off at his stated destination and see the cab drive off, no matter what conditions he found upon his arrival. Yet, while so resolving, he began racking his brain for means to acquire improvised weapons - he might very well need them as soon as he was seen standing alone, in his suit, on the pavement, before Mr. Wermod’s residence. Where there loose pipes on the pavement? Perhaps he could pick up a shard of glass, or an open tin of asparagus. Was there a chance a sports shop had opened nearby? If so he might be able to quickly purchase a baseball bat. Aw, damn it! he fumed; as he remembered that nowadays one had to first have a licence to own a baseball bat, which in turn probably required a letter from a sports club confirming that one was a member and did in fact play baseball, as well as a letter from a psychiatrist confirming that one was not a violent person; and then registering the bat with the police, with whom the vendor was required to check the prospective bat owner’s record, in case he had convictions for violent offences. What was more, the bat owner’s licence probably had to be renewed annually, which on top of everything probably entailed an annual fee and registering with a website. Of course, this was assuming the vendor was a legitimate one: most likely, any vendor of bats around the area would be a trafficker of illegal (non-registered) bats, and would most likely be operating from back alleys and cramped basements, locating which would require having the appropriate contacts in the criminal underworld.

The cab advanced a few metres only to stop again. At this point, a gentleman approached the vehicle and knocked on his window. He stared at the gentleman suspiciously, noticing his unkempt appearance, and gestured a hostile what do you want? The gentleman, unfazed, asked him to roll down the

window. Reluctantly, he did, just a crack. The gentleman smiled, yellow teeth showing in his sunburnt face, his black eyes glinting beneath a curtain of greasy black hair, his cheeks swollen by amusement at his awareness of being a sight that inspired fear into the heart of the middle class; the gentleman then lifted a plastic bag for him to look at: the plastic bag contained cans of carbonated drinks.

'No tengo efectivo,' he said to the gentleman, looking away stiffly and dismissively.

'No, no. El papel no me interesa. ¿Lleva plata?'

'¿Plata? No, no llevo 'plata'. He dicho que llevo dinero encima,' he said. i f

'No, no dinero plata. Plata plata. El metal. Plata.'

'Ah, ya veo,' he said, realising his mistake. 'No. Estoy limpio.'

'Por una moneda de cien Pesetas de plata le doy toda la bolsa,' replied the gentleman.

'¡He dicho que estoy limpio! No llevo cabezones de Franco.'

The gentleman shook his head, realizing he was wasting his time, and walked away towards the car directly ahead; the car was a hideously battered Peugeot 408, rusty and covered in grime, with the boot held shut by a rope and one of the broken tail lights secured in place with black duct tape. There were six people inside the Peugeot, at least two of them were swigging from bottles of booze. The gentleman with the bag of carbonated drinks effected a quick sale, receiving packets of bullets in payment. Owning firearms was, of course, illegal across the EU and the NAU, but this had only driven them underground, while high inflation, water and energy shortages, and endemic violent crime had accentuated their importance. Besides gold and silver (which were subject to 140% VAT), lead was the other precious metal.

A bus emerged from an alley on the left and bullied its way into the traffic. The bus was not, of course, a regular service, with a route number and fixed stops: it was, rather, unregulated and privately operated: The bus was an ancient model, with its paint faded, peeling in places and touched up in others. Moreover, it was full to the point of overflowing, with passengers spilling out of the doors, hanging on to other passengers, and additional ones sitting on the roof or standing on the bumpers and hanging on to bars soldered onto the body of the vehicle. Some were preoccupied with holding onto whatever support they had; others were chatting, smiling at the motorists immediately around them. The bus driver advanced a few inches at a time, revving up his engine in a menacing fashion,

trying aggressively to wedge himself between any two cars. No one sitting in that traffic jam seemed inclined to yield, however, doing anything necessary, at the risk of scratching their vehicles, to seal out the bus and squeeze past. Seeing cars with bumpers touching did not deter the bus driver: he pushed forward, causing the bus to make contact with two cars, a grimy Ford Fiesta on the right, and an blue Opel Vectra on the left; both vehicles were long discontinued models in poor state of repair. The Ford Fiesta pulled away, but the Opel Vectra's driver pressed his accelerator, hoping to force his way past the bus, even if it meant scratching his car. The bus driver responded in kind by pressing his accelerator, causing the bus to lunge forward and scrape the Opel. The Opel driver pressed harder, filling the air with the angry sound of his revving engine; this had no effect on his opponent, however, who advanced slowly but relentlessly, pushing the Opel sideways and under the bus' front bumper. The bus driver then aggressively jerked forward once more, partially crushing the front of the Opel. The crunching sound was followed by a lull in the noise from the two vehicles; as their respective drivers let go of their accelerators, and stuck their heads out their windows to inspect the damage. The Opel driver, seeing what had happened, became visibly agitated and began waving his brown arms and hurling epithets at the bus driver. The frowning bus driver argued back, waving his arm at his opponent with lazy blaming gestures. The passengers sitting atop and holding onto the outer walls of the bus looked on, smiling with amusement.

The cabbie stuck his head out the window, as if to get a better view and listen in on the brawl. He craned his neck to get a better view himself. By this time the Opel driver had burst out of his vehicle and positioned himself directly under the bus driver. Opel gesticulated with fury, his huge, gape-toothed mouth full of swear words and vulgar invectives. The bus driver was dismissive, his middle-aged face a blunt mask of impassive arrogance. This exacerbated Opel's fury, to the point where he grew impatient with verbal violence and decided to upgrade his medium of expression to physical violence. Opel stepped onto the hood of his vehicle and grabbed hold of the bus driver's shirt collar, pulling towards him; he then began heaving backwards, in an attempt to extract the bus driver from his vehicle. The bus driver began slugging at Opel's rabid face with his left fist, while pressing his right hand against the inner side of the window frame and applying backward pressure with his arm. Having to divide his attention this way

made it awkward for the bus driver, causing his punches to have minimal effect. However, despite using his right leg to push against the bus, in his efforts to yank its driver out, Opel enjoyed less firm structural support: the hood of his Opel had ended up at a steep angle. The two men, therefore, quickly reached a stalemate.

Observing the incident from the back of the cab, his initial fascination quickly gave way to boredom. The boredom in turn left room for concern about the interruption to whatever little flow of traffic there had been to begin with: now there was none, and this was likely to remain the case for any number of hours: the Opel had ended up firmly wedged under the bus. This meant someone would have to call the traffic police, who might or might not dare to come; or call in a tow truck, the drive of which again might or might not dare to come; or else the more motivated among the surrounding motorists and pedestrians might volunteer to help dislodge the Opel from under the bus. Given the inaccessibility of the area, the nastiness of its human capital, and the juxtaposition of drowsy indifference, amused selfishness, gleeful uncivicness, and sadistic criminality apparent in the faces around him, only the latter scenario was likely, and only provided the feared hoodlums from the area eventually decided they required road access. This meant night was likely to fall before anything was done. He turned to cast a backward glance through the rear windscreen, to see if there was any chance the cabbie would be able to manoeuvre his way out of the blockage. The road was choked solid with cars, vans, bikes, trucks, and mini-busses, so there was none. The view, moreover, was obscured by the fauna swarming the narrow pavement on both sides: pimps, freaks, weirdos, rastas, smackheads, tramps, muggers, trollops, dealers, gangsters, paedophiles, welfare mamas, ghetto queens, and midnight cowboys; manoeuvring out of there would be impossible.

He began considering whether to get out and walk towards the Palacio Real. Being White and evidently an office worker put him at high risk in an area that was already high risk for anybody, armed or unarmed, irrespective of race, creed, gender, age, or sexual orientation; however, he would be at much higher risk if he was still in the area once night fell; so bailing out now, while it was morning and the worst of the human refuse was still asleep in their cramped bedsits, improved his chances of escaping without bullet holes in his head.

He addressed the cabbie 'Oiga. Cuant-'

Suddenly, before he could finish his sentence, two racially-indeterminate men burst out from within the multitude on the pavements, running as fast as they could towards the scene of brawl, climbing over car roofs, jumping over bonnets, shoving pedestrians aside, in a scene reminiscent of an episode of *Star-sky and Hutch*. Upon reaching their destination, they began delivering blows, raining them down onto Opel with cruentous fury. This caused broad grins of cruel glee to appear on the faces of the men riding the bus: their mouths simultaneously stretching to form a constellation of waning moons on the equatorial night sky. The grinning mouths began clamoring exhortations for an escalation of violence; the observers demanded the puerisation of alveolar processes, the fracturing of supra orbital ridges, the dislocation of inferior maxillaries, the rupturing of costal cartilages, the production of hæmatomae, the release of vitreous humour, and the infliction of an ample variety of spectacular injuries, in the context of freely flowing blood and loud screams of pain. Of course, none of the exhortations were made in a well-educated and anatomically-correct manner; they were barked at the racially-indeterminate men using blunt terminology and bestial accents.

One of the racially-indeterminate men was clad in faded blue jeans and a sky-blue shirt; tired of pounding Opel in the head, he grabbed the back of Opel's t-shirt and pulled as, hard as he could, in an effort to strangle Opel by tightening the latter's t-shirt around his neck. Choking, Opel's hands deprecated punching in favour of preserving his respiratory capability; this gave the second racially-indeterminate man the opportunity to begin punching Opel in the stomach without challenge.

The freedom to inflict injury at will caused the second racially-indeterminate man enormous pleasure: his aspect contorted into a grimace of sadistic glee, exaggerating the gargoyle-like appearance lent to him by his confused parentage. Opel soon found himself with his back on the asphalt, being dragged backward by the first racially-indeterminate man, while, the second continued his assault with his wheat-coloured *Timberland* boots. The bus driver simply sat with his head out the window, observing the scene with apparent indifference: his dark brown face, lined and double-chinned, remained callously without expression. Not so were the faces of the many pedestrians who had stopped to gawk, forming a wide circle with the brawl at its centre: these faces were alight with morbid joy, positively beaming with juvenile bloodthirst; the mouths within these faces were, like those belonging to the bus pas-

sengers, either smiling or barking special requests. 'Break his nose!' 'Crack his skull!' 'Smash his teeth!' they ran.

As soon as Opel had been dragged sufficiently out of the way and onto the pavement, the bus driver's head retreated into the interior of his vehicle. The bus then emitted a metallic scraping sound as the driver shifted into reverse gear, before revving up the engine frequently and irregularly. The bus began heaving backwards, causing crunching and scratching sounds as it began dragging the Opel with it; the Opel was embedded under the bus' front bumper, and it soon became apparent that sledge hammers, crowbars, and sheet metal cutters would be required to dislodge it. No one thought to offer assistance, and the only person to approach the Opel with anything resembling an inquisitive mind - a young Afro-Caribbean male with long and brillantined kinky hair - gestured the bus driver to halt for a moment only so that he could peruse the interior of the Opel and extract whatever was valuable. This he accomplished after the briefest search, which produced a six-pack of Antartica beer and a bottle of rum. The bus driver resumed his manoeuvring as soon as the young Afro-Caribbean male waved him thanks: he pushed forward, then backward again, and repeated these operations several times. He, observing from the back of the cab, quickly grew impatient with the manoeuvring, for it was blindingly obvious that dislodging the Opel would require tools, yet the insufferably dull-witted bus driver would probably experience proton decay before lie realised.

After twenty minutes of perfectly futile manoeuvring, however, the bus driver finally decided to change tactics. He switched off his engine and got out of the bus. With his hands on his hips, he stared at the source of his problem. He was joined moments later by some of his passengers, who emulated the driver while engaging in casual conversation. Minutes passed during which people milled around the front of the bus, standing around uselessly, effectively abdicating the finding of a solution to someone else. All along he waited, observing with frustrated anticipation from the back of the cab, hoping someone would have a bright idea and show some initiative. Come on, he fumed, sighing and grinding his teeth. At last, someone came along who did. A muscular Vin Diesel lookalike emerged from within the crowd, carrying a sledgehammer; his appearance was greeted with cheers. 'Diesel' strutted with slow deliberation towards the Opel, examined the situation from various angles, and proceeded to smash the Opel's bonnet with his sledgehammer. The act of destruction proved too tempting for

some to resist: two motorists switched off their engines and emerged out of their respective vehicles, suddenly desirous to contribute to the community: the one who had stepped out of a flatbed truck, a morbidly obese Diego Maradona double with a huge beer belly, pulled out one of the steel scaffolding pipes he had been transporting; the other, a younger Evo Morales who had stepped out of a Volkswagen Polo, opened the boot to produce a thick chain; the boot was crammed with junk: wrinkled papers, plumbing parts, plastic bags, a broken vacuum cleaner, and cleaning products.

The two racially-indeterminate men, to whom but the most immediate passersby had stopped paying attention, got bored of assaulting Opel: Opel was on the pavement and barely moving, so he and his attackers were no longer exciting for anyone to watch. Before moving on, one of the racially-indeterminate men, the one with the blue shirt, relieved Opel of his wallet; the other, wearing a football t-shirt, identified more solid assets in Opel's gold watch and rings. Observing them as they walked past the cab, he noticed the racially-indeterminate men, both frowning and with gazes fixed in the distance, were perspiring profusely.

'Diego' joined 'Diesel' in the dislodging operation: 'Diesel' hammered, 'Diego' used the scaffolding pipe as a lever, trying to lower the Opel so that it would detach itself from the bus' front bumper: 'Evo' joined the dynamic duo and asked them to stop, butchering the Spanish language with his coarse dialect. The three men parleyed for a while, ostensibly discussing tactics. During this time, motorists finally began honking their horns: without a doubt, their surplus of testosterone was matched by their deficit of civility, but if it took them this long to commence their aural assault, and begin shouting and waving their arms, it was because crippling levels' of congestion had become so normal that motorists fully expected traffic to remain motionless for long stretches of time; moreover, most were grateful that they could afford to own and run a car, even if it meant journey times were longer, because public transport was a disaster area and (certainly in that part of town) walking automatically meant muggings, rape, and/or death. The rising morning heat obviously acted as a catalyst, for once the waters were tested by some initial tentative honking, other motorists, emboldened by the chutzpah of the pioneers, added some honking of their own. Soon, the honking grew in richness and intensity, with a wide variety of horn sounds piercing the air, and some of the honking motorists betraying their belief

that the longer the honk was sustained the faster the occlusion ahead was likely to be removed. Out of the rumbling of many internal combustion engines quickly grew an angry horn symphony of terrifying collective fury. Such was the level of dissonance and sonic discord that the motorists' symphony would have made Gyorgy Ligeti's 1969 Chamber Concerto sound soothingly melodic by comparison. This did not seem to bother 'Diego', 'Evo', or 'Diesel', who, apart from 'Evo' once turning his head and dismissively waving his arm, continued their discussion in a perfectly relaxed manner.

More interminable minutes passed. The taximeter continued to pile Euros onto the fare. The cabbie looked bored, his elbow resting on the door and his head resting on his fist: of course, the cabbie *loved* congestion, as it inflated fares while deflating his workload, but sitting through traffic jams all day, day after day, was still very tedious. He, on the other hand, although temporarily having shelved the idea of alighting, now that it looked as if something was going to be done about the occlusion on the road, was increasingly worried about the money drain caused by the bus driver's frustraneous maneuvering earlier on, and the lack of urgency shown by the three stooges who had volunteered to help him. He could not even rely on inflation mitigating said money drain, because modern taxi meters adjusted electronically for inflation by continuously checking the latest figures on the internet and ensuring fares increased accordingly.

At last, 'Diego', 'Evo', and 'Diesel', made a move, and sprang into action. 'Diego' and 'Diesel' resumed their self-assigned tasks, while 'Evo' approached the cabbie and explained the plan. This plan required that the cabbie, who was directly behind the embedded Opel, consent to chain the Opel to his cab, and agree to take part in the dislodging operation by using his cab to pull the Opel back and out from under the *bus*' front bumper, while 'Diesel' further flattened the bonnet and 'Diego' pried the two vehicles apart. The cabbie agreed, and got out of the vehicle in order, to assist 'Evo' in attaching the chain. This took them about ten minutes, after which the cabbie returned to his vehicle and awaited the three stooges' go-ahead to start reversing. After some more bonnet flattening, 'Diesel' asked 'Diego' to move out of the way, and directed 'Evo' to signal the cabbie to start pulling. The cabbie did as instructed: revving up the engine, he performed a graduated clutch release at two-second intervals; sitting in the back of the cab, he felt the front of the vehicle sink with each heave.

Initially, the Opel remained firmly lodged under the bus, but some additional blows of the sledgehammer and 'Diego's' leveraging with the scaffolding pipe eventually did the trick. The cabbie obviously felt the Opel giving way and orchestrated a solid final heave, which ripped the Opel out from under the bus. This suddenly sent the cab shooting backwards, J:00 quickly for the cabbie to react. As a result, the cab collided with the vehicle immediately behind him, a dilapidated Ford Ka. Given the greater mass and wall-like rear of the Passat, the impact was hard enough to crush the Ka's front, smashing the headlights and grill in the process. The cabbie was suddenly paralysed, and initially simply sat there in silence, looking through the rear view mirror, as if waiting for something to happen. He turned around to look through the rear view wind-screen, only to see a man with a pale, flowery shirt emerging from the Ka. The man looked like a Colombian cowboy, or *llanero*: tan skin, stunted cowboy hat, jeans; he signaled his displeasure without delay, slamming the door to his Ka shut. While the *llanero* walked round the cab, obviously looking forward to knocking out the cabbie's teeth and cracking his skull, the cabbie alighted to greet him. The cabbie began by making a placatory gesture. The *llanero* interpreted this as weakness and simply punched the cabbie in the face.

'¡Maricón!' the *llanero* said.

The cabbie was startled. With one hand on his face, where the *llanero* had punched him, he used the other to push the *llanero* back. The *llanero*, however, kept coming.

'¡Te voy a partir la cara, moro de mierda!'

The *llanero* attempted to throw another punch, but this time the cabbie blocked him. A scuffle ensued, with the *llanero* trying to grab the cabbie by his curls so that he could hold the cabbie's face in place while he threw punches, and the cabbie pushing his opponent's face back and shoving the *llanero's* arms aside. Both tried to use their legs to force their opponent to the ground. 'Evo', who together with 'Diesel' had been pushing the wrecked Opel onto the pavement, so as to leave enough space for vehicles to drive through, noticed the scuffle and began to yelp, ordering the two men to stop. Neither listened, more preoccupied with averting oncoming punches and scoring as many of their own as possible. Tutting, 'Evo' approached the two men and broke up the fight. The *llanero*, recognising in 'Evo' a fellow Latin American, began shouting justifications, aggressively waving his arm at the North African, his hand in

the shape of a martial arts chop. 'Evo' spent five minutes trying to calm him down, although with annoying indifference. The *llanero* eventually gave up and, fulminating the cabbie with a barrage of foul-mouthed abuse, which he discharged with an aggressively pointed finger, returned to his vehicle, slamming the door shut as hard as he could.

'Diego' had by this time returned to his truck, having replaced the scaffolding pipe on the flatbed. Walking slowly and with slothful movements, 'Evo' joined 'Diesel' next to the bus, where 'Diesel' had been chatting to the bus driver. The three remained in conversation for minute after minute, oblivious to the strident honking of horns and the imprecations of the impatient motorists, who, leaning their heads out of the windows of their vehicles, or standing next to them, no longer saw a reason for the road to remain blocked. Back inside the cab, the cabbie simply sat there, patiently listening to the radio while he waited for the bus driver to finish his conversation and finally get moving. Sitting behind the cabbie, and observing both the taximeter and the conversation ahead with frequent sighs of frustration, he cursed 'Evo' and 'Diesel' for distracting the bus driver with their superfluous chitchat. It looked to him as if they spoke slowly and repetitiously, iterating the same banal and unnecessary observations again and again, smiling, laughing, exchanging jokes, evidently in no hurry at all to get anywhere fast.

The radio reported of a motion put forth in parliament in Norway, sponsored by the Norsk Hedensk Front (the Norwegian Heathen Front), a party founded by the once notorious (and now reclusive) Varg Vikernes and which had gained seats in the previous year's parliamentary elections, to follow EU states in downgrading Christmas and reformulating the Winter holidays as a secular holiday season that accommodated all faiths. The motion was seen by the Left as a cynical attempt to push Odalism. Imitating the strategy deployed by Jewish organisations, in the United States, the NHF had developed an analogous strategy of their own, where they conducted a form of political guerrilla warfare on Christianity through targeting small, individual issues within a rhetorical framework of advocacy for the separation of church and state. Each battle was carefully selected, focussing on something - a word, a symbol, a display - relatively trivial, and easily winnable; the idea was to aggregate small victories over a long period of time, each

representing too small a concession for the opposition to feel it was worth bothering with. Of course, everyone knew secularisation, was a pre-requisite for the achievement of the NHF's long-term-goals: informed by Spengler's prediction of a (Cultural¹ phase of Second Religiosity, secularisation would open up the' market of religious affiliation to competition between all manner of alternative spiritualities, a context where they expected Odalism would thrive. And, of course, Odalism was the thin end of a wedge comprised of an entire political, social, and cultural programme, based on racial nationalism, eugenics, agrarianism, banking reform, and commodity-backed money. However, the NHF had proven fiendishly clever in their strategic adoption of the language and values of the opposition: because of this, the NHF's arguments were formulated in such a way that the opposition found their logic ineluctable; they could not but agree with it and the principles upon which it was based. Thus, it was almost impossible for them to mount any resistance without appearing arbitrary, despite being fully aware of the NHF's ultimate agenda.

At last, 'Diesel' and 'Evo' went their separate ways, 'Evo' back to his car, 'Diesel' back where he had come from. The bus driver got moving, and, after more tedious manoeuvring, during which the outside passengers who had jumped off had climbed back on, the bus finally resumed service, allowing, in turn, a resumption of the flow of traffic. *Al fin!* he mumbled, grinding his teeth as he raged in silence and cast a glance at the degenerate pedestrians. Most were like a degraded subspecies of Uruk-Hai; the best looking looked no better than Gollum; all were dead inside, their eyes dull and cold, listless, non-persons crushed by a mixture of feral rapacity and bewildered despair. The approach to Sol was a scene of utter dereliction, economic depression, and vile squalor: broken glass, boarded-up windows, arabic graffiti, extremist stickers, crumbling facades, peeling paint, obliterated signage, burnt-up vehicles, she-male prostitutes, filth. A normal, decent human being would have preferred to be an Irish factory worker in a slum in Victorian Manchester, rather than spend any amount of time in that rubbish-strewn hellhole; at least the Victorian slums had a vintage quality to them and the genetic distance of its inhabitants did not recede into the far reaches of primitive apedom. More importantly, at least the Irish workers ate potatoes - who knew what these brutes ate.

Once upon a time, Sol had been closed to motorised traffic, and it and the surrounding alleys fully pedestrianised. Since the police and local government authorities finally abandoned the area to its fate, road barriers had been ripped out and motorised traffic allowed to flood back in. The local residents had deemed this necessary once going on foot became too dangerous for any unarmed non-gang member. Sol itself had since come to look like the ruins of Detroit. Evidently, the New Year celebrations had been moved elsewhere quite some time ago, probably due to safety concerns arising from overcrowding, rampant crime, gang fights, and terrorism: the clock atop the Casa de Correos on the Calle Mayor was no longer there. In fact, the Casa de Correos itself had long ceased to be the seat of any official government business, and had been repurposed as a mosque. (He did not doubt its Imam preached only the most truculent brand of Islam, and that its library housed the most virulently anti-Western texts.) The statue of King Charles III was also gone, its plinth graffitied, postered, and bullet-holed out of all recognition. The legendary Tio Pepe display had been partially dismantled, and now read simply 'o Pep': obviously the work of zealous Muslims who idolised OPEC. He imagined the nearby Corte Inglés had probably long closed down and relocated elsewhere: it would presently be a desolate, hulking carcass - a sorrowful memory of a once affluent past - gutted and recycled as a parking lot - another Michigan Theater, only with less architectural value.

'¿Sigo?' asked the cabbie, one more time.

'Sí, siga,' he replied, determined not to wimp out, regardless of how horrendous and apocalyptic it looked outside.

'¿Seguro?' insisted the cabbie, bemused and surprised, his black eyes staring back in the rear view mirror.

'Sí, seguro. No me pregunte más y siga.'

The cabbie chuckled with gentle condescension, shaking his head a little, obviously thinking his fare had no idea of what he had got himself into. He, observing this, stared at the cabbie's occiput, his frowning eyes almost lasering twin holes onto the curved bone. The cabbie took no notice.

Chapter 21

Dr. Kevin MacDonald

Unexpectedly, the cabbie did him a kindness and stopped right before Tron's headquarters, blockading the ruined portal with his vehicle, and thus cocooning him from the bestial multitude that crawled the street. Perhaps the cabbie felt responsible; perhaps the cabbie felt sorry for him, with his suit and tie and dignified air.

'¿Tiene Yuan?' asked the cabbie.

'¿Cómo?'

'Yuan. ¿Tiene Yuan?'

'Eh, no, no llevo,' he replied. 'Sólo Visa.'

'1.220 Euros.'

That was a hugely expensive ride, considering they had covered a small fraction of the distance he had travelled on Sunday night, coming from the airport. Yet, he had seen the taxi-meter pile on the Euros at a steady and credible enough pace. That was the fare. Grumbling, he handed over his Visa - but with calm, slow, and deliberately clumsy movements, taking as much time as possible, hoping that the extra few seconds of inflation would shave off some of the value of the fare. This was a common tactic, of course: upon receipt of any amount of money, people were well advised to spend it as soon as possible; if and once a price or a loan was agreed, people were well advised to delay payment for as long as possible. High inflation accelerated consumption and destroyed credit.

Yuan, eh? Migrant cabbies from new EU member states like Morocco, Lybia, and Egypt, were clued in as to the fundamentals of currency speculation: they had ample experience with paper money. The dollar had lost its status as the world's reserve currency; the Euro had followed, the EGB forced to print

money, not only to, like the Americans, inflate their way out of unpayable debt, but also in order for the EU's economy not to lose competitiveness in the face of the volatilising dollar. The only currency that was worth anything these days was the Yuan, although the Yen was also a popular secondary choice; both currencies had appreciated considerably in the last fifteen years. As had been the long-established practice in developing and post-Soviet economies, where many preferred to be paid in dollars rather than in their unreliable national currency, many in Europe and the United States nowadays used the Yuan as a safer alternative to the worthless U. S. currency and the inflation-beleaguered Euro. He himself had long diversified his currency assets, and made a tidy profit by simply holding on to a fat stack of Yuan bank notes while it approached (and eventually surpassed) parity with the Euro. However, because fiat money always depreciates over time, and the Yuan was still a fiat currency, he had since locked-in his gains by converting his Yuan into precious metals.

Once inside the building, he once again ascended the verandaless staircase, watching his step carefully. He could not imagine anyone besides Mr. Wermod living in that house; certainly, none of the doors looked as if they gave access to flats suitable for human habitation. Their last dwellers, people who had moved in during the early days of Franco's government, had probably fossilised long ago. Even if anyone still had a key to open them, the locks on those doors were probably rusted into a single piece of metal. He imagined the flats beyond them vacant, still decorated with decaying flock wallpaper with rococo floral patterns; their floorboards broken, riddled with termites, or missing altogether; with holes in their ceilings, with dead cables hanging down; their obsolete fireplaces with pools of apiarian carcasses, and the chimneys rising from these fireplaces buzzing with angry bees. At least one of the flats was likely to have been entirely blackened by fire - a fire caused by a gas stove left unattended, a cigarette butt that fell from the hand of a pensioner following a heart attack, or an old incandescent electric heater left next to a curtain or *arable* cloth.

Suddenly, while in the midst of these speculations, the door to flat 3B opened as he reached the third floor. The door revealed a man in his thirties, White, masculine, well built, with blue eyes and light brown hair, cut Wehrmacht style. Although he was surprised to see a White face, his instinctive reaction was to look past it and into the flat behind the man, to see what it looked like. All he could see, however, was a bare wall in the

distance, wallpapered as he had expected, but nothing else. The man stared at him intently, weighing him with suspicion, the way one would look at a man in a suit whom one suspected was a plain-clothes government agent. Without saying a word or turning around, the man pulled the door shut behind him. He stared back for a moment, noticing via his peripheral vision that the man was carrying a duffel bag, and then looked away to continue his ascent. The man moved casually but took his time turning around to lock the door, which he did rotating the key in the lock with controlled deliberation. He kept his ears pricked as he reached the fourth floor and walked along the corridor to continue his ascension up the next stretch of stairs; the man now below him walked very slowly, initiating a cautious descent, probably, keeping his gaze fixed onto the ceiling, carefully following his footsteps. He wondered why the man was suspicious. The man resembled not the type that would be involved in criminal activity. Moreover, he himself was a serious man on serious business, White, well dressed, educated, middle class, and middle aged, who, to his knowledge, looked not like a tax inspector or a community cohesion enforcer. What threat could he possibly represent?

Before he could finish cavilating on the incident, he reached Mr. Wermod's door. It took three rings of the doorbell to summon Mr. Wermod out from within the depths of his flat-cavern. When the bookworm reached the entrance, he opened the door just a crack, as before, and treated him to a silent frown before allowing him in.

Despite arranging a late morning meeting, to allow for the inevitable congestion and delays, he had arrived 45 minutes late; Mr. Wermod said nothing, and looked unconcerned. He gathered Mr. Wermod was probably used to people being late, or cancelling altogether, because of his location. Or, being obviously a recluse and a hoarder, it did not matter to him at what time people arrived, or if they arrived at all.

Mr. Wermod spoke as they squeezed through the clutter on their way to his laboratory. 'I have tested the prototype with your code. It seems able to handle it without problems.'

Suddenly, a loud snap filled the air, its epicentre some way ahead of them, in the lounge. The snap was not only heard, but also felt under their feet; it was as if something had bumped the building or the floorboards. The two of them immediately froze, both instantly with the same thought. He breathed in to say something, but Mr. Wermod lifted a hand to stop him; he observed Mr. Wermod listening out very carefully while he did

the same behind him. The sound of sand and small crumbs of gravel trickling down behind walls followed a momentary silence, before fading completely. A few seconds passed, during which they only heard the front door slamming shut five stories down. Additional seconds passed in complete silence.

Mr. Wermod then lowered his hand, 'Help me redistribute the weight,' he requested, turning around only slightly.

'I am sorry?'

'Help me redistribute the weight a bit,' repeated Mr. Wermod now moving towards the lounge. 'I need to get weight off the centre of the room. There are too many books on that coffee table.'

'I see,' he answered, somewhat annoyed. He had come to see Mr. Wermod's processor modifications running, not to do unpaid manual labour. 'What do you want me to do?' he asked, tonelessly. He could not see any coffee table anywhere. There were so many books in the lounge that he could not really see the furniture underneath them, if there was any.

Mr. Wermod went to a broad column of books rising six feet tall in the middle of the floor some way towards the back of the lounge, and detached from it a pile of books. 'Help me shift these to the dining room area. Drop them anywhere.'

He observed Mr. Wermod for a moment, then, reluctantly, did as Mr. Wermod, careful not to soil his white shirt with Mr. Wermod's dusty tomes.

'Sorry about this. It won't take long,' said Mr. Wermod, depositing the books on the only free chair standing by the dining room table. (The other chairs were being used as, shelves.)

'You should consider moving to larger premises,' he said, with camouflaged sarcasm.

'Nah. It's just an old house and there is too much weight on that point right now. Natural subsidence. If we even it out a bit it will be fine.'

The two of them worked for a few minutes, dismantling the book column. He noticed Mr. Wermod had built it with tomes of Austrian economics and related topics. One he recognised (because he owned it) was G. Edward Griffin's *The Creature from Jeckyll Island: A Second Look at the Federal Reserve*. He had read it in the nineties and found it a real eye-opener, not only in regards to the origins of the Federal Reserve, but in regards to how money was created, why there was inflation, and the fact that inflation was a tax. (He remained, however, ephectic towards the late Mr. Griffin's conspiratological metanarrative, and indifferent towards his non-economic ad-

vocacies.) Together with Laurence Kotlikoff's writings from around the mid 2000s, the book had made it possible for him to be ready when the high inflation that Kotlikoff had predicted had kicked in. Moreover, it had encouraged him to experiment with alternative currency schemes that existed at the time; like the Liberty Dollar. While he had seen the Liberty Dollar as a multi-level marketing scheme, he had all the same profited by selling his rare specimens of Ron Paul ALDs on eBay, after the FBI and the Secret Service had raided Liberty Services' offices in 2007.

'Did you ever get your hands on those Ron Paul Liberty Dollars, back in 2007?' he asked, picking up a new book pile. Almost as soon as he asked the question, he realised Mr. Wermod would have been a teenager back then.

'My brother did,' replied Mr. Wermod. 'He had a one ounce gold Ron Paul and sold it for \$3,000. That was back when gold spot was below \$800. Loose change today, but back then \$3,000 bought a tad more than a bite of a pizza.'

'Yes. I made similar amounts with mine.'

'Did you get stuck with any of the silver certificates? I don't imagine you did.'

'No. I only ever ordered coins. I expected the government would eventually shut NotHaus down. I knew it wasn't going to matter that NotHaus thought his operation was entirely legal; the government was not going to tolerate a competing currency. After all, they are in partnership with a money cartel. My plan was always to accumulate them and then' sell them after they became a collector's item.'

More sand and crumbs of mortar could be heard running down behind the walls.

'Let's do this quick,' said Mr. Wermod, rushing past him to pick up another pile of books. 'Otherwise we won't have a floor to stand on.'

After five or six minutes, Mr. Wermod's coffee table became visible: it was old, made with solid oak and a dark finish. The thickness of the dust around the edges, delimiting the books' footprint, made it plain the table top's surface had not seen the light of day in years. Even now, it saw no daylight, for Mr. Wermod had completely blocked out the windows with hundreds of books: it might have been possible to spy out, peering through a slim crevice between piles of books, but it would have been impossible for a snoop with a telescope to look in. He wondered whether this was the result of a lack of space, using the window sills as shelves in order to keep weight off the

floors; a highly-developed sense of privacy; or simple paranoia. Given his rare talents and the size of his book collection, it was unlikely Mr. Wermod lacked the resources to own a larger flat, in a solid house, in a better area of town. There was no obvious explanation for Mr. Wermod to be operating from there.

'That will be enough,' declared Mr. Wermod, once he set down the last pile of books on the dining room floor. 'Thanks.'

'Let's-'

The doorbell rang. Mr. Wermod squeezed past him, saying nothing, to get to the entrance hall.

He remained in the lounge, while half listening as Mr. Wermod opened the door and exchanged a few words with the owner of a quiet male voice.

He had only just begun exploring the chaotic scene, with its thick layers of dust and dense cobwebs, when Mr. Wermod reappeared, looking very serious. 'I am afraid there has been a family emergency. We will have to re-schedule.'

'Is that so?' said he, irritated; if that was so, Mr. Wermod had just wasted him a whole morning. It was clear thirty-somethings were just as unreliable as twenty-somethings these days. On the other hand, the need to re-schedule was a source of relief, for it would save him the attempt to exit the area after dark. Could he, however, make it to the Metro station without stab wounds in his stomach? His mind began a quick analysis of how to downwardly revise his attire, in order to draw as little attention as possible. Perhaps he could soil his hands on the grimy hubcaps of one of the bangers parked along the road, and rub the grime on his face and hair.

'I'll give you a lift to a safe Metro station,' said Mr. Wermod, as if reading his mind.

'That will be-useful,' he said, tonelessly, suppressing his surprise. He would not have imagined Mr. Wermod owning a car.

Mr. Wermod seemed in a hurry to vacate the premises. 'Please, let's hurry.'

He followed Mr. Wermod as they squeezed their way through the tunnels of clutter and out of the flat. The blue-eyed man he had seen earlier stood on the landing; he looked wary, tense, but was putting on a mask of military serenity. Mr. Wermod triple locked the door (there was a keyhole hidden behind the flat number), and began to quickly make his way down, albeit with light steps, following Blue Eyes. He followed Mr. Wermod. Once on the ground floor, Blue Eyes swerved to the left and into the shadows. There, he opened the door to a cupboard under the stairs; the door was short and its chocolate brown

paint had faded many decades ago. Rather than extracting something out of the cupboard, Blue Eyes ducked and disappeared into the darkness inside. Mr. Wermod stepped sideways, turned around, and held the door open, gesturing him to follow.

‘This way,’ said Mr. Wermod.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked, frowning with suspicion. He became aware of his accelerated heartbeat.

‘To the car park.’

‘This house seems a little old for a car park,’ It all looked rather sinister.

‘Yes.’

Outside he faced almost certain death. Inside that cupboard he might possibly find steps leading to a car park. He imagined an old banger parked inside a parking bay, flanked by concrete columns, the dank air dimly lit by neon tubes.

‘OK,’ he said, flatly. His hands felt cold.

He stepped into the cupboard. There was a flight of stairs, narrow and very steep, its bottom illuminated by a moribund tungsten bulb. Blue Eyes was out of sight. The absence of petrol fumes put him on guard. As he began a careful descent, he heard Mr. Wermod stepping in behind him, followed by the sound of a lock turning.

At the bottom of the steps, to the left, he found a square chamber. The walls had been rendered with cement. There was no car in sight, and still no petrol fumes. There were a number of old mattresses leaning against one of the walls. Blue Eyes was busy shifting them aside.

Mr. Wermod joined him at the bottom of the steps. ‘It’s just a precaution. There is a lot of crime around here,’ he explained.

‘I saw,’ he replied, guardedly, with a voice smaller and less authoritative than he would have liked, not daring to ask questions. The explanation was reasonable, but the men were not relaxed: their superficial calm was a pretence.

Blue Eyes’ efforts exposed a short door, leading into a tunnel. Blue Eyes flicked a switch, causing a string of compact fluorescent lightbulbs to illuminate the roof of the passageway. He observed Blue Eyes as the latter went in, then looked at Mr. Wermod, as if for confirmation; Mr. Wermod nodded in the direction of the tunnel, indicating that he followed Blue Eyes. When he did, Mr. Wermod followed close behind.

The tunnel was long and sinuous, undulating this way and that for hundreds of metres. His chest was a drum, and the drummer a cardiac muscle, the beat heavy and urgent. His

breathing felt constricted, the air hot and dry. Where was this leading? He checked himself, in an effort to remain perfectly expressionless, and keep his body language apparently calm and authoritative.

Eventually, they faced a particleboard wall. He heard the sound of latches; then saw Blue Eyes pulling the wall back, opening it as if it were a door. The other side of the wall was painted white, and had shelves attached to it. The shelves held buckets and bottles and boxes of cleaning products. Blue Eyes led the way into what looked like a storage cupboard. 'Almost there,' said Mr. Wermod, with an amiable tone. He said nothing.

They advanced into the cupboard. Mr. Wermod then pulled the wall behind him, leaving them all lost in the darkness. The darkness was only broken by light coming from behind an iron door directly in front: the iron door was not solid, but rather consisted of angled metal strips soldered onto a frame. He was encouraged by the appearance of petrol fumes, and the hum of a ventilation system; the rumble of engines and the screech of tires echoed in the distance. It seemed as if the underground car park was on the other side of the iron door. He heard the jingle of keys, then the sound of a lock turning. Neon light illuminated Blue Eyes' face as he pushed the door open just a crack. Blue Eyes looked intently in one direction, then stuck his head out and looked in the other, before swiftly stepping out, and signalling him and Mr. Wermod to follow. The coast was clear.

He found himself stepping into an decrepit, multilevel, underground parking lot, and next to a hulking monstrosity of a car. The car was covered with a thick layer of grime, but he could see it was of a creamy white colour; it was also American and of antediluvian vintage: a 1976 Gran Torino - the four-door version of Starsky and Hutch's car. The registration plate, almost unreadable, read GAD 044. It was definitely foreign. The Gran Torino was in a lamentable condition, with two flat tires, missing chrome, and a myriad bumps and scratches. Had he been in the United States and were it the 1980s, he would have thought it had been used as a getaway car in a bank robbery.

They followed Blue Eyes after he locked the iron door. His guides appeared to feign a casual step, which seemed a lot slower than they really wanted to go. They went down a ramp onto the level below, before walking towards the far end on the right hand side. Ahead of them was a car with the headlights

on and the engine running: it was a Mercedes, a 1968 286 SE in dark metallic grey. Blue Eyes went directly towards the Mercedes and boarded the vehicle.

‘There we are,’ said Mr. Wermod, as he walked towards a black Volkswagen New Beetle, parked next to the Mercedes; he then unlocked the doors.

He got in, sitting in the front passenger seat.

Mr. Wermod did not get in after him. Instead, he pushed the driver’s seat forward and waited. He heard one of the Mercedes’ doors open and close. Then, a man hopped into the car, and sat in the rear passenger seat. Mr. Wermod followed immediately afterwards.

‘I hope you don’t mind my uncle,’ said the bookworm, seating himself behind the wheel. ‘I’ll drop you off in Moncloa.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, suppressing his perplexity.

He turned around briefly to look at Mr. Wermod’s uncle. He immediately recognised the face. He had seen it on an issue of Newsweek at the airport three days ago, and subsequently elsewhere: it was Dr. Kevin MacDonald.

Chapter 22

Occult Sect

He tried to convince himself that he had made a mistake, that Mr. Wermod's uncle simply resembled the infamous evolutionary psychologist. He burnt with a desire to say to Mr. Wermod, 'your uncle looks somewhat familiar. Is he famous?' However, for now he thought it prudent to simply observe.

When they reached the exit, Mr. Wermod pointed his mobile at the barrier, causing it to lift. He immediately suspected Mr. Wermod had not paid for the parking, but had somehow used a modified code to trick the barrier into thinking that he had.

The Volkswagen was not more than five years old and was in good condition. Remarkably, it was perfectly clean inside, without books, wrappers, leaflets, tickets, servillettes, coins, pens, paperclips, jumpers, or cleaning products littering the interior. There was not even a baseball bat or a crowbar by his feet, suggesting Mr. Wermod was very confident about his hand-to-hand combat abilities - Mr. Wermod certainly looked as if he could benchpress a small car. The only decoration was an animated air freshener card, now without scent, showing an animated stick figure with a photograph of certain Austrian painter and politician from the XXth century, endlessly dancing away.

Great. Now I am implicated in an international fugitive operation with an Esoteric Hitlerist, he thought, clenching his jaw. Given the world he was forced to live in, it was not surprising things went wrong all the time, but on this particular trip the concatenations of unlucky coincidences were proving especially pervasive. As much as he disliked Scoptic's directors,

however, he would have been surprised if his clients knew or were part of such an operation. According to media reports (for what it was worth), the Esoteric Hitlerists were supposed to be religious fanatics - they were, as Mr. Wermod said, 'men against time'; his clients, on the other hand, cared only about money - they were 'men of their time'. No. This was something Mr. Wermod - if that was his real name! - was secretly involved in; Scopic had probably just hired him (recommended by someone) because of his rare talents and expertise, and because his "organisation" was small and, well, *low key* - they were trying to run circles around Big Brother's tax vampires after all.

The car park exit faced a Tesco, although only the sign was visible over the heads of the multitude swarming the pavement. The multitude was compact, physiognomically varied, and invariably of dark complexion: many walked with nude torsos; others wore shorts and rubber flipflops; all were drenched in sweat, beaten and oppressed by the merciless sun. As soon as they had finished climbing the ramp, Mr. Wermod wedged his way into the river of pedestrians. In the resulting gap, he saw a teenager burst out of the shop and run. The teenager was gripping a bottle of booze, held in his fist by the neck. He was immediately followed by an angry man in his thirties, who ran after the teenager as fast as he could. They both had to weave their way through the teeming pavement, and were quickly lost in the crowd. Neither he nor Mr. Wermod made any comment: shoplifting these days was as common as hydrogen.

Since this was apparently a getaway, if he were a character in a 1970s Hollywood film, this would have been the part where the car chase would have kicked in. There would have been roaring engines, screeching tyres, vehicles seating on the asphalt at every bend, and suspenseful, rhythmic music. He imagined scenes from *The Driver*, *Bullitt*, or *The French Connection*. Reality was quite different. All the streets and alleys in every direction were choked with congestion. The congestion was aggravated by the number of cars, vans, trucks, and buses, parked and double parked, often in the most incredible places: anybody paying any attention to, or even caring about, what the road code prescribed was as improbable as an honorable estate agent or a bank that voluntarily abstained from ripping off its customers; space was at a premium, the pressure to meet impossible delivery schedules was unrelenting, and late arrivals meant replacement by an even cheaper immigrant la-

bourer: every nook and cranny had to be used, and was hard fought over by irate, desperate, exasperated, and highly-competitive drivers. Further difficulting progress were the frequency of protracted roadworks and the abundance of pedestrians for whom asphalt and pavement were distinctions that belonged to a subtler, gentler age, when one could actually afford to be civic and law abiding.

Instead of a high-speed car chase, therefore, he assumed he was now involved in a slow-speed cat and mouse game, where Mr. Wermod would pretend everything was calm and normal, in order to blend into the traffic, and thus remain hidden in plain sight, while silently and seamlessly evading the gaze of the Interpol, the CCTV cameras, and the Civil Guards manning the various checkpoints and roadblocks. What Mr. Wermod planned to do when they reached the first of the checkpoints he did not want to think about. There was an international search warrant for Dr. Kevin MacDonald, and the Civil Guards would have been briefed accordingly. Could all this be just idle speculation on his part? How did he conclude that it was Dr. Kevin MacDonald sitting behind Mr. Wermod and not Mr. Wermod's uncle, who just happened to look exactly like the infamous evolutionary psychologist? If only his Post-a-Phone had internet access: he would then be able to check Dr. MacDonald's likeness!, In view of such vexatious thoughts, he pretended to look at a shop front on Mr. Wermod's side in order to turn his head just enough in Dr. MacDonald's direction to catch another glimpse of him through the corner of his eye. It became instantly clear that Dr. MacDonald had been briefed as to how best to conduct himself while being transported to a safe location, for he saw Dr. MacDonald browsing through a newspaper, flipping through the pages very slowly, and obviously not really reading. Interestingly, Dr. MacDonald had not bothered to - or had been advised against - wearing a baseball cap and mirrored shades. Perhaps it was felt that, with thermometers registering furnace-like temperatures, no one would choose to wear headgear inside a car, unless evading recognition. If only Mr. Wermod would engage his 'uncle' in conversation! At least then he would be able to test his suspicions against Dr. MacDonald's accent! He did not dare say anything to Dr. MacDonald.

As expected, Mr. Wermod began erratically changing lanes. He also began avoiding main roads and navigating the back alleys whenever possible. At odd times, Mr. Wermod would tap the back of his steering wheel with his left index finger, as if

pressing a button, only there was no visible button. Most likely, he speculated, Mr. Wermod had installed an ultra-thin button using invisible electronic ink, which permitted him to activate an electronic lacquer on the Beetle's number plate, causing it to frost or appear dirty whenever they approached a CCTV camera. He had no doubt Mr. Wermod had tampered with the Beetle's black box, so that when picked up by the road sensors the vehicle would show up with bogus details on the traffic police's database - 'clean' details of a manufactured or stolen identity that he would have planted into the hacked database. Even so, Mr. Wermod was obviously taking every precaution: Dr. Kevin MacDonald was valuable cargo.

The first checkpoint was just before Plaza de España. Mr. Wermod having joined the Gran Vía, the 142-metre Torre de Madrid was now directly ahead of them. Pollution had soiled its once white facade: it had greeted its 75th anniversary with a grimy, fuliginous coating, belched out of millions of exhaust pipes over the decades; and, of course; there had been no money to finance a cleaning. Its entrails housed thousands of anonymous souls, a middle class that had been for years steadily ran into the ground, crushed under ever-growing mountains of debt, their standard of living sinking, any temporary liquid assets gobbled up by taxes, pruned by interest payments, arid sanded away by inflation. He imagined the people inside that tower - debt slaves all of them - sunken on threadbare sofas, their brows clouded by depression, their vitreous eyes catatonic in front of-antiquated television sets, pumping out low-brow, downmarket daytime television. *How can people live like that*, he thought, shaking his head, *right in the middle of the city!*

Cement blocks separated each lane on the approach to the checkpoint. Seeing them in the dim Winter light, enveloped in a midday fog of pollution, unsettled his stomach. His chest started to bubble with nervousness; his hands again grew cold and numb. What if he were arrested? His face and full name would appear on the newspapers across the world, lumped with the loonie cultists - an accessory to an international operation trying to smuggle out a dangerous anti-Semite! Never mind what lies the media told about Dr. MacDonald: the general public did not, and would not care, to know any better. The toxic lies would now go on to poison his reputation, his wife's reputation, both their parents, and their parent's siblings. The forces of democracy would destroy his firm, confiscate his assets, declare him criminally insane, and eventually

reduce him to a naked human; they would fly him over to an offshore gulag, where he would be tortured and re-educated. *Why?* he pleaded, silently, attempting to maintain a dignified and outwardly circumspect demeanor - after all, he was a serious professional, with serious clients.

At the checkpoint there were two dark green, bomb-proof booths in each direction of traffic. The booths were manned by the Civil Guard, all heavily armed and wearing bullet-proof vests. Mr. Wermod quickly checked the clock, then changed lanes one last time, for no apparent reason, just before the cement blocks began. This elicited a mini-feast of horn-honking, shouted invectives, and aggressively waved arms, none of which Mr. Wermod deigned to acknowledge. He checked to see if Mr. Wermod evinced signs of nervousness. To his surprise, Mr. Wermod was obviously concentrating, but otherwise appeared calm. Could it be that the gentleman behind him was, in fact, his uncle? Thinking that this might be the case, after all, and that all was well and innocent, made him feel better. But then, if there had been a family emergency, how could this uncle browse a newspaper with such apparent equanimity?

The car in front pulled away and the barrier came back down. There was a Civil Guard stationed inside the booth; this one looked like a balding Friedrich Nietzsche. The other agent looked like Julius Langbehn, the author of *Rembrandt als Erzieher*; this one stood outside the booth, demanding IDs. By the time Mr. Wermod pulled up, his hands felt like icicles, and his heart, having apparently crawled up to the back of his throat, was pounding like a deep war drum. He tried to conceal his terror. What did he have to worry about? This had been a terrible misunderstanding. He was just an IT consultant, in a suit and tie and with a track record of serious contracts with very serious multinational organisations; as a rational atheist, he had no interest in religious cults. Esoteric Hitlerism? He only found out what it was a couple of days ago!

Julius leaned forward and peered into the car, noting each of the occupants with his hazel eyes. Julius' face was deadly serious.

'DNIs,' he ordered.

'¿Hay donde tomarse una caña en Serrano?' asked Mr. Wermod, extracting his passport from the glove compartment.

Julius bore Mr. Wermod with probing eyes. 'Hay un bar. Pero sólo venden San Miguel.'

'Vale.'

San Miguel. Serrano. Very clever, he thought, cynically. This Wermod is an Esoteric Hitlerist. Now I am sure!

'Espere.' Julius disappeared into the booth.

They all waited. He tried to look bored while attempting to catch a glance at Julius as the latter did whatever he was doing inside the booth. However, he could only see part of Julius' back: the booth's windows were small and the (no doubt) armoured glass was covered with a reflective film. Bald Nietzsche, meanwhile, had walked round the back of the vehicle, but he was absorbed collecting readings from an electronic wand, the tip of which he had positioned directly in front of the vehicle's exhaust. Nietzsche was taking emissions readings - Mr. Wermod would be fined if they were above the EU-mandated threshold, which was, of course, optimistically low and led to 90% of drivers across the EU being fined each time. (Car manufacturers had been gradually developing engines that produced ever-lower emissions, but Brussels, anxious not to lose such a reliable revenue stream, lowered the acceptable emissions threshold every year, engineering it so that almost every car fell afoul of the law. This was yet another reason why Brussels was relaxed about the ECB's policy of continuing to increase the money supply, and therefore inflation: in an inflationary economy, buying rapidly-depreciating, big-ticket assets like motor vehicles took last priority, so only the wealthiest 1% - which included the class of bankers, politicians, and the big business owners that lobbied and financed the latter - could afford the newer, low-emissions models.) Because they had to be paid by almost every driver every time he passed a checkpoint, the fines had taken the character of an inner-city road toll.

Two minutes later, Julius returned.

Damn. He looks angry.

Julius shot a glance at Nietzsche, who was still standing by the rear of the vehicle. Nietzsche probably nodded, because Julius then nodded back before leaning to look at Mr. Wermod once more.

'Todo en regla,' said Julius, handing back the passports. The barrier came up. They were through.

Mr. Wermod was soon back to his apparently evasive tactics; Obviously, even though he had taken them past the first checkpoint, the CCTV cameras (which were everywhere) and any plainclothes tails (which could be anywhere) still had to be avoided. Whether this was proving effective, he would never find out, because within forty five minutes Mr. Wermod

double parked next to the entrance to the Moncloa Metro Station. Certainly not a safe area by any means, but at the same time also nothing like Sol.

‘Can you find your way back from here?’ asked Mr. Wermod.

‘Yes, I know Madrid,’ he replied, grabbing hold of the door handle.

‘OK. I am sorry about today. I’ll send you an email and we’ll re-schedule. That prototype is ready to go. Perhaps it will be easier if we meet at Scoptic and test it in the actual system there.’

‘Yes. That is what I was hoping we would be doing next.’

‘We’ll be in touch then.’

He opened the door and started getting out of the vehicle.

‘Oh,’ said Mr. Wermod. ‘Ah...’

He turned around. ‘Yes?’

‘Never mind.’

He exited the vehicle, determined to have a good look at Mr. Wermod’s alleged uncle when slamming the door shut. Dr. MacDonald met his gaze momentarily, then looked away, his face expressionless. This confirmed his suspicions: that was emphatically not Mr. Wermod’s uncle, but Dr. Kevin MacDonald, the former professor and present fugitive. He had to be! The white-haired gentleman looked exactly like the one in the newspapers. He was out of sight, obscured behind the Beetles’ tinted windows, as soon as he shut the door; Mr. Wermod pulled out almost instantaneously, aggressively shoving his way back into the flow of traffic.

As he walked away, he wished them luck. He was sure the media had lied about Dr. Kevin MacDonald, and the infamous psychologist looked as if he had not chosen his rescuers - he was just glad to have escaped a show trial and the death penalty.

Chapter 23

Metro

He descended the steps into the bowels of the Moncloa Metro station, still not quite believing what he had witnessed while squeezing past the giant cement blocks barricading the Spanish Air Force General Headquarters: Franco's Triumphal Arch, erected in 1956 to commemorate Nationalist victory during the Spanish Civil War, was no longer there! He knew that following enactment of the Ley de la Memoria Histórica (Law of Historical Memory) in 2007, Franco's legacy had been systematically targeted by socialist governments, including the definition of Franquismo in the Spanish dictionary; he knew that streets had been renamed, vestigial symbols removed, and tsunamis of films produced, obliterating any reminder of Franco, maligning every aspect of Franquismo, and whitewashing the Red barbarians; but he had not prepared himself for sudden confrontation with the absence of an iconic landmark. The Reds' demolishing of the Valle de los Caídos, although typical of their barbarism and proclivity to apply brute force in their pursuit of self-serving historical revisionism, he could to some degree understand: after all, it was Franco's tomb, and to them destroying it was akin to the pulling down of Lenin's statues in the former Soviet republics after the fall of Communism. However, demolishing historical monuments, rather than simply renaming them, was pure revengeful vandalism. No doubt the socialists had given all manner of reasons, couching their campaign in the language of tolerance and equality, and met little resistance from a paralysed Right, too scared to be called names by people who hated them to risk standing up for themselves and what they

believed in. It was shocking to see the arch gone after having taken it for granted for forty years.

As soon as he reached the bottom of the stairs, the temperature increased. Both the stairs and the corridors were swarming with heavily perspiring humans. Thirty years ago, he would have been able to reach the platform within five minutes, including the time it took to purchase a ticket. Now, because the Metro was choked with passengers from top to bottom, it took five minutes to advance five metres. The Third World had become a baby factory, its inhabitants reproducing themselves at a factorial rate, their fertility unchecked by contraception, their mortality checked by First World medicine, charity, and 'development' funds; the mass production of raw human labourers had become the Third World's main industry, and raw human labourers Europe's and America's main import. Among the hundreds of people jammed into the tunnel, he was able to spot only two individuals with blood ties to Spain - both were in their sixties. Feeling claustrophobic, he edged his way towards the wall on his right; this would cut the number of humans pressed around him by a third. The wall was covered with posters, containing moving adverts; electric paper was all the rage, as it made it possible to have animated posters with sound. The technology was still too expensive for using on newspapers and magazines, but that would certainly come, provided Western economies did not collapse first: those who had heralded the death of printed media when the internet was all the rage never understood that technology does not work that way - the radio never displaced the newspaper, the television never displaced the radio, and the internet never displaced any of the three; in fact, there were more newspapers, more radio, more television than ever before.

The poster next to him advertised *Space Above and Beyond*. He did a double take because he remembered the old TV series. This was neither the long-awaited second season that never came or a film based on said series; rather, this was a reimagining of the original, complete with an 'epic soundtrack by Eldrig van See'. In this new version, coloured actors had replaced the original White cast, while the Chigs had become humans, played by White actors. The re-vamped Chigs were still pursuing an aggressive war, of conquest, targeting Earth, except that in this new series the Chigs were the heroes, and the Wildcards the enemy. In fact, the story was now told from the Chigs' point of view, and there appeared to be reflexive references to the original series, suggesting that the Chigs there had been malevolently demonised by revisionist historiography; this historiography had, in

turn, whitewashed the Wildcards, whom the official history described as heroes, but whom in reality had been ruthless mercenaries, serving a corrupt plutocracy on Earth. This plutocracy, committed to a Jewish Supremacist ideology, maintained an evil empire that ruled over the entire world, and kept humanity in bondage through a dumbed-down culture of mass entertainment, mass consumption, and mass ignorance (schools and universities were pure indoctrination centres); their biggest threat was the White race, but, they prevented rebellion by dissolving nationalisms and feelings of kinship-among Whites through secularism, modernity, materialism, hyper-individualism, multiculturalism, and miscegenation. The so-called Chigs, who had developed spacecraft from within secret subterranean bases in Antarctica and on the dark side of the moon, had come to defeat the evil empire and liberate the White man from the forces of darkness.

He frowned with surprise: such a show would never run on mainstream television! White actors nowadays were in demand only to play racist villains, dimwitted hillbillies, or clueless geeks - otherwise it was as if Whites did not exist. Plus the scenario was very familiar. Watching the trailer again more closely, he saw the Chig ships had swastikas on them. The poster had also been affixed on top of another one, with different content. Ah, he thought, realising. This Space Above and Beyond was not a Fox production but a clandestine TV series, produced by an underground studio staffed by Esoteric Hitlerists. No wonder the Esoteric Hitlerists were not simply ignored by the mainstream media: they had their own media to counter their enemies and proselytise with, and this made them powerful and therefore highly inconvenient. He was coming to realise that, rather than marginal fanatics with a lunatic religion, they were, in fact, quite sophisticated, and had more resources and expertise than what media reports had led him to believe.

Worried, he retrieved his Post-A-Phone and went online to find out more about Dr. Kevin MacDonald. 99% of the Wikipedia article focussed on criticism - criticism of Dr. MacDonald's theses (all wrong, apparently), his theories (all discredited), his conclusions (all perverse), his sources (selective), his use of them (tendentious), his methodology (flawed), and his motivations (malevolent); it appeared nothing the evolutionary psychologist ever did was remotely correct; he was, in fact, the very incarnation of scientific corruption and evil. The article's edit history was one on the longest and most active that he had

ever seen: random comparisons with earlier versions revealed a systematic attempt by the editors to police, reverse, and expunge any attempt at balancing the text with alternative points of view. Elsewhere, the internet was replete with condemnation, the news sites pullulating with commentary, and the fora and the chatrooms ablaze with delirious theories about Dr. MacDonald's liberators and his current whereabouts. Hypothesised links with the Esoteric Hitlerists were in plentiful supply: most of these speculated that the escape had been funded by Hendrik Möbus, the international Neo-Nazi terrorist, who had vast media interests in the fascist Black Metal underground; that Dr. MacDonald had been flown to a secret base in Antarctica; that he was already working on brain interfaces for flying saucers operated by Nazi telepaths.

He put his Port-A-Phone away, finally despairing. He'd had enough of the Esoteric Hitlerists for today. He just wanted to get back to Castellana, have some lunch, and get back to his client's office, to do serious work among serious people clad in suits and ties.

After twenty minutes, he finally reached the passport control booths. He handed it over to the Policia Nacional officer, who eyed him coldly; he then proceeded to walk through the scanner. The officer sitting in front of the screen signalled to another to conduct a manual search - obviously they did not like something. He extended his arms and allowed himself to be patted all over. He was fed up of these security indignities, of being handled like cattle and eyed like a potential criminal. Yet, he did not want to be blown up inside the tunnels or be victim of a nerve gas attack. *If only there was a way they could find a way to automate all this tedious security*, he thought. *But then again, how long before that is used as an excuse to start chipping people at birth?* The arguments were already being rehearsed. At first it was a few eccentric techies back in the Noughties who inserted chips in their arms so that their homes would detect them as they approached and boil the kettle and switch on the lights and the television. Nowadays improved versions of these chips, mass produced, were sold via catalogue as a convenience gadget. The next step was only a matter of time, and would be marketed as the solution to end queuing: you would be able to walk into a cinema theatre and sit down in front of the screen, and your chip would automatically order Odeon Cinemas to make the appropriate debit from your bank account - no need to worry about tickets; the same 'walk-straight-thru' principle would be applied across the board, for anything that nowadays required queuing and

paying for a ticket. Ah, yes, but this chip would also record, and without a doubt transmit to centralised government databases, an almost limitless amount of information about me, in real time. And that was the feature that really mattered. Queueing would never end with such a device: it would only make people more openly rude than they already were, as seats anywhere would still remain scarce and the chip would only help avoid queueing if one got there and grabbed a seat first! The bored officer waved him through.

Most of the city residents had a chipped card that automatically activated the ticket barrier. He, not being a resident, had to purchase a traditional ticket. Still standing miles away from the ticket machines, he looked around to see whether he was near the end of the queue. A pregnant West African woman with a pushchair supplied him with the confirmation he needed when she began fumbling in her handbag.

‘Es esta la cola para comprar billetes?’ he asked, just in case.

‘No. Atrás’ she said, turning and jerking her head backwards.

He sighed. Alright. How far back?

He traced his way back to the end of the queue, which was just past security, by asking at regular intervals, until he was no longer replied to with a thumb pointing backward or some equivalent gesture.

The queue’s progress was painfully slow. Everyone around him looked either dazed or annoyed, or was perfectly relaxed, chatting amiably, laughing and joking with either friends of fellow travellers. Even though the teeming pavements above ground set standards very low, it was immediately obvious that the Metro system fed on the dregs of the human gene pool - it was like a mutant anaconda that fed on garbage. No Aryan supermen here, he thought, directing his sarcasm at an imaginary Mr. Wermod. The constant murmur of conversation, punctuated by screaming children, crying babies, shouting mothers, and raucous male laughter, combined with the constant rumble of trains, tapping of footsteps, crashing of ticket barriers, and scraping of wheelie suitcases, frayed his nerves and slammed him with a headache.

The temperature continued to increase as he burrowed deeper into the station. The heat emanating from thousands of human bodies rising up towards the blue ceiling, and building an ever hotter cloud of water vapour, carbon dioxide, pheromones, and a rich array of fetid organic compounds. The ventilation system was either out of order or switched off to avoid emissions taxes. Further aggravation was caused by the ex-

treme shortage of space: Line 3 had been refurbished some fifteen years ago, but it was obvious that the engineers had not expected, or had not been given the budget to anticipate, the massive volume of traffic the government's immigration policy was going to generate. The station now acted as a funnel, compressing the crush of commuters ever more compactly, as more kept entering the station faster than their counterparts were able to reach the exit. This had put the system under ever-growing pressure, to the point where it had rapidly deteriorated: steel fixtures were covered in black grime, layers upon layers of greasy palms and dead skin; glass panes were scratched and opaqued with grease, glue, and ripped stickers; mould grew on the walls, the ceilings, and the posters, irritated by the action of quintillions of sweat glands; juvenile delinquents and Islamist zealots had covered every available surface with graffiti. In his business attire, and despite developments in light-weight fabric technology, he felt like a chicken being roasted in an oven, shoved into a baking tray that was too small, and surrounded by potatoes, parsnips, onions, carrots, and plenty of stuffing. Rivers of sweat ran down his face, glistening in the grim neon light, and soaking the neck of his shirt. Great, now I am going to look like a homeless drug addict when I arrive back in Castellana, he fumed, checking the time. Late. A whole morning wasted just travelling back and forth, enduring indignities, tangling up with cultists, and accomplishing absolutely nothing.

He resolved to ask Mr. Wermod to come to Scoptic and do his demonstration there early in the morning the following day. Yes, early in the morning: He did not care what Mr. Wermod was involved in, or whether Dr. Kevin MacDonald was his uncle, or whether the Esoteric Hitlerists were about to take over the world (anything would be better than the present liberal utopia anyway); he was a serious person and he was going to conduct his business with his clients seriously. Then he was going to collect his gold (he had arranged to have half his fee paid in Kruggérands), fly back to England, and return to his life in leafy Surrey, with his cottage, his wife, and his things.

A coin was heard hitting the floor. If it had been the sound of an ordinary aluminium or cupronickel round; no one would have paid attention. The coin that had been dropped, however, rang like a silver coin (real money, in other words), and this made dozens of heads turn immediately in the direction of the sound. His eyes joined the scores of others around him avidly scouring the floor and scrutinising people's gestures in an effort to locate the bullion and identify its owner. Not with a

view to return the coin to him, of course, but in hopes that the coin could be pocketed swiftly and discretely if it happened to have rolled far enough from its original carrier to deem it as lost. Within seconds, a scuffle broke out at four o'clock. Male yelping and shouting provided the soundtrack to the commotion, whose violence soon escalated enough for kinetic waves of tumbling humans to start smashing against him. The sound of crying infants' and screaming women rose from the hubbub. Being taller than most people in there, he could see above the heads of spectators: the tops of three heads jerked back and forth some ten yards away from him, one of the heads quickly loosing the drab baseball cap covering it, to reveal a tight carpet of black hair. The heads disappeared as their owners fell onto the ground, causing the crowd to press in around them, and fill the gap with a number of wild-eyed, coffee-coloured young men desirous to get their hands on the bullion. No Civil Guard intervened: they were stationed around the walls, armed with electric batons, tear gas, and machineguns, but, although partially protected by their helmets and body armour, there were now too many people involved in the commotion to risk moving in without massive re-inforcements and heavy riot control gear. He surmised they were tensely standing by, silently hoping someone would avoid them hours of form-filling by finally claiming the prize.

Eventually, the fighting parties were separated once people realised that the bullion was gone, and things quietened down. Swearing and screaming were replaced by laughter and analysis.

Many minutes latter, he stood next in line to use the ticket machine. By this time he was boiling with impatience, having checked the hour a billion times, perspired away gallons of water, and silently cursed the slow movements of his fellow travellers with the force of a bazooka loaded with a neutron warhead. The final obstacle between him and his ticket was a Laurent Kabila lookalike, wearing a white shirt and rubber sandals: the gentleman in question appeared perplexed by the machine, not understanding the instructions stencilled on its casing or showing on the screen; he moved slowly and spent long seconds staring at the screen with his right index finger raised, apparently, not knowing what to do next. Either he could-not read Spanish or any of the languages offered by the machine, or he simply found it all too unfamiliar and complicated: Standing behind the gentleman, his head felt as if undergoing a volcanic eruption, perplexed by the man's inability to process even the simplest and most obvious of instructions

as much as the man was perplexed by them. Come on! he shouted in his mind, as the gentleman moved his finger towards one of the buttons, before hesitating and pulling it back to think about it some more. With grinding teeth, this body by now roasted inside his suit, he was within a hair's breadth from grabbing the gentleman's shirt and yanking him aside, so that he could purchase his ticket and get going once and for all. Just as he was about to interrupt the gentleman's cavilations in order to courteously offer him help, a Metro employee materialised to do just that - except without the courtesy.

The sandaled gentleman and the Metro employee spent interminable minutes going through the machine, the Metro employee having to repeat the same instructions over and over again, since the sandaled gentleman's brain was obviously a sieve, unable to retain information. He waited patiently while the sandaled gentleman benefited from the education he was receiving, anticipating said gentleman's eventual enlightenment. However, such enlightenment did not occur within his anticipated timeframe. The sandaled gentleman, instead of following the Metro employee's instructions, interrupted their issuance and questioned their import, growing ever more argumentative as the Metro employee gradually lost his patience. Because the Metro employee was a hot-headed Guatemalan, it did not take long before he snapped, his initially bored explanations giving way to shouted orders, emphasised with angry gesticulation and a palm repeatedly slamming the machine's steel casing. The sandaled gentleman continued to argue regardless, not angrily, but with childish innocence, smiling with amusement, and completely oblivious to the irritation he was inflaming behind him. At last, the Metro employee reached the end of his tether and exploded into violent action: shoving the sandaled gentleman aside, he punched the necessary buttons with his fist, and yanked the resulting ticket out of the machine, before throwing it into the sandaled gentleman's smiling and mildly bemused face. He, having had enough of standing in line and waiting, seized the moment and advanced towards the machine, blocking the sandaled gentleman's access to it - the latter had his ticket after all, even if it was presently on the floor. He purchased his ticket, yanked it out of the machine, and began elbowing his way towards the ticket barriers.

The ticket barriers looked worn out. They were full of scratches and covered in grime and graffiti. The one he used looked as if at one point an engineer had to prise it open with a crowbar. As he went through, he witnessed two Black teenag-

ers non-chalantly jumping over the barrier, right in front of a Metro employee, who did not challenge them. The teenagers looked well accustomed to enjoying this type of discount on their travelling expenses; having jumped over the ticket barrier, they carried on walking slowly, with an insolent swagger and entirely relaxed.

As the escalator carried him down towards the platform, he saw the latter was beyond simple overcrowding. Ahead, he faced a compact multitude, receding into the distance. Many people were having to stand with their feet right on the edge of the platform, hanging on to the commuters immediately behind them by their sleeves or whatever they could grab hold of. Their situation became ever more precarious as he descended, for each escalator continued to add people onto the platform, while none were leaving. The overhead sign warned travellers to expect delays, while the verbal announcements, reverberating unintelligibly above the thousands of angry heads, told of signal failures on part of the line and a suicide attempt at Embajadores.

I am not surprised, he chuckled inwardly, thinking with sarcasm about the suicide attempt. He imagined an office worker, White, in his forties, a loner or divorced, jumping in front of an oncoming train, having despaired of living in a world where no one gave a damn about him, and where he had no prospect of material improvement or emotional fulfilment. He imagined the loner, riding the Metro back from the office every evening, entering an empty apartment, his life lost in the anonymity of a bleak highrise estate, confined to a cell filled with old nylon, formica, and plastic. He imagined the loner arriving to his functional habitat, either with a takeaway or ready to microwave his dinner; then spending the rest of the evening watching the television, in the dark, living vicariously through the programming, sating primal needs with pornography, numbing his brain so that he may not have to feel his loneliness, perhaps with special interest magazines but really without a hobby or a creative outlet to keep him going. He imagined the loner without savings, his paycheck progressively decimated by taxes and inflation, his situation ever more stagnant, his disposable income restricted to ever cheaper entertainment, his thoughts and opinions counting less and less as he sank inexorably into old age and poverty. One day, he figured, the loner decided there was no point in carrying on, enriching banks and his employers, funding government programmes without getting a slice of the pie, ignored by the world of advertisement

and entertainment, no longer part of something greater than himself, but an isolated social atom, without friends, without a cause, his last photograph taken in a photo booth in a train station last time he had to renew his ID.

He reached the bottom of the escalator, suddenly glad he had a wife, creativity, and a brain that prevented him from sharing the loner's fate.

He took position by a column, facing the railhilf only I had a book! he sighed, noticing a young lady at two o'clock absorbed by her paperback. The lady had pale skin, withtbrown-auburn hair falling onto the jacket of her black, fitted suit. Her reading material was a collection of essays by Pentti Linkola. His nephew Andrew was interested in eco-fascism, and had mentioned this Finnish philosopher a number of times. Apparently, Linkola considered human population growth the biggest threat to life on Earth, and had advocated eugenics and genocide to combat overpopulation; unlike the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, he had simply sought the abandonment of modern technology and the pursuit of oeconomic growth to allow Man to return to a lower ecological niche. Andrew had the courage of his convictions: he lived in a book-lined treehouse with his girlfriend, without electricity or running water, surviving on berries and whatever he could catch or kill. Andrew's wife was a Priestess of Avalon, trained by the famous Tiziana Stupia. In the event of an oeconomic collapse (which he, like Andrew, expected within his lifetime) Andrew would greet the event with equanimity, as his lifestyle was not dependent on money or the techno-industrial infrastructure, while his guns and hunting knife would stand him in good stead against the future's marauding hordes looking for loot.

The first train came after ten long minutes; it was out of service. The second train followed twelve minutes later; it was so tightly packed that a boarding attempt would have been a waste of time. A third train followed six minutes later, this time empty; it immediately gobbled up a quarter of the platT form's population, leaving him poised for a spot on the next train. Not wanting to be stampeded into the bowels of the carriage, where he would find it next to impossible to alight, he calculated the optimal distance to the edge of the platform, and held his position. Seconds ticked away while the crowd around him compacted. While he waited, various attempts were made to dislodge him, either through the application of pressure on his back, the leveraging of elbows to push him back away from the edge of the platform, or the traversing of legs to destabilise

him. On each occasion, the attack was made anonymously, the attacker's face a mask of circumspection, eyes unacknowledging and staring into space. He, however, deflected each attack with determination, matching his attacker's circumspection and unacknowledging stare.

The fourth train arrived. It was crowded but its passengers could be pushed deeper into the carriages and compacted a lot further.

The crowd sprang into motion. He allowed himself to be carried by the tidal wave of eager humans. Again, limbs, but now also a variety of weapons, such as walking sticks, folded newspapers, handbags, rucksacks, briefcases, and baby-laden push-chairs were used to frustrate his advance and relegate him to a position farther back from the edge of the platform, wherefrom the competition hoped he would remain, unable to board the train. Aware that he could not afford to be civil and show consideration for women, children, the elderly, or the disabled (all of whom were equally ruthless anyway), he defended his position with vigour, resorting to brute force and employing dirty tactics without compunction. His approach secured him a place inside the train - although so close to the doors that when these finally closed they almost sliced off his ear.

If the station was an oven, the inside of the carriage was a blast furnace. He could swear it was hot enough in there to melt lead. There was barely any space for him to turn his head; and the heads of his neighbours would have been too close for his eyes to focus had he not been taller, than most of them. His ear was pressed against a heavily-graffitied glass pane dripping with condensation. Some of his fellow travellers had already lost consciousness, but were held upright by their neighbours, who were pressed tightly around them. He would have suffered the same fate had he been left without means to avoid foetus- on his discomfort. Fortunately, however, a bald, coffee-coloured man with a tabloid newspaper had ended up in his line of sight; the newspaper was, moreover, in Spanish, rather than the more common Arabic, so he had reading material for at least part the journey - the newspaper was low-brow, sports-obsessed, and full of bogus freakshow stories, but at least it was free of charge.

The train crawled slowly through the tunnel, making frequent stops, punctuated with loud blowdowns from the air braking system. If he had been riding one of the old trains, the blowdowns would have been deafeningly loud, but at least he would have been able to arrest the continuing rise in tempera-

ture by opening a window. The modern trains were hermetically sealed, and assumed use of the ventilation and air conditioning systems; the only problem was that, with global warming legislation taxing businesses for the use of (among a million other things) air conditioning systems, now* most businesses, and especially those linked to public services, kept them switched off. Compounded by extreme and ever-worsening overcrowding, this turned underground trains into mobile incinerators, unsuitable for children, the elderly, and people with respiratory conditions. Surely, he had once experienced 120° C inside an overheating sauna while holidaying in Finland, but he (and his wife) had been nude and near a bucket of water with which to humidify themselves; standing inside a hermetically sealed carriage, vacuum packed with odorous human bodies, the flesh generating ever-more heat, wearing suit and tie and heavy-soled shoes, and with human sweat as the only source of moisture, provided much more ample scope for him to test the limits of his stoicism. More annoyingly, the train's internal communication system constantly broke his concentration, interrupting his reading, with a hailstorm of useless recorded announcements - all punctuated with an annoying chime -, confirming what train and line he was in and prolixly enumerating all the stops, reminding him of smoking and mobile phone prohibitions, alerting him to the presence of a ticket inspector, warning him to mind the gap when alighting, instructing him to get right inside the car so that more passengers could come onboard, advising him to ensure he took all his hand luggage and personal effects with him when leaving the train, and informing him that all baggage left unattended would cause security alerts and be removed and destroyed. Had this been the London Underground, he would have been longing for the re-introduction of the 1959 rolling stock (the silver ones with the maple-wood slatted flooring), because not only did those trains have openable windows, but they only allowed the conductor to make extemporaneous statements, which meant announcements were made only when relevant or strictly needed. The only problem is that, even if the 1959 London Underground rolling stock had been in use, the windows would still have been soldiered shut and covered with protective metal grills. The windows of all trains, new and old, as well as those of busses, had been fitted with protective metal grills in recent years. The rest was covered in layers upon layers of filth and graffiti.

The train stopped completely.

Minutes passed.

‘¿Joder?’ said one of the passengers, lost in the crush.

This gave other passengers the go ahead to begin sighing loudly and complaining. The coughing, the tutting, the sighing, the shuffling, the throat clearing, and the sneezing, were gradually drowned out in a growing murmur of grumbling conversation. He now suppressed a smile, and waited for the inevitable. This did not take long to come: after five more minutes, he heard the sound he had been expecting: the sound of a claustrophobe screaming to be allowed out.

‘¡Abran! ¡ABRAN!’ screamed a man situated several carriages away, towards the front of the train. His screams echoed in the black tunnel.

He wanted to laugh. There was always a weirdo who freaked out.

As it turned out, providence had it in for the claustrophobe that day, and decided to deléctate in the exacerbation of the man’s distress, for moments later a power failure ensued.

‘¡Me cago en Dios!’ exclaimed another passenger, with angry vehemence.

‘¡ABRAN! ¡ABRAN! ¡DEJEN SALIR!’ demanded the claustrophobe, now even more agitated.

He and his fellow passengers were now standing in the dark. It was a pickpocket’s dream. This made him immediately focus his attention on any suspicious movement or changes in pressure against his chest or upper thighs. It suddenly occurred to him that it would have been a great idea to sew razor blades along the edges of his pockets: that would have instantly thwarted, and penalised, any attempt by a pickpocket to redistribute wealth. He resolved to designate a jacket for riding in the London Underground, and to modify it accordingly, when he returned to England. In his now effervescing mind, he fashioned a suit with razorblades along the edges of the pockets, electrified pinstripes, and a generous sprinkling of itching powder inside the jacket’s side pockets. With luck, he would be able to find electric fabric with a woven cooling system; he did not know whether the idea had occurred to anybody, but he imagined that, since Winters were as hot as Summers used to be, there would be a growing market for self-cooling suits and shirts.

‘¡ABRAN! ¡ABRAN! ¡DEJEN SALIR!’

‘¿Porqué no se calla?’ shouted back someone, annoyed, sending a ripple of cruel laughter along the train. It was so packed inside the car that he felt, the collective heaving of his

fellow, passengers' abdomens pressing against him.

As if suddenly satisfied, the gremlins that had caused the power outage now decided they had sufficiently amused themselves, and allowed the power to come back on. Although still inwardly laughing at the claustrophobe's lack of self control, he was instantly relieved to find himself again showered with photons. Thirty seconds later the train resumed motion with a jerk, and continued advancing slowly until the next station.

wi 'why don't you shut up?' shouted back someone, annoyed, sending a ripple of cruel laughter along the train. It was so packed inside the ear that he felt the collective heaving of his fellow passengers' abdomens pressing against him.

Chapter 24

Gu

The Metro's maw vomited him onto Castellana, along with thousands of smelly hominids. Now a confirmed bathysiderodromophobe, he was embarrassed by his appearance: his suit looked as if it had been left for two weeks inside a vacuum-packed suitcase, bundled up any which way next to wet towels; his hair and shirt were completely soaked with perspiration; his face was radish red. Had he not lost so much time on two purely educational journeys, he would have stopped by his apartment to blast off the filth before returning to the Picasso Tower. But the thought was a reflex from a bygone era, for water rationing would have precluded any shower at this hour. Moreover, the empty ventricle beneath his lungs protested his neglect, and his client required his presence in the office immediately after lunch, so he was forced to forgo the appeasement of his vanity for the replenishment of his stomach. He looked around, in search of an establishment more fastidious with their health and safety standards than with their customers', observance of sartorial etiquette. Unfortunately, however, the complex network of inter-connected market stalls that, in combination with the 24-hour kiosks, and the many ambulant kebab, falafel, and shaved ice stands, completely blocked the view to the pavement beyond, made it impossible to quickly locate a suitable establishment. Either he knew of specific restaurants with proven health and safety records, or he purchased a hamburger crawling with e-coli and salmonella. Even a healthy hamburger was, however, out of the question: an undignified solution for a professional of his standing and prestige. The former, on the other hand, was im-

possible, for the crushing burden of government regulation and taxation ensured that licenced businesses were constantly starting up and disappearing.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder.

He tensed, annoyed by the effrontery, and expecting a mugger.

'Hey!' said a female voice behind him.

He turned around, puzzled. He knew no one currently living in Madrid: his Madrid-resident friends had by now migrated North or re-settled in Antarctica.

A haggard, middle-aged woman, impeccably dressed, melanin rich, with kinky black hair, and thin as a rail, stood smiling at him. The face was unfamiliar.

'Is it you? What are you doing in Madrid?' she said, full of teeth. She spoke with a cosmopolitan upper-middle class accent. 'I thought you hated public transport.'

Perplexed by her familiar tone, he mumbled non-committally, not daring to admit that he had not the faintest idea of who she was. He certainly did not know, and would not know, someone who looked like that, other than as a passing acquaintance. Yet a passing acquaintance was unlikely to know of, much less speak so familiarly, about his disdain for public transport.

'Are you here on business?' she asked, with irritating amicability.

'Er... Yes,' he said, racking his brain. 'And you?' 'Just passing by,' she stated, casually, her smile never wavering.

'I see. Well, I must get -'

'Ey! You don't have time to catch up with an old friend?' she said, with mock disappointment, putting on a sad puppy face. 'Ah, er, yeah... I...'

'I assume you're not headed for a meeting... Not looking like that,' she said, with a playfully raised eyebrow. 'Well, of course not. I am...'

'Well, I'm not doing anything for the next hour or so. Why don't we have a coffee?' she suggested.

Damn, he thought. On the other hand, I was going to have lunch, so I could get an iced coffee and biscuits to go with it...

'Ah, yeah, sure. Where?' he said, now more cheerfully, but unconvincingly. Maybe I'll find out who the hell she is.

'There is a Starbucks that way,' she said, gesturing slightly with her head.

'Starbucks? Are they still here? Despite the situation in

America?’ he asked, surprised, and not moving.

‘Yeah, why not?’ she said, shrugging in an amicable fashion. ‘Euros are better than Dollars.’

‘But I was told that Coca-Cola had pulled out of Spain because of the hyperinflation.’

‘Hah!’ she laughed, dismissing the idea as if it was complete nonsense. ‘They pulled out because there are so many Arabs in Spain and they hate anything American. Hyperinflation is just a polite excuse.’

‘I see,’ he said, flatly, thinking about the supercilious waiter at the restaurant the day before yesterday - the waiter who had so brazenly told him a pack of lies.

‘What’s the matter? Craving a Coke?’

The familiarity was rapidly eroding his patience. ‘Coke would not quench my thirst right now.’

‘Oh, yes. Of course. Iced tea, right?’ she said, with a knowing smirk, turning her head slightly sideways and waving her finger at him.

How does she know these things? He fumed inwardly, exasperated.

‘Ah, yeah...’ he replied, pensively, with a cautious half smile.

‘You don’t remember me, do you?’ she said, adopting the conspiratorial tone of someone who was in on a secret.

‘Erm... I am really sorry. It has been a terrible morning.’

‘It’s okay,, we all have memory lapses... London School of Economics?’

‘Yes...’ *Who did I talk to back then?* He frowned; an elven version of himself busy searching his labyrinthine’ mnemonic archives, using a crowbar to force open rusty filing cabinet drawers, and scanning interminable rows of suspension files, containing black and white photographs and yellowed sheets of paper typed up with old mechanical typewriters.

‘We used to have coffee in the evenings...’

‘I... used to have coffee with one girl...’ he said very slowly, staring intensely at the woman under a brow furrowed in thought. *Can’t be her.*

‘Well? Don’t tell me you don’t recognise me.’

‘You cannot be her,’ he said, now completely flumoxed.

‘It is her’ she said, mock perplexed that it took him this long to realise.

‘Oh, dear,’ he said, refusing to believe.

‘Yes. It is me.’

Amid the ruins of fashion he recognised the nose. What has she done?

Indeed, he had known the woman as a postgraduate student many years ago. Gudrid, her name was; Gu (pronounced 'goo') for short. Back then, however, she blossomed with natural Nordic beauty: paedomorphic features, porcelain skin, straight blonde hair, and a figure overflowing with abundant femininity. A servile obedience to fashion, however, had motivated in her a systematic destruction of Nature's work: since White was considered passé, Gu had vandalised herself in a tanning salon until her skin resembled burnt leather; since it was cool to be Black, she had repeatedly blackened and permed her hair, leaving it worse than a Brillo pad dipped in tar; and since women's magazines featured only anorexic models and bulimic celebrities* in addition to celebrating weight loss stories, and pushing weight loss diets, weight loss products, and reasons to lose weight, Gu had also destroyed all traces of anatomical femininity, metamorphosing herself from a spheropygian goddess to aheliocaustickakopyge. To conceal the accelerated effects of angry tanning and vicious dieting, Gu added insult to injury by rendering her visage with thick layers of make-up, thus compensating the loss of the natural, with the increment of the artificial, exaggerating the latest fashion. This fashion was reflected also in her attire, which, although obviously expensive, competed for attractiveness with a bone-filled bin liner - the inevitable result of its having been designed by homosexuals who lusted after young boys, and whose outrageous imagination was promoted by magazines with thelyphthoric business imperatives.

Pity her husband, he thought, before remembering that marriage was fashionable only among homosexuals; endless strings of pointless, dead-end, disposable relationships being the fashionable preference among modern heterosexual couples.

'Well, you look different,' he said, not quite knowing what tone to use, asking himself whether Gu took supplement pills to combat osteoporosis.

He wanted to run away.

'I had a lot of improvements to make,' she said, still smiling, but now somewhat sardonically, as if embarrassed that he remembered how she used to look.

You are off your rocker, he exclaimed in his mind, now noticing her grotesque silicon lips. He had, in fact, been attracted to Gu, back in the day. He had often daydreamt of grabbing her by the hips and bouncing himself against her round buttocks - and had subsequently lamented the lack of

progression in their relational affairs beyond the strictly Platonic. She had appeared vaguely interested in him, but he had never obtained sufficient indication that the interest was romantic. Consequently, averse to risk spoiling things between them, he had played cool, awaiting an unequivocal indication that had never come.

The sight of what was left of the old Gu was too horrifying to stand, yet he could not now think of an excuse to rapidly cancel the coffee and quit Gu's presence. Why did she do that?

'Where is this Starbucks?' he asked.

'It's where the VIPS used to be,' she said, now starting to walk in its direction.

In other words, too near to say that it was too far away. Gu had been one of the few classmates he respected - she had a keen mind, and shared his interest in Austrian economics. Obviously, since she could afford to waste money on designer clothes (he did not believe in them: bespoke was the way to go), she had managed to protect her capital from the depredations of inflation. He could not understand how someone who understood the deceptions of fiat money failed to understand the deceptions of the fashion industry. She had wasted energy defacing Nature to suit the tastes of gay perverts, cultural Marxists, and Europhobic extremists based in Hollywood, New York, and Madison Avenue.

He sighed, deciding he would talk to her for fifteen minutes over a small glass of ultra-fast iced coffee and then go.

'What do you do these days?' he asked, using a tone slightly more formally polite than she would have liked to.

'Well, you know...'

The Slimfast obviously helped her shed IQ points too, he thought, with bitter sarcasm, and inwardly snorting, with contempt. In reality, however, he was annoyed at her evasions, a habit she had clearly never abandoned. Gu had always possessed an abundant supply of opinions and views on practically any subject worth commenting upon; but she had always been infuriatingly evasive when the subject was herself. Prod as he may, he had persistently and consistently been deflected with clichés, pleasantries, and generalities. Because he saw himself as infinitely more knowledgeable, skilled, and experienced than during his postgraduate student days, he now resolved to outmanoeuvre her.

'Yes?' he raised an eyebrow, without smiling.

'This and that,' said Gudrid, casually.

'This and that what? Be specific.'

'You know, I don't wanna talk about work,' she shook her head. 'What do you do?'

'I don't want to talk about work either. But I would love to know how high up the professional totem pole you are these days. Or... are you embarrassed by your life?'

'I see you haven't changed,' Gudrid said, laughing.

'I always thought you had potential,' he insisted, adopting a deliberately ironic tone of admiration, regretting it immediately. He forced out a lungful of black exhaust fumes.

'You thought well,' she smiled.

'Well, I guess you have been a failure, your outfit is last year's, and you picked it up at Oxfam for 50 pence.' In the past his desire to impress, driven by romantic aspirations, he would have been more cautious; now that no aspirations existed, now that she had affronted his sense of justice by so grotesquely disfiguring herself, he cared not to push the envelope.

'Maybe,' Gu replied, shrugging amicably.

'Are you married?' He expected a negative answer.

'Nope.'

Aha! But was that really a surprise?

'Children?'

'Nope.'

She was post-menopausal now, of course: but were she half her age she would not be menstruating at all; someone that emaciated must necessarily be bloodless and cured like a strip biltong inside. The stench of meat from a kebab stand crossed his nostrils.

'Well, what do you want us to talk about?' he said, changing his mind and deciding he did not care to find out anymore; he was only a whisker away from excusing himself.

'I read about your heuristic semantic matrices. Very interesting work,' she said.

'You must have read the article in *Science*,' he said, Gu's answer triggering a quick bout of speculation as to her profession. Accounting mathematician? No, dieters avoid jobs requiring sustained concentration; women on diets are constantly obsessing about ice cream and frequently on the verge of fainting.

'I read it. It reminded me of the Doctor in Star Trek Voyager,' she said.

Trekkie.

'I do not watch television,' he said, self-righteously.

'Well, that's a change,' she said, amused. 'I wonder if soap opera producers have approached you to optimise their script

writing. I'm sure your matrices could be programmed to keep audiences guessing and on the edge of their seats.'

He winced inwardly. Yes, he surmised there would be such an application, and that it would be profitable considering how many soap operas there were - but what a frivolous way to use artificial intelligence!

'I wouldn't know. I do not watch soap operas,' he declared. 'If I am approached to develop an automated script writer capable of analysing audience blog comments on the internet and generating thrilling plot lines I would charge as much as I could get away with...'

'Snob,' she interrupted.

'...and donate part of my fee to the ESA or the Pioneer Fund.' The scent of cherry syrup drew his attention. Turning he saw that they had just walked past a raspadero, selling Mexican snow cones. A small crowd of young Mestizos and a couple of elderly Spaniards stood by the stand, awaiting their turn with perspiring, thirsty faces.

'Wait,' he said, stopping and pointing at the raspadero. 'I am getting one of those.'

'Wicked! My treat,' said Gu, as he had hoped; he still had not had the chance to access any kind of cash.

He approached the stand and joined the group of waiting customers (it was not proper to call it a queue, as they had arrayed themselves on the basis of capacity for rudeness and brute force). Mexican snow cones - raspados - were supremely refreshing, and addictive in torrid climates. The recipe was simple: shaved ice in a paper cone with a dash of favoured syrup and optional condensed milk. He had first encountered them in Los Angeles, many years ago.

'What is the Pioneer Fund?' asked Gu.

Since he was taller than all the waiting customers around him, he could easily observe the raspadero as he prepared each raspado. A large block of ice sat on a steel surface; the raspadero, clad in a blue and red polo shirt and a baseball cap, shaved the ice with a hand shaver; said raspadero did not own one of those old-fashioned cast iron ice-shavers with a handled wheel.

'It's a foundation that aims to advance the study of heredity and human differences,' he said, without looking at Gu, concentrating on the raspados.

A mestizo walked away holding two strawberry-flavoured ice cones, after paying €100.

'Why them?' asked Gu.

'There are too many substandard humans around. A cure must be found.'

'Oh, my God! Are you saying that some humans are less intelligent than others?'

Got ya! 'Yes.'

Gu reacted with horror. 'That's racist!'

'Oh, well,' he said, shrugging calmly. Gu's preoccupation with being fashionable was not confined to clothes and appearance, and provoking her with outrageous statements had been in the past a reliable source of amusement. Besides, this being the only method by which he could pierce her armour, he found her loss of composure satisfying. (He would never do this outside this context, of course; he was a serious businessman, after all, and it was not serious to risk contracts by airing unorthodox opinions for the sake of his own amusement.)

'You don't care?' Gu frowned, now also perplexed.

'No. Twin studies show that general intelligence is partly hereditary, partly environmental. You may wish to consult the work of Professors Richard Lynn, Tatu Vanhanen, and J. Philippe Rushtori, and the work that others have done after them. Besides, the fact that some human populations score lower on IQ tests is not something we did to them. Are you going to sue Nature for discrimination?' he looked at Gu, cracking a mischievous smile.

'You are advocating eugenics!' said Gu, as if expecting him to stop, backtrack, withdraw, and apologise.

'Yes, I am,' he said, proudly and firmly and cheerfully. 'Or...' he now affected a concerned frown, 'do you... not want people to be born as intelligent as possible? Do you... not want to prevent and eradicate congenital deformities and diseases?'

'Have you donated to them before?' she asked, her brow deeply troubled.

'So you do want people to be born stupid and deformed and with debilitating conditions.' He was loving this.

'They are people too,' she pontificated, self-righteously.

'People you want to suffer all their lives. Easy for you to say, since you are healthy, intelligent, able to work, wealthy, and not hideously deformed.' Well, the latter is debatable now.

'Each person is beautiful in his or her own way. We just have to be more accepting.'

'Well, if you could ask people's souls before they were born, Would you rather we ensure you get a strong and healthy body with a keen and healthy mind, or would you rather we be accepting; and let you maybe end up with leukaemia, liver dis-

ease, severely retarded, or joined at the head with a half-formed sister? I wonder how accepting of your acceptance the souls in the beyond would be.'

'You are a Nazi!' she said, with humourless outrage.

'And you are selfish: ruining the quality of life – no, the lives! - of millions for the sake of your ideology. Some piece of work you are. You are a brainwashed fanatic,' he retorted, feigning outrage of his own, meaning every word under the camouflage of sarcasm.

'What next? The Holocaust didn't happen?'

'Look around you!' he said, " smiling as he swept an arm across the surrounding landscape, 'This used to be a First World nation! Don't you think that if we had promoted eugenics - like the Chinese are doing - and improved the average intelligence and moral and physical health of our population, we would be living in a world as inefficient, crime-ridden, and corrupt as this one? That things have deteriorated as they have only shows the poor quality of the decisions ^that have been made - product of the stupidity of the population and the corruption and craven amorality of our leaders.'

'What does eugenics have to do with moral health? Where do you get this from?' Gu was grimacing, exasperated.

'Not all highly intelligent people are highly moral, but all highly moral people have been highly intelligent. Why? Because moral behaviour necessitates thinking in abstract terms about the implications of our actions and their effects on others. So raising the average intelligence of the population would tend to raise its capacity for moral behaviour. In essence, this would mean a society not entirely free of problems but certainly with less crime and less corruption.'

'Oh, yeah? And how do you plan to turn everyone into a super genius? Have stud farms with your blond and blue-eyed SS geniuses impregnating wholesome Aryan girls?'

Oh, dear. So cliché, he thought, rolling his eyes in his mind. Smirking, he decided to up the ante. 'You are obsessed with race,' he said, with a calm tone of benevolent condescension. 'Who said anything about blue eyes and blond hair? I am talking about intelligence and moral behaviour here. Clearly, you don't associate these qualities with Blacks. You're outrageous! I never thought you were this way.'

'I am not a racist!' fumed Gu, now very uptight, flabbergasted by the accusation.

'I think you have fascist tendencies - an authoritarian personality,' he accused.

'Fascist! Look who's talking, Herr Hitler.'

He felt pressure on the right hand side; a mestizo with neatly-combed, receding wavy hair was attempting to muscle him aside and get ahead of him in the queue. He bent his legs slightly and held his ground.

'I never said to round up Nazi geniuses and throw them into cages with wholesome Aryan girls at stud farms, Frau Himmler. That's your imagination. You watch far too much television, I tell you, and that is very bad for you. Eugenics is already being practiced in hospitals today, each time they do pre-natal screening. What I say is that we learn from the Jews, and promote a culture among ourselves that puts a premium on education, academic excellence, professional success, and economic status, so that when we look for a mate, we look out for quality. We used to do that, but...'

'What? So you want everyone to subject their potential mates to an IQ test before deciding?'

He laughed, interrupting, 'You have a cartoonish perception of the world.'

'Cartoonish perception of the world,' she repeated, slowly, as if weighing every word. Gu rolled her eyes.

'I am sure you are fussy when deciding whom you date,' he challenged. 'I am sure it annoys you when you meet a great guy and he turns out to be gay.'

'All good men are taken or gay. But that is not to say I have anything against gay people.'

'Aha! So you won't make a long-term commitment with just anybody. Obviously morons and scroungers and criminals and alcoholics and nutters are out - right?'

'That doesn't make me a eugenicist,' she said, her lips tight, looking away into the distance.

'Yes, it does. You are selecting mates based on their level of fitness, and it annoys you when men who are otherwise fit are out of the market for you because they are gay. By discarding unfit males you diminish their chances of reproduction. They end up lonely spinsters holed up in grim bedsits, surviving on porn and fast food, until they throw themselves in front of an on-coming train.'

'That's not eugenics...' she objected, without conviction.

'Yes it is,' he said, pleased with himself, remembering Socrates the Athenian and then Socrates the courier from earlier this morning. 'You favour men of superior fitness over men of inferior fitness.'

'I favour real men who are also caring. I am not looking at their

genes,' replied Gu, defiant.

'Qualities which are valuable in a potential father to your offspring. They are proxies to a genetic profile.'

'You talk as if I were an animal in the wild.'

'You are. Look around you. Are we not in a jungle?'

Gu could not credibly contest such a rhetorical question - particularly with the men pushing and shoving and jabbering around her to be served firsthand a crush of pedestrians pushing and shoving past behind them.

He continued. 'Besides, I bet you would have expected to find a mate - even if you didn't find him there in the end - in a respectable location, not stumbling drunkenly into a sordid nightclub, groping the bums of pregnant women chain smoking and swilling booze on the dancefloor.'

'That's because I've got standards,' spat Gu.

'In other words, when selecting males, you are not an equal opportunities employer. By proxy, you are a eugenicist,' he asserted, conclusively.

'Perhaps I still need to work on my prejudice and I might be pleasantly surprised -'

'If you are not beaten or raped first,' he interrupted.

'-but there are plenty of women out there who are far less discriminating than me and having children. You would have them all sterilised.'

'These fascist ideas you only get from the television and from rabid Marxists like Noel Ignatiev who said that the White race must be destroyed.'

'He was right. The White race is the cancer of humanity,' said Gu, provoking him, but obviously believing it.

A brown-skinned man shoved past her with a snowcone, forcibly bumping her shoulder.

'Susan Sontag. At least think up your own lines.'

'You're going to say they were Jewish extremists? Huh?' Gu had gone on the offensive. 'Sound like - what's the name of that racist governor in America - James Edwards? Or David Duke?'

'Surely, when people who are clearly incompetent, too dull or troubled to acquire skills and run their own affairs - when the Neanderthals in the slums breed like rabbits, the only victims are their children. They do not ask to be born, and to bring them into the world when one is incapable of providing a good life for them, to condemn them to a life of poverty in urban squalor, branded by academic failure, surrounded by crime, and so forth - that is completely irresponsible.'

‘So you would castrate them,’ said Gu, again expecting him to shuffle and maybe look down and squirm out of that line of argument.

I would provide a mixture of incentives and deterrents, the same way governments - nominally at least; in reality I think it’s just another excuse to tax more - offer incentives and deterrents to promote the use of greener technology or fight discrimination.’

‘I don’t have children,’ she said, suddenly, as in triumph. ‘You will never be able to convince women to give up their careers and financial independence in order to stay at home raising children.’

Gu’s statement hit him like a cricket mallet in the forehead. He had heard the argument before, of course, as a pro-immigration argument, but it was a blow nevertheless. There he was, advocating eugenics, and yet he had proven himself a hypocrite by marrying to a highly-gifted woman only to waste it by choosing not to have children: Unborn talent was a loss to society and to humanity as a whole. More free time to contribute to human culture; more time to create wealth, he argued in his mind. Perhaps their material and intellectual contributions outweighed their withholding of their genes - genes carrying superior abilities that were statistically improbable and which in the present system were very rarely allowed to flourish. Yet, the truth was that if people like he and his wife had contributed more to the human genepool, social degeneration would have been slower - they would live in a more efficient, better run, and less corrupt society, and therefore they would not have to waste ever more time and effort dealing with, insulating themselves from, and trying to circumvent, the ubiquitous delays, the service failures, the absurd bureaucracy, and the predatory taxes needed to finance and compensate for it all. In the end, he was increasingly finding himself forced to admit, that - in the matter of his finances - a short-term credit had perhaps been wiped out by a long-term debit. Their mistake had been to assume that the world they grew up in would carry on indefinitely, only becoming ever more modern; and that it was pointless to fight the social trends that they disliked, because social change was inevitable and no individual could ever stop the march of history.

He brushed the thought aside.

‘Then you’ll be poor in your old age, and we’ll die out’ he said, simply, losing his smile.

Chapter 25 Power Grid

The lift stopped on the fifteenth floor. The opening doors revealed Dawn Bergemann and her older companion standing with serious faces. Dawn Bergemann was wearing a dark jacket with grey trousers and pointed high-heeled shoes; her companion was wearing a similar outfit in navy blue and square-tipped low-heeled moccasins. The women boarded the lift and took their places facing the doors, with their backs to him. At this point he noticed that Bergemann's trousers were made out of electric fabric; they were running a white noise animation programme.

'I am so pee'd off right now,' said Bergemann, emphatically. 'Did you specify in your terms and conditions as the licensor that they were not allowed to do that?' asked her companion, clearly annoyed but with controlled deliberation.

'Yes!' exploded Bergemann, 'I have a clause in every single licence agreement.'

'You *need* to point it out to them.'

'They say they are aware of it, but that they submitted it to the Equality Commission anyway' explained Bergemann, then adding with contemptuous sarcasm 'so that I could "take their *views* into consideration", if I chose to.'

'Tell them you are *not interested* in their views. It's *your* book, and you will write it the way you want it, thank you very much!' Bergemann's companion's eyes were open wide and stared with blue intensity under a frown.

'You should see the report they sent. Hundreds of pages pointing out thousands of instances of "bias". Pfff!' Bergemann shook her head 'How pathetic. It must have cost a fortune!'

'Uh-huh,' said her companion, turning to Bergemann and

nodding, raising one eyebrow while narrowing her eye. 'Funded by the taxpayer, no doubt.'

'I threw it in the bin. Whatever.'

'Good on you!'

'And I am going to send them an email this afternoon, telling them I don't care what they say, I won't make any changes. I write what I want, and I have the sales to back me up, plus it's in the contract.'

'That's right.'

He listened to the conversation attentively, familiar with this type of dialogue. His wife's publishers sent her manuscripts to the publically-funded Equality Commission's literary branch, where it was checked for bias. Most publishers ran a voluntary scheme, where they offered authors to have their manuscripts examined by qualified discourse analysts so that they could be expurgated of any phrase that might offend because of its negatively stereotyping groups of people on the basis of their race, gender, disability, and/or sexual orientation. Typically, the text would be analysed, problem words and phrases would be highlighted, and the author would then be given the opportunity to make the necessary 'corrections'. The argument was that this helped sales because it would not exclude potential book buyers. Ever the pragmatist, his wife (whose books competed against Dawn Bergemann's in the same market niche) had agreed to have her manuscripts thus analysed; because with no children to support them in their old age, she considered that they could not afford to risk losing sales and therefore losing income. He had argued that politically incorrect authors with unexpurgated texts tended to enjoy healthier sales because, not despite, of their refusal to have the Equality Commission effectively censor their creative output, but his wife had thought it was not worth the risk of finding out, and since he preferred to live a quiet life, and thought he could not in his position risk a scandal, he had in the end decided to go along with her decision.

'Alex says you should get out of the contract with the publisher in California,' said Bergemann.

Bergemann's companion turned to her, saying nothing.

Bergemann continued. 'He says that if California secedes from the union, once it becomes part of the República del Norte, it will be hard to get the rights back.'

'Yeah, I know,' replied Bergemann's companion, with a frown. 'But I don't think that's going to happen for a while yet. The whole Aztlán thing might not happen for another fifty years.'

‘Well,’ came Bergemann’s reply, ‘even if it doesn’t happen for a while, what you write will still be part of our children’s estate. It’s better to ensure that your intellectual property ends up in the right hands. You don’t want it to be like it was with your publisher in South Africa. The Hispanics are hostile to anything Anglo-American.’

‘Yeah. Alex thinks it will be the same. But right now the Spanish version is generating a lot of sales.’

‘Hasn’t the English version barely sold over there?’

‘I think sales are about 25% English 75% Spanish at the moment.’

‘You see? Alex is right,’ stated Bergemann, as if her companion had finally revealed a truth she had long waited to hear.

The older woman tutted; rolled her eyes, and shook her head. ‘Aw, Alex is always doom and gloom about things like that. And what am I going to do? Cancel the contract and publish it here? What would be the purpose of publishing an American edition in Spain? The American edition needs to be published in America, even if sales are mostly in Spanish.’

‘You could have it re-published it in some other state.’

Bergemann’s companion wanted to end the conversation, ‘Well, we’ll see.’

Bergemann tutted, ‘You never want to listen.’

Ding! The lift stopped.

‘Excuse me, Miss I-Have-Sold-a-Million-Copies!’ exploded Bergemann’s companion as the lift’s doors opened and they both stepped out. ‘Just because you managed to publish the world’s longest novel—’

The doors closed again. He thought Bergemann was right on the money about California. Mexico had territorial claims over the South Western United States, and had for decades now been engaging in an unofficial demographic offensive - La Reconquista, they called it - whereby an inundation of legal and illegal immigrants, followed by constant agitation demanding for these immigrants the same rights and privileges as United States citizens, was used as a weapon to transform their claims into a reality. It was called La Reconquista because the aim was to reconquer the 500,000 square miles that Mexico had sold to the United States in 1848, as stipulated in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed by the two parties following Mexico’s capitulation in the Mexican American War. Although many Americans were aware of Mexico’s Reconquista, and just as many were infuriated by radical Hispanic organisations like La Raza, which attempted to advance the aims of the Reconquista from within the United States and with Americans’ tax-

payer's money, the Reconquista had proven almost irresistible, since the cheap labour demanded by globalist American businesses, combined with a synergistic state- and media-sponsored ideology of diversity of multiculturalism, effectively short-circuited any attempts by patriotic Americans to organise a defence. Fallacious arguments like 'we need immigrants because they do the jobs Americans won't do', or 'immigrants bring skills vital to our economy', or 'immigrants help economic growth because they keep prices down', all promoted by businesses who sought to boost quarterly profits by lowering their labour costs, had for decades been reproduced in the mass media of news and entertainment, virtually unchallenged, alongside meaningless slogans like 'we are a nation of immigrants', 'diversity is our strength', and 'stop the hate', promoted by cultural Marxists, adopted by election-conscious politicians, and legitimised by the pseudo-scientific theories of liberal academics. This extraordinary set of circumstances had enabled Mexico to gradually achieve through simple population transfers and differential fertility what would have been impossible through a conventional military operation. He snorted, shaking his head as he reviewed the situation in his mind: the Mexicans, the Hispanics, who in relation to these matters said one thing in English and quite another in Spanish, probably could not believe how stupid the Americans had been, firstly not to protect their indigenous labour force, secondly to be duped into adopting the multiculturalist ideology, and thirdly to sit and watch it all happen, thinking that everything would continue as before. Then again, he argued in his mind, what could a lone individual do? Speaking out publicly against immigration, multiculturalism, and demographic change carried frightful social, economic, and legal penalties. As far as he was concerned, it was best to keep a low profile, keep one's job and money, move somewhere safe, and insulate oneself as best one could from the world. He would not be alive in fifty years time, and, unlike Bergemann, he did not have children who would want to hold him to account for not leaving behind for them a world where they could feel safe and at home anywhere, so it was enough for him to hold on for three or four more decades, and have enough funds to see him and his wife through to the end.

He had allocated the afternoon for testing. Following their initial meeting, Mr. Wermod had uploaded a modified TRS DOS emulator designed to trick modern computers into thinking they had installed one of his modified Z80 processors. This

would be sufficient for his purposes. He intended to download his software, which he had hidden in one of his web servers, programme in Scoptic's accounting architecture, load it with sample data provided by the company, and observe how efficiently the programme was able to scan for changes in the tax legislation and instantly minimise tax liabilities by dynamically restructuring the company's accounts, without leaving audit-detectable trails.

Gu had left him time to freshen up in the lavatory by suddenly cancelling their coffee together and excusing herself upon purchasing the raspados (obviously, he was no longer persona grata on her camp). He breezed past Ms. Cotter, who was busy arguing with a male visitor in a dark suit, who did not wish to have his photograph taken, and headed straight to the lavatory as quickly and as quietly as he could, anxious to avoid being seen in his currently undignified state. No sooner had he entered the lavatory, however, that the white ceramic tiles and formica surfaces disappeared from view, leaving him standing in an aphotic cloud of bleach fumes. Yes: there had been, indeed, another power failure.

Undeterred, he retrieved his fake mobile and used its screen as a mini-torch to find his way to the sink. Unfortunately, however, when he opened the tap, instead of water out came a cavernous gurgling noise. His fake telephone indicated that the time was 3:01pm: he had missed the lunch hour water supply window by a minute.

Damn women! he exploded, in his mind. If Bergemann and company had not called the lift just as he was on his way up, thus delaying his ascent, he would have just made it!

He waited for a couple of minutes in silence, hoping the power would come back on, but nothing happened. As time passed silence was replaced by the murmur of the office workers outside, most of whom were now leaving their cubicles, walking, standing around, or congregating near the windows, where they obviously intended to wait out the power failure in jovial conversation. A small group of office workers burst out laughing in the distance, at which point he finally stormed out of the lavatory and angrily made his way out of Scoptic and into the building's main staircase.

He initiated a furious descent, his feet moving at vertiginous speed down each flight of stairs. Although he had no real reason; in his fury he wanted to reach the bottom and exit the tower as soon as physically possible.

He made rapid progress, deseeding many floors per minute,

the machinegun sound of his footsteps ricocheting against the walls, his lips tight below, his flared nostrils and determined frown — until he encountered an obstacle. A group of office workers, all middle aged White men wearing ties and short-sleeved shirts, were also on their way down, but clearly in no hurry at all. They took slow and leisurely steps, all entirely relaxed, fully engaged in conversation and an idle exchange of jokes.

‘Disculpen. ¿Me dejan pasar, por favor?’ he said, but none of them heard him or acknowledged him in any way. They were too absorbed in their dialogue, and too selfish to take other people’s wishes into consideration.

He cleared his throat loudly, hoping to cause a more forceful impression. However, this only caused one of the men, the one with a bald pate surrounded by a horseshoe of dark brown hair, to turn around and look up just long enough to register his presence without leaving the conversation or causing any of the others to follow suit. The staircase then rumbled with their laughter, as one of them made an amusing observation while recounting an incident involving trivial office politics.

He, now barely able to contain the adrenalin’s call to shove the men aside and ram his way through, decided to leave the staircase and take a moment to calm down by the lifts.

There, on the twenty-second floor, he encountered Bergemann and her companion once again. The two women were standing by the lifts, still engaged in an animated exchange.

‘Why do they do that?’ said Bergemann, while her companion shook her head, disapprovingly. Bergemann continued, ‘I said to them, very specifically, that I did not want the prose modernised, whatever that means. The Spanish translation has to reflect the style and flavour of the author. No "modernising" and no censoring parts because they might offend someone.’ Bergemann ended her sentence with scornful sarcasm.

‘I know!’ agreed Bergemann’s companion, frowning askance with a lopsided grimace, as if what she was learning was the height of the absurd. ‘It’s not as if this author wrote in old English and no one could understand him anymore!’

‘For frick’s sake!’ exclaimed Bergemann, clearly furious. ‘The novel is barely over 100 years old!’

‘The novel is so long this is probably the only time it will ever be published, so it needs to be done right.’

‘Exactly! Thank you!’ said Bergemann. ‘I mean, we are talking about nine million words - twenty-three volumes of one thousand pages each. It is the only time we are going to see Henry Darger in print. If it doesn’t get done right this time it

will never be done right.’

‘They think people are so stupid,’ added the older woman. ‘They see a semi-colon in a sentence and they immediately think it needs to be broken down into two simpler sentences.’

‘Oh, my goodness. Have you seen the new editions of Emily Bronte?’

Bergemann’s companion tensed, expecting bad news. ‘No. What have they done to her?’

‘You know how years ago there was a campaign to "translate" Shakespeare plays into modern English?’

‘No...’ breathed the old woman, widening her eyes, horrified.

‘They’ve done it to Wuthering Heights! Apparently, students today are too stupid to understand Victorian English so they’ve decided that now Victorian novels will be studied in a simplified modern translation.’

‘They treat everyone as if we are all idiots. What about the bright students who do understand it?’

‘There is not enough of them, obviously, and they don’t want to seem elitist. It’s all about helping the disadvantaged, and not making anyone feel excluded.’

‘Aw, come on...’ said the older woman, completely fed up.

‘Alex has these McGuffey Readers from the 1830s - not the modern PC ones, but the original ones used by the American pioneers. Kids two hundred years ago were definitely brighter, but they were also taught much better. The level of English they had... it was amazing. Even a twelve-year-old schoolboy could read, write, and speak better than a university student today. Kids today don’t even know what a frickin’ comma is.’

‘Yeah, I am not surprised,’ the woman nodded, ‘They keep re-basing - or "re-centering", as they say - the SAT tests, so now it takes less skill to get average scores. I’ve increasingly had to send back PhD theses unmarked because the person simply could not write proper English.’

‘Whatever,’ said Bergemann, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. At this point her mobile rang and she raised an index finger, holding it in the air in front of her companion, as if to say, Wait.

This was his cue to move on. He decided he had calmed down enough now to go return to Scoptic’s offices. He would try to contact Mr. Wermod to re-schedule their meeting while he waited for the power to come back on.

Back in Scoptic he went to the deserted TRS-80 area, stood next to the nearest telephone, and dialed Mr. Wermod’s number without pressing the receiver to his ear canal. When he finally did

press it, however, he discovered that there was no line. Using an impatient index finger to machinegun the hook switch, he checked to see whether there was a chord connecting the telephone to the wall, before slamming the receiver back onto its cradle, realising his mistake. Of course, it had been decades since a typical office telephone could be used without electricity: surrounded by the Radio Shack museum pieces, he had acted instinctively as if he were using one of those old disc dial telephones that worked even during a power cut. The reflex was understandable, since he had come to rely on his old disc-dial telephone at home, as insulation against the ever more frequent power failures afflicting the national power grid.

He sighed in frustration.

Can one ever get anything done around here? he fumed, wanting to smash skulls as if they were pumpkins.

This time, he resolved to sit out the power failure, however long it took. He walked to one of the antediluvian Centronics dot matrix printers, tore off some paper for his own use, and sat by the window; perhaps he would while away the time having another go at solving Lehmer's conjecture. However, he was too annoyed to think, and soon found himself doodling.

He heard a calm voice call out his name. When he looked up, he found Dr. Brummagem standing at the far end of the enclosure, his Simon Bolivar balcarrotas as ridiculous as ever in his otherwise humourless and dignified manner. Dr. Brummagem's forehead registered only the hint of a frown, lasting only a fraction of a second, as he stared at him, awaiting his response; the suppressed frown was likely to have been the result of the dozens of sheets of paper surrounding him, filled with obsessive-compulsive geometric doodles: they probably looked as if he was designing a spacecraft, using technologies that belonged to the far future.

'Yes?' he said, tonelessly.

Dr. Brummagem explained, 'You and I are the only ones left. It doesn't look like power will be restored any time soon.'

He had been sitting in the dark for a long time now. A couple of hours perhaps; he had doodled his way well into nautical twilight, by which time the near full moon had become his sole source of illumination.

'Er... Yeah. I've gotta get going anyway,' he replied, beginning to collect his sketches with controlled calm, trying to look as if they were very important system schematics.

'What's that you're working on?' asked Dr. Brummagem.

‘System schematics,’ he replied, coolly, before going on the offensive, ‘What happened to the back-up generators?’

‘Lack of maintenance. The owners are deeply in debt, and with the tower nearly empty, budgets have been cut,’ said Dr. Brummagem flatly.

‘I see.’

Dr. Brummagem began walking down the winding corridor, towards the exit; he followed. They walked in silence, listening to the rustle of their suits. Earlier that afternoon he had talked briefly with Dr. Stumm, and informed him of his abortive testing session with Mr. Wermod. They had agreed to reschedule their meeting for the following day, and bring Mr. Wermod over to Scoptic so that he could perform a demonstration in situ, using the actual equipment and a new sample of accounting data. Dr. Brummagem’s department would be providing said data.

‘Has Dr. Stumm updated you about tomorrow?’ he asked.

Dr. Brummagem turned his head only half way while walking and gave a curt nod, ‘Yeah.’

He did not know what else to say, so he went ahead and initiated his descent down the staircase while Dr. Brummagem dealt with alarming and locking up.

Down in the lobby area, he saw Dawn Bergemann once again, walking past him enveloped in the ghostly bubble of light generated by her trousers; even with the emergency lighting, the trousers had the same effect on the semi darkness as did a television screen. Dawn Bergemann’s female companion was not with her this time; instead, a tall Black man in a smart suit - so magnificently arrogant that he looked almost sculpted - walked next to her, carrying a box. He noticed that the sticker on the box said *La Espina del Diablo* - Devil Thorn, one of her novels, and from the look of it newly edited in Spanish.

On an impulse, he called out, ‘Miss Bergemann?’

Dawn Bergemann slowed her walk and turned around, raising her eyebrows.

‘Hi, I am Dr. -’ he offered his hand and stated his name. He continued while they stopped and shook hands, firmly, ‘My niece is a big fan of your novels. I think she has all of them, including a rare first edition of *Eden’s Atlantis*. Could I purchase one of those from you and have you autograph it for her? She would be over the moon.’

‘Sure,’ said Bergemann, offering him a friendly smile, ‘I recognise you from the lift. I hope you didn’t think my mother and I were moaning too much.’

‘I didn’t really pay attention,’ he lied, ‘I am here with clients

and have a lot on my mind at the moment. Nightmare project.'

'I know the feeling,' said Bergemann, widening and rolling her eyes as she laughed and turned towards the Black man.

The Black man lowered the box he was carrying so that she could reach into it and retrieve one of the books. Bergemann extracted a handsome hardback.

'Here,' he said, solicitously producing a pen out of his suit and offering it to her.

'Thank you. So what's your niece's name?'

He stated his niece's name.

Bergemann held the pen in one hand, and the tome in the other. She did not seem in a hurry to open it. 'Nice. How old is she?'

'Fourteen,' he said, smiling.

'Cool. I wrote this book for girls her age. When are you flying back to the U.K.?'

'I will be here until Friday.'

'So you have one of your Christmas gifts sorted then,' she said, gesturing towards her book, before adding, with amicable sarcasm 'Oh, sorry. You are not supposed to say Christmas anymore. Now it is your Winter Holiday presents.'

'Careful security doesn't hear you. They'll arrest you,' he said, with a mock conspiratorial tone, eliciting peals of raucous laughter from Bergemann.

'Oh, oh. You're right. If I say CHRISTMAS one more time they'll chain me to a big iron ball and send me to the gulags!' Bergemann yelled the word Christmas towards the security men, so that it echoed across the lobby.

He laughed, then said. 'You'll be the next Alexander Solzhenitsyn.'

'Who else is your niece into?' invited Bergemann.'

'Ah, uhm, well, it's not my kind of literature...' He hesitated, then, to satisfy his curiosity, he added, 'But I think I've heard her mention -' he stated his wife's pen name. 'What do you think of her?'

'I think I read one of her books a long time ago. I liked her; she has a very elegant style. But every time I thought things were getting interesting, getting somewhere edgy, she pulled back. So in the end she struck me as a bit bland. I was a bit disappointed.' Bergemann paused briefly, looking thoughtful, then continued, 'Then again I only read one book, and it could be that she did not intend to write it the way it was published. It could be that the publishers had the manuscript screened for bias and then asked her to make changes in order to avoid of-

fending anyone. They do it with almost every book right now. Most writers go along with it because they don't want to lose sales. But I think they do because no one can be all things to all people, and please everyone, all the time, everywhere. The best writers are the ones that take risks and are honest with themselves and with their readers. If it offends someone, so be it. At least it's honest and people appreciate it and respect that. I certainly don't want to read a book that I know has been censored and made to conform to some wishy-washy, "safe" politically correct formula. That's just boring - and an insult to the reader's intelligence.'

A resigned, thoughtful 'Hmm,' was his only reply.

'That's just my opinion. You know, there may be people who like that kind of novel. But what I have noticed is that it's better for a book to cause a stir, even if it gets bad reviews, than for it to be just OK with everyone and be forgotten. People will respect a writer who writes what she believes and then sticks to her guns even if it's unpopular. Like Ayn Rand. I find her a lot more interesting because she did just that. She would never have allowed her books to be "cleaned up" and approved by some tax-funded bureaucrat working for the Equality Commission.'

'I think you are right. But there are a lot of authors out there, a lot of competition, and I suppose sometimes authors who rely on their income from writing don't feel they can risk their livelihoods and their reputations,' he argued, for his wife's sake, adopting a tone of polite reasonableness.

Bergemann fired back with aplomb, 'Writers who write to be liked will be talked about as long as they are friends with the critics and the critics are willing to tell the public to buy those books. Writers who are feared because they go against the grain by writing something they believe in will be talked about even if all the critics are against them. You choose friends, but you don't choose fear - fear chooses you. As a writer you are better staying true to your art. Let the chips fall where they may. You may or may not be successful as a writer - you can't control that anyway - but you will live happier, knowing that you never sold out, that you stuck to your guns no matter what they threw at you.'

'That may be so. But the flip side of that is that perhaps it is more practical, more realistic, to simply write what people want to read, sell as many copies as possible to make as much money as possible, and use the money to secretly do as one believes,' he offered.

'But is that brave?'

'We value bravery, but the brave thing to do may not always

be the intelligent thing to do. Ultimately it's a question of what works: what matters is the bottom line, not how we got there. Some writers probably think they would rather have the millions, and indulge their vanity safely and in private.'

Bergemann was unimpressed by his line of argument; she batted back with friendly enthusiasm. 'Most writers who got rich believed in what they, were doing. And as soon as they became aware of their success and sold out to be even more successful, people caught on and stopped buying.'

He could not argue against that. Bergemann's own sales figures backed up her argument; his wife was successful, but Bergemann, much to his wife's annoyance, was much more so.

'Besides, I think you've got to write what you believe in. Reality imitates fiction, after all' she added. 'If you don't like what you see around you, the first step to change it is to write about it. You can either highlight what is wrong or you can imagine an alternative or you can do both. With fiction you have the power to create a world that inspires people. Why waste that power? Why let other people run your world?'

'I suppose you have a point,' he said.

'You know, fifteen years ago my husband wrote a book about a future dystopia. What would everyday life be like if people sat around and let things carry on going where they Were going. If he had written it in a politically correct way, in a way so that it didn't offend or outrage anyone or put it in anyone's black list, the book would have been pretty boring, because not much really happens. There are many dystopian novels out there with a lot more action, more characters, and more extreme apocalyptic scenarios, but because he wrote it the way he did, without compromising in order to be commercial, there is nothing like it out there.'

'Actually, I like apocalyptic novels. As a child of the Cold War, my favourite ones are about thermonuclear apocalypses. What's it about?'

'It's not about nuclear war. It's about a genius IT consultant who goes on a business trip to Madrid. He's developed this intelligent software that can keep track of changes in tax law and automatically change a company's accounting statements to minimise tax bills. The story follows him around as he tries to do his job in a completely dysfunctional future. It's all problems, delays, crime, bureaucracy, whatever. Even the simplest task is a nightmare.'

'Well, that sounds awfully familiar,' he said, giving Bergemann a wry smile, doused with polite sarcasm.

'There you go. Reality imitates fiction,' she concluded. 'Hey,

you might even be a character in someone's novel!

'Hopefully not your husband's,' he quipped.

Bergemann added, 'People said it was a very paranoid vision of the future in 2009, but the future in the novel - although exaggerated to look ridiculous - was not far off the mark.'

'What's the book called?' he asked, thinking of perhaps researching it before possibly ordering a copy.

'It's called Mister.'

Bergemann's mobile rang. She lifted her index finger and held it in front of him, as if to say, Wait, then pressed the lapel of her jacket to answer the call. Bergemann's mobile was woven into the fabric.

'¿Hola? Sí. Vale. Salimos ya,' said Bergemann, staring past him into the mid-distance.

Bergemann then pressed the lapel of her jacket again, this time to disconnect, and smiled at him, 'Anyway: Gotta go, I am going to a book launch in La Casa del Libro. You are welcome to come.'

'Well, er...' he said, while Bergemann signed his copy of *La Espina del Diablo*.

'Here,' she said, handing the book to him and offering him a radiant smile. 'I hope she enjoys it!'

'How much for the book?' he said, reaching for his wallet.

'Don't worry about it. Tell her it's a gift from me,' replied Bergemann, before swivelling on her feet and resuming her way to the exit. 'Enjoy the rest of your trip,' she said, momentarily turning her head towards him.

'Thanks,' he said.

Chapter 26

Debt Collector

He arrived at *Ciro el Grande* to find the reception desk, yet again, completely deserted. He walked towards it and leaned over the counter, to check whether there was a Keeler book sitting underneath, and, if so, whether it was the same one as last time or a new one. On this occasion, however, there was no Keeler novel; the receptionist's book today was *Amadis de Gaula*, by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo.

That will keep you busy, he thought, smiling. He had read the Romance some thirty years ago: over 1,400 pages in XVIth century Castillian.

There was a young man waiting for a lift, his face upturned while his eyes tracked one of the lifts' descent on the digital display above the doors. The man was tall and muscular, White, in his late twenties, with closely cropped hair; his black combat trousers, combat boots, and black polo shirt emphasised his manly posture. He joined the man waiting at a seven o'clock position.

When the doors opened, they revealed three Arabs clad in white thoubes; all three sported beards, two sported shumaggs, and one sported a crochet kufi. The three Arabs exited the lift enveloped in an eye-watering cloud of designer aftershave.

Combat Trousers entered the lift and he followed, noticing the logo on the latter's polo shirt. The script was unintelligible, with the individual letters linked by interlaced extensions.

Dominating the symmetrical design, however, was an Irminsul, one of the Germanic neo-Pagan symbols used by Esoteric Hitlerists.

A chill ran down his spine, yet he observed for a few moments, surreptitiously, fascinated.

The lift began a rapid ascent, only to stop on the third floor. When the doors opened, they revealed two slim men wearing tight t-shirts; their body language betrayed their sexual orientation. The gentlemen entered the lift without acknowledging its occupants, and proceeded to conduct a detailed oral exploration with each other's gustatory organs. If their loose deportment when boarding had suggested a self-righteous arrogance, the blatant and lascivious rudeness with which the gentlemen employed the rest of their bodies to complement their oral activity, demonstrated their breezy contempt for old-fashioned values of public etiquette and decorum. He, who had always felt it was his prerogative - and indeed his legal right in a free, democratic society - to dislike entire groups of people because of characteristics they held in common, saw sufficient, valid justification on this occasion to express his disapprobation of the gentlemen's behaviour by loudly clearing his throat: indeed, one thing was for these homosexual gentlemen to be legally assured peace of mind that they would not be unjustly persecuted because of their sexual orientation, quite another was for them to so tastelessly and antagonistically rub it in the faces of those whose sexual orientation was harmonious with Nature's design; he resented not so much the evidence of a homosexual orientation, but the aggressive vulgarity, and the infantile selfishness, with which those who were thus orientated felt compelled to exhibit it, irrespective of occasion or location. He resented it all the more because this behaviour exemplified the generally irksome attitude of the wider gay community, as most egregiously illustrated by their (tax funded) Gay Pride parades. In his estimation, such parades went so far beyond their being simple colourful expressions of civil emancipation as to suggest their ostensible purpose served only to camouflage a lurid array of base motivations - indeed, the very colour and nature of these events made plain the tenuousness of their connection to civil rights: they constituted, rather, a grotesque spectacle of vulgar debauchery - a pornographic celebration of hedonistic egoism, bizarre narcissism, and primadonnaish incontinence, rabidly intolerant of traditional values, and maliciously calculated to affront conservative sensibilities as crassly and as shockingly as possible. In cities across the West, ordinary citizens were treated to, and were demanded to welcome, an annual rampage of obstreperous moral vandalism at the hands of militant homosexual pornographers. The only force that prevented them from being held more frequently, for longer, more outrageously, and more widely, was the growing demographic presence, apolitical representation, economic power, and cultural influence of the Mohammedan contingent: unlike the enfeebled Christians, the

immoral atheists, and the amoral fashion-conscious population at large, outside racism and anti-Semitism, the Mohammedans were fearless and uncompromising when policing and enforcing the limits of what they considered acceptable behaviour.

The homosexual gentlemen carried on with their oral and corporeal operations without registering cognisance of his expressed displeasure. Either they were too absorbed in their pursuit, or they had dismissed him in advance as an uptight Christian fundamentalist whose views were, therefore, of no account. His fellow traveller, in turn, stared dead ahead, with the sphynx-like composure of someone who was above such petty skirmishes and kept his mind focused instead on the important battles of the cosmic war. Or so he assumed, for that is what he understood the people of Combat Trouser's political and spiritual persuasion to be like.

He cleared his throat once more, this time with angrier emphasis.

The homosexual gentlemen continued to act as if they were unaccompanied, in their bedroom.

He decided, then hesitated, then decided again to adopt a more forceful approach.

He said, firmly but politely, 'Señores: ¿Os importaría esperar hasta llegar a vuestro apartamento? Realmente no estamos en una clase de biología.'

Neither of the homosexual gentlemen appreciated his humour, and only one of them deigned to acknowledge his request; without disengaging himself from his chum, the one with the smaller ears held his left hand in front of his face, inwardly curving the thumb, index, ring, and little fingers, and leaving the middle finger fully extended for a full five seconds.

At this point he decided against further intervention, concluding that Combat Trousers' approach to the situation had proven wiser. He speculated that Combat Trouser's equanimity probably derived from the secure knowledge that if and when he and his comrades had their way, the homosexual gentlemen and their comrades would soon learn the value of exercising temperance while socialising in public spaces. This, of course, provided that the Mohammedans did not have their way first: if and when they did, then the offending gentlemen in question would likely find themselves reflecting that Victorian England and Franco's Spain were not so terrible after all.

Once again his neighbours had provided him with another opportunity to sample the pungency of their cuisine. His end of the hallway was heavily scented with sesame, cumin, turmeric, garlic, sumac, cinnamon, and za'atar; in turn, these rested on a

ponderous foundation of lamb and lentils. In theory, pleasant smells, but, despite, his hunger, his nostrils rejected them forcefully as inappropriate in the hallways of a respectable hotel: in a respectable hotel, he expected to smell only faint perfumes, suggesting elegance, cleanliness, expensive leather, and the presence of serious and hard-working business executives. Moreover, he did not expect to hear his neighbour's blaring television, broadcasting to the entire floor their passion for Arabic 24-hour news channels.

Each floor was H-shaped. The horizontal bar was longer than the vertical ones and contained the lifts at its centre. The top and bottom ends of each horizontal bar had three doors, each perpendicular to one another. The door to his apartment was located on the right-hand side of the upper end of the left-hand bar. As he swiped his key through the lock and turned the doorhandle, the door to his left opened abruptly: a corcous Arab with piercing black eyes and caterpillar eyebrows, wearing a shirt and trousers, and sporting a carpet-like rectangular moustache, stepped out and looked at him, exuding expressionless suspicion. The Arab was in his fourties.

'Was it you?' the Arab said, with blunt hostility, in a heavily-accented English.

'Er... I beg your pardon?' he said, in English, almost as a reflex.

'Was it you?'

'Me what?' he said, mirroring the Arab's suspicion and quickly annoyed by his aggressive manner.

'Don't do that again,' requested the Arab, his tone implicitly threatening.

'Do what?' He frowned.

The Arab lifted a warning finger, 'Don't do that again!' He was about to dismiss his accoster with a grunt, when he heard the approaching thump of cowboy boots to his right. He turned in their direction, and saw a middle-aged man with greying light brown hair appear from around the corner, clad in old jeans and a grey jacket, and carrying soft tan leather briefcase. The man turned opposite to them towards his apartment, using his free hand to retrieve the key from his pocket.

'You,' said the Arab, calling out to the man's back, 'Oi! You!'

The man turned, to look at them with a serious mouth and a mildly perplexed brow. The man's perspiring face betrayed his Dutch origins.

'You Arnude?' demanded the Arab.

The man stared blankly for a moment, then gave a reluctant smile. 'Yeah,' he said. 'The name is Arnoud.'

'You owe me one pee,' stated the Arab. The Arab's truculent body language suggested he was absolutely serious, and prepared to use force.

Arnude's renewed perplexity turned his smile into a rictus, 'One pee?'

'Yes. You owe me one pee.'

Arnude's voice rose to a falsetto 'Since when? I don't fucking know you!'

The Arab answered bluntly. 'My friend Said lent you one pee in 1990. You never paid him and he sold the debt to me. So now you owe me one pee.'

'Nineteen ninety? The fuck I do!' cried Arnude, his falsetto rising even higher, 'Who the fuck are you?'

'My name is Ibrahim, and you are going to pay me tonight.'

Arnude now smiled, 'You know what you can do with your one pee, Ibrahim?'

'What?' egged Ibrahim, without humour.

'You can take your one pee, and shove it. They don't even make pees anymore, so I am paying you fuck all.'

Ibrahim's eyes widened with a mixture of rage, hostility, and disbelief. 'Oh, yeah? Oh, yeah?' he shouted, gesticulating with his arms.

'Yeah,' said Arnude, raising his chin defiantly. With a low voice he then added, shaking his head and turning his back to open the door to his apartment, 'Fucking one pee.'

'Fuck you! I cut your throat tonight, you pig!' shouted Ibrahim, stepping forward.

'Yeah, whatever,' replied Arnude calmly, without bothering to look.

Arnude then swiped the key through the lock and opened the door.

'You fucking pig!' swore Ibrahim, who, by now in a frenzied rage, stepped back into his apartment and retrieved a baseball bat he had leaning against the wall near the door. 'PAY! NOW!' he screamed; brandishing the baseball bat with both arms in a most threatening manner.

Arnude now saw that the Arab meant business, so he decided to laugh and provoke his antagonist even more, apparently having decided that he could slip into his apartment and lock the door before Ibrahim could reach him. 'Come on then! Come and get your fucking one pee!' he taunted.

'I FUCKING KILL YOU!' screamed the Arab, running towards his

debtor, bat aloft.

Arnude eyed the bat worriedly and slipped into his apartment, slamming the door shut as quickly as his reflexes allowed.

Ibrahim stopped right in front of Arnude's door and shouted a stream of obscenities. He then used the bat to repeatedly whack the door as hard as he could. The door was armoured, so the impacts only made superficial damage to the wood panelling.

He, who had observed the entire exchange standing by his open door, now decided to emulate Arnude, and disappear into his apartment. Of course, none of the other tenants had opened their doors to find out what the vociferation was about; but he cynically speculated that behind each closed door there would be at least one gleefully grinning person, staring avidly through the peep hole, or else listening in carefully with their eyes wide and ears pressed against the wood.

He began reviewing his options for dinner the second he closed the door behind him. Pizzas were unbusiness-like (for emergencies only); local establishments other than the bar/café/restaurant downstairs was likely to consist of either gay nightclubs or football bars. He resolved to dine at the bar/café/restaurant downstairs.

First, however, he would check that letter he had been handed at the reception desk yesterday evening.

There was a loud knock at the door.

He froze momentarily and turned to look at the door, knowing it was Ibrahim. His initial impulse was to stay still and remain quiet until Ibrahim lost interest, but then he remembered Pierre, the photographer his wife had told him about in the morning, and decided to take a leaf from the photographer's book. He walked back towards the door, deliberately going against the instinct to step lightly, and looked through the peephole. The fish-eye lens showed only blackness: Ibrahim was looking back at him.

'Open the door!' shouted the Arab, knocking seven times in quick succession. Ibrahim's vigorous knocks caused the wood to vibrate angrily against his supraorbital arch.

He said nothing, and began to walk away from the door, with calm, leisurely movements. His heart was pounding, but he wanted Ibrahim to see that he was entirely uninterested and unconcerned. This only incensed the mercurial Arab, who screamed, 'OPEN THE DOOR!' as he delivered another seven fast and loud knocks.

There was a three second pause, before Ibrahim screamed again 'OPEN THE DOOR!'

The command was followed by yet; another seven rapid

knocks, followed by a three second pause, followed: by five slow, very loud knocks.

After three further seconds of silence, the Arab screamed one more time, at the top of his lungs, 'OPEN THE DOOR!' The word 'door' was bellowed and elongated so that it filled the entire apartment, the furious decibels of Ibrahim's demented rage impacting even the most recondite recesses in the rooms farthest from the entrance.

He carried on walking towards the lounge at the end of the narrow corridor, wondering how he was going to avoid the Arab when he decided to leave his apartment to go to the restaurant downstairs or when he returned later on. Then, thinking more clearly, he realised that he did not have to tolerate such behaviour from anyone: he would telephone reception and demand that they call the police and have the hoodlum escorted out of the building, along with all his belongings.

More knocking on the door, this time slow, hard, and evenly spaced, on and on and on.

He used the telephone in his bedroom to dial reception.

'¿Diga?' answered an elderly, white, male voice, after twenty-seven rings.

'Buenas noches.'

'¿Diga?' repeated the voice.

'¿Hola?' he said, while the Arab pounded the door, shouting abuse.

'¿Diga?' It was clear the man on the other side of the line did not hear him. He raised his voice, 'Hola. ¿Me oye?'

'¿Diga?'

He spoke even louder, '¿Me oye?'

He heard a grunt and the line cut off.

He re-dialled.

'¿Diga?' answered the voice.

'Hola, buenas noches.' he began, loudly.

'¿Diga?'

He sighed, then inhaled deeply.

'BUENAS NOCHES,' he shouted.

Pause.

'¿Diga?'

He slammed down the receiver.

He decided to dial one more time.

'¿Diga?'

'BUENAS NOCHES,' he shouted again.

'¿Diga?'

This is unbelievable! he exclaimed in his mind, as he slammed down

the receiver one final time.

Ibrahim was now kicking the door, yelling and screaming, treating him to death threats, and insulting his entire family tree with the vilest, most obscene terminology that came to mind.

Worried about the door, he looked around for a weapon. His bedroom was sparsely furnished: it contained two single beds (pushed together), two bedside tables, a round table, two chairs, a bench, and a make-up table. There were knives in the kitchen, and a couple of lamps in the living room area. Ibrahim had a baseball bat, so he thought his best option would be the two blankets. He grabbed the first one and wrapped it around his left arm; the second one he grabbed by a corner and pulled off the bed as he walked towards the hallway.

There, he stood for around thirty seconds, staring at the door, readying myself as Ibrahim carried on with his pounding and never-ending stream of insults. He would use the blankets the way Roman gladiators used nets as a weapon.

Then, unexpectedly, Ibrahim fell silent, and a door slammed shut. Ibrahim's television, which had been blaring all along, now blared twice as loudly: Ibrahim had finally tired and retreated into his apartment.

This, however, did not mean he was suddenly safe to leave for the restaurant downstairs. He could exit his apartment very quietly, but Ibrahim could well be standing right behind the door to his apartment, staring angrily through his peephole, waiting for him to come out. He refused to allow himself to be shaped by circumstances, however: he was hungry and was determined to eat a full dinner, complete with appetiser, dessert, and lemon tea.

A partial solution came to mind: it would secure his exit, but not necessarily his safe return. A partial solution, however, was better than no solution.

Grabbing a knife from the kitchen, he used it to cut the pull-down string that operated the curtains in the lounge. He then made a noose at one end, switched off all the lights, and crawled with painful lensor towards the door, careful not to make a sound. Once at the door, he stood to look through the peephole: the coast was clear. He proceeded to pull down the handle in a very slow and controlled manner, hypersensitive to any noise, and, after a moment, opened the door, just a crack, with equally self-conscious deliberation. His heart was pounding, his breath shallow, butterflies flew in his stomach; however, he forced himself to continue. He lowered himself, so as

to stay outside the visibility angle of Ibrahim's peephole, and slowly leaned into Ibrahim's door. Moving swiftly and silently, he slipped the noose he had prepared into the handle, tightened it, and then tied the other end of the string to the handle on the door of their mutual neighbour, ensuring the string was tight. If Ibrahim decided to open the door now, he would not be able to. Still, he saw no reason to tempt his luck: he closed the door to his apartment as quietly as he had opened it, and stepped lightly as he went round the bend and towards the lifts.

To be safe, he decided to take the stairs. He noticed that it did not take long before some hoodlum or another decided to start graffiting the staircase.

As he was about to enter the bar area, he noticed the signs on the door:

PROHIBIDA LA ENTRADA
A MENORES DE 18 AÑOS

And

NO SE PERMITEN NIÑOS

Good, he thought for a moment, before wondering whether there were sinister reasons — reasons with pouted lips, silicon breasts, wriggling buttocks, and long legs dancing around poles - behind the management's perceived need so sternly to state their ageist policy. Then again, such reasons would make the second set of signs, re-stating the prohibitions in Arabic, quite unlikely.

Upon pushing open the door, he was confronted with a row of angry, old men sitting by the bar directly in front of him. The men turned briefly to eye him with hard, suspicious faces, before resuming their conversations. The bar was U-shaped and eccentrically situated inside a square space delimited by floor-to-ceiling glass panes. The larger area was to the right of the bar; a large, wall-mounted screen presided over half a dozen tables. The screen showed a football pitch and men in shorts running and kicking a ball; the speakers associated with the screen blared fast-paced commentary over the clamour of thousands of stadium-based spectators. Just as he was looking in its direction, the screen showed a forward rapidly approaching the goal area and kicking the ball past the defence, at which point the commentator's delivery accelerated with excitement and the men sitting on the tables and standing by the bar ex-

claimed in unison, 'Oooyy!'

The restaurant was next to the bar, so he walked past the sour boozers and took a small table in the centre of the dining room. This table had two advantages: firstly, its situation at the dining room's axial point made it less likely to be ignored; secondly, its contiguity to a larger table populated by business executives generated for him the correct ambiance for a professional of his station. For a crazy moment, he thought of raising his right arm and clicking his finger for attention, but he contented himself with simply imagining the scene.

The restaurant was decorated after the mozarabic fashion. The designers had sought to give it a palatial feel, only it looked ridiculous given the small size of the dining area, and the fact that it was contiguous to a football bar and café that served Moroccan breakfasts. Faint Middle Eastern muzak played in the background.

Minutes passed, without acknowledgment from any of the waiters. There were three of them, concentrated in one corner of the dining room, looking stressed and running around in a state of confusion; despite their constant comings and goings, they were accomplishing nothing. He could not understand their level of disorganisation, because two thirds of the tables were vacant, and none had signs indicating a reservation. Eventually, one of the waiters - a greying Spaniard in his sixties - ventured in his direction, only to walk past him to attend to the larger table. Fair enough, he thought, since the business executives had been there before him and had already put down their menus.

After some of the others placed their orders, one of the business executives - the one with a larger-than-usual beerbelly - spoke jovially and loudly with a South American accent: 'Hace calor y no tengo mucha hambre.? Pediré algo ligerito. Un pescadito a lo mejor. ¿Todavía hacen la lisa esa? ¿Tienen una fresca de hoy?'

'Sí, tenemos una de esta mañana,' confirmed the waiter.

Beerbelly frowned suspiciously, 'Sí, bueno, de esta mañana - hoy - pero... la pregunta es si la lisa es fresca.'

'Es fresca,' replied the waiter circumspectly.

'Pero... ¿Fresca del mar, o fresca del congelador?'

'La lisa ha salido del mar,' stated the waiter unsmiling.

'Bien, pero...¿Salida del mar, cuándo? ¿Salida del mar ésta mañana?'

The waiter nodded, 'Llegada de la costa ésta mañana, en efecto.'

Beerbelly raised a cautionary finger, 'A, pero eso no quiere decir que haya salido del mar esta mañana. Cuando dice "llegada de la costa ésta mañana", cabe la posibilidad, de qué la lisa llevase muerta ya varios días, o llevase congelada varias semanas — o inclusive meses o años. Lo que quiero saber es si la lisa es fresca, porque salió del mar - porque la pescaron - esta mañana; no si esta fresca porque salió de una camión frigorífico esta mañana, después de llevar semanas; meses, años, congelada.'

'Bueno, a ver, la lisa nos llegó esta mañana. Vino en un camión frigorífico, eso sí, pero nos llegó de la costa, en donde están los pescadores, y los pescadores pescan y venden pescado todos los días. Así que la lisa, por fuerza, es fresca. De eso no hay ninguna duda. Vamos, que no tengo ninguna duda yo. Usted a lo mejor sí. Pero yo estoy seguro de que la lisa es fresca, y desde luego aquí sólo servimos pescado fresco. No congelamos nada.'

'Sí, pero un momento. El que los pescadores pesquen y vendan pescado todos los días no significa necesariamente de que vendan pescado fresco pescado ese mismo día todos los días. Podrían muy bien estar congelando lo que les va sobrando e irlo vendiendo cuando pueden. La lisa podría - en teoría - muy bien llevar diez años congelada.'

The waiter gestured a reluctant concession, 'Bueno, podría ser. Pero no lo creo. Aunque si no me cree, se la puedo traer aquí a la mesa para que la vea, y si rio le gusta puede usted pedir otra cosa. Sin ningún problema.'

Beerbelly considered for a few moments, 'Bueno. Le creo. Tráigame la lisa a la plancha. No. Pare. Tráigame la lisa para que la mire de todas formas.'

'De acuerdo,' said the waiter, taking note. He then turned to the only woman at the table. 'Y para usted, señora?'

The woman, White, in her fifties, was diminutive in size, but well dressed and confident, at ease in the all-male company. She wore sparse make up, but her slightly wavy, bronze-hued bob, although natural, was carefully styled.

'Aver. El solomillo a la plancha...?' she said, pointing at an item on the menu, before giving the waiter a concerned, querying look, '¿Es muy un plato muy grande?' she asked.

'No, no mucho,' replied the waiter, pursing his lips, frowning, and shaking head as he gave an indication with his hands, 'Más o menos así de grande, con patatas.'

‘¿Me lo puede traer a la mesa para que la vea primero?’

‘Sin ningún problema,’ said the waiter, very serious, taking note.

The waiter left, and the business executives carried on with their conversation. They mostly exchanged jokes and anecdotes, typically heard at conferences or clients’ meetings. The woman - Julia was her name - held everyone’s attention as she recounted an incident in a recent presentation she had attended: ‘... Al final le dije al de al lado: "¿Oye, de dónde es este señor?" Y me dice: "De Escocia." Y yo le digo: "¿Y en qué idioma está hablando?" Y me dice: "En inglés." Y yo le digo entonces: "No le entiendo nada." Y me contesta él: "No te preocupes. ¡Yo tampoco!’

The whole table exploded with laughter

After a twenty further minutes, he was finally presented with a menu. The menu, otherwise profusely ornamented with arabesque filigrees, was fairly straightforward for a Western diner, since the management had not bothered to translate the Middle Eastern dishes into Spanish, and had peremptorily limited the Western dishes to a small number of generic staples. He rejected the hamburger, because he would not trust the mince; he discarded the breaded cod, because he would not trust its age; and he dismissed the omelette, because he would not risk Salmonella. This narrowed his options down to the spaghetti, the steak, and the vegetable soup. The vegetable soup was likely to be a vegetable stock cube dissolved in too much water, while the steak could have come from a cow with spongiform encephalopathy, so he, despite his conviction that the so-called mad cow disease was a conspiracy dreamt up by the French ministry of trade, opted for the spaghetti. The spaghetti dish was ludicrously called Spaghetti Western.

While he waited, a waiter brought a huge fish on a wooden slab for Beerbelly to inspect. Beerbelly momentarily interrupted his anecdote in order to carefully scan it and smell it. This he did in a number of places, stopping each time to consider, and sometimes sniffing a part of the fish a second time, with his eyes directed at the ceiling, so as to be sure. Julia darted a quick glance in Beerbelly’s direction and looked in the opposite direction, concealing her horror at this grotesque scene under a polite, social mask. A silver-haired gentleman sitting across from Julia silently and subtly conveyed his sympathy, upon registering both Beerbelly’s fish sniffing and Julia’s reaction. Eventually, after a suspenseful hesitation, Beerbelly concluded his inspection by nodding his approval. The waiter walked away, a suppressed smirk lurking in the

depths of his otherwise stolid face.

‘¿Está listo para pedir?’

He looked up to find a waiter with an electronic notepad, ready to jot down his order.

‘Si. El Spaghetti Western.’

‘¿Algo más?’

‘¿Me trae otra botella de agua mineral con gas?’

At this point, the sound of a darabuka, not coming out the speakers overhead, but live, irrupted into the dining room, causing everyone to turn in its direction. A group of moustached musicians, clad in thoubes and kufis, were slowly making their way towards his neighbours, next to which already stood another man, a Congoid, also wearing a thoub and a kufi, staring at Beerbelly dead in the eye. The man, a waiter, looked like a hybrid between Laurent Cabila and Louis Armstrong. Beerbelly had temporarily disengaged himself from conversation to stare back at Cabila-Armstrong. Beerbelly’s fellow executives gradually took notice and fell silent.

They had become spectators to a staring duel.

Beerbelly, who vaguely resembled XXth-Century Venezuelan dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, stared back defiantly, his face a mixture of puerile cockiness and ironic jollity. Cabila-Armstrong’s eyes were open wide, intense, but his visage was one of calm determination; his arms by his sides, his stance imperious and arrogant, magnifying the space occupied by his corpulent physique.

The musicians progressively stepped up the tempo, slowly working up a ritualistic crescendo as the two duellers stood immobile, with their focused eyes hotly lasering each other’s. This, and the interest with which everyone observed the confrontation, suggested that these staring duels were a tradition for which the restaurant was well known. Cabila-Armstrong appeared confident and experienced - he was probably a staring champion, with a row of trophies proudly displayed on his mantelpiece at home - his bulbous face and eyes almost genetically engineered for this peculiar sport.

It was clear here that the trick was to sustain the opponent’s gaze without moving a muscle, making a sound, twitching, smiling; laughing, blinking, swallowing, coughing, yawning, sneezing, or - most pathetic of all - looking away. A blink meant instant defeat: an ignominious admission of weakness, deserving of universal opprobrium and contempt. The staring duel, in other words, represented an evaluation of the contenders’

masculinity, their capacity to hold their own, to not buckle under pressure, to appear formidable, assert themselves; and beat down the opposition. It tested the mind's mastery over the flesh, the psychological toughness of those who were thus challenged. Victors were leaders, doers, the irrepressible, the irresistible, the unconquerable. Organisations looking for aggressive chief executives would be on the lookout for individuals with this profile, able to demonstrate it under scrutiny and under pressure. Defeat automatically jeopardised the defeated's chances of promotion, eroded the respect of their peers, cooled female interest, lowered self esteem, and gave social and professional inferiors licence to be insolent. Therefore, for those seeking to improve their station in life, to elevate their social status, to increase their reproductive success, to enhance their self concept, to demoralise competitors, and silence trouble-makers, there was only one acceptable outcome: crushing victory; no rationalisation, excuse, or explanation would ever do in its stead.

Beerbelly's visage did not suggest he was conscious of how much there was at stake. He appeared to take the contest purely as a game, and seemed unconcerned with the outcome. Then again, perhaps a certain air of nonchalance was a key strategy in playing the game, in as much as it conveyed confidence and a high self-concept. A game that was intolerant of weakness would logically interpret an excess of earnestness as insecurity, as being overly concerned with defeat, and, therefore, as a sign of suffering, from a poverty of social capital, which in itself indicated not simply ineptitude, but lack of aggression and leadership skills. Even if, in reality, defeat meant instant social bankruptcy, appearing not to care always opened the possibility of the defeated contestant possessing additional social resources that observers might not be aware of, social capital of such quality - in other words, concentrating a network of such powerful individuals - as to enable a transcending of ambition and aspiration. A Bilderberger, for example, could easily choose not to win a particular contest, because he had already proven himself beyond all question,- and therefore would not need to waste time with a frivolous engagement beyond which there could be not further advancement. Needless to say that such instances were extremely rare, and that, for most common mortals, choosing not to win would only be seen as an excuse, designed to camouflage weakness and lack of ability.

Seconds passed, during which the music intensified and all

the executives sitting around the table remained frozen and silent, fascinated by the contest. Julia arched her eyebrows with a half smile on her face.

Finally, the darabuka player reached the final roll, indicating the moment when the contest would be decided. Cabila-Armstrong looked calm, comfortable, unhurried, as if he could continue to stare indefinitely: his eyes, by now bulging, as far from conceding defeat as they had ever been. Everyone expected Beerbelly to blink at any moment. Beerbelly, however, sustained his gaze for the three seconds of this roll, exercising complete mastery over himself, before, finally, treating Cabila-Armstrong to the look reserved only for, the lowest of the low, the most contemptible and risible scum imaginable. Shaking his head, as if unable to believe what a worthless piece of human excrement his opponent had proven himself to be, he looked back at his fellow diners, sharing with them an amused grin of benevolent condescension. Cabila-Armstrong realised that very moment that he had been defeated, and so did everyone else. A bomb of applause and cheers detonated at Beerbelly's table, sending a clamorous Shockwave of ovation across the restaurant. All eyes, shining above cheeks that hurt with joy, were pointed at Beerbelly, who smiled beatifically as he gestured with his hand, palm up at a forty-five degree angle, accepting the ovation after the manner of Saddam Hussein. Beerbelly knew his stock had gone up.

'¡Qué maravilla!' said the waiter, who had temporarily abandoned scribbling his order for sparkling mineral water. The waiter was smiling from ear to ear, and shaking his head in wonderment. '¡Fantástico!'

His pasta dish was plonked in front of him an hour later. The kitchen staff were all layabouts: his Spaghetti Western had been apathetically thrown together: the spaghetti had been abandoned to boil in a pot for æons, after which it had been dumped onto a plate (without a proper rinse), where a careless cook had quickly poured some Heinz tomato Ketch-Up onto it before sending it out to him. While he waited the restaurant had been emptying further, thus eliminating the possibility that the kitchen staff were too pressurised to keep track of their pots and were forced to cut corners in order to get the orders out.

He stared at his plate for a moment, his lips tight, before scanning the room. He saw the three Arabs that had come out of the lift earlier still sitting at a far away table. They were engaged in jovial conversation, only half way through their dinner. The

latter, consisting of Middle Eastern dishes, was much more elaborate and ornamentally garnished than his. The only possible conclusion was that at *Ciro el Grande*, there was one standard for Westerners and one standard for Arabic-speaking Muslims. And, judging from the treatment that was being afforded to his executive neighbours, exceptions were a function of the Western client's purchasing power. Annoyance clouded his mind as he stumbled upon this realisation: why was he not being afforded Executive treatment? Not only had he the obvious gravitas of a middle-aged man in a Saville Row suit, but he was a renowned professional, written about in venerable international publications, with an impressive portfolio of very important clients. Evidently, because he was on his own, the waiters had tacitly and instinctively assumed he was less important than his counterparts round the neighbouring table. Middle Eastern cultures were built around an extended kinship social model, so evidence of social capital more readily translated in the waiters' minds into evidence of power.

He fumed in silence.

Beerbelly's fish arrived at this point. Because the fish was so immense, it drew veiled stares of disbelief from his fellow executives, although some found it comical. Not Julia, though: she darted a sideways glance at the fish, which was almost as big as her, and dared not look again. It was clear that, she had already decided she would never again share a table with that particular colleague.

'A ver,' said Beerbelly, grabbing his fork. 'Empiezo por el ojito!'

Beerbelly's fork plunged into the fish's eye, gouged it out, and took it to his mouth, where it was deposited and- enthusiastically masticated.

Quietly amused by Beerbelly's antics, he began eating his spaghetti. He first had to add a heart attack's worth of salt, because government regulations had long regulated the salt out of Heinz tomato Ketch-Up.

His neighbour's conversation was lively, and the volume continued to increase as the wine continued to flow. This included Julia, who far from being drowned out by her male company, commanded attention, and caused explosions of laughter as she continued to regale her immediate neighbours with more amusing anecdotes. Beerbelly had some of his own, but the main source of amusement was his method of dispatching the fish: his comestion emphasised ecological efficiency: Beerbelly did not discriminate in regards to types of tissue, flavour, or

texture; he ate with prodigious appetite and shocking speed, beginning from the head, working his way towards the tail, and leaving nothing on his plate. Not content with this, he also dipped his fork into his colleagues' dishes, anxious to evaluate their choices and the chef.

Half an hour later, as he chewed on the last of his spaghetti, the waiter visited his neighbours to clear out the plates. When the waiter gestured to pick up Julia's plate, Beerbelly lifted his index finger, warning the waiter against it.

"¡Epa! ¡No se lo lleve!"

The waiter hesitated, but Julia frowned and addressed Beerbelly, '¿Cómo que no se lo lleve? Yo he terminado.'

'¡Pero es que ahí queda carne!'

Julia tensed and addressed the waiter, crossly ignoring Beerbelly. 'Lléveselo. He terminado.'

'¡Pero Julia!' pleaded Beerbelly.

'¡Lléveselo!' Julia demanded, grinding her teeth.

The waiter, scared by Julia's tone, obeyed promptly.

Chapter 27

No Retreat, No Surrender, No Apology

By the time he finished his dinner, paid for it, and returned to his apartment, it was nearly eleven. (Ibrahim, the mad debt collector, had not heard him: his TV was still blaring away, still tuned in to a 24-hour Arabic news channel.) He was anxious to speak to his wife and discover new horrors about Pierre, the misanthropic, photographer. Alas, their meeting was not due for another four hours, so he would only find out in the morning. He imagined Pierre's flat lined with records - every wall - and every door locked with a combination key. He further speculated that the flat would be neat, astringently clean - something like mainstream Pop record collector Artur Carvalho's apartment in Sao Paulo, except always dark, lit only by moribund tungsten bulbs. Bored, he switched on the television.

He found himself in the Fly Fishing Channel. Lee Cummings, his old fly fishing instructor and AAPGAI Grand Master, stood facing the viewer, his head and shoulders set against a Cumbrian landscape. Lee was a White man in his late forties, with a militaristic, dignified, and vaguely fierce manner; in his grey and kaki green attire, he was the epitome of the rugged outdoorsman. It had been Lee's eighteen-year-old daughter, a fly fishing genius, who had broken his phenomenal distance lily casting world record, ending a terrifying reign of fourteen years.

Nowadays he was the new Hugh Falkus, except Lee approached his subject with a hardcore nationalistic/survivalist slant, and infused his programmes with vintage Black and Death Metal music.

'I am standing on the remains of the third Outer Sea defence,' he began, 'looking Northward and inland across Hodbarrow and towards the Cumbrian Mountain range. This is a view often taken for granted by locals, yet an image in my mind which formulates the perfect starting point for the first episode of this series, as it was in this very location, forty years ago, at the tender age of 7, where my introduction into the wonderful world of fresh water fishing began.'

He smiled, remembering his first nocturnal catches on the River lit and recognising the Cumbrian accent.

'You should note that forty years ago the water line was much lower,' Lee continued, 'and the second sea wall was still visible...'

He had already seen the award-winning series (he owned it on DVD), and, too depressed to be reminded of happier times, he changed channel, keying in a random number.

The ESA TV logo appeared on the screen. The channel was re-running a documentary about Mercury, using stereo images sent from BepiColombo, captured a two or three of years ago. He had already seen it.

He changed channel, again keying in a random number.

An Indo-Hispano-Cameroonian news reader reported on statements made by the president of the ECB, urging 'wage discipline' across the union. The ECB had resolved earlier in the month to offer even more broadly-defined asset swaps to the five member state governments worst affected by the worsening liquidity crisis.

He changed channel, again keying in a random number.

This time it was a debate on Sky News 24. Various politicians ranging from liberals to social democrats, debated - or rather, sat in the studio agreeing with each other on - the merits the EU as they saw it in 2075, by which time they hoped it would count with 65 member states, including Morocco, Algeria, Lybia, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Kurdistan, and the Sunni and Shiite Republics. Apparently, this would stabilise the region, foster economic growth, and liberate women and homosexuals under social democratic governments; apparently, also, we badly needed this to happen, since we needed the skills and the diversity of ideas in order to keep up with China.

He changed channel, repeating his earlier procedure.

A Bollywood melodrama appeared on the screen; the female lead was in mid song.

He changed channel, repeating his earlier procedure.

The CNN logo appeared on the screen. A bald White man in his early forties and wearing a navy blue suit with a tie patterned after an American Confederate Flag appeared speaking to journalists. He was commenting on the sudden suicide of the Congressman whose refusal to agree with a fellow politician's equating of Walsh and Mearsheimer's *The Israel Lobby* with the *Protocols of Zion* had resulted in a firestorm of vituperation. The Congressman's abject apologies following the outbreak of controversy had only further exacerbated the bloodthirst of his critics, who had continued to demand ever more extreme acts of contrition and ever more humiliating displays of self-abasement. The Congressman had hung himself by the neck with a fishing line after his wife had filed for divorce.

'There comes a time when the White man has to stop apologising!' the bald man said, as text appeared below his face identifying him as governor James Edwards from Tennessee, 'and start standing up for themselves and what they believe to be true. No retreat, no surrender, no apologies. That's my motto, and that's why people vote for me. As to the Congressman, I find it hard to defend a man who will not defend himself, I think the Congressman was wrong to apologize, wrong to backtrack, wrong to try to appease the Jewish lobby. They were going to eat him alive anyway, so he might as well have stood firm and hit back at them with all his might. At least he would have gone down fighting. My heart goes out to his children, who are now left without a father because of people like you and the ne'er-do-wells from AIPAC, the ADL, and the SPLC. I retract nothing of what I said.'

An explosion of shouting and yelping followed; one journalist managed to shout an audible question.

Governor Edwards lashed back at the throng, 'Why do I continue to be asked about this incident? We have a hyperinflating economy, Mexico is about to annex the entire South West of the United States, China is about to land a man on the moon and we can no longer afford to run a space program - we have big problems, ladies and gentlemen, and you want to talk about whether or not someone got offended by a someone else's book review?'

Another explosion of yammering and yelping followed. A pushy journalist out-shouted everyone with another question.

'Look: your network helped conduct a hate campaign that drove this man to suicide. Are you going to apologize to his children? Are you going to pay them compensation for the loss of their father? We all know that if the Congressman had not been White he would not have been faced with a vile hate campaign - I am offended by that. When do you plan to say you are sorry? When do you plan to make your donation to American Renaissance and the Council of Conservative Citizens? When do you plan to campaign for a museum honoring the memory of the tens of millions of victims of Soviet terror? Why aren't you outraged by the fact that not one has been built? Will you now turn yourself in to the authorities so that you can be charged with racism and serve your prison term?'

That James Edwards is on fire! he thought, pursing his lips, and nodding slowly as he raised an admiring eyebrow. Obscure envy stirred vaguely in the catacombs of his psyche, animated by the knowledge that his opinions, albeit identical to Edwards, were suffocated by the fear of any adverse economic consequences arising from their free and open expression. *Better to keep quiet, make money, and live well;* he thought, in a tiny part of his mind, very quietly.

A mestizo news reader appeared on the screen, facing the viewer as he stood some distance from the throng of journalists still surrounding the spirited Governor.

'There you have it. Governor James Edwards of Tennessee, a personal friend of the former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, spitting nails, spewing hateful venom...'

Aw, shut up, he was about to groan, tired, before switching channels one more time, when the sudden sound of gun fire coming from somewhere outside the screen caused everyone to cluck and scream and bodyguards and police officers to spring into action. Governor Edwards was rapidly bundled out of sight while police officers took cover and began looking for targets. The camera, obviously mounted on a tripod, was left running for a couple of seconds before an over-groomed, racially-neutral newsreader sitting at the newsdesk in the studio replaced the scene.

She began 'Those were the scenes in front of the governor's mansion in Nashville, Tennessee this afternoon...'

Damn! Well, that's the problem, he thought, re-assuring himself. *Best to keep quiet, make money, live well, and be safe.*

He watched for a while, curious to find out the identity of the unsuccessful assassin. Unfortunately, however, CNN was not

giving away hard information; instead, they were beating eggwhites over the airwaves with endless commentary and speculation. The coverage was designed to sensationalise, keep viewers on the edge of their seats, with their eyes popping out of their sockets and their teeth chewing on their nails: it was a constant barrage of tension, fast editing, raised voices, wild gesticulation, and hysterical hyperbole. None of it was sympathetic to the Governor, of course, and all of it was sympathetic to the gunman. The latter was characterised, although not explicitly, as a champion of democracy - a modern day Stauffenberg.

Whatever, he groaned, disgusted, and operated the remote.

The next channel was operating with bandwidth restrictions: transmission was confined to within a small rectangle at the centre of the screen, surrounded by a large black frame. Typically, this meant the channel was a small, independent outfit, without access to premium services on the internet - typically, but not necessarily: some channels, like BNP TV in Britain, were denied access to these premium services, and the regulatory bodies, by government order, only allowed them limited bandwidth and lower data transfer speeds. Such channels (allowed purely because they helped intelligence services to monitor and flush out dissenters) were usually relegated to the slower, older, legacy servers, running Stone Age versions of Apache and Unix - a practice that allowed ISPs to give these servers a second lease of life until they finally broke down. A channel not subjected to this type of soft censorship, could obtain as much bandwidth and data transfer speed as they were able to afford; this was usually the case with the most braindead and frivolous of channels: they always had the widest bandwidth and the fastest data transfer speeds technology would allow. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he leaned towards the screen, in an effort to decypher the channel's logo amidst the confused pixelation: it said, in gothic letters, Stormfront TV. The 1848 daguerrotype of Edgar Alan Poe filled the tiny screen, as a pleasant and well-mannered voice mentioned the American author in passing while in the midst of an erudite narrative. It irritated him that the internet now operated on multiple speeds, running better or worse, depending on the balance of the user's bank account. For this reason, his contrarian nature motivated him to now watch the programme, if only to give a poke in the eye to the bureaucrats who sought to direct his attention away from intelligent programmes and towards brainless gameshows and ball games. The narrator soon replaced Poe in the guise of presenter: he was a White man of

around 70, polished and unpretentious, dressed in a classic suit and tie, with silver hair and prominent eyebrows; as he spoke, he gesticulated with his arms.

The presenter, intoning with a gentle Slavic accent, said ‘...in our next and final programme we will explore how these postmodern, turn-of-the-century revivalisms, influenced by a variety of underground subcultures in modern popular music, like Neo-Folk, Martial Industrial, Black Metal, forged an alternative language in opposition to Western liberalism as they evolved into the countercultural literary current we call the hypermodern palaeoconservatives. Having established its genealogy, we are going to follow this evolutionary process and we are going to take a look at this fascinating movement in some detail; we are going to identify its key characteristics and we are going to analyse its wider political meaning in twenty-first century postmodernity.’ The presenter then wrapped up the programme with a cordial farewell and an invitation to obtain supplementary literature from the sponsor (The Council of Conservative Citizens), as the credits ran through the screen. The screen told him he had been watching a presentation by Tomislav Sunic.

On operating his remote control one last time, he chanced on a channel dedicated to German Expressionist film. He began watching Robert Wiene’s *Das Cabinet Des Dr. Caligari*, but then changed his mind and, after checking his emails, and quickly reading up on Harry Stephen Keeler and Esoteric Hitlerism, settled for the 2012 silver-screen adaptation of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, which was playing on a different channel. He had read Ayn Rand’s opus magnum some thirty years ago, and had only watched the film once.

He still found Angelina Jolie’s lips annoying.

Chapter 28

Democracy in Action

The banging on the flat next door would not stop. On and on. and on it went, obliterating the sound coming from the television behind him. He sat in his study, drenched in sweat, surrounded by computer screens, the blinding Summer light coming in through the window and scorching everything in its path. The sun had already curled, the cover of a journal he had left on the floor and was currently in the process of melting the Rockefort in the sandwich he had been too hot to eat. Why was it that Mr. Stein could not let a single Summer pass without bringing in a legion of brickies and carpenters to revolutionise his dwelling with yet another extensive bout of redecorating? He walked over to the window to determine the extent of the redecorating in progress. Three floors down, there was a white van with the rear doors agape, parked along the pavement, directly behind a skip half full with construction rubble. A stocky man with but tennis ball fuzz covering his scalp carried a plank of wood across his shoulder as he walked into the building. Across the street, a fat man, bald, middle aged, and wearing shorts and dark shades, walked slowly past with a Budgen's plastic bag at the end of each arm; the fat man, tired, suddenly paused and leaned against a squat wall for a short rest. Outside his field of vision, a car drove past along the A road that ran along the front of the house; the driver was an ardent drum and bass enthusiast who he felt the need to broadcast it to the entire neighbourhood, each boom of the bass powerful enough to shatter windows and register on seismographs as a small earthquake.

The hammering stopped for a moment and he was able to hear the television again: The point is, ladies and gentlemen,

that greed - for lack of a better word - is good' said Gordon Gekko.

A sudden explosion of frantic thumping, shouting (in Spanish), and slamming of doors drowned out Gekko's speech.

Spanish? he asked himself, surprised.

A voice barked, '¡Arriba!'

He opened his eyes to find himself lying on a bed, fully clothed, in a crowded room with the lights and a television on. The room was teeming with Guardia Civil agents, distributed in strategic positions, all pointing guns at him, ready to shoot. Their body armour, so loaded with protective gear and weaponry as to be almost astronomical, identified them as being from the Unidad Especial de Intervención. The UEI was the most specialised unit of the Guardia Civil, reserved only for the most dangerous missions.

'Er... ¿Disculpe?' he said to the agent directly in front of him. As he remembered where he was and realised that he was no longer dreaming, his body felt suddenly very heavy. Had Ibrahim called the police?

The agent responded with stern earnestness, 'Levántate. Muy despacito.'

He thought about it for a moment, waiting to see if the Guardia Civil vanished. He spent a second or two searching for indications that this was a dream. He found none, however, and given the number of tense fingers on hypersensitive triggers surrounding him, he did not dare make a thorough visual inspection, or to issue a verbal challenge. Instead, he obeyed promptly.

He adopted the persona of a concerned citizen. '¿Ha pasado algo?' he asked, frowning, his eyes now very open and alert.

'Tu calla,' said the agent. 'Simplemente levántate y no hagas tonterías.'

It seemed wise not to further question the agent. As soon as he got up, he received another order, 'De cara al suelo. ¡Ya!'

He did as instructed, very slowly.

He now noticed the incessant barking of dogs somewhere down the corridor.

As soon as he was on the floor, face down, several agents scrambled over him to immobilise him and fit him with handcuffs. A knee pressed his head against the carpet, hard, so that it burnt and broke the skin. Rough hands yanked his arms round and up his back, until they would not twist any further. Sharp pain shot through his arms; more pain lashed his wrists,

as the latter were strangled with thin plastic strips. The agents performed their manoeuvres with paranoid vehemence, with a violence that was completely out of proportion with situational requirements: if the agents did not regard him as extremely dangerous, then whatever criminal act they thought he had committed must be so vile that they deemed it unlikely anyone would care to listen to complaints about excessive force. In fact, it might well be that they were required to make a spectacular show of force, to satisfy political imperatives and secure their jobs. With that in mind, it took him only one second to realise what this was in connection with, and half that to decide on the level of aggression of his juridical response. This angry resolve evaporated the next second, however, when his mind began exploring the professional, social, and economic ramifications of the arrest, particularly in the context of a criminal justice system that operated on geological timescales, and which guaranteed costs and politics, but not justice. Fear paralysed him: what if this reached the media?

The agent who had spoken to him, obviously in charge, barked orders. Those who were holding him moved, 'escorting him out of the apartment.

As he reached the front door, he found thousands of formika shards and wooden splinters littering the carpet. The door had been smashed open. Dozens of Guardia Civil agents had been stationed along the corridors and up and down the stairs. They were all tense, perspiring, and ready to spring into action, pointing their weapons at his head and torso. There were also dozens of dogs - still besides themselves, barking; he saw the dogs had been fitted with footwear - standard practice across Europe these days, given the amount of hypodermic needles, chemical spills, broken glass, and shards of rusting metal littering all city centres.

An overwhelming deployment of UEI agents secured the lobby, as well as the exits. A staircase to the right of the front entrance led down into an underground carpark. In there, he found yet more heavily armed personnel, plus a bullet-proof van waiting directly in front of the sliding glass doors. The car park was choked with APCs, jeeps, and patrol cars. The cement walls flickered with the blue lights rotating silently atop these vehicles. There was a dense smell of petrol in the air. He was bundled into the van and forced to sit on one of the metal benches running along the inside, walls upon which sat yet more gun-toting agents. At all points there was an even-number of them; the Guardia Civil always worked in pairs.

Inside the van, no one said a word. Barked orders could be heard echoing outside. Some of the agents deployed in the car-park spoke into their helmets, reporting updates, issuing and receiving instructions, coordinating their movements.

The doors of the van were slammed shut. He thought he saw martial satisfaction in the face of the agent slamming the doors.

Many minutes elapsed, during which he listened attentively to the sounds coming from outside the van while studying the faces of the agents sitting across from him. Their faces - White all of them - were blank masks. For the first half hour, there was considerable tumult outside, as the Guardia Civil reversed their deployment and loaded themselves into their many vehicles. He heard orders being barked back and forth, boots stomping, engines running;

He found it odd that they would leave him in the van for so long, without going anywhere: did that make sense, in the context of an UEI operation? If he was dangerous enough to necessitate UEI mobilisation, would it not have made more sense to transport him out of the area straight away? After all, the kind of dangerous criminals the UEI was organised to deal with were dangerous because they were powerful, and led organisations staffed with trained personnel capable of mounting resistance or a rescue operation; therefore, the sooner these criminals were removed from the area the less of a chance his cohorts would have to react. This suggested to him, in a vague and diffuse way, that the operation was somehow cosmetic. This was confusing, and cast doubt on his initial working theory. His thought processes then quickly disintegrated into an agitated emulsion of undigested impressions.

Eventually, the van began moving.

Chapter 29

Confederate

The cell was packed like a tin of sardines: as with all the adjacent holding cells, humans had been packed in and repeatedly compacted with each raft of new arrivals. To his surprise, however, he was not surrounded by hoodlums and siccarions, and members of ethnic minorities were poorly represented among the present sample of detainees. In fact, most of his cellmates appeared respectable White citizens, taken from all levels of the social pyramid. Their respectability stood in marked contrast to the cell itself, which consisted of a grim cement cube, dimly illuminated, poorly ventilated, and very old. Facial expressions and body language, although not easily available for examination amid such a compressed crush, evinced attitudes which, based on what fragmentary data he could glean from those standing immediately around him, were well aligned to each detainee's educational background. Those betraying the least years of academic training glowered with anger, contempt, and defiance, while those betraying a postgraduate education looked embarrassed and dispirited, their minds wracked by feelings of guilt and self-hatred. There were exceptions to the rule. The two gentlemen at ten o'clock, whose conversation he had been overhearing for the past half hour, appeared highly educated and completely at ease with themselves; rather than worry, their attitude was one of tired resignation, as if they were experienced in detention, and had learnt to approach it philosophically. The pair communicated in English: one of them, Pedro, was Spanish, formal, serious, in his early sixties, with receding grey hair; the other, taller, blue-eyed, white haired, and a young-looking seventy, was American; the latter's name was David. Pedro was in the book

trade, David seemed to be a political activist; the two caught his ear when they made passing references to David Irving and Kevin MacDonald, whom they both seemed to know personally. Their presence in the cell added alarming weight to his initial working theory as to the reason for his arrest.

With butterflies in his chest, but attempting to keep his mien expressionless and serene (he knew he was being filmed), he pricked his ears, desperate for usable information.

‘As bad as the Obama years were, I don’t think it would have been any different had Clinton won the Democratic nomination in 2008,’ said the American. ‘As to Ron Paul, if he had campaigned on the issues that were important to people, and not spent so much time talking about Austrian economics, he might have had a chance. When I ran in Louisiana in 1991, I was frank and open about the issues I was campaigning for, and I still got 60% of the White vote. Now it is too late, of course; even if most Whites - and that would never happen, the best anybody could ever hope for in an election is a sizeable majority - even if most Whites voted for a pro-White candidate he would still lose because we literally don’t have the numbers anymore. But in 1991 it was still possible - and even in 2008 it was still possible, because America still had a two-thirds White majority. We are well beyond the point of no return now. Change will not happen without - literally - the dismemberment of the union, and that’s where I think we are headed. I think that with hyperinflation and all the rest, *Boobus Americanus* is no longer comfortable enough to be able to ignore what is going on - things are unraveling much faster, and I think that an endgame is in sight.

Given the damp and wrinkled condition of David and Pedro’s suits, and the oleaginosity of David’s hair, it was clear that they had both been in that cell for a number of days.

He had decided that survival and sanity would be enhanced by remaining unemotional. His rational mind knew that his soon-to-be interrogators would interpret nerves as an admission of culpability, and that technically they could regard it as good as a frank and open confession. However, mastering his fear was not as easy as recognising the advantages of doing so: modern society regarded the crimes he had probably been linked to as among the most repugnant; those found guilty of it, as well as those in any way connected to it, were universally reviled, their reputations destroyed, their careers terminated, their finances ruined - they were forever shunned as moral lepers, completely irredeemable and unworthy of redemption

- unworthy even of life. His ability to see the wider implications of his actions proved hypertelic in such a situation, obfuscating his mind with a sludge of apprehension where detached clarity was needed. He focused on attempting to glimpse an optimal strategy for answering questions - the police officers at the station would likely ask many of them, many times, in many different ways, and his answers would be exhaustively analysed by psychologists with all manner of computational tools at their disposal - including this own semantic heuristic matrices. Yet, not only did he lack the serenity of mind necessary to perform an efficient strategic analysis, but the conditions inside the cell - high humidity, elevated temperatures, dearth of personal space, noise - interfered with his reasoning capacities. The consequence was involution and paralysis. His senses collected random data in a disordered and fragmentary fashion, none of which proved reassuring. The fear among those of his class infected his spirit, even though he neither was nor regarded himself as being anything like them (they were what some called 'lemmings'; he considered himself not only cognitively superior, but also a man with an independent mind, immune to intellectual fashion and government-sponsored socialisation). The realisation that he was likely to be held for days, possibly weeks, before being allowed access to a telephone, set in motion yet another lengthy domino of consequences which compounded the fear; since he had been due to fly back the following evening, it was almost certain his wife would end up sick with worry, unable to reach him or obtain news as to his whereabouts. Similarly, his clients would be ill impressed by his disappearance, and would be much less likely than his wife to worry about his health and well-being: more probably, they would brand him unreliable and unprofessional and, besides refusing to settle the remainder of his fees, would not find much energy to recommend him or his firm.

Scoptic, in particular, would be especially uptight about the non-completion of his assignment, since the latter relied on his unique expertise and patented technology; they would have no time for excuses or explanations, however reasonable: their lawyers would soon be scouring the contract once again to amass grounds for litigation. His office would function without serious problems for a few days, but, once a sufficient number of emails and telephone calls remained unanswered, apathy and laziness would set in. This would, in turn, open the gateways for all manner of conspiracies and in-

trigues, petty and otherwise. On the other hand, his unscheduled absence would also help him identify staff members best employed by his competitors: the constant and the consistent, those who got on with their work without his supervision, and who used their initiative and their ingenuity in order to be able to continue while others dropped their pencils and waited around helplessly, he would retain - the rest he would terminate immediately, with glowing letters of recommendation designed to facilitate their swift recruitment by competing firms, where their sloth and incompetence would serve him well.

'I remember people saying some years ago that Spain would break up into its constituent regions,' continued David, 'with Catalonia and Galicia breaking off in the North, and so on, and you saying that first, it would be the restored Califates that would break off in the South.'

Dr. Kevin MacDonald, he remembered. What if Mr. Wermod had been effective, and he had not been captured on CCTV sharing a vehicle with the notorious fugitive? And what if Mr. Wermod had been truthful, and the silent passenger had been, indeed, his uncle; who just happened to look like Dr. Kevin MacDonald. It was possible. However, if that had nor been the reason for his arrest, the demographics of his holding cell - the fact that there were any to start with - made sense: a perceived accomplice to an international Hitlerist operation to liberate and abscond the world's most wanted fugitive would be in solitary confinement, resting between torture sessions, being pumped with truth-telling drugs, randomly showered with photons or plunged into darkness. No. The reason for his arrest was that accursed airport cabbie from Sunday night, who had reported him to the police, accusing him of a hate crime, in an effort to avenge his injured pride. In that case, he intended to defend himself vigorously, and go on the offensive and prosecute the thug, flogging him with lawsuits and hounding him without mercy until the courts threw him in the slammer. But, even so, what if, while reviewing the evidence, investigators discovered footage of him sharing a car with Dr. Kevin MacDonald, or even someone who looked like the American evolutionary psychologist? He would never see the light of day again. He would become another Papillon, except that there would be no escape and no best-selling book to subsequently narrate his adventures.

No, he knew the reason for his arrest. Usually, his instinct was sound and he knew it in an instant back at the hotel. Mr. Wermod was a genius and, from what he had seen and heard,

the bookworm knew how police state technology worked: if the white-haired gentleman in the car had been Dr. Kevin MacDonald - and he had no concrete proof of that - then Mr. Wermod would not have got himself involved in a secret rescue operation, targeting one of the world's most infamous scientific criminals, without being absolutely sure of his ability to avoid detection. Yet, being sure did not mean actually being able to: there was a logical flaw there, and - if it had been Kevin MacDonald - then his life was likely over. His wife would die of grief, waiting, then despairing - it broke his heart to contemplate the possibility. It was therefore imperative that he conducted himself in such a manner as not to arouse suspicions, not to give the authorities grounds for deeper and wider investigation, beyond the incident he had probably been arrested in connection with (if only he could be sure!). If he kept himself calm, his deportment dignified, his mind lucid, his speech measured, and his arguments reasonable, a modicum of luck would see him released with only minor charges, provided he was able to convince his interrogators that his motives had been pure and that he had acted in self-defence. But, when? From the look of many of his cell mates, it was clear the police's interrogation strategy relied on softening detainees through open-ended detentions, suspended in an information vacuum, punctuated only by the regularity of lights out and cheap, low-calorie, processed meals, handed to them in biodegradable paper bags.

He could not discern the content of Pedro's low murmur, but David talked long and frequently, and his voice carried better above the background rumble of conversation, '...because I think, like you said the other day: even though they have their own self-serving hate laws, we are not likely to end up in a Sharia court simply because we have spoken against Jewish Supremacism. We wouldn't get that kind of conviction and confiscation of assets in a Sharia court.'

Pedro murmured something; again it was drowned out by the background noise.

That's right, and even if they openly speak against us for the sake of extending the legal basis for multiculturalism - after all, they've benefited immensely from it and it still suits them - the Muslims probably think it makes sense to secretly support our cause for now, because it also helps to undermine their Zionist enemy. They've realised we don't have the numbers and their constituents will tune in to our message against Jewish

Supremacism, therefore it is safe to secretly support us. And I don't blame them, they are doing what best advances their collective interests. Plus, on the face of it, our message doesn't threaten them because they have also realised we are not White Supremacists, we only want all the peoples of the Earth to enjoy security and prosperity within their own living space, and live according to their heritage, their customs, their traditions, remembering their own history and honouring their heroes.'

He was tempted to introduce himself to the gentlemen; they appeared intelligent and articulate, their dialogue sensible, their manner cordial, their nature civilised. In other words, to him they appeared to be serious men - men a man of his station could deal with. Perhaps, through engaging with them in social intercourse, he would glean the secret of their aplomb: he was ignorant, because he had never fallen foul of the law, let alone suffered arrest or imprisonment, but evidence suggested that there existed a psychological mechanism for facing this type of situation with rational stoicism. Such a mechanism, should he discover it and master it, would doubtless prove advantageous in a business context, where competitive brinkmanship on the one hand, and intimidation by the tax and regulatory authorities on the other, habitually generated comparable psychological pressures: he was already adept at handling these types of pressures, but they were evidently not as ominous as his present straits; he speculated that, by raising his endurance threshold, he would be able to out-manoeuvre his opponents, calculating lucidly and serenely while they bit their nails and made mistakes. For a while, however, he simply observed the two gentlemen, sporadically attempting to make eye contact, but at times conflicted by a fear of appearing over-eager. He tacitly rationalised that it would be more dignified for him to wait until there was a pause in their dialogue - he did not wish to begin by branding himself a boor who ambushed conversations between gentlemen and he despised people who behaved in this manner: they were often the ones who crashed into a dialogue with their cheerful smiles, extended hands, loud salutations, and a self-satisfied air (usually while he was in mid sentence), causing an abrupt lowering of tone and a change of topic, and terminally frustrating the exposition of an argument. Unfortunately, however, David evinced a fondness for lengthy monologues, which formed a ceaseless stream of words, and which allowed not a respite during which a stranger could politely interject a remark; while Petro's low rumble was too rapid and too inaudible for anyone

not already familiar with the topic of conversation and the idiosyncrasies of Pedro's speech to be able to infer when the Spaniard had completed his remarks. This made the dialogue entirely non-porous. He was further frustrated by the fact that both men seemed completely engrossed in their discussion: David, in particular, had his gaze either fixed onto Pedro, or else cast in thoughtful mid distance; Pedro's eyes half registered him for a moment, but otherwise the Spaniard ignored him completely. As minutes passed, he hesitated, then became irritated, then hesitated again, gave up, tried again, doubted himself, thought of taking a step closer, checked himself, inhaled, lost interest, regained it, waited patiently, gave up impatiently, cleared his throat, looked away, scratched his head, decided he had better not get involved, realised they, might have useful contacts, stared intently, averted his gaze, and finally postponed until a more suitable opportunity presented itself. That David sure never stopped talking!

In the end, however, that more suitable opportunity did not present itself. In fact, the guards made the decision for him, for after an hour they handcuffed the two men and led them away, taking their possible contacts and the key to their equanimity with them.

He berated himself, then decided it had been prudent not to fraternise with his cellmates, for he ignored the, grounds for their arrest, or what links they might have to organisations not approved of by the state. If they knew Kevin MacDonald personally, he did well staying clear!

Then again, what if he had been hasty concluding that the gentlemen actually knew the evolutionary psychologist? What if they only knew about him because they habitually kept up with the news and current affairs? The gentlemen had sounded well informed and anybody who kept up with the news and current affairs could not have avoided gaining cognisance of Dr. MacDonald's process. It was, therefore, not inconceivable that the two gentlemen would discuss him, in familiar terms. David might have been a Representative for the state of Louisiana over thirty years ago, but it did not follow that the so-called Monster of Long Beach knew him personally, or even knew of him at all. In fact, it was just as possible that Dr. MacDonald loathed this David; and/or Pedro, found their views repugnant, and abhorred them, while David and Pedro wore, in contrast, quite fond of the psychologist, because they sympathised with his plight as a human being, and strongly objected to the idea of a social scientist being prosecuted because

his conclusions were inconvenient to some. Leaving aside the broad masses, whose opinions did not count anyway (all they did was repeat what they saw on television, and then again they limited themselves to a brainless diet of game shows, soap operas, telenovelas, Hollywood films, lifestyle shows, and the national lottery) there probably were many out there - serious, normal, intelligent people, with postgraduate diplomas and company directorships - who held similar views.

But what if they were fond of the psychologist because they agreed with his theories, whatever they were? The wording in media reports was formulated on the implicit assumption that Dr. MacDonald's theories were vile and pseudoscientific, seldom bothering to enlighten the reader as to what exactly they were, except in the form of a rebuttal. And even when the media did afford the public the courtesy of summarising said theories, if only to set up their inevitable (and inevitably contemptuous) refutation, the summary appeared designed to obscure rather than to elucidate, insulting the public's intelligence with grotesque cartoonifications of whatever it was Dr. MacDonald had once written. The latter could no longer be known, of course, except by the obdurate contrarians who made it a point to source forbidden literature via underground sources, if only because they refused to be told by the state what they could and could not know: but he was personally sceptical of media reports, simply because their condemnation was so vehement, universal, and devoid of substantial argument. Yet, whatever the truth, the fact remained that when the System decided to demonise and ostracise someone, that someone became toxic; and anyone careless or reckless enough to betray any kind of association, sympathy, empathy, or admiration for this enemy of the people, was rewarded by the blatant suspension of any legal right or constitutional guarantee. This would prove somewhat inconvenient for him at this juncture, of course, and affirmed the correctness of his prudence - or, more honestly, the opportuneness of his inassertion.

Anxiety effervesced in his solar plexus; he pushed it away, replacing the clutter of fear-generated thoughts with the image of fat drippings on the steel surfaces of a kebab shop in Archway Road, London, being scrubbed vigorously with astringent products under a harsh neon-light.

He imagined Pedro and David signing forms and retrieving their belongings on their way out, their well-connected or otherwise clever lawyer-friend having moved the necessary levers inside the bureaucracy to secure their release. Perhaps that

was the key to their stoicism: they knew that their social capital ultimately protected them from ending their days rotting in a prison cell in solitary confinement, their bank accounts drained, their assets gradually liquidated, as mercenary lawyers devoured the proceeds by following standard legal procedures that were doomed to fail in advance simply because they lacked the political clout and/or the moral conviction to be effective advocates. He then imagined Pedro and David walking out of the station and conversing as they were either collected by a friend or attempted to hail a taxi in the searing midday sun. In his imagination, the scene was from an alternative reality in which he had gone ahead and introduced himself, connected with the gentlemen, and been able to benefit from their association when their lawyer secured their release; in that alternative reality, he stood alongside them, hoping to hail a taxi. Had real life mirrored his imagination, he would have then gone straight to the airport (not bothering to stop by *Ciro el Grande*), and waited for his flight, however long it took. At the airport he would have telephoned his clients in order to somehow explain his absence and discuss implementation of his accounting system. Once back at his office on Monday he would have briefed his elves and flown them into Madrid to take care of the system's deployment. Why on Earth did he have to be so damn cautious? It seemed to him that people with less sophisticated brains, who simply went ahead and acted on impulse, without thinking about consequences very much, tended to obtain infuriatingly quick and easy results, while he, who took care to consider consequences far into the causality chains, tended to obtain poorer results after waiting twice as long.

Chapter 30

Obama

One officer sat across the steel table, the other stood against the cement wall. They both looked deadly serious - deadly serious because they wished to make it plain that he was in deadly serious trouble. The seated one had before him a single sheet of electronic paper; he looked like the former U.S. President Barack Obama, fifteen years younger - a bad sign. Said sheet of paper was, without a doubt, showing a detailed dossier. The other officer, a corpulent man in his early 40s, had dark Black skin, a shaved head, and a gorilla's cranium; even at his peak, Mike Tyson would have been scared of him. Obama wore a white, short-sleeved shirt and a generic tie; his sidekick wore a black suit, which, because of his torso's colossal breadth, made him resemble a nightclub bouncer. The scant neon lighting cast shadows and conferred upon the scene a dismal green colouration that reminded of the X-files.

He wondered whether they intended to treat him to the tedious good cop, bad cop routine. The Obama-lookalike disabused him the moment he opened his mouth: they intended to treat him to the more exciting bad cop, worse cop routine.

Obama spoke in English, 'What was the reason for your visit?'

'Business,' he replied, his mind focused, determined not to open up a single avenue for entrapment. The more economical he could make his replies, without appearing uncooperative, the less opportunity there would be for widening the scope of the investigation. He was convinced his arrest had been instigated by the cabbie, and that, his inquisitors being who they were, and the surrounding society being what it was,

they would be eager to enlarge the investigation and find ways and reasons to increase the number and severity of the existing charges (whatever they were) - a situation which, if allowed, could and would most likely lead inexorably to linking him to Dr. Kevin MacDonald.

‘What kind of business?’

‘Consultancy - I am an IT consultant,’ he smiled, cursing himself almost instantly: the smile was, and would be seen as, highly artificial - an obvious attempt to appease and ingratiate himself with his inquisitors, both of whom would instantly interpret the gesture as evidence of culpability.

‘Very well,’ said his interrogator, looking fed up. ‘If this is how it’s going to be, you leave us no choice.’ Then, suddenly, his interrogator stood up, causing the metal chair to scrape on the cement floor, and exited the room, taking his dossier and his colleague with him. The armoured door slammed shut.

He remained seated on his chair, paralysed.

A few moments later, the room was filled with a raging storm of white noise, blasting out of speakers affixed to the ceiling.

For a moment, he simply sat, waiting, staring at the closed door, as if hypnotised. It then occurred to him that the officers would be observing him from another room, and that he was in all certainty being recorded. The situation was too critical for him to be rolling his eyes - and he could not risk doing so anyway - but the corners of his mouth still experienced a redistribution of the surrounding muscular tension: if these goons thought that white noise was somehow going to modify the truth, or cause him to imagine an alternative story more conducive to improving their chances of promotion, they were as clueless as they were puerile. Evidently, they had been too pressed for time - or, thinking less kindly, too lazy - to review the entire dossier; if they had, they would have been able to locate, in the section listing his economic history, purchases of albums by a number of Noise and Noise-crossover artists, including M87, Folkstorm, Goatvargr, Uncertainty Principle, and Fall of the Grey-Winged One, who some twenty years before had experimented with white noise. In fact, what they were treating him to now sounded almost exactly like M87’s ‘Mu Cephei I’ from the album Noctilucent Threnody. Then again, given the extensiveness of any one person’s economic history, and the fact that his main interest lay in Classical music, discovering such obscure information would necessitate knowing in advance what to look for amidst vast warehouses of legacy data.

Turning to stare at the ceiling, he studied the white noise, trying to ascertain whether they had absconded any sonic patterns beneath the chaotic torrent of decibels. (He did not put it past them to use subliminal suggestion of some type.) If such patterns existed, however, he never found them, for he was soon distracted by meandering recollections.

The white noise made him think of the contents of a bag of Cofresh spicy dried green peas and peanuts dropping onto a stone floor. The peas in turn made him think of the Guildford city branch of a certain estate agent franchise. Many years ago, before he bought his first house, he had been renting a cottage in what back then was still a small village in Guildford's periphery (the village had since turned into a town, the adjacent greenery concreted over to make way for giant blocks of government-sponsored social housing estates). The owners had decided to sell the property and the aforementioned branch of the aforementioned estate agent franchise had been assigned the task of finding a buyer. His first encounter with the estate agents explained the comment a friend of his had made around the time, whereby she had branded them, with a tired sneer, 'typical salesmen': he and his wife had returned home one afternoon shortly after the property had officially gone on the market only to encounter a changed atmosphere.

'Something feels different,' she had said, stopping as she looked into the sitting room.

'Did you move the sword?' he had asked, referring to the Knight Templar sword they had leaning on the wall next to the fireplace; he remember it being on the left.

'No, I didn't.'

He had turned around, then stopped as he fixed his gaze on the sofa, frowning, 'Where are the blankets?'

His wife had declared, 'Someone's been in here.'

The back of the sofa had been right against the wall facing the fireplace. He had looked round the side, in the gap between the sofa and the round table standing next to it: there, on the floor, surrounded by spiderwebs, he had found the blankets, bundled up.

'I think you are right,' he had replied, picking up the blankets.

'They've also moved the Greek amphoras. Look!' His wife had pointed at the Corinthian vessels they had by the TV table; they had been swapped and replaced the wrong way around.

Not finding additional alterations to their decor, they had both gone into the kitchen. On the surface, nothing had been

out of place. Upon approaching the counter that ran along the window facing the back garden, however, he had noticed the cut crystal Champagne flutes and water goblets, which back then sold for £30 and £40 a piece, had been left in the sink, next to a precariously balanced pile of greasy pans and pots, the latter of which had been half filled with soapy water. Any slippage, caused by either carelessness or even moderate seismic activity, would have easily shattered the crystal.

'Bastards,' he had muttered, extracting his Blackberry out of his jacket's breast pocket. A voice mail message had been delivered just as he had looked at the screen. The message had been left by a man in his early thirties; the latter had spoken quickly and breezily, with a callous air of businesslike urgency - the tone of a driven salesman for whom people either had money that belonged to him, or got in his way. The man, identifying himself as an employee from the estate agents, had communicated his urgent need to gain access to the property that afternoon and his desire to be telephoned as soon as possible.

'The estate agents left a message. They were looking to gain access to the property this afternoon,' he had informed his wife, assuming the message had been left earlier and delivered only then as a result of a network problem. 'Obviously, since they did not hear from us, they just walked straight an. They must have obtained duplicate keys.'

'They are supposed to give 24-hours *written* notice!' she replied, furious.

'Well, they clearly don't give a damn,' he said, his brain a pressure cooker of mounting irritation, 'And to be honest, I am not surprised. The other day, when the agent was here with the old guy, I sensed immediately he was a phony, a despicable cowboy. He had this typical salesman manner about him - the clearance designer suit, the pretend-courtesy, the formulaic body language, the lying mouth.'

'It makes me so fucking angry,' she had spat, grinding her teeth, gesticulating. 'You can't feel safe in your own home!'

'They mentioned the other day something about wanting to take photographs,' he remembered. 'I think this is what this entry has been about, and why they re-arranged our belongings.'

His wife walked around in circles, her eyes wide with rage. 'They have no right to come in here and touch any of our stuff. Fucking shitheads!'

'Well, we're going start leaving the front door locked with the latch on and the key in the hole. I can lock the kitchen door and we can leave by the back door, taking the kitchen key with

us. That way, if they have keys to the back door and they decide to try going in that way, they will only have access to the kitchen. I will lock the door to the lavatory too.'

'Yeah. And shut all the curtains and cover the keyholes, so they cannot look in through those,' she had suggested, rolling down the kitchen blinds.

Unfortunately, the damage had already been done. While he and his wife had been strategising, so as to find the most effective way to seal the property against future trespassing, the Brillcreemed trespasser had been sitting in his office, uploading images of their living room and their kitchen onto the estate agent's website, advertising their personal possessions to the entire world.

'I am going to write the owners and make a formal complaint,' he had said, before he even visited the offending website to confirm his suspicions. (The blurb on the website was a textbook example of positive spin; the estate agents clearly saw the property not as a place where real people, perhaps a family, made a home, but as a product that had to be shifted as fast as possible, using whatever high-pressure tactics they could dream of, so that they could earn their commissions and meet their monthly sales targets, lest they fell victims of the next cull of worst-performing estate agents, as regularly instigated by central office.)

'Not that they are going to care,' his wife had observed, turning to him for an embrace.

'Well, I am still going to write it. I am not going to take it without complaining. They will have to waste time and therefore miss sales opportunities making phone calls, sending emails, and mouthing apologies, however insincere.'

His wife had always been a cynic, 'They probably do this all the time, you know. They are completely blasé and all they are thinking about is their fucking commission - closing sales as quickly as possible. All their apologies are probably scripted and they are so used to it that they don't even care to hide it all that well anymore. They say the bare minimum they can get away with and move on.'

He had known her analysis was correct. In all probability, corporate estate agents, through a mixture of performance pressure and cynical training, generated a culture across their franchises that both attracted and bred amoral hypocrites and corrupt opportunists, to the point where their agents were proud and crudely boastful of their own semi-criminal practices. Corporate estate agents denied everything whenever the television networks screened one of their exposes, issuing

statements ridden with self-righteous platitudes, which attempted to explain away the incriminating footage as a distortion. It was always a 'localised problem', which had already been dealt with swiftly and firmly, since the culprits were 'no longer with the company'. On the one hand, nobody really believed that, while, on the other, it never made a difference anyway - the estate agents had configured the housing market in such a way as to make themselves indispensable.

His stiffly-worded formal letter of complaint had yielded predictable results. The manager of the estate agent's Guildford office had telephoned him two days later, naturally at an inconvenient time.

'Yes?' he had answered.

'Hi,' the scoundrel had said, with an inappropriate excess of cheer. The branch manager, in typical homo oeconomicus fashion, had then betrayed his own boorish ignorance by assuming they were on a first name basis.

'This is Dr. -' he had replied, sternly, adding his surname. 'Yeah, I understand you were not happy about...' began the estate agent, proceeding to steal his time with a loquacious explanation. The explanation was, as expected, ridden with tendentious understatement, self-serving ellipses, and tedious circumvalations. The branch manager's speech was fast, his voice high, and his accent urban - a disgusting, embarrassing creature.

'My wife discovered a broken vase,' he had interrupted, the assertion delivered in a scientific, unemotional tone. He had been impatient to fast forward to the abject apology and hang up.

'Oh, really?' the estate agent had pretended.

'Yes.'

The branch manager had then further irritated him with a circumvilivaginating denial of liability, citing, with deliberate disingenuousness, schedules in industry codes of practice, and managing, in the process, to confuse definitions, misapply terminology, and incoherently clutter his sentences with jargon, in an infantile effort to sound official and impressive.

He had again interrupted the branch manager, using the same tone as before. 'The law requires you to give 24-hours *written* notice.'

'Well, yes, but that's what I'm trying to get at, we left you a me-'

'The law requires you to give 24-hours written notice.'

'I completely understand your position, but -'

'Also, you have used the likeness of my belongings for promotional purposes without my authorisation,' he added.

'We are perfectly entitled to take photographs of the interior of the property in order to be able to sell it. The other option would be that we move all your stuff out, take photograph the property, then move it all back in. I don't think that -'

He was inwardly outraged by the charlatan's insolence. However, he maintained frosty manner. You did not seek my authorisation.'

'As I said, we are -'

"You trespassed and damaged my property."

'I don't know anything about this. My colleague was charged with the task of taking a couple of photographs and that's all he did. He did not report any incidents. The damage - if there was any damage, because I have no way of knowing that, I wasn't there and I haven't been to the property - must have occurred later, if I may. Could it not have occurred later? Perhaps while your wife was cleaning or while re-arranging things? Do you have a pet?'

'I am only interested in apologies.'

'My colleague has not mentioned this at all. I know nothing about it. He said he just went in to take a couple of photos and went straight back out. I don't know anything about moving furniture round, Sir, and I can assure you that is not how we run our business. We are not interior designers. We sell property. The photographs are intended to give people an idea of what sizes the rooms are. No one looks at the furniture. You can be sure that if anybody notices your belongings it will be a tiny proportion of the people visiting our website.'

'I am only interested in apologies.'

I don't know anything about damaged property. And it is not in our interest to go in damaging people's property. We just want to go in and out, take the photos and sell the house. I am sure that if something had been accidentally broken, my colleague would have mentioned it and we would have been in touch ourselves to try to sort it out'

He had wanted to laugh upon hearing that.

Not all estate agents had proven unworthy of his esteem, however. Tim Crowe in Cranleigh had contrasted sharply with his corporate counterparts. Honourable, serious, and straightforward, Tim had founded his business on a bedrock of integrity, a quality portfolio, local knowledge, and a personalised approach with his clients. Tim Crowe did not treat the latter as either obstacles or resources - each he treated as a sovereign person: he was a serious businessman, with whom he could do serious business. He wondered what ever happened to this no-

table Englishman. He imagined Tim had packed his bags and emigrated North, or South, somewhere remote, perhaps Antarctica - this was logical, since Cranleigh (like the surrounding villages) had quickly deteriorated under the Gordon Brown and David Cameron regimes, red brick and green lawns giving way to grey cement and angry graffiti, family-owned businesses giving way to corporate franchises, corporate franchises giving way to boarded-up windows. The only thriving businesses nowadays were the pubs, which apes defying taxonomy frequented in search for rapid inebriation and excuses to brawl and crack skulls with their knuckledusters. 'You spilt my beer' or 'you looked at my girlfriend wrong', spat with tight lips, tense jaws, thrusted chins, and puffed up chests, the most popular and widely-recognised invitations to affray, had become the main type of interaction around there - although run-ins with the 'moderate' jihadists from Ewhurst, agitated daily by their viciously anti-Western Imams, provided frequent opportunities for group depredations.

He had foreseen such developments back in the noughties (well before St. John's Seminary had closed down and been taken over by the government as a refugee processing centre) and begun taking precautions accordingly. At first his wife had rolled her eyes in amusement at what she had regarded as paranoid delusions, but once the government housing estates were built, and the rabble started moving in, it was no longer a case of whether to spend money on shatter-proof glass for the windows, but on how much it would cost to install the thickest and strongest panes available. Over time he had turned their house into a fortress: it was hidden away in a largely inaccessible part of the woods, situated on steep terrain, and as far away from the nearest towns and villages as was geographically possible. Still, it was not possible to trust even the wilderness to be entirely safe, for the public footpaths traversing it were frequented by muggers, psychos, and teenagers, who, when not hypnotised in front of the television or playing videogames, enjoyed intoxicating themselves, ingesting hallucinogenic drugs, intimidating ramblers, having intercourse with one another, and burning stolen vehicles. He had suggested to his wife that they emigrate to Antarctica a couple of times, but she was not interested: even though the continent was now accessible all year round, had growing communities of European emigrees, and the climate in such extreme austral latitudes was much milder than it had been when he was born, she disliked the idea of restricted consumer choice. Greenland had been

another option, and not as distant, but the Danish territory was too near the United States and politically-correct Canada for comfort. ‘

Obama and King Kong burst back-into the interrogation room. This time King Kong took a seat next to Obama, who slapped his dossier onto the table as he sat down. Obama pierced him with his black eyes and said nothing for a moment, tensing his jaw muscles as he twisted his head to one side and then the other so as to crack his neck. King Kong leaned back on the metal chair and crossed his arms, frowning darkly. His interrogators glowered in silence until the door behind them opened, to reveal a thin tired-looking White woman of about sixty, carrying a tray with a jar of iced lemonade and two tall glasses. The woman set the jar and the glasses on the table, next to Obama, before quitting the room. Obama sat still for a few moments longer, never deviating his glare from him; he then reached for the lemonade and filled both glasses to the brim. With his brown hand, adorned with a gold ring, he slid one of the glasses over to his colleague. King Kong picked up his glass and, with eyes half lidded with ecstasy, gulped away at the lemonade, until there was nothing left. The sound of the glass hitting the table punctuated King Kong’s loud, refreshed exhalation.

He observed his interrogators with superficial equanimity. It proved difficult not to burst out laughing. Where they encouraging him to lower his guard, suggesting themselves incompetent by playing crude tactics? He expected them to employ low cunning, but he doubted their brains were subtle enough for sophisticated psychological manipulations.

Obama spoke, ‘Right, Mister. How many times a month do you attack people of other races?’

He allowed himself a sardonic inward chuckle. Relief allowed him to concede that the airport cabbie had surely proven abnormally resourceful and determined.

‘If you are referring to the cabbie that drove me from Barajas last Monday, then I am glad to be here, because the gentleman in question is a crook and I would very much like to discuss this matter at length. This gentleman spent the entire ride attempting to artificially inflate the fare, going the wrong way, going the long way, and fiddling with the meter. When we finally arrived at my destination, he resorted to outright theft by sleight of hand, pretending I had given him a €50 note instead of a €500 note. When I refused, he produced a weapon and physically threatened me with violence. I acted in self defence.’

Obama's face did not register acknowledgment of these remarks; he spoke wearily, 'When are you going to stop lying?'

He sighed. Obama was fond of doublebind questioning.

'What makes you think I am lying?'

Obama slammed his fist on the table, and jumped to his feet, screaming, 'THE FACT THAT YOU ARE!'

He remained seated, impavid, unimpressed, and strangely calm. He held Obama's gaze without blinking, his face expressionless. Now that things were happening, his nerves had suddenly dissipated - which was just as well, because he knew that in situations like these, it was the appearance of tranquil strength, rather than servile solicitousness, that proved the more crucial factor in successfully extricating oneself from them.

'Why don't you check his meter? You will see that it has been chipped,' he said, simply.

Obama sat down slowly, and had a sip of his lemonade. This appeared to instantly relax him. 'Look,' he began, 'I realise it's scary to be arrested for a hate crime. Hate crimes are taken very seriously by the criminal justice system, and as far as we are concerned about the worst thing you can do. You'll be definitely fined, and you'll get a prison sentence. How long, is up to you. If you cooperate and make a full confession, you'll get out with maybe ten years' worth of working life left. If you don't, however, you'll not only lose your job, but you'll lose everything. Your lawyers will take everything you own, of course. Your wife will leave you. You'll be too old to work by the time you get out. You'll end up alone in a home for the elderly, hated by everyone - and you know the sort of things that go on in those. They'll have no pity for you, as a convicted hate criminal. So, just spare us the bullshit, save us all time, and just confess.'

King Kong just stared at him, arms crossed, his large head cocked to one side.

He shrugged, 'I have already confessed. You've heard my account of what happened.'

'Well, let's see,' replied Obama, now adopting a petulant attitude as he picked up the sheet of paper in front of him and began scanning through its contents. 'Flew with convicted Holocaust Denier David Irving, landed at Barajas on Monday, on Flight BA 5898307. During the flight, read an article in the newspaper about Nick Griffin from the neo-Nazi British National Party. At Barajas, stopped and interrogated by the Guardia Civil; claimed you had no luggage. Then took a cab, and were driven to hotel. Refused to pay the fare and assaulted and humiliated the cab driver, a Black man. Meetings throughout the week at the

Picasso Tower in Castellana. Held conferences with a Dr. Oker, a Dr. Stumm, and a Dr. Brummagem, all of whom work for a company called Scoptic and all of whom have been investigated four times in the past three years by the Ministerio de Hacienda. Had two additional meetings with a Mr. Davies, who is registered unemployed and believes in Esoteric Hitlerism. Monday you attended David Irving's Holocaust Denial lecture, which caused a riot. Met with a Dr. Kautonen, a Right Wing economist who opposes sending aid to feed and vaccinate orphaned children in Africa. Consorted with Maras outside the Corte Inglés; supplied them with technology and funds. Monday evening ordered a pizza and refused to pay the coloured delivery man. Tuesday you ordered lunch at El Barrigón Alegre and then tried to do a runner. Tuesday evening you stood by while neo-Nazis vandalised an art gallery; conversed with and accepted literature from a Far Right Christian fundamentalist. Smoked and broke a lift at the hotel. On Wednesday had second meeting with Mr. Davies... Unknown whereabouts until lunchtime... Da da da... Second altercation at the hotel, this time with a man of Middle Eastern descent attempting to collect a long-standing debt.'

Obama looked up at him, revealing a sideways smile and shaking his head slowly. He stared back at Obama, his face blank.

'You are in serious trouble, Mister,' Obama said.

'Your dossier is riddled with inaccuracies,' he stated. 'I don't even know where to begin.'

'Oh, is that so? So you deny you arrived on flight BA 5898307?'

'Well, no...'

'Or that you and David Irving flew together?'

'I didn't know who he was at the time. I only found out later, after I had lunch with Professor Kautonen on Monday.'

Oh, yeah...' interjected Obama, sarcastically, 'And you just happened to be attending David Irving's Holocaust Denial conference.'

'Teemu selected the restaurant. I had no idea the hotel was holding a Holocaust conference, and that this David Irving was speaking there.'

'Of course,' stated Obama, mockingly. 'Blame Teemu. We know you and David Irving were talking aboard the airplane.'

'David Irving complained about the sandwiches they sold at Heathrow Airport. I told him to avoid the lavatories. That was the extent of the conversation.'

Obama leaned back on his chair, staring at him without a

blink; he then stroked his chin, the picture of pensive skepticism.

Obama's cartoonish interrogation tactics left him comprehensively unimpressed. He could not decide whether they represented Obama's best efforts, or they were Obama's cunning way to induce his interrogation subjects into underestimating him and thus lowering their guard. Either way, as quickly as he decided not to allow Obama to control the direction of the interrogation, he remembered newspaper reports about ministers being convicted for speeding or being captured by CCTV cameras engaging in activity they themselves had outlawed; it occurred to him that the continuous tsunami of politically correct legislation that sought to regulate every aspect of every person's life provided him with the tools to defend himself.

'May I remind you,' he said 'that sarcasm is no longer an acceptable interrogation technique. The law says that you have to limit yourself to questioning in a neutral tone, with the object of ascertaining the facts and nothing more; it does not allow you to use emotion in an intimidatory or derogatory fashion to extract information.'

Obama snorted in contemptuous bemusement, shaking his head, as if he had just heard the most ridiculous assertion imaginable.

'Certain exceptions apply, Herr Adolf,' Obama said, grinning. 'Nazis get special treatment.'

He sat in silence. Denying he was a Nazi would only play into Obama's hands. Obama would believe whatever he wanted to believe, it was clear, and he would make the rules as he went along, as it best suited him. He would have to rely, on constructing a word cage to logically lock Obama out of deleterious lines of questioning and nefarious conclusions. The only problems were that he lacked information about Obama and the criminal code and that logic word cages were difficult to construct when the other party applied the rules in an illogical and ad hoc basis.

'No doubt I am entitled to speak to my solicitor,' he said, closely observing Obama's facial expression.

Obama arched his eyebrows and gave another sideways smile, tilting his head back a little. 'All, yes, your solicitor,' he said, as if remembering something unimportant and somewhat amusing he had forgotten. 'Of course you are.'

Obama then simply remained seated, half smiling, staring at him, doing nothing for several seconds.

'Well? I would like to call him before I am interrogated.'

'The thing is, Mister, you are not being interrogated.'

‘Oh. Am I not?’ he retorted, unable to wholly suppress his sarcasm. ‘Could you explain what is happening, then?’

‘We are just asking you a few questions,’ Obama said. ‘You know. Routine stuff. Standard procedure.’

‘Then could I see your procedural manual? I know that across the EU we have freedom of information laws, and I am therefore entitled to know what rules apply - and what rights I have - during police questioning. I ask because I think I may need to refresh my memory as to the difference between a police interrogation and the police asking me a few questions.’

‘Of course. We’ll bring it over,’ answered Obama, pleasantly, remaining seated, immobile, smiling, and staring.

‘OK,’ he said, then waited.

Obama just stared at him, half smiling, saying nothing.

‘Sorry, but I don’t think you’ve understood,’ he ventured, ‘I need to see your procedural manual.’

‘Of course. We’ll show it to you,’ said Obama, nodding slowly, half smiling, observing him suspiciously beneath a thin varnish of sarcasm.

‘Could you do it now?’

‘We could,’ replied Obama, again not moving.

He looked at King Kong. King Kong was now affecting boredom, his gigantic head turned sideways and upwards, towards some fascinating detail on the ceiling.

‘OK,’ he said, giving up on King Kong and fixing his gaze back on Obama.

Obama inhaled heavily and looked back at the dossier. ‘OK. So, tell us about David Irving.’

He sighed, disheartened. As he turned to momentarily look at the wall on his left, he noticed how the neon tubes above took advantage of the pitting and irregularities on the cement surface to cast lugubrious shadows. A sudden lull in the power supply deepened the gloom, and caused Obama and King Kong to tilt their heads back to check the lighting. Somehow the scene disturbed him and the simmering of fear surged beneath his thorax.

He began, ‘I don’t know anything about David Irving. As I said, I didn’t know it was him sitting ne -’

‘OK, so you didn’t know him from Adam, but you went out of your way to book a seat right next to him,’ interrupted Obama, sarcastically.

‘I didn’t go out of my way to -’

‘Oh yes you did, Mister. We checked with British Airways and you changed your sitting arrangements online on 30 November at

2:34am. Quite an odd hour to be doing that.'

'Well, of course. The website allows you to choose your seating.'

'You had a window seat and you chose - in the middle of the night, probably because you are ashamed of your beliefs and didn't want your wife to know - to sit in the middle row, not even next to the aisle, where you would have more space. You were willing to sacrifice your comfort in order to sit next to the Nazi historian. That, to me, says you badly wanted and actively sought to sit next to the Nazi historian. That, to me, Mister, says you are a Nazi.'

'The window seat was right at the rear and I don't like flying at the rear.'

'And the aisle seats? There were 23 of them available when you made your booking, yet you chose to burrow yourself in the middle, next to the Holocaust Denier. At 2:34 in the morning.'

Obama was an idiot, he concluded. 'The BA website doesn't say who one's neighbours are.'

King Kong's unexpected guffawing filled the room. Obama's cheeks swelled with gleeful satisfaction.

'Oh, yeah? And you don't think we know about your Nazi codes? You were seated on 39F and David Irving was on 39E. Three plus nine, twelve. F is the sixth letter of the alphabet. Twelve plus six, eighteen. One, Eight. A is the first letter of the alphabet; H is the eighth. A, H. Adolf Hitler. You are not as clever as you think, Mister. We know everything.'

'David Irving's seat was not next to mine. He was on the aisle seat - seat D - and he switched seats with my neighbour,' he stated, remembering.

'That was a decoy.'

'Besides, even after he switched, Irving's seat would add up to the letters, A and G. AG, corporation with stockholders: that's me, only in German. The seat order was wrong, according to your logic'

Obama's grin remained broad with amusement. 'And you don't think we thought of that? Of course, you switched seats so that you would be able to give the excuse you've just given us. It was a crude decoy. You Nazis are so damn obvious.'

'My travel plans changed due to unexpected scheduling problems with my client. I booked that flight relatively late. Even if I had done what you claim I did - and I didn't because I did not know David Irving and I think World War II is a boring topic - it would have been highly unlikely that I would have been able to find that particular seat still available -'

'Security footage inside the aircraft also shows you having

confrontations with the flight attendants - a non-White female and a homosexual male. You sure went on a hate spree.'

'Confrontations? I don't remember having any confrontations,' he said, perplexed.

'You accosted a Mrs. Gupta at the gate, when you were denied boarding because you turned up late. You then tried to steal beverages and were rude to Mr. John when he - and rightfully so, if I may add - took you to task.'

'Mrs. Gupta, if that was her name, was being obdurate. I did not turn up late. I was sitting before the gate well before they announced boarding. I just waited until the crowd thinned out because I don't like standing in crowds. As to Mr. John, the kitchen was deserted. We were packed like sardines inside the aircraft. The aircon was off. It was boiling in there, and the flight attendants were nowhere to be seen. In fact, I had to go looking for them because I was dying of thirst. Mr. John I found on the upper deck, chitchatting with one of his colleagues, not doing his job.'

'I see. So just because they were not fussing all over you, and were following correct procedure, you felt entitled to harass the airline's flight attendants, and target them according to their race and sexual orientation. I notice you did not abuse any of the White, male, heterosexual attendants.'

'There were none onboard. You know it. And if it had been John Wayne manning the gate and barring me from boarding the aircraft, I would have complained just as I did.'

'Mr. John was also manning the gate, but you chose to accost Mrs. Gupta. What? Was she an easier target, because she was smaller and weaker?'

'I just went to whoever was nearest.'

'... Or were you too disgusted by Mr. John's sexual orientation to bear speaking to him?'

'No... err... He was on the other side. I simpl-'

'Either way you lose, Mister,' sentenced Obama, arching his eyebrows, and half smiling, with evident delight. It was clear Obama felt in control, and was loving it.

'Apparently,' he agreed, sarcastically. He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts, then spoke again, 'Look, I just flew here on business. The whole trip was riddled with delays and annoying incidents. It's normal these days because nothing works like it's supposed to anymore. I can't do anything about the power outages and the crazy security and the overcrowding. But I still expect airlines to offer good customer service. I am within my right as a paying customer to complain if I

am not getting the level of service they promise and which I am paying for.'

'So, just because the world is not designed for your pleasure and convenience, you feel entitled to abuse people who are different from you. Amazing how the Nazi mind works,' stated Obama, feigning bemused amazement.

'No. Look. There is a difference between -'

'There is no difference,' butted in Obama, abruptly stern. 'Abuse is abuse. You subjected Mrs. Gupta to aggressive and intimidatory behaviour, which greatly upset her, from what we've been able to see on the footage. That was a race hate crime you committed right then and there. You then degraded Mr. John. When we see this in the context of your seating arrangements, and your quite consciously and openly consorting with Nazis, we cannot help draw the conclusions we draw, Mr. White Supremacy.'

He snapped, 'I treated Mrs. Gupta and Mr. John equally. They were equally incompetent, and I treated them as I would treat anyone-who is incompetent — irrespective of their race or sexual orientation. I don't care if you are gay or Black or-'

'Oh, I think you do,' jumped Obama, almost cheerfully. 'Well, you think wrong, then' he retorted, just as quickly.

'We know that at Scoptic you were not looked after by a Ms. Cotter. Your response was neither aggressive nor intimidatory, and you did not subject her to your degrading manner,' said Obama, now glancing at his dossier with a raised eyebrow.

How do they know about what went on inside the office?

As if reading his mind, Obama smiled and added, 'Don't act surprised. Do you not think that a company like Scoptic - which you know full well is a front operation - would not already be under investigation? I mean, here you have these clowns with obviously made-up names - Oker, Stumm, Brummagem - running an outfit in Spain, contracting fake companies, and trying to come up with an accounts department that can dupe the taxman. Come on! Don't you have a PhD? You should have known better.'

'First of all, I don't know anything about Scoptic being a front operation. They looked legitimate to me. And I don't blame them if they wish to avoid paying tax. That's perfectly legal. Tax evasion is another thing, but they were not looking to evade taxes - only avoid them,' he stated, finally angry.

'Very cute and subtle distinctions, Mister,' interjected Obama, feigning bemused boredom. 'Sophistry won't help. We know everything. We've got everything recorded and data-based.'

‘Secondly,’ he continued, ‘I’ve got two PhDs, so stop calling me Mister. The proper form is Doctor - and if we were in Germany, it would be Doctor Doctor.’

‘As you wish, Mister,’ defied Obama, before breezily returning to his line of questioning. ‘So you did not abuse Ms. Cotter, who probably deserved it, because she was White; but you hatefully abused Mrs. Gupta and Mr. John, because they were not White and gay, respectively. That is the sign of a prejudiced mind. It’s amazing how a man with your education and intellect can be so prejudiced - so filled with irrational fear and hatred for people who just happen to look and, live differently from you.’

‘Mrs. Cotter was unpleasant, yes, but she was an employee at a client’s office, and it was not for me to admonish her behaviour. She was my client’s problem. They were the one’s paying her salary, not me. This was different from me paying the wages of British Airways employees through my fares and expecting customer service in return.’

‘OK, so, in other words, she’s OK because she’s White, and Mrs. Gupta and Mr. John are not because they are not White and gay respectively,’ provoked Obama, titillated by his own insolence and wrongheadedness. |

He was now too angry to respond. At the same time, he saw how Obama was hoping to stoke him until he became irrational. He waited in silence. Obama observed his face closely, like a Palaeolithic hunter, looking for stirrings in the African savannah. King Kong simply sat in his chair, hands now folded before him, staring drowsily, thoroughly bored.

Obama broke the silence. ‘Alright, so, with your hateful racism and homophobia well established, then, let’s get back on track. Tell me about David Irving.’

Here we go again, he sighed in his mind, knowing Obama would ask the same questions over and over again, perverting his arguments, distorting the facts, twisting his words, and deliberately reaching annoying conclusions as he hoped for a breakthrough. The breakthrough would not necessarily have to be an admission of wrongful activity, of course; a reckless statement, a rhetorical admission, or a thoughtless comment on his part would serve the purpose just as well.

‘I have already told you everything there is to tell about him,’ he said. ‘I mean, look, if you have everything recorded and data-based, as you say you do, you already know that I had never met, or had dealings with, this David Irving guy, before I found myself sitting next to him aboard the aircraft on Sunday night.’

Even then I didn't know who he was. To me he was a well-off pensioner. And he was not particularly pleasant to me either.'

'What do you expect? He's a Nazi.'

He ignored Obama's taunt. 'And as for his Holocaust conference, I had no idea there was one or that he would be speaking or that it would be at that hotel. Professor Kautonen chose the restaurant.'

'Here we go again with Professor Kautonen. Blame Teemu for everything,' said Obama. 'Some friend you are.'

'World War II I find utterly boring as a subject.'

Obama looked at King Kong, who in turn turned to look at Obama. Obama said 'Irvingesque idiom,' causing King Kong to nod in agreement.

'What do you mean by that? What's happened,' he asked, impatiently.

'It seems your close friend, David Irving, and you, have had such a narrow relationship that the two of you have ended up copying each other's idioms.'

'What idioms?' he asked, irritably.

'David Irving also finds - and I quote - the Holocaust "boring",' answered Obama.

'I said World War II,' he corrected.

'Same thing,' said Obama, dismissively. Then, feigning curiosity, '...or, are you going to tell me that you find World War II boring but the Holocaust really interesting?'

'Wait a minute - if Mr. Irving finds the Holocaust boring, why was he holding a Holocaust conference. You are fabricating,' he fired back, frowning, but pleased at exposing his inquisitor's idiocy.

Obama ignored him, 'So you find the Holocaust really interesting?'

'I notice you're ignoring my question.'

'And you are ignoring mine. Answering a question with a question will not work, my friend. You forget that we interrogate criminals all the time, so we know every trick in the book. So - answer me - do you find the Holocaust really interesting?'

'Don't pull a Jeremy Paxman on me,' he warned, raising an index finger.

'I don't know who he is. Answer the question: Do you find the Holocaust really interesting?'

He persisted, 'What about David Irving? Does he find it interesting or does he find it boring? Because if he finds it boring, why was he holding a conference?'

'So you find the Holocaust boring, then,' tested Obama.

'That's a logical fallacy you've just committed,' he observed.

'OK. So you find it boring. Alright. That's what I expected.'

After all, you are a racist homophobe who consorts with Nazis and the Nazis say the Holocaust never happened.'

'I don't deny the Holocaust,' he anticipated.

'Oh, no - you just think it is the hoax of the twentieth century,' taunted Obama, smiling. 'I know you've read Arthur Butz's *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*.'

'Pardon me? I've never read such a book. Never heard of it,' he said, frowning, now without a trace of amusement.

'You've read it. I know it.'

'When did I read it?'

'I don't know when, but you've had it and you've read it.'

'I am quite happy for this to be heard in court. Your records won't show me ever having purchased such a book. I don't even know what it's about or ever heard of the author.'

'OK. So the court can hear about your roommate at university, who had a copy of that book. It was in the same room as you, so you had it and of course you read it.'

'If he had it, I am finding out now. I have 'never looked through people's private papers. Besides, there is no way you could possibly know what books he had in the room because there was no GCTV inside college dorms back then.'

Obama was unimpressed, 'His credit card records show he bought the book in 1991. That's the time you were his roommate at university. So the book was in the room, and you read it-'

'Credit cards were not given to people that age back then.' 'It was his parents' card.'

'How do you know he made the purchase, and not either of his parents?'

'There you go again with the smoke and mirrors!' exclaimed Obama, treating him as if he had spent the whole interview obdurately attempting to deflect his questions. 'The book was delivered at his parents' address, but, interestingly, the delivery coincided with your pal being on his spring break, during which he visited his parents. Obviously, he went to pick up his book.'

'Well, I have not read the book, or ever heard of it until now.'

'Fine. At least you don't deny that you roomed with a Holocaust Denier, who read Arthur Butz because he thought the Holocaust was a hoax. OK. So, to recap, we have established that: one, you are a racist homophobe; two, you flew to Spain with convicted Holocaust Denier David Irving, and went out of the way to seat yourself next to him, using a Hitlerist neo-Nazi code in the middle of the night, hiding from your wife; three,

you have a long history of associating with neo-Nazi thugs who deny the Holocaust. Some piece of work you are.'

'I would like to speak to my solicitor and see that procedural manual now, if I may,' he announced, tired of Obama's games.

'OK. No problem,' replied Obama. 'But, before we get to that, we need to ask you a few questions - you know, standard police procedure, because we are not yet interrogating you.'

'No. I would like to speak to my solicitor and see that procedural manual. Now.'

Obama did not react: he simply said, amiably, 'OK. We will get you a telephone and that manual.'

'Good,' he replied, playing along; he knew Obama was going to try to resume his questioning, but he was not going to let Obama interrogate him any further .until his request had been satisfied. .

'So, about David Irving. Tell us about him,' resumed Obama.

'I would like to speak to my solicitor and see that procedural manual now, if I may,' repeated he.

'Sure. Coming right along. But, first: David Irving. Tell us about him,' insisted Obama.

'I would like to speak to my solicitor and see that procedural manual now, if I may,' he iterated.

'Don't you worry about that. Your rights are fully guaranteed by the European Constitution and we will of course abide by the law. Provided, that is, you are not an enemy of the state, in which case different rules apply.'

'What rules?'

'You know full well: anti-terror legislation, of course. We are charged with protecting the public, and sometimes, ordinary laws fall short of what's required. That's why we have special powers. Otherwise, you Nazis would have taken over by now, and we would all be slaves under .you blond, blue-eyed all-Aryan dreamland dictatorship.'

He decided he had made a mistake asking a question, and resolved not to engage with Obama in any way until his demand was satisfied, 'I would like to speak to my solicitor and see that procedural manual now, if I may.'

'So, as even you will surely understand,' continued Obama, as if nothing, 'we need to first get you to honestly and frankly confess to .the exact nature of your relationship with David Irving. If you cooperate, and we are not left with the impression that you are hiding something from us, we may not feel the need to apply the full force of anti-terror laws on you.'

'I would like to speak to my solicitor and see that procedural

manual now, if I may.'

Obama plodded on, 'And you know what anti-terror laws mean: open-ended detention, interrogations all day every day and all night every night, no access to the outside world, certain conviction, and open-ended incarceration in some remote maximum security prison camp, regardless of the actual sentence, for the protection of the public' |

'I would like to speak to my solicitor and see that procedural manual now, if I may.'

'What would a white collar professional like you, a techno-geek, do in a prison camp. You surely don't want that. Cooperation is the only reasonable option for you. You know we know everything, so it is pointless to try to deny what we already know and have proof of, so just cooperate, and we will be lenient.'

'I would like to speak to my solicitor and see that procedural manual now, if I may.'

'Tell us about David Irving.'

'Solicitor. Procedural manual.'

'Come on. Just tell us about him.'

'Solicitor.'

'David Irving.'

'Procedural manual.'

'David Irving.'

'Solicitor.'

'David Irving.'

'Sol -'

'Listen, Mister. No matter what you say or do, I am just going to keep coming back again and again with David Irving, until you tell us about him. Until you confess, frankly and completely.'

He decided not to answer. What to do? Obama was clearly not going anywhere; Obama had all the time in the world, it seemed, and carte blanche to do as he liked, to interrogate at will, for as long as it took, making up the rules along the way and changing them as needed and as often as required, until he cracked. If he simply repeated his demands, nothing would change: Obama would keep pounding away with his puerile bullying and crude psychological games. If he said nothing, he would be deemed uncooperative, and this would go on record, which would not look good in a court of law. If he replied honestly, Obama would not believe him. And, of course, if he lied and gave Obama the answers he wanted, he would go straight to prison. None of the available options were attractive, practical, or feasible. He needed time to think - to reconsider his tactics and analyse the situation - he might glimpse an exit if

given an hour to rest and cogitate. Yet that was precisely what Obama was intent on denying him: Obama would deprive him of tranquility, of food, of drink, of sleep, and keep chipping away until he could not stand it anymore. It was therefore legitimate to wonder whether there was any point to the interrogation at all, if they had already convicted him in advance; perhaps the interrogation was needed somehow - he was sure they did not know as much as they claimed - perhaps they required information, and not necessarily what they claimed to be after, but something else; perhaps it was purely procedural, and any declaration he made would have no bearing on an outcome that had already been decided, agreed, and budgeted for; how to be sure?

He realised Obama had carried on talking while he was engaged in his deliberations. These were interrupted, along with Obama's verbiage, when the door to the interrogation room opened, to reveal a suited shoulder and the hoary head of a White man born around the time the Battle of Stalingrad.

'Voy a por bocadillos,' said the elderly man, addressing Obama and King Kong..

'Sorry, what?' said Obama. He did not speak Spanish.

'Sandwiches,' said the old man, with a heavy accent.

'Ah, yes. What's in them?'

'Steak, chorizo, Spanish omelette,' offered the old man.

'Steak,' said Obama. 'In a stick.'

'Chorizo,' rumbled King Kong, in fairly good Castillian. 'Two big ones. And a Spanish omelette one.'

'¿Y para el señor?' asked the old man, jutting his chin towards him.

'Nothing,' said Obama, smiling. 'He's not hungry.'

The old man nodded his acceptance and left, shutting the door.

'OK,' resumed Obama, looking at him, now affecting a serious frown. 'David Irving. Tell us about him.'

He decided to risk going ahead and simply answer questions. The interrogation was of course being recorded, so his answers would be on record, and the record, provided it was read objectively, would show him in a good light, while it would also show Obama and the police force in general in a bad light - perhaps not immediately, or when it best suited him, but without a doubt in due course. 'Alright. He was seated next to me on the flight over. I didn't know who he was. I had never seen him before. If he had ever been on the news or-the media, I never paid attention. I then saw him again on Monday when I had lunch with Professor Kautonen. I had no idea there was a conference being held at the hotel where the restaurant where we ate was located. I only found out there was one, and that it

was him speaking, after there was a riot and a gang of thugs smashed everything.'

'Those thugs, mister, were anti-racist activists. They were protecting democracy and people's freedom of expression,' pontificated Obama, his tone as self-righteous as his words, and without a trace of irony.

'Whatever,' he replied. 'That is all I can tell you about David Irving.'

'David Irving abused a Jewish gentleman aboard the airplane. You did not intervene. Why do you tolerate anti-Semitism? Is it because you hate Jews?'

It was now his turn to pontificate: 'Yes, I remember that. Well, again, dealing with rowdy passengers aboard the aircraft is a matter for the cabin crew to deal with. That is part of their job description, and my airfare is paying for their wages, so, no, I don't expect to have to get involved in altercations between passengers,' he stated, with emphasis, before adding, with malicious irony, 'It's not a self-service petrol station aboard a British Airways flight. Ensuring passengers are well behaved is part of British Airways' remit when they assure travellers a positive customer service experience.'

'So if British Airways fail to tackle anti-Semitism, you are OK with it. Anti-Semitism is OK if people tolerate it.'

'I didn't say that. I said it was the cabin crew's job to deal with rowdy passengers.'

'We are not talking about rowdy passengers. Hitler and the Nazis killed six million Jews. You are happy to just remain supine on your seat, placidly sipping your Coke and reading your magazine while anti-Semitism rears its ugly head, and hate crimes are being committed right in front of your eyes. What kind of a citizen are you?'

'I am a citizen who expects his fellow citizens to do their job, which I am paying for. I paid for it, so I've done my duty. Now those who got paid, need to do theirs.'

'Oh, I see, so now you get angry. Why didn't you get angry aboard the aircraft, when the convicted Holocaust Denier sitting right next to you made his vicious anti-Semitic remarks to the Jewish man? Where was your outrage then?'

'Look, I don't know what the altercation was about, I was not listening, and I did not hear what Mr. Irving said, if he said anything at all. All I heard was a lot of shouting coming from across the aisle. If I remember correctly, Mr. Irving just sat there in silence. I don't know about any anti-Semitism. If there was, it is regrettable. But such incidents are for the cabin crew

to deal with. I paid for them to deal with such incidents, if they arose. And I think the cabin crew did deal with this particular incident in the end.'

'But the CCTV footage inside the aircraft shows the cabin crew were slow. You just sat there and let it all happen, even though you were sitting right next to the vicious anti-Semite. You were in a position to do something, and you didn't. At the very least you could have written a letter of complaint. You're fond of doing that; aren't you? Why didn't you write in to British Airways to express your repugnance and make it clear that you abhorred anti-Semitism and would not tolerate it in any way, shape, or form?'

'If I wrote a letter every time I got poor customer service, that's all I would be doing.'

'You see, that's the problem right there. You see it as a question of customer service, but this is not about you, Mister Doctor Doctor, being fussed over with good customer service - it is about anti-Semitism being committed right under your nose, and you not being prepared to stand up and be 'counted as someone who is righteously intolerant of that kind of disgusting behaviour.'

'You know, you look and sound just like Barack Obama at times. What with all the flowery rhetoric and the fine, humanistic language.'

'Flattery will get you nowhere,' warned Obama, waving his hand and shaking his oval head vehemently.

'I am not flattering you. Obama was a disaster.'

'For you, maybe. For you, mister White Aryan Resistance. But not for the millions of people who voted for him,' rebutted Obama, intensely. Then, after a pause, he added, relaxing, 'Well, at least you are now openly admitting to your vicious racism.'

He rolled his eyes, tired of Obama's cartoonish perceptions - or of his feigning them.

'Well, anyway, it is the cabin crew's responsibility to ensure all passengers have a positive customer service experience. If the Jewish gentleman in question was victim of anti-Semitism, it was for him to complain. I am sure British Airways will deal with the matter promptly and seriously, and refund the Jewish gentleman's fare in full, as well as permanently ban Mr. Irving.'

'Oh, yes, you can be sure of that!' exclaimed Obama, as if glad to hear his answer, 'But that does not relieve you of your guilt, Mister. You failed to act, and that's on record. You are an anti-Semite. The CCTV footage establishes it, and your responses here confirm it beyond all reasonable doubt. Boy, are you in serious trouble!'

He said nothing. As the interrogation progressed, it became ever more difficult to take his inquisitor seriously. A mild sense of despair and resignation was descending over him. He could glimpse how Obama was gradually constructing a cage around him, building a case, circling around the actual incident .he wanted to discuss - nay, describing a spiral, whose axis was the incident in question. It would probably take hours before they reached that point, by which time he would be, Obama obviously hoped, bent over with hunger pangs, parched with thirst, and hallucinating with sleep deprivation. Obama - like his gorillaceous colleague - would make a sadistic meal out of gorging his steak sandwich, and drinking a whole jar of iced lemonade, in a childish and predictable effort to soften him through excruciation. Obama's spiral technique was very Chinese. He had obviously been trained in conformity with the latest theories of interrogation.

'OK,' said Obama, suddenly, picking up his dossier from the table. 'Let's see... Ah. At Barajas you were stopped by the Guardia Civil because you traveled without luggage.'

'Yes,' he said, suppressing a smile. Although he knew his system was unorthodox, it never ceased to amaze him how it perplexed and bemused the conformist mind. It was as if the System expected everyone to carry luggage, and broke down when someone chose not to. He bet it would not be long before an anonymous bureaucrat, burrowed deep in their catacombs of government bureaucracy, would generate a new inscrutable mass of regulatory texts, banning people from traveling without luggage. In future, he imagined, one would have to bring luggage - luggage, of course, which complied with a tottering power tower of regulations, all of them incomprehensible to the human mind, self-contradictory, semantically nebulous, syntactically contortuplicated, and written in impenetrable legalese, capable of confounding the most abnormal of geniuses - but luggage nevertheless.

'Why are you afraid of having your luggage X-rayed?'

'I like to travel light.'

'I didn't ask how you like to travel. I asked why are you afraid of having your luggage X-rayed?'

'I don't accept your premise. I travel without luggage because I like to travel unencumbered by the million restrictions, rules, and regulations they impose at the airports.'

'What is it you send in those parcels you posted four days before your flight?'

'My luggage.'

'I see,' sighed Obama, 'so now you think you can play clever with us, eh? You think you can play games with us?'

'I am not playing games. You know perfectly well that is what I do, because you confiscated one of the parcels and inspected the other,' he ventured, hoping Obama's response would finally elucidate the mystery of the missing parcel and the missing items in the parcel that did arrive.

Obama cocked his head and grinned sideways, feigning bored skepticism, 'Don't for a moment hope you can turn the tables on us, Mister. We can throw you in a deep, dark dungeon in solitary confinement for any number of years, if we want to, for no other reason than because we think it will make you more cooperative.'

He resisted the temptation to point out the counterproductiveness of carrying out the threat: if they did as they threatened, his recollection of events would fade, and his utility to them would fade along with his memory. Then again, perhaps that was what they desired. And then, yet again perhaps that was a decoy, and Obama was gathering information obscurely, in passing, obliquely, by pressing on with absurd and apparently irrelevant lines of questioning, which, in their aggregate and without him knowing it, would paint a picture of what Obama was really interested in.

'I am not playing games,' he stressed, trying to be patient, 'I post my luggage because I don't want to carry it around. It's a hindrance. Especially with all the airport regulations.'

'Especially with all the airport regulations,' repeated Obama, slowly, for emphasis. 'And since these regulations are there to frustrate criminals, your wanting to avoid them - and going through such great lengths to do so - says to me your motivations are criminal.'

'I think the regulations are insane. There are far too many of them, they are too complicated, and I have no patience for them. I just want to have the clothes and the toiletries that I need when I reach my destination,' he said, not caring what Obama thought.

'It is clear you have no patience for the law. But that's not a surprise, because Nazis never do. So what are you afraid the X-rays will see?'

'The X-rays still see my luggage because the X-ray still scans every parcel while in the postal system. So, no, I am not afraid of the X-rays. I am, however, impatient with the indignities to which I am otherwise subjected at the airport.'

'That's because you are not prepared to do your bit for society. If you want to live in a safe society, you have to make some

sacrifices. You know, there are millions across the Gibraltar straight willing to risk their lives to come here and contribute. You -' Obama snorted in contempt, 'you are only interested in your own selfish comfort, in your enjoying good customer service; that's why the notion of making a small sacrifice for the greater good is so alien for you.'

He wanted to point out that the insane airport regulations were symptomatic of bad governance; that a well-designed society does not require so many rules and regulations to function correctly; that a hundred years ago, there was a lot less regulation and the threat of crime and terrorism was significantly less. However, pointing out the obvious would divert the interrogation into politics, and, given Obama's rhetoric, this would only lead him into further trouble. Therefore, he found it wiser to say instead, 'I am doing my bit for society by helping alleviate congestion at the airport. All parcels sent through the post are X-rayed anyway, so I did not avert security - I simply chose for my luggage to be screened outside the airport in order to save time and bother.'

'You did not alleviate congestion. You increased it by arising the suspicions of the Guardia Civil, who saw it fit to interrogate you because of your selfish greed for comfort and your anti-social banditry,' accused Obama, before taunting, with school-boy sarcasm, 'I bet you didn't think of that, eh?'

'In the past-'

'Although,' interrupted Obama, loudly, 'that perhaps was exactly how you planned it - you wanted to distract the Guardia Civil, to act as your own decoy, clogging up the terminal and causing wasteful delays by having them focus on your lack of luggage rather than on your luggage, which was already safely making its way past their security controls via the postal system. Either way, you're not as clever as you think. The police are always going to be clever than you!'

'As I was saying - in the past I was always stopped and had all my luggage searched by the police. This added to the delays and the congestion. Therefore, it was logical to suppose that by bearing no luggage at all, I would eliminate the delays and not contribute to the congestion.'

'Not that you cared about the latter, of course,' observed Obama, 'Your only motive for avoiding congestion was the fact that you feel better than everyone else. You are arrogant and elitist. Like a typical Nazi.'

A reckless impulse urged him to say, well, yes, I am better than everyone else! However, he suppressed the impulse just as quickly, realising that Obama was obviously banking on exasperating

him into a reckless outburst. A reckless outburst, when seen in black and white on a transcript, entirely decontextualised, was open to all manner of negative interpretations and perverse extrapolations, something of which Obama was obviously well aware, and which provided the necessary raw material for state prosecutors eager to convict. He said, 'I didn't say my motive was to avoid creating congestion; my motive was to avoid the congestion itself, which, in turn, avoided creating congestion. So even if my motives were personal, my personal motives were not obnoxious because they had a positive outcome beyond myself; it was the classic "win-win situation.'

'In other words, now cutting all the crap you just added there as padding, you think you're better than everyone else,' said Obama, almost rolling his eyes, acting as if he was fed up of constantly being lied to. 'And it's possible for you to think this way because you don't believe in equality. You order human beings into elitist hierarchies, with you - of course! - at the top, and those who are different from you - Blacks, Jews, gays, the disabled - at the bottom. Isn't that what you really mean?'

'No,' he replied, patiently, as if talking to an obtuse four-year-old, 'I mean, I don't like congestion, and by circumventing it I also help to alleviate it, which benefits me and everyone else.'

'And since you don't believe in equality, it is fair to induce you don't believe in democracy either, isn't it?' challenged Obama.

'I believe we don't live in a democracy,' he sniped.

'Oh, is that so, Mister Totalitarianism? Then why aren't you loving it?'

'Because we have elections where once every five years we are presented with virtually identical candidates who argue loudly about narrow, inconsequential issues - half a percentage point up or down in one type of tax, while putting up all the others - and, in between, they do whatever they like, on the premise that they won the election because people voted for them and therefore they have a mandate.'

'And rightly so! And rightly so!' exclaimed Obama, his body language as emphatic as his oratory.

'Except people didn't necessarily vote for the winner, while they certainly voted against the losers. I personally would like to see real choice, where one can vote for fundamental change if there is need for it. So you see, I am in favour of more and real democracy, not pretended and less democracy.'

'Ah, so now we get to the bottom of it,' exhaled Obama, as if discovering the truth he had been searching for. 'You don't think we have a democracy because you want to vote for fascist parties,

and there are none on the ballot! Well, what can I say? We just don't like your type around here. We are going to make you Nazis run, and keep you running, until we get rid of you completely - completely and forever.'

'I never said anything about wanting a fascist party. Fundamental change does not equal fascism,' he lectured.

'Fundamental change does equal fascism!' screamed Obama, slamming his hand on the table as he jumped to his feet once more.

'Oh, pardon my ignorance,' said he, sarcastically, finally blasé in the face of Obama's theatre.

'The opposite of freedom and democracy is brutal dictatorship and totalitarian oppression,' spat Obama, triumphantly, before calming down, and strolling around the room, never taking his eyes off him. 'No matter how thin you slice it,' Obama smiled, waving his index finger in the air, 'baloney is still baloney, Mister.'

'I disagree. Fundamental change could also mean abolishing income tax, doing away with fiat money, and -'

'Ah, of course. You had to be one of these gold bugs. What a surprise,' lamented Obama, sardonically, with a dismissive wave of his arm. 'So the income tax is there to perpetuate the banking cartel, which is, of course, a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world, yeah?'

'Not necessarily,' he pontificated, ignoring Obama's taunt, knowing he had made a mistake, and dreading Obama's next intervention. 'I was just presenting you with a possible platform that would be both democratic and represent fundamental change.'

'It's not democratic...' began Obama, contemptuously.

He let out an inward sigh of relief. He had inadvertently, and momentarily, let the kitty out of the bag, but Obama had missed it.

'It's not democratic...' iterated Obama, shaking his oval head, before leaning on the table, resting both hands on the surface, 'because, as you well know, if you abolish income tax, whose purpose is to redistribute wealth and flatten inequities, you allow the gifted to get rich, creating a hierarchical society with an intellectual elite at the top. How self-serving of you! You should be ashamed.'

'Forget it,' shot back Obama. 'You have left us in no doubt of what kind of person you are. You hate democracy, despise equality, and long for a fascist dictatorship that would crush the weak and send every non-Aryan to the gas chambers. The gold standard leads to the death camps. Pure and simple. Don't think

we haven't cottoned onto that. You may not have the courage to say what you really mean, but we don't mind spelling it out the way it is.'

'I disagree,' he stated, beyond bored.

Obama now adopted a businesslike manner. 'OK,' he said. 'Let's see. At Barajas you got into a taxi.'

'Yes,' he said, his voice with an angry edge. He knew what was coming, and was resolved not to let Obama get the better of him. If this was all there was, there was some hope still. If, on the other hand, this was one of various incidents designed to make a tortuous case linking him to Kevin MacDonald, then there was a cell waiting for him somewhere in the democratic gulag. Only there was not going to be an Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to write a *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* type novel about him, and, given Dr. MacDonald's profile, they would make sure he would not become the next Henri Charrière either.

'What happened?'

'As is normal and expected with airport cabbies, he tried to rip me off,' was his summary.

'On what basis do you assume he was trying to rip you off?' Challenged Obama, thrusting his chin. 'On the basis that he was BLACK, perhaps?'

'On the basis he had a chipped meter, kept trying to fiddle with it, and tried to go the wrong way and the long way,' he replied, with a dignified tone.

'Did you examine the meter? Did you take it out of its casing and examine the electronics inside?' said Obama, insolently.

'No, but-'

'So you have no proof that the meter was chipped, do you? Your conclusion is based on conjecture, and your conjecture is based on racism,' said Obama, self-righteously. 'The cab driver was BLACK, and therefore his genes made him a criminal, isn't that what you assumed?'

'The meter was chipped. The fare started piling on at the speed of light every time the cabbie got the chance to set it on turbo mode.' "

'I think you saw what you wanted to see. Because of your vicious racism, you cannot conceive of a BLACK man earning an honest living as a cab driver or anything else. Because of your vicious racism, you resented handing over your money to a BLACK man. Because of your vicious racism, whenever you get into a taxi cab driven by a BLACK man,, you look at the meter and it's always fast. Isn't that the kind of KKK shit you have

stuffed in your head, Mister?’

‘I suggest you impound the cabbie’s vehicle,’ he said, trying to maintain an even tone, ‘and examine his meter in detail. When a meter is adding Euros faster than the human eye can read the numbers that’s more than €10 per second; that, to me, is a chipped meter.’

‘We have checked the meter in question and it works fine - as it’s supposed to,’ said Obama.

He snorted with contempt, ‘I don’t believe you. That meter was chipped. Absolutely no doubt about it.’

‘And I don’t believe anything a racist says, except when he is being racist,’ retorted Obama.

‘It’s not a question of whether you believe me or not,’ he countered. ‘It’s a question of whether the meter was chipped or not. You Cannot prove a negative. But I can prove a positive. Unless, of course, the cabbie has since got himself a new meter, or has an unchipped meter on the ready just in case.’

‘I am surprised you think a BLACK man intelligent enough to take precautions like that,’ said Obama, doing his best to look unimpressed.

‘I think the cabbie was corrupt enough to know every trick in the book to both rip people off and avoid getting caught,’ he corrected.

‘OK, so you saw the driver was BLACK, you thought "Shit, I’ve got to ride with a fucking nigger in the car, and give that stinking coon my money"; so you assumed - conveniently, of course - that the meter was fast, and then refused to pay when the jigaboo got you safe and sound to your destination, right?’

‘Er, no,’ he said, as in addressing - in feigned good humour - a recalcitrant and noisome person. ‘We arrived at my destination, and the cabbie tried to rip me off by pretending I gave him a €50 note instead of a €500 note.’

‘So you tried to deceive the BLACK cab driver, to swindle him out of his honest pay, with a cheap sleight of hand - but he had an eagle eye and he caught you, and you became violent, like a typical Nazi skinhead.’

‘No. The cabbie pretended I gave him 50 when I gave him 500, then became violent when I refused to let him rip me off by handing over more of my hard-earned money.’

‘You threw him to the ground, stomped his head against the pavement with the heel of your thick-soled shoe, and cleaned out his wallet as you delighted in the BLACK man’s screams.’

Obama’s version annoyed him. ‘That’s not true,’ he said, frowning.

‘We have witnesses,’ revealed Obama, triumphantly. ‘They said you had a crowbar, and tried to hide it by throwing it in the grass.’

‘Well, your witnesses are not reliable.’ *Either that or you are fabricating testimony*, he added, in his mind.

‘They also said you verbally abused and intimidated the BLACK man, even after you had already beaten him and he was down on the ground, writhing in pain, no longer able to defend himself.’

‘There was nobody around, and the only person shouting was the cabbie, so there is no way one could have heard.’

‘So you admit he was shouting. Good, because the witness testimony is unequivocal about this,’ declared the ever more pharisaic Obama.

‘The cabbie was shouting because he was aggressive and abusive towards me; he attempted to intimidate me verbally and with a crowbar.’

‘And are you surprised he had a crowbar,’ posed Obama, ‘considering how many times he must have been ripped off by White racists? Good on him!’

‘The cabbie got paid the full fare. I availed myself of his wallet purely to get my change, since I did not have anything smaller than a 500.’

‘It’s amazing how you can twist events so that it’s the Black man’s fault,’ said Obama, frowning. ‘Then again, you’ve had four hundred years to practice, haven’t you?’

I am not four hundred years old, he replied, in his mind, before saying, ‘I think you are doing that, twisting events, so that it’s my fault. I am sure the CCTV footage taken on the night will confirm my story.’

Obama shouted back quickly, ‘The CCTV footage shows a Black man requesting payment, and a violent White racist pulling him to the ground and twisting the Black man’s arm until it breaks! The CCTV footage shows a hate-filled White racist mugging the Black man and then spitting abuse into the Black man’s face! That is what the CCTV footage shows!’

‘I told the cabbie not to be so racist. That’s what the CCTV footage shows; you just choose to interpret that as abuse, while conveniently ignoring the cabbie’s crowbar, his screaming abuse at me, and his threatening me with violence.’

‘CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT?’ screamed Obama at King Kong, gesticulating wildly, incredulous.

King Kong just stared back at Obama, then at him, with a frown, before shaking his head, saying nothing.

Obama continued, wide eyed, 'So now the White man calls the Black man racist! You're UNBELIEVABLE!'

For a moment, he did not dare say anything. Obama now looked capable of violence. After a few instants of silence, however, broken only by Obama's heavy breathing, he said, 'Show me the footage. I will show you that crowbar and the moment when the thug was threatening me with violence.'

'I don't have to show you anything,' said Obama.

'That's because you know I paid the cabbie, admonished him for his racism, and only retrieved the correct change from his wallet, even after he had nearly smashed my skull open with his crowbar.'

'You did NOT pay the Black man his honest wage. In fact, when he requested that you pay him, you mocked him, and preferred to rip your money to pieces rather than allow him to earn his living.'

Now he faced a conundrum: if he admitted that the so-called money he ripped up was fake and purely for the benefit of muggers, Obama would forget the latter and joyously suspect - and indeed vehemently accuse him - of being involved in a forgery operation; if, on the other hand, he omitted telling Obama that the money was fake, Obama would take it as proof that his statement was correct. How else to explain his actions?

He finally said, 'The cabbie had me wedged between his car and the door. I ripped those banknotes to confuse the thug so that I could neutralise him. It was clear to me that the cabbie would have attacked if I had just handed over the money to him.'

'Why would he do that?' challenged Obama, feigning puzzled indignation. 'All the Black man wanted was his due. No more, no less. Why do you insist in assuming he was a thief?'

'Because when you see a cabbie consciously and deliberately going the wrong way, with a chipped meter, constantly trying to set it on turbo, and then trying to pretend you gave him a 50 when you know you gave him a 500, only to then produce a crowbar when you challenge him, you sort of get the idea that he is not exactly an honest fellow.'

'Sort of get the idea...' repeated Obama slowly, nodding pensively as he paced round the room. 'So, in other words, your actions had nothing to do with concrete evidence - you admit that they were based on fuzzy, ill-formed, half-baked, speculative notions of yours, influenced by your hateful and odious racism!'

'No, that was an ironic understatement.'

‘Ah. So you think this is a game. You think racism is just a big old laugh. Hey, let’s beat some random nigger, then tell the police it was the nigger’s fault for being racist,’ exclaimed Obama, standing with his hands on his hips, his face the picture of angry disbelief.

‘The only racist was the cabbie,’ he fired back. ‘He tried to rip me off, then subjected me to racial slurs when I refused to let him.’

Obama chuckled in response, allowing his chuckle to gradually escalate into laughter.

He sat in silence, observing Obama’s trachea ripple as the laughter turned uproarious and hysterical. Come on. Enough with the theatre, he thought.

‘I should point out that your refusal to show me the CCTV footage speaks volumes,’ he said, finally.

Obama ceased his laughter, abruptly, and fixed him-with a serious gaze. ‘I don’t have to show you anything,’ said Obama, quietly and wide-eyed. ‘The police don’t need to argue with racists. We are here to get information about your racism, so we can convict you. If you want to waste your money getting some racist lawyer to defend you, by all means - the sooner you are ruined, the better; but don’t for a minute think we are going to let you waste tax-payer’s money proving what doesn’t need proving because it has already been proven beyond all reasonable doubt.’

‘Well,’ he rejoined, ‘you are already wasting tax-payer’s money by interrogating me, rather than the cabbie. I was the victim of racism. The cabbie was a predatory, abusive, and violent rip-off merchant. My conclusions had nothing to do with him being Black. They have everything to do with his behaviour. You should be investigating his vicious racism.’

‘Oh, yeah. Thoroughly and in-depth, right?’ mocked Obama.

‘Exactly,’ he replied.

‘And while we are at it, why not exonerate Hitler, and investigate the Jews for their vicious racism,’ orated Obama. ‘Because the Holocaust had nothing to do with their being Jews of course, but everything to do with their racist behaviour. It’s the Germans who are owed compensation for the Holocaust!’

‘Your logic is flawed,’ he sentenced.

‘It’s flawed because it’s your twisted logic, Herr Hitler. Thank you! Now we can finally move on,’ said Obama clapping his hands.

He stared at Obama, in silence, curious as to what new travesty of the facts Obama would come up with next.

Obama said, 'OK. So... We have established that you are happy to associate with - no, you seek out! - convicted Nazis and Holocaust Deniers, that you are anti-Semitic, homophobic, and racist - violently racist! -, that you believe in Jewish conspiracies, and that you think yourself better than everyone else, to the point where you engage in egotistic, anti-social behaviour. Jeez, Mister, I just don't know how much worse it can possibly get. You are like, the worst person in the world!'

'Well, the fact that you won't show me the CCTV footage that supposedly proves all these allegations tells me all I need to know,' he said, stopping short of threatening with litigation: he knew - the same way Obama knew, given his behaviour - that the likes of Obama were above the law.

'And, by the way,' intimated Obama, ignoring his comment, 'don't congratulate yourself - the implications of your phrase "fiat money" did not escape me. We're sending the taxman round your house to look for your gold. I know - and you know we know - you have an illegal stash hidden away somewhere.'

Damn him! he exploded, in his mind, but twitching not a muscle. He attempted to sound casual, 'Yes, I had a coin collection, but I used it as a deposit for the house we have now,' he confessed - omitting, of course, the fact that he had since accumulated savings in the form of another hoard.

'Well, we are going to send the taxman round anyway. I'm sure there'll be something illegal in there.'

Again, he decided Obama would automatically construe silence as an admission of guilt. 'Well, like everybody, I try to avoid taxes. But I don't evade them.'

'Tax avoidance and tax evasion are the same thing.'

'No, they are not. Avoid -'

'Listen, Mister,' interrupted Obama, gesturing with his hand. 'If you are avoiding taxes, it is because you are antisocial and you don't want to chip in your fair share to the common pot. If you are evading taxes, you do it for the exact same reason. So, tax avoidance and tax evasion are the same thing, as far as the taxman is concerned. You won't be able to fool him with your sophistry. The law is the law, and if you break the law you go to prison. Pure and simple.'

'The law,' he said, annoyed, 'permits tax avoidance. As in when you buy a less polluting car and therefore avoid paying taxes designed to encourage greener motoring.' The argument was purely rhetorical: the government had never succeeded in persuading him that the sole purpose of green taxes was to increase government revenue with minimal voter backlash; the

operative word was, of course, ‘taxes’, not ‘green’. The revenue collected by the so-called green taxes always went to fund speed cameras, automobile black box scanners, telephone monitoring, internet surveillance, parking meters, clamping, politically correct propaganda campaigns, electioneering entitlement programmes, ministers’ salaries and expenses, and various government bureaucracies, such as the Equality Commission and other behavioural and psychological regulators.

‘Pfff! You’re really a piece of work. That kind of bullshit argument won’t wash with the taxman. Taxes are there to be paid. And they need to be paid because the government needs funds. And the government needs funds because it is there to run the country and look after people and protect them – not protect people like you, of course, but protect them from people like you. Therefore, taxes are a civic responsibility. So, if you avoid paying taxes, you are evading your responsibility, and this makes you a criminal.’

‘I cannot decide whether you sound like Euthydemus or his brother, Dionysodorus,’ he said, calmly, but finally unable to resist retaliating with a demeaning remark of his own.

‘Who were they?’

Pig-ignorant fool, he thought, smiling inwardly, before answering, ‘They were Athenian sophists. Plato used them in one of his early dialogues to ridicule the kind of eristic arguments you make.’

‘Well, there you have it,’ said Obama, as if a conclusion had been reached, turning around to look at King Kong. ‘He mentions Plato. Not only does he think himself better than everyone else, but he confesses himself an eugenicist.’

‘And you have just proven my point,’ said he, not deigning to elaborate.

Obama turned to face him again, ‘You can prove all the points you like, Mister - in your mind. But you won’t be able to prove anything to the taxman, except that you have been filching money from the government.’

Obama’s phrasing hit a nerve with him. ‘Hang on. Irrespective of how much money the government wants me to hand over, that money is mine. It doesn’t belong to the government. I hand it over because the government intimidates me into doing it, and I therefore have no choice. But that money is mine. I worked for it. I earned it. It is the product of my talent, time, and effort. If the government did with it what tax-payers asked for, then OK, their taking a chunk of people’s private wealth might have legitimacy, but they don’t. They use intimidation and outright theft to take my money and everybody else’s

money and they do with it whatever they like. They then hold elections once every five years and present us with identical candidates. So don't tell me I've been filching money from the government. The government has been filching money from me!

'So you go and steal from the government, right? You feel justified to rob people of their public services, their unemployment benefit, their disability benefit, their winter heat allowances, their pensions, their council housing, their single mum's allowances, and whatnot, because the government doesn't exist purely for your pleasure and comfort.'

'I didn't say that. I still pay tax. I keep for myself what the law allows me to keep, and hand over what the law requires me to hand over. That is not the same as saying that the money belongs to the government. Just because the law demands that people hand over their money it doesn't mean that tax is some form of debt they have with the government.'

'You owe tax. Therefore it is debt,' insisted Obama, emphatically serious.

'No. The government may take my money, but the money still belongs to me. That is why - in theory - there are elections, and why people are allowed to choose from a list of candidates, and why these candidates compete with one another by offering - in theory - different economic programmes. The idea - long abandoned - is that politicians are accountable to me, to tax payers, and that they are not allowed to waste my money any which way they like.'

'Waste your money,' replied Obama, enunciating the words fastidiously. 'Of course, you would see it that way: you, Mister superior, who turns his nose at the rabble and the lumpen proletariat and the millions of scrounging immigrants and criminal Blacks that make up the majority of the population.'

'Successive governments have crippled the economy with an entitlements programme they could never afford, because their time horizon was always the next election. Then, when they couldn't pay, they ran the printing press and sought to inflate their way out of their deficits.'

'What convoluted logic you have! ANYTHING to wriggle out of your civic responsibilities! Well, prattle your conspiracy theories all you like; they'll not make any difference. We'll prove you are a paranoid conspiracy buff and you'll pay the money you owe. The taxman won't be as patient as we have been. He's just going to wait until you're finished ranting and then rip your fucking bollocks off. You just wait!'

He simply shrugged, as if to say 'go ahead, search all you

want', but, in reality, anxious for Obama to change the subject and completely forget about it. He had already been provoked into saying much more than he would have liked.

Obama fixed his black eyes on him and lowered his voice, menacingly, 'We'll find your anti-Semitic gold, Mister. You can be sure of that!'

Obama then returned to the table, sat down, and picked up his dossier one more time, his manner abruptly indifferent. 'OK. What next... err... aha!'

The door behind Obama suddenly cracked open, to reveal the octogenarian sandwich "boy" of earlier. He was pushing the door with his left shoulder, while holding with both hands four half-bagette sandwiches. Both Obama and King Kong turned their heads to look, King Kong licking his lips in anticipation the instant his black eyes zeroed-in on his lunch.

'Steak sandwich, two chorizo sandwiches, and a tortilla sandwich,' said the sandwich "boy".

'Great,' said Obama, smiling broadly.

Sandwich "boy" handed over the sandwiches, careful not to drop them as Obama and King Kong grabbed the ones they had ordered. Obama then followed the sandwich "boy" out of the room. King Kong remained seated, staring at him darkly, with his massive head tilted back slightly, somewhat menacingly. Obama returned two minutes later, carrying two cans of carbonated drink.

The aroma of a hot, juicy steak, fried in a pan with a pinch of salt and a spoonful of olive oil, trimmed and filling a freshly-baked bagette, along with a few slices of fresh tomato, entered his lungs, causing his mouth to salivate and his stomach to protest its emptiness.

'Mmmm,' exclaimed Obama, closing his eyes in ecstasy as he took a hearty bite out of his sandwich. 'Man, this good!'

He stared at Obama, noticing how his inquisitor's brown temples throbbed synchronically with his chewing. As soon as he swallowed, Obama looked at King Kong, nodding in approval, 'Yours good? Is your chorizo nice and tasty?'

King Kong nodded back, too absorbed by sensual pleasure to utter a word.

Obama then looked at him, and taunted 'I don't know about you, but I was starving!'

He said nothing, resolved to stoically transcend his animal discomfort.

Obama, however, derived enormous delight at the thought of making it as difficult as possible for his detainee to achieve that

transcendence. He said, mockingly, 'I don't know why you didn't order a sandwich for yourself. It's not as if we didn't give you a chance.' Obama took another hungry bite, once again moaning with pleasure as he chewed, before adding, 'You could have been biting into one of these right now. It's very tasty and juicy. This is premium beef, I tell you, from an old-fashioned farm.'

Again, he said nothing.

Obama's temples continued to pulse rhythmically, his chewing relentless. 'I don't know how you think you'll gain something by not eating,' Obama continued, chuckling and smirking. 'It's so stupid. You don't know what you're missing.'

He waited patiently, while Obama and King Kong devoured their sandwiches.

Once finished, and while King Kong was still attacking his tortilla sandwich, Obama opened his can of Coke (which was still ice-cold, despite the high ambient temperature), tilted his head back, and guzzled away for many seconds. He observed Obama's Adam's apple pulsing as his inquisitor drank with a face that was lost in thirst-quenching bliss.

When finished, Obama put the can back on the table, exhaling loudly, as relief washed over him in an awesome wave.

'Nothing like an ice-cold drink when you are dying of thirst,' said Obama, smiling broadly, his teeth very white against his dark lips and gums.

For an instant, he had an impulse to grab the chair he was sitting on, and swing it against Obama's head. He imagined Obama's head cracking open like a coconut, and seeing Obama still smiling smugly, even while on the floor, with his brains spilling out. He fancied Obama would never stop smiling and provoking him with his twisted accusations, degrading interpretations, and willfully wrong conclusions, even as he stomped on Obama's cranium and turned his inquisitor's cerebellum to mush.

'You're thinking of whacking me in the head, aren't you,' said Obama, winking at him with obvious self-satisfaction.

He opened his mouth momentarily, minded to utter a mild denial, but was interrupted by Obama before he had decided on his wording.

'Psh!' hissed Obama, as he leaned back in his chair, shaking his head, grinning from ear to ear. 'Beneath your suit and tie and two PhDs, Mister, you're are just a common racist thug.'

'I do think that if you were a character in a novel, a lot of readers would be wanting to whack you in the head,' he said.

'Only in a novel written by William Pierce,' replied Obama,

shrugging indifferently.

‘Who’s he?’

‘Stop playing games,’ mumbled Obama. ‘You’ve been twisting things the wrong way all morning. I’m tired of it. Let’s get serious, OK?’

‘I am serious,’ he stated, emphatically.

‘Good.’

There was a moment of silence. Obama simply sat on his chair, leaning back, his stomach full, his thirst quenched, his brain in siesta mode. Interrogating a detainee, and finding ways to pervert all his statements with contortuplicated trickery was evidently energy-intensive. He noticed Obama’s shirt had large circles of sweat under each arm and around the neck. Eventually, Obama leaned forward and picked up the dossier once more.

‘Okayyy... What else have we got here...’

He waited, anxious.

‘OK,’ said Obama, quickly, and suddenly alert. ‘On Monday morning you went to the Picasso Tower. What did you do there?’

‘I had a meeting with my clients.’

‘Who specifically?’

‘Dr. Oker, Scoptic’s CEO; Dr. Stumm the CIO, and Dr. Brummagem, the CFO.’

‘What business do you have with fraudsters who hide behind fake names?’

‘Well, as I said, to me they appeared legitimate. And, yes, I guess Brummagem sounded like a made-up name, "but then again, there are many people who have made-up names in the world - most surnames have been made up anyway, based on professions or lineage: Miller, Fisher, Johnson, Peterson. Jewish surnames are well-known recent examples - usually derived from cities or minerals or natural features. Silverman, Berliner, Krakowski, things like that. But that is because Napoleon forced them to adopt surnames, chosen from a list that was made available to them. Before that they called themselves things like Chaim son of Moses, or Solomon son of Abraham. No big deal.’

‘More vile anti-Semitism... And I suppose you are going to tell me next that Abraham Lincoln was Jewish, right? And that the American Civil War was a Jewish conspiracy designed to destroy the White race, right?’ Obama snorted, Before emitting his verdict: ‘Typical.’

T never said anything about -’

‘Well, anyway,’ interrupted Obama. ‘So you admit that you

realised all the names were made up, and that you knowingly made yourself an accessory to a string of financial crimes. Boy, your sentence is going to be long! OK, so what did they hire you to do?’

‘Develop an accounting system that would keep itself up-to-date with tax legislation.’

‘So that it could look for loopholes in the legislation and steal money from the government.’

‘So they could minimise their tax liabilities,’ he corrected, in an emphatic monotone.

‘In other words, steal from the government. Wriggle out of paying their fair share.’

‘Minimise tax liabilities within the confines of the law.’

‘OK, so stealing from the government’

‘No,’ he stressed, as if lecturing an obtuse child. ‘Making efficient use of the accounting structures permitted by the law.’

‘OK, so stealing from the government, then,’ persisted Obama.

‘Taking full advantage of what is permitted by up-to-date tax law.’

‘Meaning, stealing as much as you can. From the government.’

‘I am not going to go along with that, no matter how many times you repeat it. Tax law demarcates a percentage of a company’s profits according to a set of rules. Outside that, the profits are for the company to keep. My job was to make sure the lines of demarcation were as clean and precise as possible.’

‘Alright, so we agree then: your job was to make sure they stole money from the government as quickly as possible, while the taxman wasn’t looking. Because that is what exploiting loopholes amounts to: stealing money - from the government - while the taxman isn’t looking.’

‘Well, when this goes to court, I look forward to the prosecution making this argument, so I can see him laughed out of the court,’ he said, giving up.

‘Good. So, now that you have finally admitted that you agreed to set up an electronic scam machine, we can move on to the next question. How long have you had dealings with Mr. Breme.’

‘I don’t know anybody with that name.’

Obama sighed. ‘When will you stop pretending you’re a serious businessman?’

It took superhuman effort not to take the bait, ‘I don’t know anybody with that name.’

‘You do. Stop calling him Dr. Oker. There is no doctor and no Oker.’

‘Dr. Oker approached me about developing the aforementioned

accounting system about a year ago. He had read the article on Science magazine and was very interested in my work with linguistic matrices and artificial intelligence.'

'So, you don't care when a white-collar criminal with a fake name asks you to develop software so he can steal from the government. You are happy to sell your ideas for fraud to the highest-bidding criminal.'

'Look. Wanting to minimise tax liabilities does not make Dr. Oker a criminal; it makes him a businessman. And as far as I am concerned, the project was legal and legitimate, and I have no knowledge, nor did I ever get the impression, of Dr. Oker being a criminal, white collar or otherwise.'

'Mr. Breme travelled to Chile in 2005.'

He was baffled. 'Was there something wrong with Chile in 2005?'

'Mr. Breme also travelled to Munro in Antarctica in 2019.' 'That only tells me he might have been a fan of Scott of the Antarctic'

Obama suddenly exploded with a histrionic show of exasperation; 'WHEN will you stop LYING!' Obama shouted, becoming so animated, gesticulating so wildly, with his eyes almost falling out of their sockets, as to appear comical. 'Don't you see that your position is utterly hopeless? Give up! Just give us an honest answer for once, in your life! Regardless of what you say, you are headed for prison. The gulag! And - guess what, Mister - there isn't going to be a Solzhenitsyn to write a novel about you. No! No no no no no! Next time you get a chance to see your reflection in the mirror, you will be an old man - your head bald, your face like a city center road map, your back curved like a banana.'

He remembered the Robert Scott of the 1948 film Scott of the Antarctic; he had always been fascinated by the stiff upper lips of John Mill's Scott and his film comrades - even if it was only a film, he liked the idea of enduring extreme adversity with calm fortitude and a gentlemanly formality. Scott might have been victim of over-ambition and inadequate preparation in his bid for the South Pole, but Scot, like his comrades - Wilson, Oates, Bowers, Evans - had gone down bravely, fighting to the last, ever master of his emotions. To his mind, that was the behaviour that pertained to a serious person. Moreover, a serious businessman understood that competition for resources, be it money, status, or freedom, was a fact of life, that it was a matter of survival - otherwise, nothing personal. Consequently, a serious businessman elevated himself above the pettiness of emotional blackmail, personality clashes,

office intrigues, and short-term setbacks, to focus on achieving objectives by making rational decisions. A serious businessman could expect to be under constant pressure - internal pressure to perform, external pressure to outcompete. Therefore, his present situation was normal - different in practice, but theoretically no different from the situations he encountered as a consultant in an expertise market. The key to success, as Herb Cohen said in his brilliant book, was to see it all a bit like a game - in other words, to care, but not that much. Yes, Obama was anxious to obtain damning information from him as quickly as possible, and both hated Whites and loved Blacks; but Obama was simply sticking up for his kin and doing what he was hired to do, using whatever tools at his disposal; he was neither good nor evil - simply a Black man looking for a promotion. He was just one strategising organism competing against another, in a habitat with finite resources. His survival depended on ensuring the net flow of resources went in his direction. And resources included information. The more expensive he made it, the more time, effort, and skill he forced Obama to invest in order to obtain it, and the more unrewarding he made the information appear in contrast to the expenditure required to obtain it, the sooner Obama would tire and see the pointlessness of pressing him for more.

The game was on.

He said, coolly, 'I don't see the relevance of Dr. Oker's travel preferences.'

'Aw, come on, now, Mister. Chile? Antarctica? Even a five-year-old can see the connection. Why don't you drop the pretence?'

He simply stared, his face an expressionless mask.

Obama continued, 'Mr. Breme travelled to Santiago on 19 April 2005. Stayed until the 21st, and flew back to Germany.'

'I still don't see the relevance. I only met Dr. Oker this year.'

'Mr. Breme flew to Santiago in time for your hero's birthday, probably to celebrate it with Miguel Serrano.'

Had that name not sent a chill down his spine, he would have had trouble suppressing an urge to laugh. Damn, he thought, dreading he might indeed be in as serious trouble as he had initially imagined; if this was about more than a thieving cabbie playing at race politics, he might as well pluck out his eyes because he was never going to see the light of day again. 'Really?' he said, trying as best he could to sound nonchalant and blasé. 'Well, I can tell you I have no heroes whose birthday I celebrate.'

'Sure. And my name is William Pierce,' mocked Obama. 'Only

a Nazi would make it a point to travel to Santiago on Hitler's birthday. To Santiago, of all places! Mr. Breme was part of the Neo-Nazi international underground, and you know it. That's why you do business with that piece of scum.'

'Surely, if that was the case - and this is news to me, and I don't necessarily accept that your allegation is true - '

'It is not an allegation, Mister, it is a statement of FACT.'

'As I was saying, if the allegation is true, surely a neo-Nazi would have celebrated Hitler's birthday in Austria--or in Germany.'

'Not if he was a disciple of Miguel Serrano, as you know all too well,' replied Obama, hands on hips, opening his eyes wide, and forming a tight, rimless circle with his lips. 'We know he went to the master to be initiated into his twisted cult.'

He decided to risk a lie - surely, Mr. Wermod had been careful. 'I have no idea who this Miguel Serrano is.'

'And of course you don't read the newspapers, or watch the news, or surf the net, or talk to anyone about current affairs, right? You live in a cave in the mountains and never see or talk to anyone, except your wife whom you drag by the hair and bang once in a while. Right? Well; maybe that's true. After all, you are a Nazi and Nazis are all misogynistic troglodytes.'

Obama's disgusting utterance hit him like a football in the face. Obama had overstepped his bounds in a most grievous and intolerable way. Unfortunately, neither fracturing Obama's mandible or storming out of the room in disgust were possibilities. Moreover, whichever way he reacted would diminish him: if he showed anger, Obama would grin with pleasure, knowing his tactics had rattled him; if he ignored the injury, Obama would snort with contempt, knowing he was a man without honour. It was exasperating. Still, he had to answer, otherwise he would go on record as uncooperative as his silence would be interpreted as an admission of guilt.

'I am a scientist. I read scientific journals,' he said eventually. 'I am also a businessman and I read business journals. Like I said before, I find World War II boring. Religion I find equally boring. Therefore, if this Miguel Serrano is a cult leader, I would not know about him. I certainly haven't heard him discussed among my clients.'

'You think you're really clever, don't you? You think that by using "is" you are going to fool me, eh?'

'Is?'

'Yes, "is",' iterated Obama, with cartoonish emphasis. Then again, perhaps you think he survived the Kali Yuga, and is hiding in

Antarctica too.'

'What, with Adolf Hitler?'

'Aha!' shouted Obama, shooting an accusing finger in his direction, his face fulgurating with delight.

Chapter 31

The Gulag

Never would he have imaged that he would one day find himself in such a situation. There he was, a respectable businessman and law-abiding citizen, an intelligent person with a post-graduate education and the subject of articles in the most prestigious scientific and business journals, lying on the floor of a holding cell, in the dark, on remand, suspected of vile crimes and dubious associations, forming part of a sudorous ahuman carpet alongside all manner of tattooed thugs, drug addicts, and common criminals. The overcrowding inside the cell made it impossible to see the floor: chests were pressed against backs, groins against glutei, and shoes against faces; detainees slept on their sides, using each other's heads or feet as pillows. He had chosen the latter, the kinky hair of black men appearing at best too prickly for him. The temperature exceeded what old-fashioned thermometers were able to register; the walls and ceiling perspired with condensation; there was a constant murmur of breathing and snoring, sniped at every second by coughing, sneezing, and throat-clearing. The air was thicker than lentil soup, and pungent with the stench of perspiration, flatulence, and tooth decay.

He was very concerned with keeping his Saville Row suit in good state of repair. Appearances mattered.

He had realised almost immediately that he had made a stupid mistake. He imagined Obama was now buzzing with the satisfaction of knowing that he had caught him, the scientist with two PhDs, telling a pack of lies. Of course, there was no way he could have known about Hitler's secret base in Antarctica without being aware of Miguel Serrano's writings. Never

mind that he had never read them. Mr. Wermod had told him and he had an eidetic memory. That was good enough for Obama. Obama would not care to hear reasons, excuses, or explanations.

'There were Hitler survival myths for decades after the war,' he had said, trying to sound dismissive. 'Even twenty Yeahrs ago I remember seeing press reports of Hitler being found in Chile or Argentina, aged over a hundred. So Hitler in Antarctica, why not? It makes sense when you appear so obsessed with Hitler and the Nazis.'

'Don't you start. Don't you start projecting your Nazism on me,' had warned Obama, waving an admonishing finger at him, before adding, condescendingly, 'I am BLACK, remember? BLACK, as in, man with black skin, originating from Africa, with a big cock and a big sense of style. Yeah? My heroes are Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, George Washington Carver, and people like that. Not that you'd ever heard of them.'

He had been sent back to the holding cell soon after; and he had been kept in there all afternoon, until evening. It was now one hour since lights out, but he could not sleep.

How had he managed to end up in there? Less than six days ago - the previous Saturday evening - he had been in his double-glazed, air-conditioned woodland cottage, sitting on a comfortable sofa, surrounded by his possessions, in the company of his wife, reading the introduction to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. They had done nothing extraordinary that evening; they had dined on a roast chicken, watched an old film (*Twelve Monkeys*), and picked up their respective books. His wife had finished McKittrick Ros' *Delinda Delaney*; she had read the novel purely because of its bizarre literary style. On Sunday morning they had played a game of *Dóminos* with his wife's mother, who had come to visit; his mother-in-law was an astrophysicist who also composed deep space ambient music in the vein of Arecibo's *Transplutonian Transmissions*.

In terms of that type of music, however, he preferred Wierzba's 1999: *Earth Termination*, but his mother-in-law cited it only as a minor influence. After *Dóminos*, which all of them played over a dram of mead, his mother-in-law had challenged him to a game of speed Chess. They had tied, winning each five out of ten games, and his mother-in-law, an irate loser, blamed her not winning on the cuckoo clock he had in his kitchen, which had broken her concentration by striking three o'clock just as she had glimpsed a decisive series of moves. She had then left, Bobby Fischer-style, allegedly to continue working on her

13,200-piece puzzle, depicting Bruegel's *The Battle Between Carnival and Lent*. How far away that seemed to him now! His normal life, by which he meant his private life - and which could very well end up becoming his former life - suddenly felt like a pleasant dream, distinctly recollected, but forever beyond reach. He longed to be back at home, lying on the sofa, wearing a clean shirt and a clean pair of trousers, reading his book, losing himself in Spengler's meta-historical analysis, in the sedentary tranquillity of his private environment, bathed in comforting silence and tungsten light, and feeling his wife's warm and affectionate presence as she worked on her latest novel nearby. If only he would wake up now and find himself on that sofa, smelling the scent of beef roasting in the oven - along with basted potatoes, parsnips, carrots, and onions - as he discovered that it had all been a nightmare, and remembering that he had simply completed his project and returned home on Friday night to spend a leisurely weekend, drinking lemon iced tea, reading and listening to music, and playing games with his wife.

His wife! She had probably been ringing the mobile all day, at first eager to report her observations inside Pierre's apartment, subsequently simply to hear his voice and confirm that he was alive and uninjured. He guessed she would have attempted to contact the hotel, his office, and, eventually, Scoptic's Dr. Oker, if he had not been "in a meeting", would have been no help, but at least she would have made him aware of the fact that his absence had been unplanned and unintentional. If Dr. Oker had been unavailable or uninterested, however, she would have left a message with either Mrs. Cotter or Dr. Oker's personal secretary, either of whom would not have been careful with the wording of her message and passed on a mutilated, vague Chinese whisper, which would have been imperfectly recited, carelessly heard, and wrongly interpreted by Dr. Oker. He hoped Mrs. Cotter had resisted the temptation to spew her misandristic venom, implying somehow that she assumed, he had buggered off with some secret lover or prostitute, because that is what all men are like. His wife would dismiss such gratuitous prejudice out of hand, correctly ascribing them to fun happy experiences with a long concatenation of indolent misogynists, promiscuous rakes, repressed homosexuals, and impotent kleptomaniacs. Having exhausted obvious contact points, his wife would have, most likely, decided to wait a while, hoping for signs of life from his camp, before prologuing the escalation of her search with a fresh and attempt at contacting him. He

was pained by the idea of his wife worrying, increasingly anxious by the lack of information and the impossibility of obtaining any. She would probably eventually lose her appetite and find it difficult to concentrate on her writing. If only his captors would allow him access to a telephone, as they were legally obligated to do. One telephone call is all he would need to get things moving in the outside world.

The problem would be who to call. His wife was the obvious choice, but then that was probably not the most effective option. She would want to extricate him from his plight irrespective of cost; only lawyers would not necessarily obtain any results other than cleaning out all their bank accounts. He had the impression that this is what his captors would be hoping for, having contrived his detention in such a way as to protract any legal process and render it as costly as possible so as to leave him destitute. After all, they appeared convinced that he was a neo-Nazi, and in a nominally, capitalistic society economic destruction was a favourite way to neutralise political dissidents. No, he would have to call someone with influence who could get him out of there by pulling the appropriate levers, and have that person convey a message to his wife. Whether they would let him talk long enough to explain his predicament, suggest the appropriate course of action, and articulate a satisfactory message to pass on to his spouse was another question. His captors would probably impose an artificially low time limit on his call; they would also record everything, and have a plan in place to neutralise any ally or advocate he might have in the outside world. He would therefore have to use whatever time he had available to (1) compose a highly-compressed message that could be intelligibly and unambiguously unpacked by the recipient, and (2) decide on a way to encode it, so as to frustrate any attempts by his captors to frustrate any bid to regain his freedom.

Evidently, the most secure encoding would be one that hid the information in plain sight. The encoding itself would in turn need to be concealed within apparently banal and typical phrases: talking over the phone in ASCII or Base 64, for example, was out of the question. And since his captors' strategy obviously relied on facilitating collaboration by progressively depressing his faculties, using noise, and food and drink and sleep deprivation, he would have to concoct his message quickly and in such a way that it would be easy to remember even after his mind was no longer in proper working order.

He had his work cut out for him.

Even if he managed to get out of that dungeon, however, he could not help worry his troubles would not end there. Obama's conduct, and a string of vaguely-recollected press reports involving 'enemies of democracy' over the Yeahrs, made it plain that the government wrote the rules as they went along, legislating on the hoof in order to obtain the desired result where existing legislation failed. Usually, these 'enemies of democracy' had been radical Islamists, for whom he had felt zero sympathy. 'Because he felt Islam had no place in Europe, and because it was clear to him that Islam - never moderate, regardless of politically correct platitudes to the contrary - was resolved to conquer Europe, he had consumed the aforementioned media reports - typically informing concerned citizens about the deportation or conviction of one radical Islamist or another - with angry glee. Moreover, he had greeted the introduction of anti-extremist legislation with great delight, since it ostensibly, targeted .Islamists, on whom the ordinary legal process, and anything but the most draconian of penal consequences, was a complete waste of tax-payer's money. Naturally, he did not like being forced to tolerate the limitations to his freedom of speech, thought, movement, and association that resulted from the egalitarian application of such legislation. To him Islam was always radical, and because it was (and openly declared itself to be) a proselytising Middle Eastern religion favoured by men and women who shared common characteristics, it would have been much more reasonable and rational if such legislation had relied on racial and/or ethnic profiling for its application. He would have also preferred strict controls on who was allowed to come and settle in Europe, rather than strict controls on what people who lived in Europe were allowed to say, write, read, watch, think, or publish, what organisations they were allowed to belong to, what political parties they were allowed to vote for, what music they were allowed to listen to, and what personal associations they were allowed to maintain, in order to keep the chanko stew in the social pressure cooker from exploding. After all, a homogeneous society was easier to legislate for because people shared a concrete set of values; a highly heterogenous society required mountains of legislation, regulating every aspect of the individual's life, as well as a bloated and highly complex bureacracy, designed to invent it, record it, expand it, refine it, and enforce it, alongside an omniscient surveillance apparatus, to constantly monitor behaviour and report non-conformity. Indeed, finding formulas for inducing highly heterogeneous

groups of individuals to cooperate and perceive themselves as members of a single community with common or compatible interests had exercised the brains of even the most highly gifted of academic researchers. It was the difference between dealing with a solution versus an emulsion, or a cohesive compound versus an adhesive compound. Would he have just preferred? Well, not just preferred, but a lot more than that: in fact, he had strong objections to how Western politicians had re-configured Western societies, allowing or encouraging high immigration from all over the world in order to appease the lobbying of big businesses, who demanded cheap labour in order to reconstruct profit margins obliterated by taxation, regulation, and ruthless competition, once they had finished cutting all the corners and discovering all the cheapest materials. Yes, he had strong objections, had nourished them for decades, but he was also convinced that, unfortunately, there was nothing he could do: protesting in any meaningful way would have fixed the government's microscope on him, inviting monitoring, tax probes, media reports, social discomfort, public opprobrium, and worse; and as a serious person and reputable businessman, leading a serious consultancy firm, he could not afford to put his livelihood or his reputation at risk. Learning to live with the state of the world, and insulating himself as best he could from its continuing deterioration, had been the least risky and therefore the most rational choice. He had reasoned that, provided he did not rock the boat, kept his grumbles private, and voted with his wallet, he would be able to live his life in relative comfort, irrespective of how bad things got out there. And if things ever got so bad that maintaining his safety and standard of living became impossible, he would always have the option to emigrate.

Given recent evidence, however, it appeared to him now that, perhaps, his method for adapting to the realities of a changing world had not been optimal.

Surely, the causality chain that led to his head resting on a common criminal's brown moccasin shoe, inside an overcrowded holding cell, in the steamy basement of a corrupt police station, did not begin with him having chosen the wrong taxi cab, or even the wrong method of transport, at Madrid Barajas, Terminal 4, back on Sunday night. He could have hailed a criminal cabbie at any time: either in the future, where criminality in the profession would have been statistically probable, or in the past, where it would have been less endemic, but in neither case an impossibility. The existence of

criminal cabbies was a constant in time; their frequency, and their proliferation in the form of airport mafias, however, varied in conformity with the law of entropy, or second law of thermodynamics. The problem, therefore, had been the rate of entropy - the rate of social decay, the speed at which form degenerated into chaos - a factor over which, despite his misanthropic pessimism, he knew well enough humans had some degree of control. But not all humans, of course: only those in a position to influence events, those equipped with elite brains and who were, or had put themselves, in a position to be able to shape events and reconfigure society as per their aspirations; the rest, the average consumer, either through apathy, lack of brains, lack of power, a combination of these, or all of the above, were shaped by events, and accepted as inevitable the society they found themselves in. He, of course, considered the latter inferior to himself. But he also considered most members of the current political and intellectual establishment inferior, despite the fact that it was their world he was living in, and their rules he was shaped by. If he was superior to them, however, then he was back to his initial question: how did he manage to end up in that cell?

If it was the brainless, apathetic consumer who conformed to the status quo, then he had not been living up to his own standards, because he had behaved just like them, if the power elite was comprised of corrupt ideologues and nincompoops, then he had not been living up to his own standards, because he had not displaced them. And, of course, he had not failed to live up to his own standards because of lack of talent or ability, and therefore because the acquisition of power was beyond his reach; rather, it was because of his conscious and deliberate lack of involvement, instigated by a belief in his own helplessness. Because this belief was not founded on empirical evidence collected through personal experimentation, but rather on a priori conclusions, adopted on the basis of everyday observation, he had effectively abrogated responsibility, and world-shaping had defaulted to those next in line, all too willing and glad to have a bite at the cherry. There was no question in his mind that he could out-think, out-innovate, and out-manoeuvre most of the craven dilettantes running things these days; and, there was no doubt in his mind either that he was enough of a misanthrope to match them in ruthlessness. Yet, it was they, the degenerate parasites he despised, who had ended up with the upper hand, moulding his behaviour, limiting his freedom, and deciding his fate for him.

He had railed against the mediocrity of the common man, fulminated against their choice of political leaders, ranted against the cowardice of politicians beholden to economic interests, and orated against the supine addiction to comfort and safety of the general voting public, because they would rather make small concessions here and there than actively defend their freedoms - their freedom of speech, of thought, of movement, of assembly, and of having full control over their assets and their economic affairs. He had expressed himself on the subject in no uncertain terms - except he had done so privately, strictly among trusted friends and family, where there was no risk and therefore where it did not count, while acting in the outside world just like the common man and member of the general voting public he had so acidly criticised. When taxes had risen, he had growled to his wife and quietly reconfigured his finances, staying clear of any activism - he had been sure activists would be duly investigated, and he had wished to avert that risk; when laws had been passed, limiting acceptable modes of speech and thought, he had learnt of it only after the event - at no point had he taken an interest in the political or academic process leading up to the passage of such laws, or become involved in any form of opposition; when new regulations had been introduced; requiring him to surrender ever more information about his identity, his whereabouts, his assets, his income, his habits, his spending, his organisational memberships, and his personal tastes and predilections, he had reacted by growling to his wife, but otherwise done as ordered - at no point, except in risk-free circumstances where it counted not, had he acted by attempting to create alternatives of his own, either as a spearhead or in association with like-minded individuals.

His flattering self-concept stood in baffling contradiction with his belief in his own helplessness. Whence lay the origin of this belief? Certainly, the fact that his letters of complaint (to editors, to companies, to airlines, to hotel managers) had typically met with no response, and infrequently with merely a perfunctory apology, composed by cut-and-paste monkeys out of ready-made clichéd phrases, had time and again confirmed him in his belief. But these experiences only provided him with confirmation; they were not the primary source. And, if he was frank with himself, he could not think now of a single incident whereby a belief in his own power to influence the way the world was run had been changed into a belief in the futility of even trying: The primary source was internal: it had to involve

something he had a stake on - something like, for example, his preoccupation with his own social and professional status. It was this preoccupation that had consistently checked the impulse to publicise his non-conforming views outside a narrow circle of friends and family - that had encouraged him to emasculate his language, and conceal his real opinions under a veil of obliquity, obscurity, allusion, proverb, dissimulation, irony, and euphemism. But was not social and professional status dependent • on external validation? Had he not made himself subservient to his inferiors by making his source of self-esteem dependent on their granting validation? Within this analytical framework, a belief in his own helplessness betrayed itself as a convenient rationalisation.

Obama was ill informed about the nature of his crimes: his had not been a sin of commission - and it was quite possible that Obama knew this and was persecuting him for that reason; his sin had been one of conscious and persistent omission. Viewed from this perspective, he was guiltier than his cellmates, and deserving of his fate. Why? Because his cellmates were cellmates because they lacked the ability and the qualities necessary to change - or at least contribute to change - the way the world was run. The stupid did not always become common criminals, but common criminals were always stupid: therefore power, other than in the transient forms afforded by fists, guns, bombs, and knuckledusters, was beyond their reach. Unable to make the rules, they broke them all in the only way they knew how, out for whatever they could get. He, on the other hand, was a vastly superior specimen - superior to his cellmates, to the common man, and to their rulers - and yet he had withheld his talents, withheld his opinions, withheld his energy; in short, opted out, and focused on being comfortable within the domesticity of his life, watching his civilisation being devoured by anarchy, brutality, corruption, incompetence, misguided ideology, and hyperinflation, in an inexorable descent from the the light of the stars to the mud of the jungle.

True: he could not, by himself, abolish the indignities of airport security; purge the academic establishment of mutant Communists; elect politicians who would abolish the income tax and resist Zionist control; break banking cartels; seal Europe's borders; revoke Turkey's EU membership; repeal all the ridiculous anti-hate legislation; or re-introduce a commodity-backed, inflation-proof currency. He could not, by himself, do any of these things; and neither could he do them in asso-

ciation with like-minded people any longer: demographically, the numbers were now against him; most who once thought like him had long been replaced by new generations and new peoples, who could not, and would not, be roused to righteous anger by the issues that mattered to him. But the world he lived in had not materialised in an instant: it had been the result of a long and gradual process, spanning many decades, during which the opportunities had been available to him to do something to frustrate the type of transformation being inflicted upon the peoples of the European continent. He had glimpsed the deeper import, and sensed the underlying thrust, of each small capitulation that had been required of him and his fellow citizens, and yet he had been satisfied with merely snarling at home and adapting silently, resorting always to a strategy of absquatulation, obscurity, obfuscation, and avoidance, and never to one of active confrontation. Each demand for a concession - a new law criminalising certain opinions, the prohibition of a word, the lowering of a tax threshold - had been an opportunity he had consciously wasted, and a tacit assent he had given to the villains and idealists and so-called world-improvers to whom he had, by default, given *carte blanche* to destroy the world. In short, his obdurate passivity made him a criminal worse than his cellmates, because the magnitude of his crime was far greater. The differential between his potential and his achievement, between the rarity of his gifts and the pedestrian nature of their exercise, was immense; a myopic and miserly Promethean, he had silently accepted, and lived by, the rules of his inferiors. He lived in the world that he deserved. That is how he, a serious person and respectable citizen, with two PhDs and a serious consultancy firm, had ended up sleeping rough among criminals, in an overcrowded holding cell, inside a corrupt police station, with his gifted head resting on a brown moccasin shoe.

While lost in these lucubrations, he felt a boulder roll onto his head. It was round and approximately four kilogrammes in weight; it also had a prickly surface.

A Black man had rolled over and began using his head as a pillow.

Chapter 32

Value Added Tax

Interrogation. Day two. Once again he sat at the steel table. Across from him: Obama. King Kong was absent, replaced by a different gentleman. The new gentleman was in his early thirties, of average height and part Persian extraction; he had a square jaw and dark hair, slicked back with gel in perfect parallel lines. The gentleman wore a dark suit, a crisp white shirt, and a silk tie with a ball-and-chain leg-shackle pattern. He looked like a carbon copy of Jim Profit, from the 1997 Fox TV series. Profit sat back in his chair, his head cocked slightly sideways, his face expressionless, one hand on the table and the other on the chair's armrest, his staring eyes cold, suspicious, analytical. Since Obama had not bothered to make any introductions, he imagined Profit was, if not a specialist interrogator, trained in extracting confessions through semantic trickery, then perhaps a criminal psychologist, invited in to probe and study every recess of his allegedly hateful, racist mind. Whatever, or whoever, he turned out to be, Profit's manner made it clear that the gentleman had convicted him well in advance, and that, for him as well as for Obama, the sole purpose of the interrogation was to collect data for the prosecution, so that a cooperative judge could prescribe the longest sentence possible as per the most elastic interpretation of the law. There was no indication as to where the men stood in relation to each other within the force hierarchy.

Obama spent a few minutes browsing through his dossier, scrolling up and down, and reviewing his notes, without acknowledging his existence; he made occasional scribbles onto a

digital pad he had brought with him, which sat atop a manila envelope. Then, suddenly, as if deciding he had read enough, Obama became animated, inhaled and exhaled loudly, put his pen down, and looked at him, leaning forward, resting his elbows on the table, and crossing his fingers below his chin. Obama was wearing a brown suit and a dung-coloured tie that day.

'OK. Day two,' began Obama. At this point, Profit leaned forward and rested his forearms on the surface, the right forearm in front of the left forearm, the right hand holding a Bic pen upside down. Profit, never blinking or taking his eyes off him, began tapping the pen on the table at steady, one-second intervals.

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

He repressed the impulse to roll his eyes and shake his head in contempt. Of course, he thought. Profit was just padding: a colleague of Obama on his day off, or perhaps even an actor, shuttled in simply to play the personified equivalent to the Chinese water torture. What kind of a nupson did they think he was? He was beyond tired of Obama's Kindergarten tactics.

'Were the pancakes good?' inquired Obama, barely able to suppress an insolent smirk.

'I have not been fed,' he replied, evenly, knowing Obama knew it perfectly well, probably because he - Obama - had engineered the sudden shortage of ingredients in the kitchen.

'That is most unfortunate,' said Obama, shaking his head. 'How will you manage to remain clear-headed during the interrogation? You're gonna have to be very careful, and think each reply through before saying anything. One slip-up and you follow Saddam Hussein down the gallows.'

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

'Did you say interrogation? I am glad to hear that word. I demand access to a telephone,' he said, with angry irony.

'We're already rang it for you,' said Obama, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

'I beg your pardon?'

'We've already rang it for you.'

Anger exploded inside him, as if a kettle element had been switched on inside his brain. 'You made my telephone call for me? I assume you rang my lawyer.'

'No. You are going to prison, so we didn't bother with that. We rang the VAT office.'

'The VAT office?' he exclaimed, horrified and perplexed in equal measure.

'Yes. The VAT office.'

'Why the VAT office?'

'To inform them of your arrest, and suggest they recover any arrears by liquidating your business assets.'

'When I get out of here I am going to sue you. I am going to sue you and your department, and I -'

'Blah, blah, blah,' said Obama, his eyes half lidded with boredom as he leaned back in his chair. 'You are going to prison, Mister. Accept it, get used to it. We think your VAT affairs need to be in order, first and foremost. Anything else is less important and can wait.'

'If I am going to prison no matter what, then why are you bothering to interrogate me? Why should I cooperate with you?'

Obama raised his eyebrows, 'Good question. You are going to the gulag. The question is how long for. You want a big black cock up your arse for life, or do you want it for only twenty years?'

'You have all the class of an Alan Ginsberg,' he said, pleased with the sound of his own deadpan mordacity. The feeling of superior self-satisfaction reminded him of Pat Bateman, from Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho.

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

'What was that?'

Explanations were wasted on Obama's dull and atrophied peabrain, 'Never mind.'

'Alright. As you wish. Now, I want to know about your circumstances in 1994. You lived at 954 Archway Road, Highgate, London.'

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

'94-Yes.'

'And you were friends with Mr. Breme. He lived in flat D.' 'Mr. Breme? You mean Dr. Oker? No. I met him for the first time last year.'

'You've known him for nearly 30 years. He lived in flat D. The flat next to the shared toilets, up one flight of stairs.'

'The only time I ever spoke to anyone there was when the next door neighbour knocked on my door to discuss evidence of a large evacuation in one of the lavatories. The gentleman in question - tall one from Serbia - had mobilised half the tennants and was looking for the culprit.'

'You and Mr. Breme were involved in a multiple-identity scam.'

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

'No, that was the Irish guy that stayed there around '95. I didn't know him. I only found out later, from the landlord, that he had disappeared owing rent, that he had something like twenty different names and four telephone lines up there and the means to make fake IDs.'

'That is consistent with the way you operate.'

'I beg your pardon? I don't have multiple identities, or manufacture fake IDs, or disappear owing people money.'

'To quote you, I cannot wait until you repeat that in court, because we have reams of evidence demonstrating that you have done that many times.'

'Show it to me. I want to see. Chapter and verse.'

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

'Since 2003 you have posted 126 comments on BBC News forums, all using made-up names, and giving false regional addresses. Since 2002 you have registered to 11 internet fora, each time giving out false personal details. Since 1996 you have created 16 different email addresses, which, other than your main work email, you have changed on average once every 18 months...'

'Wait a minute. It's very normal -'

'It isn't to my mind,' anticipated Obama. 'It isn't, because it implies you have something to hide, and you are willing to engage in deception in order to avoid discovery. If you were an honest citizen you would have nothing to hide and you would always give out your true name, everywhere and every time.'

'It's called: exercising one's right to privacy, which, obviously, the websites in question have not taken seriously. Your logic makes nearly everyone a criminal,' he said, somewhat embarrassed by his own carelessness. Of course, he was well aware that even an oligophrenic chimpanzee could identify internet users even if they used pseudonyms and/or gave out incom-

plete or false details; but then, he had considered his postings on technology fora or news feedback sites innocuous enough to obviate the need for hysterical paranoia and tortuous conspiracy theories.

'You would be the same person all the time, everywhere, for everyone. What, are you not comfortable being yourself?'

'I'd rather choose my friends.'

'And certainly banks are not among them.' -

'Pfff. Only a banker would count banks as their friends.'

'But you really loathe banks, don't you? They are all run by Jews, and you would rather keep your anti-Semitic gold under a mattress, than let a bank get its clutches on it.'

'Savings accounts are pointless in an inflationary environment.'

'So you counterfeit money instead.'

'I've never operated a central bank,' he said, sarcastically.

'On seven occasions between 2002 and 2005 you counterfeited money by ping-ponging cheques between accounts to levitate your balance artificially with cheque money that did not exist in either of the originating accounts, and meanwhile earned interest on the uncleared balance.'

Obama's men had obviously audited his banking history. He had forgotten about that incident. Cheques! The idea of writing out a cheque now seemed rather quaint; the only place one found cheques these days were museums. 'Yes, OK, I did it. At the time I was having a temporary cash crisis and I thought the cheques would avoid me penalty charges while money I was waiting for came through.'

Obama nodded slowly, 'Uh-huh.'

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

'As far as I remember it didn't work. I was able to build a house of cards writing these cheques to myself. From account A to account B on day one, from account B to account A on day two, from account A to account B on day three, and so on. Eventually the paired cheques ended up in a virtual face down, waiting for its counterpart to clear. It worked the first time because although the cheques were re-presented, in the meantime the money I was waiting on came through. The second time, when I attempted a carousel, circulating cheques from account A to B, B to C, C to D, and D to A, the cheque I was owed did not clear in time before the banks involved returned my cheques unpaid; charging me a fee on each and every ac-

count. That, however, doesn't qualify as counterfeiting because the cheque money never made it into the economy, and each cheque was paired with another one extinguishing the money I created with the first one.'

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

'It is illegal to create money out of nowhere. You deceived in order to steal.'

'I stole nothing. I loaned myself money for a few days.'

'You created fake money with bogus cheques. You squandered other people's savings on superficial luxuries. That is theft.'

'The money was virtual, so it was nobody's savings. I also spent not a penny. I couldn't have anyway, because the money never cleared. I simply bought time to avoid a penalty charge.'

A penalty charge that is levied on overdrafts, which are, in effect and while they exist, counterfeited money, because that money that the bank supposedly loaned never existed in the first place - that, to me, was and still is fraud.'

'You bought more than just time. For example: chocolate bars by Suchard Velma, towels by Frette, a pair of black brogues by Church's... Only the best is enough for you, eh, Mister?'

There was no way he spent money like that in 2003; he had more rational priorities by then. 'What are the dates of those purchases?'

'The brogues were purchased on 2 June 2001; the towels on 9 December 1995; the chocolate bars on 13 November 1995...'

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

'Some of those purchases were made over a decade before the cheques in question were written out.'

'Your appetite for luxury eventually led to debts and you stole from the bank to finance a life of luxury. Whether the self-indulgence took place before or after the cheques were written out is immaterial. You stole to feign wealth and enjoy an international popstar lifestyle you couldn't afford. Your whole life is fake.'

'At the time the purchases were made I could afford them, so you cannot argue that because I had a cash crisis over a decade later I was being -'

‘OK. So we have established that you and Mr. Breme were in cahoots and operated in the same fashion. Both of you fraudsters with multiple identities.’

‘No, we haven’t established anything of the sort. And I wasn’t wallowing in luxury in 1995. As you well know and said yourself, I lived in a bedsit in a B-band house in North London.’

Obama picked up his dossier and spent a few seconds rapidly scrolling up to the appropriate point in the document. He then said, ‘Your landlord at your Archway address thought you were trouble and kicked you out.’

‘I left. I moved into a bigger place.’

‘You refused to pay your electricity bill.’

He brimaged. ‘The bedsits had coin-operated meters. And like the other tenants, I did complain about the rate, because the landlord kept tinkering with the meters - in his favour, of course. Not that it made any difference.’

‘Your neighbours also complained about you.’

‘They didn’t,’ he stated. Just as quickly, he then remembered his neighbour from the flat down the hall, a dreadlocked ecoterrorist in his fourties. The latter had - once - knocked on his door and asked him to turn down the volume. Not that he was playing music loudly, however: it soon emerged that the problem resided inside the ecoterrorist’s hypersensitive ear canal, which took instant offence by any kind of electronic hiss; the fact that (since he could not afford a stereo) he had been playing an In the Woods CD on a Sony Discman plugged onto a guitar amplifier had not helped, because the amplifier exaggerated the hiss from the recorded guitar distortion. He had attempted to negotiate, in good faith, an acceptable level of volume with the ecoterrorist, but after several minutes of tests, during which Ecoterrorist would go into his bedsit to listen out and then return with feedback, listening to music proved impossible, once it was determined that Ecoterrorist was happy only once the decibel levels had been reduced to single digits.

Obama smiled, jutting his chin and raising his eyebrows in provocation. ‘You think you can run away from your past, and invent a new life when it suits you, eh? You thought the people that noticed you and whom you crossed would fade into oblivion and disappear, their inconvenient memory of you erased by ganga and booze. Eh? Is that what you thought?’

He imagined the small, slow brains of the ambulant freakshows he might have stumbled upon as an impecunious young man - small, slow brains full of cells containing memories he would rather be erased by dint of hard drink, hard drugs, and

deep trauma. His mind then retrieved the image of his former landlord, a bearded Greek from Thessaloniki, opening the boot of his dilapidated Mondeo, and showing him bank statements he had intercepted, addressed to the by then vanished Irish conman: the latter had been receiving monthly payments of around £1,700 from an unknown source - one and a half times the average national income back then. A rapacious half smile had darkened his landlord's countenance; it was the face of a man betrayed.

He decided that Obama was grasping at straws; his procaious inquisitor was obviously under pressure to meet government-set arrest or conviction targets, and that promotion for himself and funding for his department were subject to his meeting those targets. In his anenious and hebephrenic fashion, Obama was banking on his ability to turn a (bogus) race hate attack charge into a profitable conspiracy. He also realised that his judgment had been clouded by pavid assumptions and paranoid speculations, which had blinded him to the obvious questions by shifting his focus onto evading Obama's absurd pysmatic strategems.

He said, 'Look. Yesterday you were accusing me of being a neo-Nazi. Now you are suggesting I am a multiple identity fraudster — trying to link me to conmen, or suggesting my client was one. I don't know anything about that, and I don't know what you are trying to do. If you have charges against me, then it's time you tell me. Clearly. I have the right to be legally represented and to make one telephone call. I demand immediate access to a telephone.'

At this point, Profit stopped tapping the table and turned briefly to exchange glances with Obama. Obama nodded, and Profit opened his mouth.

'I have been appointed as your solicitor.' Profit's voice was calm and self-assured, his diction precise.

'You're my solicitor,' he replied, half incredulous.

'Yes. And I suggest you cooperate. Your situation is very serious.'

His mind took him back to Mr. Wermod's car; the image of Dr. Kevin MacDonald, sitting on the back of the Beetle, silent and uneasy, overlaid the sight of Profit's cold face. 'What are the charges against me?'

'You have not yet been charged,' said Profit.

'Then you ought to release me, because I am obviously not suspected of terrorism and you cannot detain for more than 48 hours.'

'We are detaining you for reasons of national security.'
That was Kevin MacDonald! Had to be! 'National security?'

'Yes.'

A black sludge of fear and anger began flooding the chambers of his rational mind. He cursed Mr. Wermod; the fascist bookworm had implicated him in Dr. MacDonald's sequestration! Unless he could convince his inquistors he was victim of circumstance, he would end his days a walking skeleton in the Cuban gulag, sharing a bunk bed with an Esoteric Hitlerist who dreamed of Nazi UFOs and worshipped Miguel Serrano. 'Please explain. Because I have no idea how I have come to pose a threat to national security.'

'We cannot answer that question.'

'Please explain.'

'Reasons of national security.'

'I cannot prove my innocence if I don't know what it is I am supposed to prove I am innocent of.'

'You will just have to cooperate.'

'You are my lawyer.'

'Yes.'

'It doesn't sound like you are on my side.'

'I am not.'

'So why are you here?'

'Because the law requires that you be legally represented.'

'So you think I am guilty of whatever it is you intend to eventually charge me with. A priori.'

'I didn't say that.'

'So you think I might be innocent.'

'I didn't say that either.'

'I see.'

'Good.'

'What happens now?'

'We ask questions. You answer.'

'How long will this go on for?'

'We cannot answer that question.'

'I would like to make a telephone call.'

'The telephone call has already been made for you.'

'I have the right to make a telephone call. Who you call, that's your business. But I want to make my own telephone call, as I am permitted by law.'

'You fall under a different legislative regime.'

'What does that mean?'

'You fall under a different Act.'

'Why?'

'I am unable to answer that question.'

'Why?'

'National security.'

'Who did you call, then?'

'Your local VAT office.'

'Why the VAT office? Am I suspected of VAT fraud? That's not national security.'

'No. We called your VAT office because under the circumstances we consider that, first and foremost, your VAT affairs must be in order.'

'My VAT affairs.'

'Yes. They will in turn refer your case to the tax office. They will trigger an investigation.'

'An investigation?' he said, horrified.

'Yes. It's standard procedure, to ensure your declared VAT is in harmony with your tax returns.'

'Why is this imperative now?'

'A detainee's tax affairs need to be in order, first and foremost.'

'Has my wife been notified of my situation?'

'The taxman will be in touch with her in due course.'

'In due course? How long is in due course?'

'The process usually takes six to eight weeks.'

'Six to eight weeks? Are you telling me you're going to keep my wife not knowing where I am and what's happened to me for six to eight weeks?'

'It's standard procedure.'

'I don't understand the standard procedure.'

'That's not important and not for you to understand.'

'I want to understand what's happening and know what I can expect!'

'That's not important and not for you to understand.'

'Why not?'

'That's not important and not for you to understand.'

'What is important and what am I to understand?'

'You are in serious trouble and need to cooperate fully with the police.'

'You're fired. I would like another lawyer.'

'I am afraid I cannot be fired. I am a government employee and I have been appointed to represent you. I have no more choice in the matter than you do.'

'OK. If that's the case, I want to see the Act that sets out the legislative regime supposedly governing my particular case.'

'That would get you into even more trouble.'

‘How so?’

‘It would be interpreted as a desire on your part to locate and exploit loopholes in the legislation. The automatic presumption that would be made would be one of guilt.’

‘I don’t see how that would change anything. All evidence points out to the fact my guilt has already been decided upon and that I am here only so you can find as many ways to prove it as you can, regardless of my testimony or any actual evidence.’

‘Your full and honest cooperation will mitigate your sentence.’

‘I would still like to see the full text of the Act.’

‘That can be arranged, but I strongly advise against it. Your prurusal of the text is likely to result in the longest possible sentence.’

‘I would still like to see the full text of the Act.’

‘OK. We will bring you a copy of the full text so you can read it. But please let it be on record that you will do this against my professional advice.’

‘Frankly, I don’t think much of your professional advice. All I’ve got so far is veiled minacity and non-answers.’

‘Insulting me will not help your case.’

‘I don’t believe there is a case. It seems your employers have decided to convict me no matter what, to meet some kind of target. Since I cannot fire you and you will not defend me, you will have to listen to my frank and honest opinion. How soon can I get the full text of the Act.’

‘Very well. I will need to apply for a copy of the text. I will need to fill out a number of forms. In turn you will have to fill out another set of forms and pay a fee.’

‘Pay a fee? Isn’t the text in the public domain?’

‘It is, but obtaining a hard copy and having it sent here costs money. I am afraid you will have to pay for the privilege.’

‘The "privilege"? I see. And how am I supposed to pay, given that my wallet was stolen and I had to surrender my personal effects when I was booked in?’

‘An authority to debit your card will be included in the forms we will provide you with.’

‘How long will the whole process take?’

‘Three to four days. Up to a week.’

‘Can you not simply bring an electronic copy?’

‘No. The Act only allows a printed copy.’

He darted a glance at Obama, who had been sitting on his chair, staring at him, a pressure-cooker of suppressed hilarity,

barely able to keep himself from exploding into a million peals of laughter. Even if he had not already guessed as much, one look at Obama's face would have been sufficient to tell him that the Act in question was likely to consist of a vast, logorrheic swamp of inenunerable prose, redacted by legislators especially trained in obfuscation. Ensnared within the labyrinthine structure, multi-tiered subordinate clauses, and anfractuous syntax of the Act, would sit definitions vague enough to validate any number of funest conjectures a versute government dolop might care to entertain. Obama had probably wiled away the past minutes rehearsing in his mind the next barrage of supposititious arguments and procacious ipsedixitisms with which to insult his intelligence.

'OK,' he said, deciding he no longer cared. Obama, Profit, and King Kong were all malicious parasites, funded by the EU government with his own tax money. Since the whole process was a pointless charade, with the end result known in advance, he might as well say and do as he liked. 'I will not answer any more questions until I have been provided with a copy of the Act and have had adequate time to read it and understand its contents.'

'Well, Mister. Then you are going to be locked up for a very long time. Just as well. It will give us more time to soften you up and find ways to get a full confession out of you.'

He decided he might as well make give Profit a run for his money. 'And I would like *you*,' he said, addressing the lawyer, 'to advise me fully on all matters.'

'Unfortunately,' said Obama, 'your access to legal counsel is limited to thirty minutes a week. And you've already used up your time for this week.'

He frowned, 'How so?'

'There is big backlog of cases and not enough funding,' replied Obama, shrugging his shoulders with lackadaisical irony, 'He have to prioritise. Nazis are bottom of the pile.'

'Does he have a name?'

'He has a name, yes,' Obama said, casually, 'but your legal counsel has signed a confidentiality agreement, so his name is simply: Legal Counsel.'

'And you? Do you have a name?'

Obama decorated his face with a lopsided smirk, 'Barack Obama.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Whatever, Mister.'

Chapter 33

The Kingston Champion

He had been relocated to a new cell, but the move had made zero difference to his level of comfort. Designed originally for one person, the cell was currently being used as a human sardine tin, at no point packing in fewer than ten men. The only source of light inside the narrow, rectangular space was a lone fly-caked lightbulb overhead, which enjoyed reluctant assistance from the neon tubes in the corridor beyond the iron bars fronting the enclosure; three quarters of the internal illumination was absorbed by the black grime covering the peeling, bottle-green walls; while eighty percent of the external illumination was blocked by his cellmates. With the latter he shared a bed-bench, a bronze tap, and a squat toilet. The stench of stale urine, feces, and body odour kept urging him to force the humid, germ-infested air out of his lungs. The average temperature was even higher than in the larger cell, and there was only minimal respite at night. Sleeping was, of course, nearly impossible, not only because of the miasma, but also because of the constant movement of his cellmates, their frequent coughing, and the continuous murmur of conversation, a prurient scalp and tartar build up were additional sources of discomfort.

He was the only dweller who, in his estimation, could appropriately be called human; his cellmates were all very degraded specimens, mud-hued and short in stature, their bodies misshapen, their movements simian, their crania small, their faces gargoyles, their expressions feral, not unlike Maori warrior masks. In a different age they would have been held in zoos and studied by primatologists, evolutionists, and eugenicists

alike, the object of horrified fascination as the most extreme results of dysgenic fertility, mongrelisation, and the adaptiveness in a natural environment of the most archaic anatomical traits. None spoke a civilised language he could recognise: if any of them spoke Spanish, English, or French, or even a criminal pidgin based on any of those languages, their enunciation was so poor, and their vocabulary so reliant on prison and gang slang, as to sound like a foreign dialect to his educated ears. He could not be certain, even, that they understood each other, as their utterances to one another were invariably accompanied by rude gesticulation, and their reactions when spoken to invariably dull and sluggish, even though the pidgin was barked in an aggressive and threatening tone. If the maras who had mugged him by the Corte Inglés a couple of weeks ago had appeared primitive, from a cognitive perspective his cellmates represented the bottom 10th percentile even among that class: at least his muggers had been endowed with sufficient low cunning to keep themselves out of prison.

Among his nine cellmates, one had asserted himself as their leader. If Che Guevara had been born an Australian aborigine, he would have been the leader's handsome brother. The leader wore faded blue jeans and a glistening bare torso, which, like his face, was covered in tattoos; he was lean but muscular, and his long, unruly dark hair broadened his agrestial face. Pretender to the throne was a younger, more malevolent version of the Wichita Massacre co-perpetrator, Jonathan Carr; and, despite his predominantly Black ancestry, his facial tattoos had been designed to fashion his visage into a human skull. It was easy to imagine him a brutal raper of Nordic women. Wichita wore but a pair of shorts and a filthy pair of tennis shoes. Abo, the leader, usually kept near the bars, and sat on the bench, facing the far end of the cell. Wichita usually stood in the middle of the room, eyeing Abo with silent pique and predatory anticipation. Equally silent was Baseball Cap: Baseball Cap was lean and sported angular cheekbones; his sullen, Amerindian face was adorned with pockmarks and a Charles Bronson moustache; his filthy undershirt revealed tattoos with religious motifs, the muscular arms on either side ending in two grotesquely oversized fists. Unlike Abo, who shouted constantly, Baseball Cap hardly ever said anything, and limited himself to stare dead ahead with his small angry eyes. He was the kind of gentleman who would arrive home drunk every single night to beat up his wife and terrorise his children. His wife, in turn, probably cuckolded him with the likes of Abo on a regular ba-

sis. And his children, without a doubt, were all truanting burglars, vandals, muggers, bullies, and pickpockets. Baseball Cap was lower in the hierarchy than Wichita, but on the same level as the thin, long-faced North African with the thin moustache, bulbous eyes, and acute anterior plagiocephaly. Plagiocephaly spoke fast, loudly, and frequently. His favourite interlocutors were a Pakistani and a fellow North African. The latter was a jihadist, overweight, with a long, square beard and a crocheted skullcap - he did not look fierce enough, or well-educated enough, to blow himself up at an airport, so it was likely he had been caught running Islamist websites, crammed with bomb-making instructions and anti-Jewish incitement. The Pakistani was thin, with greased-back long hair, hollow eyes, and a gentle manner; he conformed to the BNP's description of a typical pædophile. Neither Kiddiporn nor Jihad, who were engaged in frequent conversation, appeared to have much patience with Plagiocephaly, and barely humoured him with short and non-committal answers. Abo had a sidekick in the form of a Sub-Saharan teenager, who was odious, insolent, and swaggering - his mouth was an outlet of uninterrupted shouting and coprolalia. The coprolocutor's favourite target was Plagiocephaly, who obliged with torrents of shouted imprecations of his own. Sidekick had two young confederates, also Congoids, and probable muggers or shoplifters, whom he nicknamed Zipi and Zape. The remaining two inmates were gypsies: one was a man in his mid forties, swarthy, with a small moustache and burn marks on a large part of his body; the other was feral and in his teens.

Given the quality of their companionship, it was evident Obama or whoever made the decisions in this respect had recommended that he be kept in isolation; since chronic overcrowding meant that solitary confinement was no longer an option except in the most extreme cases, isolation translated into minimising his ability to relate or communicate with any other detainee. It was also possible to conclude from his present situation that he was deemed instrumental in the ongoing investigation: despite their bestiality, rank odour, and status system based on low cunning, intimidation, and brute force, they were no more dangerous than the average burglar, beggar, or pickpocket. This had not meant that he had been exempt from having to negotiate his way out of ugly situations whenever the pecking order was destabilised by a new arrival. The first such occasion had been marked by his arrival. Thankfully for him, his inegalitarian mentality and the earliest les-

sons from the school playground had provided him with the correct instincts for engaging in resource competition with hominidae genera of Pliocene vintage: imitating David Irving's sternest stare, and taking advantage of his tall stature and athletic build, he had successfully projected his willingness to disproportionately retribute even the smallest infraction with forceful malice. Unused to seeing White men stand up for themselves, his cellmates had assumed he was a vicious neo-Nazi and left him alone, lest they rouse the ire of the Esoteric Hitlerists.

Sporadically, over the space of several days, he had overheard some of his cellmates - Plagiocephaly and Jihad - mention the Esoteric Hitlerists in mid jabber. Since by then he had successfully trained his ears to vaguely understand the pidgin spoken around him, he discovered that his cellmates were terrified of the Hitlerist cult. Their small brains were packed with horripilating urban myths associated with the cultists - horripilating, of course, for a naïve eight-year-old sitting by a campfire in the woods; he did not believe any of the silly stories. Like the average, well-informed man, he had come across periodic media reports about this cult. The ultra-liberal mainstream media characterised it as the province of Third Reich nutters and Hitler fetishists; to him it had appeared more like the weirder end of a broader neo-Pagan, Wotanist movement, only the media, always prepared to sensationalise and promote multi-racialism and miscegenation at the expense of the indigenous White population, got all the mileage they could out of any such fringe cult. Subsequent events had suggested to him the Esoteric Hitlerists were, perhaps, more powerful and well organised than he had imagined - structurally a decentralized network, like an Aryan al-Qu'odah, only sans the mindless terrorism. However, after listening to his cellmates' camp fire stories about the terror from Antarctica for days on end, he had begun to doubt the existence of an Esoteric Hitlerist cult, at least as described in the media. It seemed to him that, once abuse and overuse had devalued the term neo-Nazi, Esoteric Hitlerism had been constructed by the Freud-Marxist establishment as a new Satan with which to instill fear in the soul of secular Christendom. If only for the sake of his own sanity, he convinced himself that the gentleman in Mr. Wermod's car *was* indeed Mr. Wermod's uncle, and *not* the notorious - well, *controversial for some* - "evolutionary psychologist, Dr. Kevin MacDonald. In any event, if and when he extricated himself from this ridiculous detention (because, so

long as he was not issued with a prison uniform, there was still hope), he would make it a point to *read* all of Dr. Kevin MacDonald's writings, and make up his *own* mind, without concern for what anybody else said or thought.

After much tedious form filling, a copy of the Act governing his detainee status had arrived three days ago. He had been allowed out of his cell and conducted to the interrogation room, where he had found King Kong waiting for him. King Kong had instructed him, with a seismic voice, to sit and wait. The two of them had whiled away the time in conversation (King Kong had turned out to be congenial, and keen to tell him about his exploits as a world-ranking dominos player), until a knock on the door had extinguished King Kong's monologue. King Kong had opened the door, to reveal a Tesco supermarket trolley loaded with paperbound volumes.

'El Acta,' had said the man pushing the trolley, a brown ectomorph in his twenties with a Curacao accent.

The young man had left the trolley by the side of the steel table, and left. King Kong had sat down opposite to him. For a moment, he had looked at the trolley, then at King Kong. King Kong had gestured with his eyes for him to start perusing the text, tacitly making it clear that he (King Kong) was to remain in the room to keep an eye on him.

The situation had been, of course, comical, and he had known that both King Kong and Obama (whom he expected would have been sitting in another room, watching him via CCTV, drinking Kool-Aid and cackling with his chums) had known it too, and that they had expected the sheer immensity of the text to dispirit him completely. He had imagined a semi-darkened room, with a panel of plasma screens atop a desk, and Obama sitting on one of the swivel chairs, next to an operator, and accompanied by some of his colleagues, the latter standing behind him, either with their arms crossed or their hands on their hips, their faces alight with cruel amusement. A number of them would have been eating popcorn. Scorning capitulation, and desirous to delay for as long as possible being returned to his cell, he had got off his chair and begun examining the trolley's contents.

The Act had consisted of 125 volumes, the same number as the last edition of the Encyclopedia Espasa Calpe, totalling over 200,000 pages, each crammed with text in the most obscurantist and contortuplicated legalese possible with any of the Indo-European languages. While scanning the schedules he had found sentences running at over 800 words. If the EU's Treaty

of Lisbon of 2007 had consisted merely of a re-write of the rejected European Constitution of 2004, designed to obscure the original text so as to make it incomprehensible to the people, it had been immediately apparent that the skills exercised in this undertaking had since been amply perfected by the EU government bureaucracy. He had concluded that it was not unlikely that such treaties were drafted by highly gifted minds especially trained in the art of convoluting even the simplest of statements beyond all human comprehension; and that, moreover, once drafted, those who wrote the text, having successfully completed the project, forgotten about it, and moved on to new projects, would find it almost impossible to explicate the originally intended meaning of any of the sentences they had penned, simply because the graphomaniacal extensivity of the text and the number and intricacy of the provisions made it impossible to remember. EU Treaties superceding the Yongle Encyclopaedia in extensivity were probably routine by now. He imagined that, once a revolution swept from power and hung from lamp posts the entire current political class, whatever new order succeeded the present one, if substantially different in character, would look back at the present era with bewilderment, and future encyclopaedias would comment on the factorial growth of ever-more-inscrutable legislative texts (and the corresponding bureaucracies) the way they would comment on any other social pathology of modern times.

Obdurateness and willpower had enabled him to locate, after many hours, the sections relevant to him, dealing with the treatment of detainees, their rights, and the government's obligations towards them. However, even his exceptional brain was unable to disentangle the legalese, so his knowledge increased by exactly zero, despite concentrating fully and availing himself to his professional training as a linguist. The Act had defeated him.

The experience had highlighted the fact that the system wished him not to know about the system, and sought to frustrate challenges to the status quo by withholding from the citizenry information about its functioning, internal construction, and, specifically, the regime of political œconomy governing its relationship with the individual citizen. In the context of his earlier speculations concerning the myth of an Esoteric Hitlerist menace, this suggested to him that the system was perhaps more fragile than he had been led to believe: under different circumstances he would have carried on thinking that official legal texts were convoluted because government lawyers were

at war with lawyers employed by private industry, whose primary source of income was discovering loopholes for their clients to exploit; under present circumstances, however, the deliberate obscurantism of the Act, and, by implication, of all such documents, suggested that the continuity of the system, because it was (like the Soviet system) thoroughly corrupt, was being maintained in the only way it could be maintained: through vulgar deception.

No longer was the key to regaining his freedom being able to prove his innocence, because guilt or innocence were as subjective as true or false in a system that served the interests of ruling elites who practiced moral particularism; the key was in discovering the appropriate levers to cause his captors to regard the continuation of his detention as less profitable than its suspension. This required information. With his cellmates effectively barren in terms of anything usable, it all hinged on him being able to manipulate the interrogations. The only problem was that, with the insufferable Obama being pathologically cynical, and apparently conversant with every base method of trickery, his manipulation strategy would require a level of subtlety unattainable as long as he was kept in squalor and on a starvation diet. The one bowl of porridge he was fed daily was only sufficient to feed bouts of nausea and endless headaches.

The day after perusing the Act, he had demanded to see Profit again. Because Profit was only around on Fridays, he had been forced to wait. On the Friday in question, King Kong had escorted him to the interrogation room. There King Kong had once again regaled him with his domino adventures in Kingston until Profit had shown up, clad in an indigo blue suit and five minutes late. Profit's silk tie that day had borne a garrotte pattern.

He had demanded that the five minutes that Profit had shorted him be either rolled over to the following week, or held in a time fund for future use. Profit had agreed to the request, so long as he did not have to guarantee being available on weekends or out of hours, unless each accumulated minute be counted as half a minute if his counsel were ever to be required during such times. Their subsequent exchange had been as comforting as their first.

'I want you to tell me, in plain language, what my rights as a detainee are, according to the Act, and what the government's obligations are towards me,' he had begun, speaking slowly and irritably. It demanded considerable effort to pull chunks of

critical logic out of his head when it felt as if peened under a bus-sized plutonium boulder.

'I cannot do that,' had retorted Profit, his face blank and his voice even, like an automaton.

'Why not?'

'Because you have already had a chance to examine the Act yourself. Asking me to repeat what you've had the opportunity to read for yourself is a waste of government time, and, as an enemy of the state, you have no right to waste government time.'

He breathed in, trying to gather the necessary energy, 'I am not asking you to simply repeat the relevant sections of the Act. I am asking you to condense them into short sentences in plain English.'

'That is the same as asking me to repeat what is in the Act. Whether I do it verbatim or in condensed form and in an English suited to your tastes does not mean I would not be repeating, because I would still be stating what is in the Act, which you have already had the opportunity to examine yourself. Your request is a waste of government time.'

He imagined himself clobbering Profit's head with a pressed brick (colour: brown; texture: indented; configuration: frogged), in an effort to get him to talk like a *normal* human being, who treated him like a *person* and *gave sensible* answers, containing *useful* information.

'Is the Act meant to be understood by members of the public?'

'No. It is only meant to be available for examination should anyone request it. It would be unreasonable to require that it be redacted in a way that could be understood by everyone, because understanding is subjective.'

'OK. In that case, I can ask you to explain its contents. Not repeat: explain.'

'That would take too long.'

'Then summarise.'

'That is impossible. The law is too complex.'

'Simplify.'

'That would be the same as misleading you, and I am not permitted to do that.'

'Do I have the right to make a telephone call?'

'You have been given a chance to examine the Act in detail already. Answering that question would therefore constitute a waste of government time. You have no right as a detainee to waste government time.'

He now experienced a momentary burst of energy; with the consequent increase in focus, he determined not to let Profit

succeed. 'I did not find any specific reference as to whether I had the right to make a telephone call.'

'That is not the fault of your legal counsel or of the government: you were given the chance to examine the Act at your leisure. The answers to your questions are in the Act.'

'It is the fault of the government because of the tortuous and obscurantist way the Act is structured and redacted.'

'That is a subjective assertion and it has got nothing with the actual interpretation of the law. I think the Act is clear. I can advise you on how the law is to be interpreted.'

'I demand to make a telephone call.'

'A telephone call has already been made on your behalf.'

'So I'm told. But I did not *make* it. Your side made it. I demand to *make my own* telephone call, as it says in the Act.'

'The Act says you have the right to a telephone call. It does not specify that you have to make it yourself in order for it to qualify as your telephone call.'

'Ah. I dispute that interpretation. Show me chapter and verse and we will go through the specific clause word by word.'

'That would take too much time. You only have 30 minutes of legal counsel a week.'

'Well, then we will do it over several weeks, until the matter is elucidated.'

'Besides, you have already been given the chance to examine the Act. What you suggest would require having the text in front of us. Forms would need to be filled and fees would need to be paid, the processing of which takes time. That would constitute a waste of government time.'

'Then bring an electronic copy.'

'As a detainee you are to be kept away from any and all electronic devices.'

'But your colleague the chief interrogator has been coming in with an electronic dossier.'

'He has authority, and you were under constant supervision. That's different.'

'In that case, you can bring an electronic copy of the Act, and we can examine it under constant supervision. You can read out the text to me, and we can examine my transcription on regular paper.'

'You have already been given the opportunity to examine the Act at leisure. What you suggest would be a waste of government time.'

'I disagree. I had the chance to read it. As my legal counsel, your job is to counsel me on matters of law. In other words,

help me understand and arrive at the correct interpretation of the law.'

'I have already been doing that.'

'Oh. How so? All I've heard so far are reasons why you cannot do it.'

'I've been telling you. You have the right to one telephone call. The Act does not specify that it needs to be made by you personally. Therefore, it can technically be made on your behalf, and this we have done.'

'I dispute your reading of the Act. I would like to test it.'

'I am a professional lawyer.'

'Other professional lawyers would disagree with your reading of any legal text. That is why you have litigation, and why you argue with other lawyers in a court room.'

'I am not a litigation lawyer.'

'It makes no difference. You are still a lawyer. Interpretation of the law is your stock in trade. Interpretations are always subjective.'

'The Act is clear on the point of telephone calls. There is no ambiguity.'

'I disagree.'

'That is merely your subjective opinion about something I said. Not about the text in the Act.'

'The Act is drafted ambiguously. You have one interpretation. I have another. Both are valid, yet the implications are very different. Hence, there is scope for a debate.'

'I am not here to have a debate. I am here to advise you. I am more than happy to do that.'

It was at this point that he had begun to panic. Without access to a telephone setting the legal wheels in motion outside would be impossible. Should they ever allow him to write a letter, it was almost certain that Obama would scrutinise it first, and most probable that his wife would never receive it. It troubled him greatly to think of her feeling sick with worry at home, suspended in an information vacuum, and without any means to contact him and find out about his whereabouts or whether he was safe and whole. Not being able to reach her was exasperating. The thought of never seeing her again, and wasting his life and his brain in a horrid dungeon, awaiting charges or trial, or else in an Israeli gulag, doing mind-numbing menial labour, was even more so. Looking down at his suit for a moment, noticing how it, like his tie and his shirt, had begun to fall apart, stained and wrinkled and splitting at the seams, only exacerbated his fear. He did not dare look at

his shoes: they had become scratched and scuffed and were splattered with fecal matter. Each day he moved further away from being a smart, important, and well respected businessman, with, an elegant wife and a country cottage and clients and sought-after professional skills, to a shunned non-person, a shameful defective that was best locked away and forgotten; despite obsessive efforts, each day he looked more the part of an emaciated, unwashed, disturbed criminal; the issuance of a prison uniform drew ever closer. Once the uniform was issued, even if his status remained that of a detainee, he would have crossed the symbolic threshold, severing his links with his life in the outside world. The disintegration of his business outfit was co-material with the disintegration of his identity, the outfit's replacement by a prison uniform the replacement of that identity. Once again his thoughts had transported him to the comfort of his home, to his wife, his books, and his things. How far away they all seemed now!

Two days later King Kong had pounced, in the middle of the night, during a rare moment when he had been dozing, sitting on the bench. The pongid police officer, clad in black suit and tie, had sported an inexplicable, friendly smile as he ordered a warden to open the cell and allow him out. King Kong led him through deserted corridors to a different interrogation room, accompanied by one armed escort. Once inside, but not until the door had been closed and locked, King Kong had produced a narrow, rectangular box with a sliding lid.

'Wah ya dink?' asked the smiling King Kong, treating him to a conspiratorial wink as he opened the box's lid to reveal a set of dominoes. 'We a play, mon?'

He was perplexed. Then, once his brain transcribed the patois into standard English, he was suspicious. 'I am willing to play,' he said, finally, almost tonelessly, his eyes observant. He was willing to take the risk if only to enjoy some respite from the cell's challenging environment for a while.

'Alright, mon!' said King Kong, with excitement, as he pulled out a metal chair to sit down. The sound of the chair scraping on the cement floor was followed by the clatter of twenty-eight tiles being poured onto the table. He noticed that his chair was not only a different colour and design than King Kong's, but that it was also screwed onto the floor. 'Your psych-profile say yu a geneus, mon. Mi no s'pposed to do dis, mon, you know. Mi a want see if ya cleva like ih says. I dun told the chief I'm goin' try soften you up. See if I can get info out of you. There a no CCTV 'ere. Dis be de room weh we sof'en detainees. Overstan?'

He looked around. The room was essentially a cement cube. The ceiling's sole ornament consisted of four pairs of neon tubes. There was no sign of any CCTV equipment. The walls were bare, unpainted; if there were any microphones, they were either well hidden (perhaps painted onto the armoured door) or outside. For all he knew, Obama was sitting in another room, wearing headphones, listening in with a fascinated smirk on his face; such a scenario would explain King Kong's eagerness to tell him about his dominoes adventures: the two of them could have discussed the tactic in advance, and prepared the ground with manufactured anecdotes, retold over a period of days and at random occasions to enhance credibility. On the other hand, King Kong seemed a bit of an oaf, and it was not entirely improbable that he was genuine, at least when it came to the game. He simply could not be sure. And, of course, whether by design or by accident, this played into Obama's hands. If not a tactic, the incident would further stoke his paranoia, confuse his thoughts, misdirect his suspicions, and yield results for Obama during future interrogations.

Sitting on his fixed chair, he quickly realised in what sense detainees were softened in that room. Butterflies flew in his thorax. Would King Kong don the knuckleduster if he lost? Certainly, he was now at the officer's mercy; displaying fear would signify submission, which would in turn equal hospitalisation.

'I can't say I've played dominoes too often. I am more a chess man,' he said, unable to resist the snobbery, despite his circumstances: he hardly ever played chess. The game he most enjoyed was, in fact, monopoly.

'Chess a fi pansies mon. Dominoes ih da only sereeous game in town, zeen?' said King Kong, smirking as he shook his head.

King Kong then reached into his trouser's back pocket, and produced a small, ringed notepad and a short pencil, both of which he placed on the table, right next to him.

'If you say so,' he said, looking at King Kong intently. 'But if you want me to play, I want food and drink.'

King Kong chuckled, in good humour. 'OK, man. Mi ca get ya coffee. But mi dun nuh 'bout food. A de late, ya nuh see.'

'I won't be clever on one bowl of porridge. You know it,' he tested. 'If you want to beat me at dominoes, make it fair and beat me when I am in good form; don't just beat me because I was half starved to death. Otherwise, you are a coward.'

King Kong's smile faded, and a sudden frown of determination corrugated his brow. 'OK, OK, mon,' he said, 'We a make it fair. I order pizzas an' we play.'

King Kong got up, opened the armoured door a crack, and spoke to the officer guarding the door outside. He then returned to the table, sat down, and leaned back on his chair, with a studious smile.

'Wa mek yu a go a racist, mon?' he said. 'Ya seem like ranking mon.'

He resisted the impulse to tut, shake his head, and look away.

'I *am* a *ranking* man,' he answered, instantly exasperated. 'You know it full well.'

King Kong simply chuckled, bemused, before leaning forward in order to scramble the domino pieces. 'Whatever, mon,' he said.

'Where's your colleague?'

'Gun 'ome, mon.' King Kong did not look at him.

His mind responded by conjuring the image of Obama once again, listening in to the conversation in a darkened room while doodling on a note pad.

He decided to test the veracity of that image. 'Does he play dominoes?' The question somehow caused him to imagine Obama furiously bench-pressing at a gym, high on adrenalin as he ruminated over the, interrogations and thought of new ways to twist his words and entrap him.

'Naa. 'im play cricket.'

He found that hard to imagine. On an impulse, and for the benefit of his hidden eavesdropper, he said, 'I find that hard to imagine. He must not be very good.'

King Kong ignored his statement. Instead, he stopped scrambling the tiles and commanded, 'Choose yu five pieces, mon.'

He was not going to allow King Kong to shape events. He said, 'Is the pizza on its way?'

'Ya, mon.'

'You want me to play and I have no say on the toppings?'

King Kong looked at him darkly, the whites of his eyes entirely yellow. 'Look, mon. Yu a prisoner 'ere. You get no topping, OK mon? I get toppings and ya get a margarita. Yu playin' dominoes with a rankin' champeean. Just count yu blessings, mon. A may sofon ya up an' trow ya back inna renk cell tumaara, ya nuh... wid da rude bwoys and da battyman. But tonight ya get a break, so be homely, OK mon?'

'OK,' he said. 'Fair enough.'

He chose his five pieces and stood them up in a neat line, like menhirs, on the table. King Kong swept the excels pieces to the side, from right to left, with his right arm: his left hand held his five pieces, which he kept close to his barrel-like chest. His handling of the tiles was expert, and his movements betrayed enthusiasm. This was interesting.

‘Ya a go mon.’

As he had the double six, he moved his hand towards it, but then stopped short, and left his hand suspended above the tile, all the while scrutinising King Kong’s reaction. King Kong’s face, beaming with anticipation at the prospect of a challenging game, and already reviewing stratagems in his mind, momentarily flimmered before giving way to perplexity. This is what he had hoped to confirm: King Kong might have ulterior motives for summoning him to a game of dominoes, but he genuinely craved a game. He said, ‘Before we begin. If you really want me to play like a genius, I want access to a shoe polishing kit, shaving cream, and a razor.’

King Kong’s frown intensified. ‘Naa mek mi vex, mon! A weh ya gaan wid dis?’

‘I can’t concentrate if I look like a raggamuffin. I am a *businessman*, remember?’

King Kong burst out laughing, evidently amused by his turn of phrase. King Kong’s response afforded him some relief, although he observed his opponent’s cachination; closely. He knew he was tempting his luck, but he thought it imperative to be able to recuperate at least some of his dignity, following two weeks of detention. Wracked nerves had accelerated the weight loss instigated by the meagre prison rations, but he had concluded that if he could at least shave or neaten his beard and polish his shoes, he would feel closer to the man he was outside, and derive some serenity from regaining his self-perception as a wrongly detained white collar professional who was in the process of regaining his freedom. The grease on his hair (for he had been denied access to a shower) would then easily pass for gel, provided he managed to produce a convincing styling with his digits. The humiliation of having to answer to the call of nature cheek by jowl with nine primitive felons, all the while having to be extremely careful to avoid soiling his business attire, he thought he would be able to bear a while longer, once the right level of physiognomical distance between him and his cellmates had been at least partially re-established. It was not lost on him that, given the balefulness of his circumstances, it was somewhat odd to make the polish

of his footwear and the trim of his beard the focus of his tribulations, but he rationalised his priorities on the basis that, since the system was corrupt and irrational, having a positive attitude was the key to his freedom: he accepted the maxim that before success must come the appearance of success, even if this appearance was purely for his own personal consumption. There was a very real risk, however, that King Kong (and therefore also Obama) could identify in his requests a preoccupation useful as psychological leverage. It was, therefore, of the essence that he presented his requests as demands for concessions in exchange for an indulgence.

‘OK, mon, OK,’ said King Kong, smiling. ‘Mi a go a len’ ya mi boot polish, mon.’

‘And the razor and the shaving cream,’ he pressed.

‘Mebe. Ya wait deh.’

King Kong exited the room, locking the door behind him. He waited in silence for approximately ten minutes, during which he ruminated his demands and concessions strategy. He was careful to sit straight, keep his respiration regular, and display no emotion, lest there was, after all, a hidden camera somewhere, and Obama had zoomed into his face, in order to perscrute the image up on a wall-to-wall screen, searching for signs of weakness. The silence was disproportionately pleasurable, given the constant noise inside the cells. When King Kong returned, the dominoes champion was carrying a plastic bag, which he deposited onto the table. The bag was from Tesco.

‘OK. ‘ere a da razor an’ boot polish. Now no mo’ politricks, racist mon. Polish yu boots an’ dun romp wid me. Leggo!’ he said, while sitting down. ‘Give dem bek weh wi dun, overstan’.

He examined the contents of the bag while King Kong re-scrambled all the tiles, including the five he had previously lined up. The bag contained a disposable razor, a tin of shoe polish, and a well-used brush. The sight conjured up in his mind the image of Ring Kong by his locker, lazily and carelessly dumping the three objects into a bag that he had retrieved from a bin, keeping the equipment deliberately insufficient, because he was purely concerned with making the point that he was doing him a big favour, and could not care less about how he was going to shave two weeks of capillary growth, then and there, without cream or water. He decided to work with what he had been given. |

King Kong spent a full minute shuffling the tiles, as if to ensure he completely ruined any calculated re-arrangement his opponent might have constructed during his absence. He then

selected his five pieces and stood them in a row in his left hand, where he held them in place with his sausage-like fingers.

‘Leggo, mon. Choose yu pieces,’ said King Kong, when he had finished.

He selected five random tiles from the pool in front of him and stood them like menhirs, in a neat row, on the table. All the while, King Kong observed him very carefully, staring darkly as he kept his tiles close to his body. Once finished, he looked up at King Kong, to find the latter’s until-now-genial face suddenly transformed into a black war mask. King Kong, champion or not, was obviously in awe of his IQ score and took him seriously, victim of the popular misconception that Spearman’s g necessarily translated into formidable game playing. In an instant, Kingston’s King of the Dominoes came to life: King Kong selected a tile from his lot and, with a spectacular gesture, raised his arm above his head and slammed the double six onto the table, filling the air with a thundering clap, before vehemently shoving the double six to the centre of the surface.

‘Dobbel six!’ announced King Kong, his deep voice rumbling at 12 KHz.

The force of King Kong’s opening move had caused his meticulously lined-up menhirs to topple with a messy clatter. Because two of his tiles landed face up, the combinations exposed to his opponent’s orbs, he was forced to return them to the pool and select new ones. This time, however, he took a leaf from King Kong’s book and held them flat against the palm of his hand, thumb along the top edges and remaining fingers along the bottom.

His highest combination was a six and a four, so he placed it next to the double six.

King Kong responded by banging a four and a five onto the table, next to his piece.

‘Pass,’ he said, finding no usable tiles. King Kong slammed down his next combination: five-two. His turn to respond: two-four.

King Kong’s turn: four-six, piledriven next to the two-four.

His turn: ‘Pass.’

King Kong: six-one; he was now down to two pieces. He lay them down on the table face down, covering them with his massive paw.

His turn: one-three.

King Kong, who by now looked as if he was ready to stand and slam-dunk his next piece, grabbed each piece between the

index and thumb of each hand and clicked them together instead.

The move was perplexing to him. He waited, first staring at King Kong, then checking the tiles on the table, then inspecting his remaining ones.

King Kong clicked his pieces again, louder, his dark visage registering impatience.

He waited, assuming King Kong was weighing options.

‘Leggo, mon!’

‘Pardon?’

At this point the lock on the door suddenly clunked and the door swung open. Both he and King Kong turned in unison to look. An unexpected spectator entered room: Obama.

‘Aha!’ said the new arrival, placing his fists on his hips, as he stood and gazed at the scene with bulging eyes and lips contracted into an asterisk - a cartoonish expression that said *got ya!* This evening Obama was clad in a dark grey suit; a blue tie adorned his white shirt. ‘Trying to gain the confidence of a police officer, eh? See if you can get privileges out of him, eh? Trying to set up a blackmail scam, eh?’

‘Nothing of the sort,’ he said. ‘*Your* colleague-’

Obama interrupted him, ‘Blah blah blah... I’ve got no time for your racist lies and Holocaust denial. I know your game, Mister. You Nazis are all the same.’

The image of Obama furiously bench pressing at a gym returned to his mind; he imagined Obama clenching his jaws and baring his teeth, his eyes wide open as he stared into space, reeling with the adrenalin storm of an anabolic steroid rage.

While he imagined this, the moment for a response passed, causing a change in dynamics: Obama, having interpreted his silence as weakness, now took off his jacket in an obscurely menacing way.

‘Now we are *really* gonna get to the bottom of things with you,’ Obama threatened, his tight shirt outlining his ripped musculature. Although in his forties, Obama’s granite torso looked like a slimmer version of Linford Christie’s in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

The implicit subtext of violence motivated him to evaluate Obama’s physical characteristics: high density of fast, twitch muscles; long limbs; lower sitting height; and narrow hips, which gave him a more efficient stride. A body built for explosions of energy and speed. Would he don the knuckleduster? Would he go to his locker and come back with a baseball bat? Would the baseball bat be made out of wood, or a metal alloy? King Kong had so far played the friendly cop, so he reasoned Obama’s role defaulted to angry cop - Obama’s favourite

role. He threw a cautious glance at King Kong, who was still sitting at the table: King Kong's gaze was fixed onto the dominoes, listless, beads of perspiration covering his cheeks and brow, disappointment at the interruption discernible in his features. It was reasonable to suppose that, despite King Kong's huge bulk, it would be the dominoes champion holding him in the chair, or squeezing the handcuffs round his wrists, and Obama throwing the punches. Alternatively, they would resort to stress positions. So far Obama's tactic had relied on attrition - the same nonsense every single time, designed to exasperate and lure careless comments; physical torture, beyond experimenting with hunger, thirst, and squalid humiliation in his cell - and besides long periods of being showered with white noise - had so far stayed off the menu - (in subtle, unstated ways) kept in the background as an option that was deemed acceptable, effective, available, exciting, increasingly necessary, rich in possibilities, unlimited in its extremity, and ultimately inevitable.

Obama gestured with his hand in King Kong's direction. King Kong, moving very slowly, as if he could barely find the energy to do it, began picking the dominoes tiles off the table one by one and putting them away in the box. Obama stared at King Kong for a moment, impatience and disapproval proclaimed by each one of his facial and ocular muscles.

'Come on, get on with it!' he said, finally.

King Kong, anaesthetised by disappointment, his eyes dead with boredom, (and as catatonically as a London Underground ticket inspector sitting inside a booth in the 1980s, staring into space as commuters peremptorily whizzed their tickets past his line of vision on their way to the tunnels) barely managed to lift his eyebrows in acknowledgment. Obama waited in silence a while longer, his left hand by the side of his body, his right fist on his hip. He noticed Obama's masseter rippling under the latter's brown skin; Obama's corrugator supercilii being held in a state of tension; Obama's dilator naris pumping in unison with his accelerating rate of respiration; he could almost see the adrenalin rushing through Obama's veins, inflating and hardening his muscular tissue.

Obama's patience was finally exhausted by the sheer torpor with which King Kong was replacing tiles inside the container. Obama tutted and screamed, 'Will you finish clearing out your fucking game and get ready for a fucking interrogation!'

King Kong stopped and frowned at Obama, his pride wounded, his brow suddenly dark with hatred.

Obama, passing from anger to rage, took a rapid step forward and cleared the table with a violent sweep of his arm. The

dominoes tiles and box flew through the air and landed on the floor at the far end of the room with a noisy clatter. King Kong jumped to his feet, making threatening show of his size.

'What? You got a problem, you fat cunt?' screamed Obama; his body language belligerent, his posture already in combat mode.

'Yuh too renk!' said King Kong, stepping towards Obama.

Obama stepped towards King Kong in return, until the two of them were directly face to face, with their foreheads touching and their eyes only an inch from each other's. A staring duel ensued; the scene resembled the face to faces held by boxing opponents ahead of a pay-per-view televised match: odium rays shot out of their irises to land onto the retinas of their respective opponent; their aspects were inscribed with grim determination and dark rage. He, meanwhile, simply sat in his chair, fascinated, the morbid voyeur in him hypnotised by the imminence of violence. With luck, he thought, Obama would be taught a lesson that evening, with King Kong's iron fist punching his jaw clean off his face and sending it spinning across the room and onto the cement floor. Perhaps King Kong would detuncate Obama's head with a savage ripping motion, then take it outside, and hurl it onto the yard behind the station, where idle day labourers from Morocco, or Brazilian children with dreams of being the next Pelé, would use it to play a football match.

The staring duel lasted for many seconds, during which time he salivated with the prospect of seeing Obama humiliated - brought down a notch or too, put right back in his place. Eventually, King Kong tired of the visual aggression and, with motion that was shockingly fast for a man of his bulk, shoved Obama back, sending him to the floor.

Obama waited less than 5.264 picoseconds to punish the act. Jumping to his feet, he then spun his body and struck King Kong in the face with his right foot, deploying a spectacular kick boxing manoeuvre. Obama's choice in footwear - a pair of Chelsea boots - amplified his retaliatory effectiveness, and toppled the corcous dominoes champion, who collapsed onto the cement floor, unconscious.

Obama stared at his defeated work colleague for a moment, then straightened his tie with angry and arrogant movements. He stared at Obama, quiet as a mouse. After a few seconds, Obama remembered he was not alone and turned to look at him.

With a harsh, minacious stare, Obama pointed his finger at him and spat, 'You just wait until I get my hands on you, Mister!'

Chapter 34

Abo

Abo stepped on his shoe as he squeezed past him on his way back from using the toilet. The act was performed casually, but its execution was deliberate and most likely premeditated. Confirmation, anticipating any doubts, came immediately: Abo supplemented his act by meeting his gaze and treating him to an insolent grin. Insensible to the squalor, the noise, the cramped conditions, the suffocating temperatures, the oppressive humidity, the hours of brain-rotting idleness, and the brutalising degradation of being treated like cats caged inside a hoarder's excrement-strewn council flat, his cellmates proved themselves razor-sharp at the point of detecting the challenge, and realising its implications: before he'd had time to think about an appropriate response, he found himself surrounded by curious eyes and childish smirks. And, in the time it took him to notice them, he realised power relations within the cell had already been re-ordered. Because he operated within genteel business circles, where people were serious and correct in their dealings, he lacked the reflex that would have protected his place above the cell's power pyramid: in a purely theoretical way, he recognised what this reflex should have been, and understood that he should have knocked Abo's teeth several seconds ago. Now those seconds had become a whole eternity; the moment had receded far into the past, into infinity, it could never be recuperated: both Abo and the other eight petty criminals instantly realised that they had no need to fear retaliation from a neo-Nazi gang, because their blue-eyed cellmate was no Esoteric Hitlerist, protected by the might of Wotan, the hammer of Thor, the ruthless force of the cosmos; he

was, plainly, what he appeared: an ordinary, middle-aged businessman. They had interpreted his two seconds of inaction as evidence of his lacking the confidence that originated from being part of an ethnic support network that was capable of anything, and prone to the most murderous, monstrous, pitiless brutality: were he part of one, ran the logic, he would have acted resolutely, unmindful of any immediate consequences to himself, secure in the knowledge that any and all infractions would be penalised with humiliations, fractures, amputations, mutilations, loss of manhood, and loss of life. If he had acted decisively when he first entered the cell, it was because he knew the rules and had prepared himself in advance; in other words, it was a manufactured, pre-rehearsed stunt, the lack of substance behind which had now been uncovered. That his situation was not as dire as the one Dr. Kevin MacDonald had found himself in was a spurious argument: while Dr. MacDonald faced certain execution (Nuremberg was sufficient precedent), the fact that his writings appeared to have at least challenged some of the most awesome taboos of the age; the fact that he had obviously written openly, signing his monographs with his name; the fact that he had published and continued to publish, in full knowledge of the ferocity of the opposition, evidently without buckling in to threats or pressure of any kind, until it had been materially impossible to continue, appeared to have had earned the psychologist a solid support base, thus elevating him to a level of public importance, where champions of his writings, admirers of his courage, opponents of his censors, and resisters of his enemies, had deemed him important enough to organise, finance, and deploy his glorious and heroic rescue. He, on the other hand, had avoided controversy, valued anonymity, evaded cameras, and opined privately, elevating his profile only where it was consistent with his own conception of respectability, and" otherwise living in faceless tranquillity, in comfort and without offending anyone (offensive or incorrect behaviour was deleterious for business): his small morsels of glory existed burrowed away in the catacombs of the academia, buried in the sedimentary strata of arid journals, cerebral magazines, and conference circuits, somniferously attended by corporate termites in grey suits. There would be no rescue operation, and no campaign to free him; where he to disappear, no one would notice: the world would go on as before, neither the better nor the worse without him.

Another second had passed, and his lips were still silent. His cellmates began stepping towards him, slowly; their smirks

faded, their eyes hardened, their fists clenched. He knew not what to say. Had he been in good form, optimistically disposed, he would have attempted a bold line, calculated to stun them with his daring and blast their confidence and put them all back in their place. However, not only felt he mentally, physically, and spiritually diminished, but he knew in advance that any bold utterance would be met with derision, not because his cellmates would know there was no substance behind it, no real threat of awesome retaliation, but because he knew in advance that they would meet it with derision, and that this would tell them that there was no substance behind any such utterance.

He parted his lips, racking his brain for options. His cortex yielded none: it was completely sterile. Abo sustained his grin. Behind him, Wichita, Sidekick, and one of the teenage Congoids, formed a slowly contracting semi-circle; behind it, a larger, concentric one contracted at a slightly faster rate, comprised of the second Congoid, Plagiocephaly, Baseball Cap, Jihad, and Kiddiporn. Jihad sported a frown; Kiddiporn cocked his head, venturing a lop-sided smile - he was homosexual.

He inhaled by the mouth, intending to say something, yet without the faintest idea of what. For a second, he considered letting his cellmates beat him up, just to get it over with and move on - somehow, a few cuts and bruises suddenly seemed easier than figuring out a way to keep his place in the power pyramid; he was too exhausted, too hungry, too debilitated by sugar and caffeine withdrawal symptoms, to think. Yet he knew that any beating at the hands of these savages would not just result in a few cuts and bruises; the matter would not end even with a fractured cranium, a ruptured kidney, and blindness in one eye: his cellmates would remember the "four centuries of slavery under the heel of the White man", and would target him for retribution, no doubt indulging their most extreme fantasies as they devised new ways to inflict suffering and degradation. Never mind that it was the coloured man who did most of the enslaving, having sustained the institution in Africa for thousands of years, before selling their merchandise to buyers in open air markets; or that it was the White man who abolished slavery, and the Englishman the first one to do so, centuries ago, 79 years before Abraham Lincoln's Proclamation of Emancipation; or that, even in the United States, slave ownership was mostly restricted to a tiny minority of wealthy plantation owners; and never mind* that his cellmates, and if not them their parents or grandparents, had

come to Europe voluntarily, seeking the personal safety, standard of living, employment opportunities, political dignity, civilised environment, welfare state, and public services they never managed to independently think up, let alone develop, in their own traditional homelands; never mind all that: all White men were guilty, all White men had benefited from White privilege, where the White man had been king in his own fatherland.

His tongue was numb. His mind was blank. Fear and indecision had lobotomised him. Synaptic activity had collapsed to zero: molecular activity had ceased; atoms had stopped spinning; electrons had fallen into their atomic nuclei: his brain had become a Bose-Einstein condensate.

Plagiocephaly, craving excitement, initiated a rhythmical clap, which quickly infected the other cellmates. The rhythm consisted of two long claps followed by three short ones. This development signified deference to Abo: as the alpha male, Abo enjoyed the privilege of drawing first blood. Abo's eyes brightened correspondingly, the flame of sadism burning in his pupils as his cheeks swelled with cruel satisfaction. He could not help but study the glint on Abo's eyes and the ruin of his rotting teeth.

The concentric circles contracted further.

The clapping grew more vigorous.

Abo's trachea began rippling.

He began taking a step backward, then stopped himself. Abo tilted his head back, his chest undulating with laughter. A shard of broken glass glinted in Wichita's hand. Scenes of Wichita gutting him like a fish now flickered in his mind; these were followed by scenes of Abo brandishing his severed left leg in the air, and biting a chunk off his calf in front of his grinning cellmates.

'¿Qué cono pasa aqui?' demanded an angry voice outside the cell. A loud, metallic rattling on the bars supplemented the question.

The clapping suddenly stopped, and Abo looked towards the corridor outside. Abo then shrugged and showed the palms of his hands, offering to the voice outside an ironic smile that insolently pleaded ignorance and abrogated responsibility. 'Nada,' said the criminal.

He, who had been standing with his back towards the corridor, now turned to look: directly outside the cell stood a warden, White, fifty-something, of average height but incredible breadth, with a brush-style haircut and short and clean-edged beard delineating his jaw. In his thick-fingered right fist, the warden held a baton. Next to the, warden stood King Kong, sporting a

frown and a surly expression. King Kong was clad in his usual black suit, complete with the thick-soled shoes.

The warden inserted the key in the lock and addressed him harshly, 'iTú! ¡Sal!' The warden used his chin and head, jerking the former forward and the latter sideways, underlining his order with a gestural demand for instant obedience.

As the door opened, he stepped out of the cell.

Relief washed over him; even though it was likely Obama was now ready to subject him to torture, several hours of drowning, electrocution, and pointless questioning appeared a more attractive alternative to spending the next five minutes in the company of Abo and his cohorts. Obama needed him alive and able to function; neither Abo nor his cellmates had anything to lose, being answerable to no one and without an agenda.

Escorted by the warden, King Kong led him through the corridors back into the interrogation room where they 'softened' detainees. To his surprise, Obama was not waiting for them. Moreover, apparently he was not coming.

The two of them stood in the centre of the room; he by the table, facing the door, King Kong about a metre from him, with his back towards the door. His mind was still reeling from the developments in the cell; moreover, he was plagued with serious concerns about what was likely to happen once he was sent back to Abo. Therefore, he was only able to half-listen to King Kong's nearly impenetrable patois. "

It sounded as if King Kong desired to privately discuss a proposal with him, which was to remain between the two of them.

At first, the nature and content of this proposal was nebulous, because King Kong kept alluding to these obliquely. Once King Kong decided that he appeared insufficiently attuned to his allusions, however, King Kong lowered the level of cryptic: King Kong intimated that times were hard, that wages couldn't keep up with prices, that he was crippled with "credit card debts, that his girlfriend needed three jobs to keep afloat,-that he was being hounded by debt collectors, that he could no longer afford to run his car, and so on and so forth all this, before adding that sometimes the branch got it all wrong with an investigation, that sometimes they targeted the wrong suspect, that the course of an investigation was not set in stone, that investigations could be re-assessed, that sometimes data was misinterpreted or overlooked, that occasionally key files got mislaid, that so on and so forth. He, of course, eventually came to glimpse King Kong's meaning. Circumstances made King Kong's proposal tempting, without a doubt, but could he

trust it? There was no guarantee that King Kong or Obama, by proxy was not seeking to entrap him; that; despite apparent friction between King Kong and Obama, the proposal had not been agreed and practiced beforehand, as a means to ratchet up charges and secure a conviction. Perhaps, even, Obama's impatience with King Kong's dominoes had been pure theatre: previously agreed and rehearsed, and performed to suggest that King Kong was vengefully motivated to make, overtures; hoping to frustrate Obama's investigation by engineering the wrongful release of his suspect. He could easily imagine King Kong and Obama rehearsing their brawl, days in advance, doubling up with laughter as they imagined his reaction, and congratulating themselves on their own cleverness. Whatever the case may be, there was, in addition, the problem of his cell; where nine violent thugs waited impatiently for his return. He could easily sense the gory images flashing in their minds as the detainees' imaginations explored the most painful ways to maul and disembowel him while his screams of horror provided additional entertainment. Part of him wanted to believe that, even if King Kong was unable to engineer a release, a bribe would secure him more tranquil accommodation. For King Kong such an arrangement would have the advantage of alleviating financial distress while irritating Obama. Moreover, King Kong would be motivated to prevent Obama from sending him back to a dangerous cell, since his death would cut the flow of subornative munificence. The arrangement, however, could potentially prolong his detention: lured by the carrot of personal privacy, and deterred by the stick of unpleasant company, he would easily become a reliable source of Supplementary income for the Kingston champion one King Kong would be unlikely to surrender before the money had been exhausted. In both the matter of the investigation, and the matter of his accommodation as a detainee, it was clear both Obama and King Kong saw him as either an obstacle or a resource: an obstacle, because he was not supplying the required answers; a resource, because his detention and conviction, for each in a different way, could enhance their bank balances. His survival, he knew, depended on not treating them like 'serious' men, but rather on mirroring their attitudes and out-manoeuvring them with superior tactics: given the vastness of his opponents' cognitive inferiority, he thought it shameful that he had not already turned the tables on them. At the very least, he should have by now reconfigured power relations so the net flow of resources and concessions was running in his favour. How was it that any common gangster with no education and a 500-

word vocabulary (half of which consisted of swearwords) succeeded in running the station within days of his arrival, while he, the genius with published tracts in the most esoteric journals, found himself at the bottom of the pile weeks after his arrest. In the kind of business setting he considered "normal", where one dealt with serious, respectable, law abiding businessmen who acted intelligently, honoured agreements, and negotiated towards mutually advantageous relationships, he would have long ago been successful in this endeavour. Yet, this was not a business setting, what he considered "normal" had long ceased to be considered "typical" by anyone, and abstract reasoning was maladaptive in an ecology where survival put a premium on brute force and low cunning. Worse still, that ecology was not confined to that particular police station, or to police stations in general, but to whole world A world which was modern, where the traditional Western values of truth, hard work, discipline, individualism, meritocracy, low gender status differentials, representative government, and fair play, had long given way to Eastern values of duplicity, hedonism, collectivism, slavery, misogyny, tyranny, and ruthless force. With neither brute force nor low cunning second nature to him, he was easy prey for those better adapted to the modern world.

He realised King Kong had been staring at him, a ruffian's half grin expectantly on his dark face.

A decision had to be made.

Yet a decision necessitated him thinking in ways to which he was unaccustomed.

Low cunning and brute force.

Perhaps, he thought, there was a way he could play Obama and King Kong against each other. The problem was that he lacked reliable information: Obama's methodology made it possible to think that anything he had observed while detained could have very well been a dirty trick pretence, theatre, a calculated sham.

There was no way to be sure.

Moreover, even if King Kong was genuine, and could, with the right economic incentive, be motivated to pull the necessary levers within the bureaucracy, so that someone above Obama found the time and a reason to re-direct Obama's investigation, there was no guarantee that Obama would pay any attention: any exonerating document, interpretation of data, or exculpating witness that might be found Obama could just as easily pervert to produce the desired outcome for his investigation; Obama was not going to risk being made a fool of by the sudden discovery of an inconvenient piece of evidence. The

result in that case would be identical to that of another alternative scenario, where King Kong was genuine, but so callous in his financial motivations as to not care whether his leveraging within the bureaucracy would actually deliver freedom for his suborner: in other words, so long as he was getting bribed, King Kong might be happy to accept the money and do his part, even knowing his efforts would prove entirely fruitless. In that scenario, it was difficult to imagine that King Kong would advise him in advance of the likely ineffectiveness of any "assistance" he might be able to provide; in all probability, King Kong would secure a steady revenue stream by carefully managing and manipulating the hopes and expectations of his client, conjuring the vision of light at the end of the tunnel, without mentioning that the end of that tunnel was doomed to recede forever.

On the face of it, nothing he did would change anything. He was helpless.

Yet, he refused to capitulate. If he was to be interned in an Israeli gulag (the most likely destination for a convicted neo-Nazi) or gas chamber (an eye for an eye!) he would rather don the prison camp pyjamas in the knowledge that he had not arrived there without first having exhausted every possible avenue to obtain his release. And what of his wife? Presumably his captors had eventually informed her of his situation, no doubt with a blunt and peremptory form letter, but, all the same, he could not bear to imagine in what condition she was in, after weeks of not knowing what was happening, why he was being detained, when or even whether he would be released, and all the while unable to communicate with her husband.

The memory of sitting in his lounge filled his mind: there was he, on a plush sofa, near his wife, either reading or watching a film, enveloped in a comforting atmosphere of soft tungsten light, surrounded by quality furniture, erudite books, and weird ornaments carefully collected over the years: the Greek amphora, for example, with depictions of Ares, Aphrodite, and Athena; the Arthurian swords, which his wife collected to inspire Arthurian romances, and which nearly every new visitor picked up and swung around; the Antarctic Dream Dollars, framed and hung on a wall, which he had given his wife one Christmas, 'In case we need them one day'; his complete works of Aristotle, in the green 23-volume Loeb Classical Library edition; his collection of traditional Hutzul carved objects, including plates, boxes, and candle holders, which they had picked up in Kiev ten years ago, before India and China began mass producing them; his 6,000-piece puzzle, depicting the Schilovski Gyrocar, which he had hung in his

study after the November heatwave; the Lego machine he had built two years ago, which could solve a 7x7x7 Rubik's cube (*easy peasy lemon squeezy*); his wife's typewriter collection, which included a Bar-Lock No. 2 (downstrike), a Williams No. 2 (grasshopper), an 1895 Ford (thrust), and his Steel Wedding Anniversary present, an 1892 North's (backstrike). If only the present were just a nightmare, and he were to wake up the next moment, in his bed, in the middle of the night, and realise that he was home, safe and sound. Even better: if only he were to wake up, and realise that it was 1996, and that he was still in his twenties,

able to sleep under a warm quilt, knowing that the next day the price for a can of Coke would be the same as that of the day before, that he would be to leave his house to train at the gym for an hour, and know he was likely return to find all his possessions where he left them, even though only a thin sheet of glass separated them from the passers by outside. 1996 felt like a different world now.

King Kong's tut awoke him from his trance. King Kong was looking away and wearily shaking his head, as if saying 'The White man doesn't understand.'

Although King Kong's patronising gesture annoyed him, the annoyance did not facilitate a decision. He had to delay.

'I would not mind a game of dominoes. In fact, champion or not, I bet I'll beat you every time.'

King Kong snorted scornfully, 'No dominoes today, mon. Very busy. Zeen?'

He took a risk, 'I see. Your colleague won't let you.'

King Kong's face was a mask of smug boredom; the Kingston champion did not answer.

At this point, he realised his own idiocy: why had it not occurred to him that the solution to his immediate problem was to simply state his problem? As usual, he had preoccupied himself with esoteric elucidations and missed the simplest and the most obvious. Of course, information was just as good a currency as gold, silver, tobacco, or rice. The belief that he had information is what was causing his captors to keep him detained. He said, 'I have a slight problem. A situation has arisen with my cellmates. If am returned to my cell, there won't be any more interrogations.'

'Wa mek?'

He did not understand King Kong's patois, 'Wa mek?' 'Why?'

'Because they want to rip me to pieces in there.'

King Kong chuckled. 'Dat's because yu racist, mon. Ya no see it? If ya w'en't a racist doondoos life would be good, golden bwoi. But ya chose a be a Nazi bakra. Mi would rada yon talk to

mi, but ya hiez-hard, you dam lagga head bud. Mi can't help ya. Now ya a go bek a di cell cork up with de battybwois.'

He could barely understand King Kong, but he got a general sense of what the Kingston champion was telling him, 'No, it's because they've realised I am not a neo-Nazi. They were scared of me until then.'

'Mon, everything you say is 99.9 % lies. Wa don't ya tell de truth? We can mek a deal, ya overstan'? Ya tell us everythin' we wan' to no', we fix yu sentence.'

'Fix my sentence?' he said, indignant by King Kong's presumptuousness, 'How about you listen to the truth, which is what I have been telling you from day one, and you let me go, free and without charges?'

King Kong's face registered a mixture of benign condescension and disappointment, 'Sorry, mon. Can't help ya if ya won't help yaself.'

He said nothing, unable to think of a reply that was not obvious and that he knew would not be perfectly useless. After two seconds, King Kong shifted his weight from one leg to another and began moving towards the door.

He wanted to shout, 'Wait!' However, no follow-up to the command occurred to him. What could he possibly say? King Kong reached the door, opened it, and stood by the side; the rectacle of neon-flooded wall just beyond seemed abnormally bright. King Kong gestured with his head, 'Cm'on.'

He began walking towards King Kong, as slowly as he could, hoping to gain extra seconds during which he could think of a way to argue his way into solitary confinement. He imagined that chronic overcrowding had made solitary confinement cells change their status from pit of torment to luxury accommodation long ago; playing the part of a recalcitrant troublemaker was unlikely gain him access to this luxury; subornation might or might not bring temporary relief in this department, but it would certainly entrench him in a position of dependency, besides cleaning out all of his bank accounts.

'Is there a lavatory I could use?' he said, hoping against hope.

'In di cell,' replied King Kong.

His legs continued to propel him forward, almost automatically. He noticed his heart was pounding.

'The lavatory in the cell is faulty.'

'Squat toilets don't break, mon. Who yu tek me fo? I a no baby who was born las' night.'

In a panicked daze, he noticed that they had already exited the 'softening' room and begun walking down the corridor. For unexplainable reasons, looking at the neon tubes above him made him

think of the lightbulb in the Livermore, California fire station, the longest lasting lightbulb. He noticed how the greenish light shone on King Kong's bald pate as the Kingston champion walked ahead of him. King Kong was probably no more corrupt than anyone else, he decided; if he solicited bribes it was not because he was Jamaican, or from the Caribbean, or from the Third World, but because everyone was doing it, including the Whites; most of the latter were degenerate these days; it was called: globalisation. Bribery had increasingly become a fact of life, and indeed an essential survival skill, in a world where the distinction between First World and Third World had grown progressively meaningless: immigration, multiculturalism, high inflation, universalism, had progressively homogenised populations and therefore styles of governance, administrative practices, and global living standards. This homogenisation had been a dream long pursued by Freudo-Marxist litterati, who had supported immigration, multiculturalism, and universalism because they equated homogenisation with leveling upwards; in practice, however, it had delivered universal poverty, and short-circuited the main engine for wealth creation and technological development on the planet. Chronic lack of funding and indeed, despite the huge sums of money in circulation, chronic lack of money in real terms had crippled public bureaucracies, which had grown so bloated through the vicious circle of ever-worsening poverty and the need for election-conscious politicians to introduce unfunded poverty-relief programmes, that not even tax rates of over 100% could possibly pay for them, now or in the future. Moreover, because unfunded programmes were funded by printing money, and printing money caused inflation, and inflation decimated debt, the collection of taxes had been hampered by the fact that tax payers routinely sought to reduce their tax liabilities by delaying tax payments. And, because more than half of the labour force consisted of government employees, a secondary effect of this chronic lack of funding was to foster a sense of helplessness and paralysis, which in turn fomented a culture of professional apathy and a Hobbesian war of all against all: in a nanny state, every man for himself, out for whatever he could get. The only way to set the bureaucratic wheels in motion, therefore, was to provide some extra 'lubrication'. King Kong was a very normal product of the times.

'If I fall ill with dysentery, I will not be able to answer questions,' he said, before adding, on impulse 'or to come to a deal.'

King Kong did not acknowledge him. The Kingston champion's mile-long shoulders carried on swaying rhythmically as they walked along the length of the corridor. Seconds later, they reached the stairs. The stairs led to the basement levels housing the detention cells.

Low cunning.

‘Perhaps I should speak to your colleague,’ he said, hoping King Kong would be keen to prevent Obama from setting up his own alternative revenue stream, but with no intentions - yet! of buckling in to pressures to suborn; he would find another way. ‘He may be more receptive to a deal.’

King Kong stopped and turned around, treating him to a broad smile. This raised his hopes. Aha! he thought, suddenly determined not to let go of the initiative and to quickly build on any concessions he obtained. However, King Kong’s chest began to ripple, and a bassy rumble of laughter began emanating from his trachea. He observed King Kong closely as the cachinnation escalated, hoping that this was merely the Kingston champion’s way of prefacing cooperation without losing face as if the laughter was intended to mean ‘T knew the White man would be scared and come to his senses.’ Yet King Kong ended his laughter by shaking his head as he exhaled a decaying falsetto. This could only be interpreted in one way: ‘The White man is scared. How silly of him to think he could run things around here.’

King Kong said, ‘Mi come here fi drink milk, mi noh come here fi count cow.’

The expression was cryptic to him, but he knew one thing: that he had blown it.

King Kong had recognised his fear, obtained evidence from him that the fear was well founded, knew what was about to happen in that cell, and desired him to experience the attentions of his cellmates (for a while at least) before (maybe) offering to assist him again. King Kong was in the driver’s seat, knew it, loved it, and wanted to keep it that way.

King Kong turned his back on him and resumed his descent down the stairs. He, now frigid with fear, turned around to look at the face of his uniformed, armed escort. The face, a young Eric Estrada lookalike decked with two observant eyes, suddenly smiled. The smile betrayed patronising glee.

He followed King Kong down the steps, as slowly as he could. For a few, crazy instants he imagined kicking King Kong’s back and sending him rolling like a barrel of Dark Lord Imperial Stout to the bottom of the stairs, then quickly turning and yanking his armed escort’s machinegun to pull him down as well. He imagined the scene: King Kong rapidly accelerating as he tumbled down, and knocking anybody loitering at the bottom of the stairs like an array of bowling pins; Young Eric

Estrada, tumbling head over heels, bellowing in pain, following in short order. He then imagined himself running for his life, down endless corridors that led nowhere except locked doors and iron bars, while Young Eric Estrada bounced to his feet and commenced a furious pursuit, machinegun in hand, finger on trigger, desperate to shoot. He finally imagined himself - getting caught, having his head detruncated with a savage ripping motion, then taken outside, and hurled onto a yard behind the station, where idle day labourers from Morocco, or Brazilian children with dreams of being the next Pelé, used it to play a football match.

By the time he had finished imagining these scenes, he found himself already in the basement, past several locked iron bar gates, within a twenty yards of his cell. They had been joined by a prison warden, holding a ring full of keys. A cacophony of snouted conversation, taunts, and chants attacked his ears on both flanks. He noticed some of the detainees holding small mirrors in one hand through the iron bars, so as to be able to see down the corridor. He tried to delay arrival at his cell by slowing down even further, but Young Eric Estrada prodded him in the back with the barrel of his machinegun whenever he deemed the length of his stride unsatisfactory.

His heart was now pounding so vigorously that he could barely hear the noise around him: his head was filled with the thumping of his own heartbeat. His respiration felt constricted.

The blood in his hands had turned to liquid helium. They were now five feet from his cell.

He considered relieving Young Eric Estrada of his machinegun and shooting dead everyone in sight, then shooting his way out of the station.

However, he was paralysed by fear and the conviction that he would not succeed.

'Here ya go. Sweet dreams,' said King Kong, with a cruel smile, standing aside as the warden inserted the key in the lock. Young Eric Estrada stood behind him, machinegun ready.

He stood facing the cell. The familiar faces stared at him from within the darkness behind the bars. Abo adorned his face with a hideous, periodontitic smile, his black eyes ablaze with cruentous desideration. The other cellmates, dull for everything else, but eerily acute when it came to any kind of juvenile bullying, took Abo's smile as the cue to resume their rhythmic clapping.

Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap... Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap... Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap...

Abo stood in the middle of the cell, naked to the waist, arms by his sides, his wild hair conferring a Satanic air to his features. His cellmates distributed around him, coalescing into a semi-circle.

Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap... Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap... Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap...

He looked at King Kong, hoping for some sign of mercy. King Kong's face was the picture of bemused boredom. Young Eric Estrada's face beamed with a delighted smile. The warden had his eyes averted, staring at the floor, with only the hint of an amused smile on his face: he had seen this countless times.

Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap... Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap... Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap...

'No tenemos todo el día,' said Young Eric Estrada, suddenly.

He waited for a moment, desperate for a last-second reprieve a gesture indicating that this was all a prank.

Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap... Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap... Clap... Clap... Clapclapclap...

After the moment had passed, the brutal reality could no longer be denied: he was minutes away from death. The bloodied flip-flops and gory tennis shoes of his cellmates standing around his cracked skull on a pool blood would be the last thing his eyes would see. He stepped forward, suddenly serene. Faced with inevitable death, what was there to fear? Fear was the offspring of uncertainty, and he was no longer uncertain.

Exhaling, he stepped forward.

'AHA!' echoed a shout from the far end of the corridor.

He, King Kong, the warden, and Young Eric Estrada turned to look, their heads turning synchronically, as if activated by the same remote control.

'I knew I'd find you here!' echoed the angry voice.

In the distance, beyond several layers of iron bars, he glimpsed Obama walking towards them, preceded by another warden, who advanced ahead of him, opening the iron gates. Obama's gaze was fixed on them, as he walked with a resolute stride. His inquisitor was wearing a pair of café-au-lait trousers, a white shirt, a gun strap (complete with holster and a loaded weapon), and a generic striped tie. In his right hand, Obama was holding a battered manila folder containing what looked like documents; under his left arm Obama held an R-Kive woodgrain-effect storage box, obviously heavy with evidence.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' Obama shouted, now only fifteen yards away.

Everyone outside the cells was paralysed; everyone inside the detention cells lining the corridors, on the other hand, became agitated, anticipating a fun-filled brawl. An animalistic hubbub of excitement and loud volleys of rude imprecations flooded the area. King Kong raised his eyebrows and looked away, the gesture of a man who was bored by, and indifferent to, his colleague's ire.

'That suspect is NOT to be allowed out of the cell!' announced Obama, as he walked the final five metres towards them.

He noticed Obama's forehead was creased with the signs of rage. A vein running along its middle was dilated to twice its usual diameter, carrying a fast-moving cocktail of adrenaline and sickle cell anaemia. Despite Obama's statement, the fact that lie was carrying files renewed his hopes of a last-second reprieve. It looked as if Obama had been looking for him to subject him to another interrogation.

'Return him to his cell! NOW!' commanded Obama, jerking his oval head in the cell's direction.

He cursed Obama, then looked at the warden: the warden simply imitated Obama's head jerk, suggesting that he hurry in. He, however, did not move. Abo remained standing in the centre, his face a gargoyle-like mask of mock seriousness, insolence radiating just beneath the surface:

Two seconds elapsed, during which he did not move, causing the warden, King Kong, and Young Eric Estrada to stare at him, before turning their heads towards Obama.

Obama mumbled, between grinding teeth, 'You fucking nit-wits!'

The clamour of jeering and screaming criminals in the surrounding cells became deafening. It felt as if being inside a zoo, surrounded by cages teeming with excitable monkeys, jumping and screeching and rattling their cages in a scene of uncontrollable chaos.

Young Eric Estrada prodded him in the back with his machinegun, indicating that he should enter the cell. He entered the cell, knowing better than to avoid Abo's gaze. King Kong's warden locked the entrance behind him.

'You! Oi! Oi! Just what the fuck do you thing you were doing?' screamed Obama, directing his venom at King Kong.

King Kong stood still, looking away with bored eyes and only the barest hint of a patronising smile on his cheeks.

'ANSWER ME!' demanded Obama.

King Kong remained silent for a moment, then, with an inaudible sigh, put his left fist on his hip, revealing his gun strap, and pinched his nose with the thumb and index of his right hand, his perspiring face registering weariness.

‘ANSWER ME!’ demanded Obama again.

No response came from King Kong.

Obama snorted with contempt. ‘I am in a sea of idiots!’ he said, ‘Fucking idiots. All of them.’

He, meanwhile, stood facing Abo. Abo stared back at him, his facial expression unchanged. The cellmates were all silent all around him, both interested in Obama’s ranting and seemingly waiting for a cue.

‘Get him out there!’ he heard Obama scream, behind him, closer than before.

The lock turned. The door to the cell creaked as it was opened.

‘Tú, señoritingo, fuera,’ said the warden.

He turned to look, and found Obama facing the cell, full on, still holding the archive box and the manila envelope, and sporting a furrowed brow. The warden, still holding the door, jerked his head, indicating that he should hurry out.

‘I am going to fucking crush you, you fucking Nazi scum,’ said Obama.

Yes, Obama had changed his mind, and had decided, once more, to interrogate him.

‘Hurry out! Haven’t got all day,’ commanded Obama.

Chapter 35

Alpha Male

They walked through a series of corridors with two armed escorts, Obama carrying his files, he in handcuffs. Obama had wanted to make a detour via his office on their way to the interrogation room, so he, who so far had only seen a small part of the station, had occasion to gain further knowledge of its layout and extension as he was walked through.

The upper floor echoed the reality in the dungeons below: the station's population and the real estate containing it had expanded at very different speeds: payroll expansion had been exponential, matching the growth of violent crime; floor space, on the other hand, had experienced negative growth, as both police officers and criminals had generated a tsunami of paperwork, which in turn had generated kilometres of files and kilolitres of evidence. Open doors revealed cramped offices, with three or four men sharing spaces designed for one, their desks pressed together, shelving and cabinets shoved into every available nook and cranny, every surface overwhelmed by lever-arch files, ring binders, manilla folders, brown envelopes, archive boxes, paper trays, photographs, cans of carbonated drink, bottled water, fast and junk food wrappers, plastic cups, desk lamps, input devices, printing devices, computer screens, portable electronic gadgets, stationery, notepads, circulars, memos, forms, loiters, reports, Post-Its, statements, minutes, chits, reminders, directives, handbooks, procedural manuals, and old telephone books. The swivel chairs were almost invariably broken, threadbare, and deformed through extensive, intensive, and brutal use; the foam exposed, blackened, and crumbling; the backrests either twisted to one side,

loose, or missing altogether. The desks, although almost invisible, were in a similarly poor state of repair.) Any available floor space had been reduced to narrow runs, and these were frequently overwhelmed by rubbish spilling but from the chronically overflowing bins; some of the latter were buried under stacks of old pizza boxes, which in turn served as bases for secondary mountains of rubbish, piled up as high as they would go against a wall. The walls were mostly lined with shelving, holding millions of box files and ring binders, most of which were old, held together with layers of duct tape and cello tape, and covered in black grime and layers upon layers of Typex and re-cycled adhesive labels. The dominant colours were coprolite brown and gunite grey; any aberration from that norm suffocated by the thick layers of dust that covered every surface that was not in heavy use.

Unsurprisingly, the faces of the entire payroll registered mixtures of catatonic boredom, surly apathy, ironic cynicism, paralytic resignation, acrid irritability, scheming malice, jaded disinterest, corrupt joviality, and spiritual capitulation. Because of green bans on air conditioning, the temperature was no lower than on his cell, the higher altitude compensating for the slightly lower demographic density; consequently, nobody wore jackets, every tie knot was loose, and every shirt was wet with perspiration.

Obama, walking behind him, greeted no one as they made their way to the interrogation room: evidently, his inquisitor had been on a temporary assignment.

Minutes later, they arrived at their destination. The door to the interrogation room was open and being traversed by a sullen detective, carrying a crate full of coniferous branches. The detective, a balding, overweight man in his sixties, said, 'Ya esta casi.' He stopped, but Obama, not understanding, snapped irritably, 'Did I ask you to stop? Get in there!'

He entered the interrogation room (one he had never been in), and noticed there was another crate still on the table. The crate held lengths of golden tinsel and boxes of glass baubles.

Christmas ornaments, he thought. The coniferous branches had been, in fact, artificial: parts of a Christmas tree, the display of which had been outlawed for fear of offending people of other faiths. He imagined a dump truck backing up towards a vast landfill, before a hydraulic ram began tilting the dump body, causing several metric tons of impounded Christmas decorations to fall into a crater filled with millions of tons of glittery ornamentation. He imagined the Christmas decorations having been sorted previously, at a warehouse, where

workers sitting alongside a series of conveyor belts spent all day every day in December separating baubles, tinsel, lights, and a million other things. The baubles would be crushed and ground to a powder inside a grinder, to prepare the glass for melting.

‘Ah!’ breathed Obama, annoyed, upon entering the room behind him and noticing the table was not clear. Obama then ordered, ‘OK. You, Mister, sit down and wait. You, chain him and watching closely until I return. Make sure he doesn’t move a muscle.’

He did as instructed. The armed escort cuffed his ankles to the floor, then took position by the door. The armed escort was a man in his twenties, coffee coloured but otherwise racially indeterminate; he had a lean, muscular torso, which he covered with a t-shirt that was too tight, presumably to show off his musculature; his face, serious and frowning but unable to entirely conceal the hint of a cocky smile, betrayed the escort’s pleasure at holding his machinegun: the weapon made him feel powerful and important. He stared at the escort from his chair for a moment, almost rolling his eyes at the sight of the escort’s general manner; he felt relieved Obama had unwittingly rescued him from (or at least postponed) a cruel death down in the dungeons, but he was all the same tired of his captor’s infantile behaviour: it seemed to him as if the European Union - nay, the world was run by children - children with adult bodies and access to weapons, able to hold political office, mobilise armies, maintain police forces, and collect quadrillions in tax money.

Obama disappeared, only to re-appear five seconds later, following the bald man, who had returned to collect the last box left on the table. Obama’s face registered uptightness and impatience, the bald man’s calm indifference. Were it not because Obama’s hostility augured even harsher treatment, the scene would have been comical. Obama stood near the door, observing the man as he carried the box out of the interrogation room. At this point, Obama slammed the door shut, turned his oval head, and fixed his eyes on him, odium rays shooting out of his black eyes, ‘OK, Mister. Kiss your white Aryan Nazi arse goodbye, because today you’re gonna learn to respect the BLACK man.’

He said nothing.

Obama yanked the chair out from beneath the table and sat down with angry vehemence.

He noticed now, for the first time, that Obama had left the archive box and the manilla folder in his office, and taken with him the electronic dossier he had used on all previous interrogations.

'In fact,' said Obama suddenly, 'you just wait there. I'm going to fucking show you.'

Obama jerked himself upright, the back of his knees propelling the chair backwards until it collided against the wall behind. With angry movements, Obama then went to the door, yanked it open, and leaned into the corridor, raising his arm above his head.

'Oi!' shouted Obama, snapping his fingers repeatedly, in an attempt to gain someone's attention. 'Oi! You! Speak English?' A voice replied in the distance.

'For fuck's sake!' cursed Obama, turning abruptly to Machinegun by the door. 'You, watch this fucking Nazi while I go get someone with a fucking brain.'

Machinegun nodded promptly, knowing better than to show even the slightest trace of torpor.

Obama stormed out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him once more.'

He stared at the door, then at Machinegun. Machinegun was as bemused as he was by Obama's behaviour, only Machinegun's enjoyment was magnified by his being a care-free observer, and not the object, of the interrogation.

Minutes passed in silence.

The door had a small wired-glass window, through which he could see the heads of police officers passing by, back and forth, at different speeds, depending on how busy they were. Back and forth, back and forth, they went, for minute after minute after minute.

The wall to his left was half-taken up by a two-way mirror. He avoided looking at his own reflection; thinking of the condition he might be in disturbed him. Was Obama sitting behind that mirror? Had his temper tantrum and storming out been a trick, calculated to rattle him and trigger revealing psychosomatic gestures? Was a gesture specialist sitting next to Obama, watching, recording, interpreting, commenting, noting key time index points?

Two heads nearly collided outside. '¡Me cago en Dios!' exclaimed one of them, looking down, as if examining something. He surmised the collision had caused a drink to be spilled onto one of the party's t-shirts. After an inaudible exchange of blame and apologies, and much looking down and annoyed headshaking, the colliding parties moved on. He imagined they

would use up a whole kitchen towel roll to clean up the mess: many years ago, when one purchased a roll of kitchen towel, the strip of absorbent paper was rolled tight, and a single roll would last for many weeks, absent a major or chronic spillage; nowadays, however, manufacturers fluffed up the rolls by using quilted textures and rolling the absorbent paper very loosely, so that it occupied the same volume as the old roll, but contained 40% less paper. The scam was initially tested with three-for-two offers, whereby the fluffing-up of the rolls financed the offer, and the customer ended up purchasing, for the price of two-roll packet, a three-roll packet, containing 7% less paper than in a normal two-roll packet. The test had obviously proven successful, and the scam had subsequently been rolled out across the board, heralding the extinction of the proper roll.

Consumer protection? Were it possible to convert all the matter in the universe into printer toner, there would not be enough to print all the rules and regulations dictating what a business may or may not do these days. Learning them all, let alone understanding them, demanded so much time and effort that no one paid any attention: it was simpler for a business to simply guess and hope they would not be sued or fined or closed down; besides, while large businesses had entire armies of lawyers employed to find ways around the legislation (as well as, more importantly perhaps, lobbyists, to obtain, in exchange for party political donations, special concessions from whichever party won the election), few small businesses, other than clandestine black market operations, were likely to trade long enough for their infractions to be detected by government consumer watchdog agencies: the tax burden crushed them first, like beetles under a 160 Kg Atlas stone. In fact, few small business ever managed to start up legally: the amount of red tape the government required businesses to go through before they were allowed to commence trading what with registrations, proofs of identity, of address, of ownership, tax, VAT, health and safety regulations, labour unions, anti-discrimination compliance verification, compulsory pension plans, and so forth could only be expressed in tetrated scientific notation; socialism choked most small enterprise at or before birth.

A sudden burst of activity outside caught his attention: human heads were now shooting past at high velocity, bearing

faces contorted by adrenalised urgency. Waves of shouting and the chaotic thumping of running feet signaled rising commotion. Telephones rang constantly in the distance. Machinegun, who had been in a daze, staring into space, began turning his head from time to time to peek through the narrow door window. He, still sitting on his chair, kept his eyes fixed on this window, trying to extract as much information as possible from this abrupt change of pace. Because the door was made of reinforced steel, it was not possible for him to discern the semantic import of the shouts: he was only able to pick up random, isolated words in Spanish.

None of the heads belonged to Obama. He wondered whether the heads would eventually slow down, allowing Obama to return and resume his inquisition, or would maintain their current velocity, forcing a change of plans on his inquisitor. A third possibility was that the heads would not slow down and Obama would walk in through the door the next moment in order to proceed with his interrogation, unaffected by events outside. As odious as he found his antagonist, a new installment of the latter's leading questions, tortive logic, wrongful premises, race-obsessed accusations, and infuriatingly self-serving conclusions still seemed preferable to possibility number two: if the emergency forced Obama to postpone his interrogation, Obama would most likely return him to his cell, where Abo anxiously awaited, building the callus on his middle knuckle by continuously punching the rough cement wall.

Machinegun grew restless, his face now almost continuously plastered against the door window.

‘¿Que pasa alli afuera?’ he asked Machinegun.

Machinegun ignored him. Five seconds later, however, Machinegun opened the door and asked ‘Que pasa?’ to one of the heads passing by. The head replied, but it was impossible for him to hear from where he was seated.

Machinegun closed the door and resumed his assigned task, watching him like a hawk.

‘¿Que pasa alli afuera?’ he asked Machinegun, once again.

Machinegun ignored him, maintaining his frown.

‘¿No contestas?’ he insisted.

No effect.

‘Hmm,’ he grunted scornfully, looking away, shaking his head slightly.

Minutes passed. The heads outside continued to shoot by, back and forth, like excited gas molecules bouncing inside a pressure cooker sitting on a stove a stove set at maximum, in a greasy kitchen, in a teeming restaurant, in a sordid

neighbourhood, in a grim and crime-infested city, in a debtor nation, in a conquered continent, in a hot hemisphere, in an overpopulated planet where the White man's only remaining safe haven (and who knew for how long!) was the melting, sinking, and mostly deserted continent of Antarctica.

He wondered whether Obama knew about his wife's Antarctic dollars, or would find out about them during this new interrogation, instigating her arrest. Earlier interrogations had already confirmed that Obama believed that he was connected to the Esoteric Hitlerists and that they were abscoding Kevin MacDonald. Islamic terrorist networks were known to use sleepers, trained fanatics without police records living ordinary lives lodged inside ethnic enclaves and ready to spring into action at short notice. The Esoteric Hitlerist cultists were portrayed in the media as a mystical order of Hitler-worshipping lunatics, an extremely dangerous and well-organised terrorist network, operating entirely in sleeper mode, its sleeper cells like latent occult viruses, cryptic, infectious, arid continuously replicating. If one really thought about it, however, here was of course no real evidence that the Esoteric Hitlerists actually existed: occasionally, the media would report the dismemberment of a cell, or the thwarting of a major operation, but who could be sure? After all, for the past twenty years such reports had been used so often in the context of Islamic terrorism, labelling as "al-Qu'edah" anything involving any random group of men with beards and knitted kufis, that only the "educated man" who relied on mainstream corporate media to update him on world events failed to see these reports, as the political tools that they were: whenever the governing party was in trouble at the polls, or the head of government was enmeshed in a lurid scandal, a major terrorist threat and marshal law soon followed. Still, he was plagued by the conviction that he had personally witnessed a Hitlerist operation; that he had been sitting only a metre away from "the Monster of Long Beach", Dr. Kevin MacDonald, and that, if the Esoteric Hitlerist cult was indeed an urban legend, a media myth concocted by Jewish billionaires seeking leverage for concessions from politicians, he would not have spent weeks in the legal limbo of indefinite detention. To him it seemed improbable incredible even that the media myth had become so successful that even the police force had been taken in on the con. Then again, perhaps it was not as incredible as it seemed: police involvement necessitated conviction within the law-enforcement hierarchy after all, and police mobilisation rendered the Esoteric Hitlerist menace more spectacular for the man in the street, thus offering a more persuasive argument to accept, for his

own protection, more invasive state surveillance, cognitive restrictions, and speech controls. The fact was that plausible arguments and rationalisations in both directions were so numerous, that distinguishing between fiction and reality became impossible. Conspiracies, and conspiracy theories, thrived in the information age because the accessibility and inexhaustibility of information, of any which quality, from any which source, destroyed the boundaries separating the two; source, destroyed the boundaries separating the two; and if a conspiracy existed only in theory, the need for efficient explanations soon transformed theory into self-fulfilling prophecy.

According to standard media fare, the Esoteric Hitlerists regarded Antarctica as sacred, a continent once inhabited by the Hyperboreans. The Hyperboreans were a race of extra-galactic beings who once roamed the Earth in non-physical form. They commanded the power of Vril, reproduced asexually through spasmic emanations, could see through the Third Eye, and had the light of the Black Sun coursing through their veins; their immaterial realm was neither geographically bounded nor subject to the cycles of re-incarnation. At some point in the distant past, they had descended onto the physical Earth, and founded the Second Hyperborea on a ring-shaped continent in the North Pole. Native to Earth at this time were bestial imitations of man, the black, red, and yellow races, who had been condemned by their creator, the Demiurge (an inferior terrestrial godlet who inhabited the realm of the physical), to an involuntary cycle of re-incarnation with no higher purpose. Horrified by this nefarious order, and determined to reclaim the planet from the degenerative forces of the Demiurge, the Hyperboreans had set out to instruct his creatures in order to elevate them above their animal station. Their mission, however, was eventually thwarted by catastrophe: rebel Hyperboreans intermingled their blood with the creatures of the Demiurge, causing the loss of Paradise. This primordial miscegenation accelerated the process of material decay, and was marked by cataclysms; the poles were inverted by the collision with Earth of a comet or moon. Hyperborea dematerialised once again and the continent disappeared beneath the deluge, but the Hyperboreans themselves survived. Some took refuge in the South Pole. Others migrated to the then-fertile Goby Desert, and founded a resplendent civilisation. The Esoteric Hitlerists regarded the appearance of Cro-Magnon in Europe as evidence of the Hyperboreans being driven Southwards by the Ice Age. The world, according to the cultists, was therefore a battlezone, where the Hyperborean's descendants, the Aryans, were engaged in a war against the Demiurge and his forces of entropy.

The Aryans would be able to reclaim the Golden Age if they managed to re-purify their blood, and restore their hæmetic memory. According to Serrano, there had been a historical conspiracy to conceal the origins of mankind, and the last documents relating to the Hyperboreans had been destroyed by the arson of the Ancient Library of Alexandria.

The media added piquancy to these summaries by circulating rumours about the Hilterist cult operating underground bases in Antarctica. The first bases had been built during the 1940s, in Neuschwabenland (New Swabia), the Antarctic territory claimed by Nazi Germany in 1938. Construction had continued after the war, expanding the network of secret installations all over the continent. Some of the bases, the rumours claimed, maintained a fleet of Haunebu (flying discs, or Nazi UFOs), developed under the auspices of the Vril Society, an inner circle of the Thule Society in Berlin, which founded the NSDAP. Some of the wilder rumors claimed additional Nazi bases on the far side of the moon, built as far back as 1942. However, the less sensationalistic among mainstream documentaries on the subject did clarify that these rumours had long been traced to books written from 1967 onwards books by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, Jan van Helsing, Norbert-Jürgen Rathofer, and Vladimir Terziski, as well as to an Ernst Zündel marketing ploy from 1970s. Yet, media mythology claimed that the Esoteric Hitlerists, inspired by these tales, Serrano's writings {El Cordon Dorado, or The Golden Band), and by Troy Southgate's concept of 'revolution from the periphery', had been establishing racially pure communities in the Antarctic, and arming themselves with weapons of mass destruction, Vril, and space-faring technology. Such documentaries also claimed that the Esoteric Hitlerists, inspired by films like Iron Sky, and delirious novels by Alex Kurtagic, had real-life plans for lunar bases.

He had no time for such idle speculation; in his opinion reality was likely more prosaic.

The steady rise in global temperatures had accelerated the melting of the polar ice caps. One of the results had been a steady flow of migration towards Antarctica, primarily among wealthy tax refugees, rugged White adventurers afflicted by Old West nostalgia, and conservative revolutionaries interested in a modern version of the XIXth century Lebensreform movement. The first group (the tax refugees) consisted mostly of fanatical Objectivists; they were concentrated in Marie Byrd Land, where they had set out to build a huge industrial and

technological society, founded on principles of laissez faire capitalism. The second and third groups, concentrated in Queen Maud Land, had, in turn, founded autonomous village communities, each with a well-developed and distinct local culture: its inhabitants were typically Wotanists, health and fitness fanatics, and hardcore survivalists, who believed self-sufficiency and the nobility of blood and soil; they appeared skeptical of bureaucracies and centralised authority; they paid no taxes; they were partial to Classical, and pagan and militarist forms of music, like Neo-Folk, Black Metal, and Martial Industrial; and for their local schools they favoured instruction text lists from 1900, updated with angry diatribes by modern revolutionaries. Among the latter, Tradition & Revolution by Troy Southgate, apparently an extremely dangerous and poisonous text that was banned everywhere in the civilised world and which was otherwise known as the Red Book of Troy, was a favourite among the youth. (The Sunday magazines, of course, claimed that the text, like all of Southgate's music, was designed to infect even the most skeptical mind upon first contact; that its poison, its evil genius, was so potent and irresistible, as to instantly modify the physical structure of the brain. And, of course, this was almost certainly government and media-sponsored nonsense, designed to scare people off reading the notorious Red Book.)

Several of his acquaintances had re-settled in the hyperaustral continent, or were planning to do so. Although none were (or admitted to being) Esoteric Hitlersits, in his opinion their brains were still volatilised by fantasy. He had heard them predict, for example, that Antarctica would become the new New World, where a new breed of Pagan Puritans would seek refuge from the horrors of the collapsing Occident. He had also heard them prophesy that with China occupied pursuing its policy of Lebensraum across Eurasia, pushing the moribund Russians beyond the Urals, the endangered remnants of European man, provided enough survived to avert the extinction of the subspecies, would rebuild his civilisation in the periphery, and, like the phoenix, would rise from the ashes to eventually challenge Chinese hegemony in a world of universal poverty. That might well be the case one day, he had thought, but this was a vision that would take centuries to unfold, China was no decadent and multicultural Rome, and the new 'frontiersmen' - although arguably a movement of leaderless resistance on a large scale - hardly qualified as XXIst century Ostrogoths; therefore, it was irrelevant to his needs here and now. Moreover, the vision was idealistic - a fashionable delirium re-

motely inspired by media demonisations of Miguel Serrano's followers: governments, globalists, corporations, would also covet a slice of the Antarctic cake, and would seek to tax, militarise, multiculturalise, and develop new markets in the Hyperborean paradise, in their image and designed to advance their peculiar agendas. Any secret underground bases already in operation down there were likely to consist either of prison camps, experimental weapon's factories, or gold hoards. And if any of these bases were operated by Esoteric Hitlerist cultists, then the most likely concealed asset in their possession would be Dr. Kevin MacDonald.

He shook his head out of its stupor. He had to stop losing himself so obsessively in these speculations: always the same film, always the same arguments, round and round in his mind, with Dr. MacDonald and Mr. Wermod and Dr. Oker and Dr. Brummagem, and Dr. Stumm, getting nowhere, resolving nothing, gaining no new insight.

The door opened. An angry-looking man, who looked like a young Carlos the Jackal, stared into the room. Carlos' eyes shout out two odium rays directly at him.

'¡Tú! ¿Cómo te llamas?'

He stared back in astonishment for a few moments, unsure. '¿Me hablas a mí?'

'¡Sí, cono! A quién más. ¿Cómo te llamas? ¡Rápido!'

Annoyed, he stated his name, but reluctantly. How dare that monkey speak to him like that? He was a serious person and expected to be treated seriously, even as a temporary detainee.

Carlos was too arrogant to acknowledge. Instead, he looked at Machinegun and ordered, 'Vigíalo bien. ¡Que no mueva un músculo! Si lo mueve, ¡dispara!'

'Sí,' replied Machinegun, eagerly, clutching his weapon and staring at his sitting form with a frown of determination.

Carlos moved on, shutting the door as he went.

He stared at Machinegun. Machinegun appeared delighted with his task, and eager to comply. After a few moments, Machinegun's features hardened. '¡Eh! W said the youngster, pointing the barrel of his Metal Storm at him, '¡No respire!'

Imbécil, he thought; he carried on breathing normally.

Machinegun smirked, then chuckled.

A tectonic tremour of laughter rumbled into the interrogation room, passing under his chair. The epicentre was... King Kong. The pongid wheeler-dealer passed by just at that moment, his face radiant with a splendid smile; King Kong's calm stroll was not only slightly surreal, but also had the effect of emphasising

the frenetic level of activity around him: the heads continued to shoot by at high speed, back and forth, back and forth.

The lights flickered overhead, dimming momentarily before flickering again..

Machinegun tightened his grip on his weapon, saying to him, with his eyes, *Don't even dream of it!*

He kept his face expressionless in response. He was not going to allow that irrelevant little baboon the pleasure of observing a reaction to his ridiculous taunts. He would rather be shot than make Machinegun feel important.

He imagined Machinegun in a bootcamp during training, forced to spend hours polishing his boots and then being screamed at by the instructor because he missed a spot, and being sent to run bare-chested through tall stinging nettles all afternoon. He imagined Machinegun being forced to dig trenches with a plastic spoon, clean lavatories with a toothbrush, do a million press-ups, stand at attention in the scorching sun for four days in a row, do forced marches uphill carrying a rucksack loaded with plutonium. He imagined Machinegun being fed one, bowl of watery porridge a day, and being allocated a bunkbed with a micron-thin mattress and sheets made out of ceramic sandpaper. He had to suppress a sudden impulse to laugh as he then imagined Machinegun trying to sleep in such a bed, inhaling his bunkmate's endless flatulence and unnerved by the constant creaking of the bed's springs, as his legs were sanded raw each time he changed position. Machinegun would have been rudely awoken in the wee-est hours of the morning, with a whistle, or a bugle, or frying pan beaten with a spoon, and been forced to jump to his feet and run to the showers and wash himself quickly under a freezing jet of liquid helium. |

He cared not that Machinegun's training was unlikely to have consisted of such a cartoonified bootcamp: as with everybody, everywhere and always, believing the produce of his imagination was infinitely more satisfying. .

And what about Obama? He could not imagine Obama having a private car or a home, let alone a family and children, to go to in the evenings - or, for that matter, a life outside a police station or an airport terminal. Obama probably survived exclusively on takeaway or canteen food and slept in the office - not because he was especially hard working, but because that was his habitat and those were his feeding habits. He imagined Obama spent a large part of his working day joking with his colleagues - colleagues, of course, of his rank; anyone beneath

him he most likely treated harshly and with contempt. In fact, Obama, he speculated, would be obsequious to his superiors, cocky among his colleagues, and icy to his inferiors: his superiors he likely saw as either obstacles or resources, his colleagues as competition, and his inferiors as - quite simply - scum. What was more, given Obama's style and performances, it was likely Obama began each day scheming and calculating. He imagined Obama standing in front of a sink in the gents, looking at his reflection in the mirror as he shaved his brown cheeks, with his brow stormy as he mentally reviewed personnel dynamics and office politics in the search for tactical advantage and promotion opportunities. Obama's present assignment in Spain was probably the product of his cunning manoeuvring, the transfer almost certainly a step designed to either prevent a colleague from gaining ground within the organisational power structure, or position him (Obama) closer to the front of the promotion queue. Yes, Obama was all about power and status and showing others how he thought he was better - more aggressive, more cunning - than them. Beyond that he had no higher purpose: Obama was not interested in justice, in law enforcement, or in improving the criminal law system; he simply wanted to be Top Dog, so he could rule with an iron fist, and do whatever he liked.

The door opened again. Carlos' face appeared and the Jackal's eyes shot a new volley of odium rays in his direction.

'¡Tú! ¡Fuera!'¹³¹ he spat, jerking his head outwards.

He stared at Carlos, just as he had done before, perplexed. He was not sure whether to obey or explain that he was waiting to be interrogated.

'¡Rápido, cono!'

He complied. *Let them sort it out.*

He joined Carlos in the corridor. The corridor was still operating as a high-speed human motorway, with personnel going back and forth, looking serious and stressed and agitated. Some were on mobiles, others on walkie-talkies. There were uniformed policemen as well as plain-clothes policemen, plus detectives and inspectors and superintendents and detainees, the latter with lacerations and disheveled and being led in handcuffs to cells or to interrogation rooms. It seemed every telephone in the station was ringing. He could hear a hyperactive televised broadcast blaring in the distance.

'Ven,' ordered Carlos.

Chapter 36

Government Fiat

People were running; sirens wailing; helicopters flying overhead. Weapons fire crackled in the distance. The air pululated with the stench of burning tyres and the clamour of a thousand voices.

He looked towards one end of the street: army jeeps and armed personnel vehicles were attempting to force their way through the gridlock of traffic; men in camouflage fatigues ran towards him, on the pavements, between, and over the paralysed motor vehicles. Coming from the opposite direction were ordinary people, of all races, genders, creeds, ages, sizes, and sexual orientations, carrying tins, bottles, packets, boxes, crates, fruit, frozen food, and bovine carcasses. The pavements were littered with debris: sheets of paper, bank notes, paper napkins, broken glass, decomposing rubbish. Thinking, it prudent to exit the area quickly, he began walking towards the soldiers.

The buildings around him were all cement grey and red brick, near-derelict and unfamiliar. All along the pavements on both sides, the crumbling walls of these buildings had been covered with a lasagna of posters, which the sun had faded, the heat had scorched, and the acid rains had peeled away. A multi-coloured Babel of graffiti covered the posters: some of it was incomprehensible, written in Arabic, Mende, Nsibidi, Shumom, Vai Syllabry, Hebrew, and Lao scripts; some of it used runic script or symbols, favoured by Esoteric Hitlerists and other mystical Nazi sects; some of it was written in the Roman alphabet, but in an array of languages from the peninsula's independent republics, rebel statelets, and dependent

territories, including Castilian, Basque, Catalan, Valencian, Galician, Aráñese, Aragonese, Astur-Leonese, Eonavian, Fala, and Tarifit; and the rest were written in North African French, broken English, and Inglés de Escalerilla.

He wondered why no one was bothering to scoop the thousands of banknotes strewn everywhere.

Were many of the vehicles not so badly rusted or brown with dust, it would have been possible to fry an egg on any bonet; yet, despite the immense heat, all their occupants chose to cower inside with their windows rolled up. He glimpsed fearful faces staring out behind tinted glass.

Soldiers continued to run towards him and past him. None challenged the looters.

He carried on walking.

As he turned a corner, he saw a Metro entrance. Since he did not recognise the street, the Metro station would have normally indicated his whereabouts. Unfortunately, however, truanting children had vandalised the sign, anonymising the station. Moreover, the station was closed: beyond the grid of the metal shutters at the bottom of the stairs the ticket hall was in darkness; the piles of rubbish mounting up against the shutters suggested the closure was not breaking news. Either the Metro workers had been on strike or the station had been condemned due to its age. The name of the station would probably be emblazoned on a sign in the ticket hall, but he dared not descend the steps to peer through the shutters: not only did the mountains of stinking rubbish present him with a distasteful and significant obstacle, but amid the empty bottles of booze and cans of beer, there were filthy blankets and cardboard boxes down there sheltering vaguely human sleeping forms.

The harsh sun cooked his head and facial skin.

For the time being, he decided to lose himself in the narrow, residential alleys, lest he be re-arrested. The running looters soon thinned out, but traffic was still in gridlock. He could not tell whether cars were double parked or simply unable to move. Some motorists, however, had parked directly on the pavement. One, a man with tanned skin and curly black hair and driving a white Ford Sierra, was attempting to re-start his engine, unsuccessfully. It sounded as if he had ran out of petrol. The rear bumper was so low as to be almost touching the asphalt.

He hoped the food riot was localised. Since his first task was to locate the nearest Corte Inglés and purchased replacement

outfit, a widespread food riot would prove highly inconvenient, as it would mean a shuttered up and heavily guarded department store. Indeed, priority number one was to restore his appearance as a serious businessman; he would not feel at ease until he had shed his filthy suit and ruined shoes, shaved, deodorised, washed his hair, and donned an attire appropriate for a man of his station. His plan was to sneak into a Corte Inglés, purchase disposable razors, shaving cream, deodorant, and a manly shampoo; perform rapid ablutions in the gents' toilets; then pick a suit off the racks before he was noticed, sneak into the trying room, re-suit himself, and pay for it all, having selected an appropriate tie on his way to the cashier. With luck, his credit card, returned to him along with his personal effects at the police station, would still be operational.

Priority number two was to telephone his wife and inform her of his status and intention to fly back to England that very evening. By telephoning his wife after he had attended to his grooming and wardrobe, he reasoned, he would minimise chances of a second arrest, thereby shortening the time elapsed between his telephone call and his arrival in London; reversing the order would likely result in his being mistaken by a violent drug peddler and therefore in re-imprisonment.

He had no intentions of stopping by the hotel before heading for Barajas. He would settle his bill by telephone and he would sleep at the airport, upright on a plastic chair if necessary, until the next available flight. The sooner he left Spain, the better.

Hopefully, he would not coincide with Obama at Terminal 4 - or, worse still, aboard the airplane!

Yes, Obama would certainly be the least welcome of all possible travel companions, and given his luck and turn of events that day, it was almost certain Obama would indeed end up aboard his flight and on a seat directly adjacent to his own. He imagined his inquisitor angrily selecting his seat at the checking-in console, with a detective novel tucked under his arm; then himself walking down the aisle to his seat, to find his inquisitor already seated, with his book on his knee, his table down, and angrily slapping the pages of the inflight magazine. What would he do then? Affect English phlegm and sit next to Obama, pretending nothing happened? Disembark and book another flight? Quietly propose a seat swap with another passenger somewhere far? Stand back, hack into Obama's mobile, and send him a bogus message from the station saying they had changed their minds and wanted him to immediately report back to duty?

No. He won't be there.

He soon found himself facing a broad avenue; he did not recognise it, but it was welcome news, as it was more likely to contain a Metro station somewhere along its length. He revised his trajectory accordingly. The avenue, however, proved devoid of Metro stations. Instead, it led him to a scorched and dusty motorway, choked with paralysed traffic, and flanked on both sides with tall cliffs of tightly compressed residential buildings. Jeeps and armed personnel vehicles crammed with camouflaged figures sped along the shoulders. Motorists were standing about or walking or running in between the lanes; some had abandoned their vehicles. Gunfire echoed in the distance. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath, and looked around, rivers of perspiration running down his face and neck.

Then, he saw it: in the distance, a green isosceles triangle, recumbent and with white script written across the middle. *El Corte Inglés*.

OK. We're in business. Enjoy your P45, you cretin! he triumphed, thinking of Obama and walking swiftly.

Chapter 37

Suit

The scenes inside the Corte Inglés were of utter chaos. A vociferous swarm of human locusts had descended upon the Hypercor, frenzied shoppers forcing their way in through the turnstiles and denuding the shelves faster than they could be re-stocked. The tills area resembled a mosh pit, with humans of all descriptions shoving and shouting and impatient to transfer their liquid assets to the till operators. The car park had been flooded by a torrential flow of vehicles, all pumping petrol and, diesel fumes, and filling every available gap, space, nook, corner, cranny, alcove, lane, or niche, selfishly disregarding signs or markings or the needs of other motorists. Cars, vans, trucks, scooters, bicycles, and motorcycles, double and triple parked anywhere, regurgitated motorists carrying plastic bags, duffel bags, postal sacks, backpacks, boxes, cartons, and crates of every colour, size, and design. These freshly paid workers were only interested in, and were all racing towards, the Hypercor, the Corte Inglés' supermarket. The other areas and floors inside the store were virtually deserted and fully stocked with merchandise: shelves, racks, display stations, all loaded, packed tightly, and piled high. Only half the fluorescent tubes overhead were on. Armed security personnel - almost like cosmonauts under all their bullet-proof padding and riot-control gear - patrolled every section, though they were mostly concentrated around and within the Hypercor, where they assisted the store's management in enforcing government-mandated staples rationing. None of the escalators was operational.

With no time or patience for queuing at the Hypercor, he made do with the hand soap available in the gents; it was versatile enough. There was nothing he could do about his facial hair, but he decided that in combination with a suit it would confer upon him added gravitas and severity, neither superfluous for a serious businessman. The only serious imperfection was the lack of gel: his hair was fine and cut long on top so that it could be slicked back, and without gel his hair was too long to stay in place; once dry this would prove a real nuisance, forcing him continuously to run his fingers through his hair in order to keep it off his face. It did appear, however, that he presently had more serious and pressing matters with which to occupy his mind.

On his way out, he darted a glance at the television screens in the consumer electronics shop: most of the television sets were tuned to one of the hundreds of sports channels; however, a couple of them were blaring news reports. He caught a glimpse of the president of the European Central Bank making declarations and looking somewhat defensive, but he felt self-conscious about the state of his attire and also lacked the energy to stand around listening, so he quickly moved on.

He visited the men's fashion on the first floor. There, he located the suit racks and hid behind a column while he observed the attendants: there were two of them, one White, in his seventies, with a walrus moustache, behind a counter, next to a till and busy with paperwork; another Black, in his twenties, clean shaven, juggling three impatient customers loaded with stacks of identical white shirts. Once the Black attendant had his back to him, he moved swiftly, darting to the rack, picking up a suit his size, collecting a white shirt and a tie along the way, and heading into the changing rooms in a single manoeuvre.

With rapid movements, he discarded his soiled, stinking clothes and donned their replacement. Less than a minute elapsed before he found himself examining his reflection in the mirror, looking like a man accustomed to be taken seriously. The new suit was notably inferior in quality to his Saville Row two-piece, but it was clean and new and would suffice for the journey. Because of the weightloss and the beard, he now closely resembled Vincent Van Gogh.

He headed for the till and addressed the senior attendant.

‘¿Cuánto por la ropa que llevo puesta? He cojido el traje, la camisa, y la corbata.’

Walrus looked at him, surprised. ‘Se lo lleva todo puesto?’

‘Sí.’

‘¿El traje, la camisa, y la corbata?’

‘Así es.’

‘Vale. A ver...’ Walrus grabbed the scanner and began walking round the counter. ‘Déjeme ver las etiquetas.’

He stood tall, dignified, as he waited for Walrus to scan the labels.

‘Diecinueve mil,’ said Walrus, finally, as he returned to his station behind the counter.

‘¡Diecinueve mil Euros!’ he replied, astonished. The price was nearly double what he had been expecting. ‘¿Pero, de qué esta hecho este traje?’

‘No es que este hecho de platino. Es la devaluación,’ explained Walrus, apologetically.

‘¿Devaluación? ¿Ha habido una devaluación?’

‘Hombre, sí. Qué palo. ¿No lo ha visto en las noticias?’

‘Eh... No, he estado de vacaciones en las montañas, sin television o radio o señal en móvil,’ he said, half heartedly, a strand of hair falling out of place.

‘Ya veo. Pues, es que el banco central ha devaluado el Euro un 80%, así, de un tirón. La crisis económica.’

He ran his fingers through his hair, ‘¡Vaya!’

‘La gente se ha vuelto loca comprando comida. Han habido revueltas.’

‘Eso sí lo he visto.’

‘Vamos a acabar como en los Estados Unidos. Ya es sólo cuestión de tiempo.’

I’ve got to get out of here!

‘Venga. Entonces pago rápido y me voy¹³⁵. Que no quiero me que subáis el precio mientras saco la tarjeta de crédito.’ ‘Muy bien. Diecinueve mil quinientos.’

‘Pero, si ya ha escaneado los precios! ¿Cómo me lo va a subir?’

‘La caja esta conectada al internet y verifica la tasa de cambio en tiempo real. Así que no sólo las etiquetas se autoactualizan, sino también la caja actualiza los importes escaneados hasta el instante en que se efectúa el pago.’

‘¡No perdéis una!’

‘Lo siento, pero cuando la inflación es tan alta y el banco empieza a imprimir dinero de esa forma, no podemos permitirnos el lujo de no tener los precios sincronizados. Si no, estaríamos en rebajas permanentes y a la larga no sobreviviríamos. Y sin Corte Inglés, ¿adonde va usted a comprar nada?’

'Venga. Deje de hablar y dése prisa. Aquí esta la tarjeta,' he said, quickly shoving his card towards the attendant.

'Muy bien. Quiere una bolsa para su otro traje? 'No. Tírelo.'

Next: shoes. He walked swiftly towards the shoe store, located on the ground floor. This was also the location of the Hypercor, so he had to squeeze his way past the compacted throng of highly agitated shoppers attempting to get in. The bags and boxes they were carrying were intended for carrying groceries, he noticed, since green taxes had made plastic bags prohibitively expensive. There weren't enough trollies to satisfy demand and, because most people were stocking up on tins and other long-life food items, they would need some form of container to retrieve their groceries from the boots, of their vehicles once home.

At the shoe store, he was confronted with a bewildering array of choices, catering for every demographic, again without discriminating for age, gender, colour, size, nationality, religious persuasion, or sexual orientation. Although it was still only January, the Summer fashion was already advertised and on the racks. And, naturally, like every year he found it cheap and ridiculous - an affront to a discerning man of classical tastes. It required effort - and patience he lacked - to identify a pair of shoes worthy of his feet.

A shop attendant approached him. It was a man in his late twenties, of mixed North African, Amerindian, and Spanish ancestry. The clamour from the Hypercor was so deafening, however, with people shouting and jabbering at the top of their voices in every language and pidgin known to man, that he was forced to read the attendant's smiling lips.

'¿Tiene estos en talla 44?' he shouted at the attendant, irritated.

A scuffle broke up in front of the Hypercor. He turned to look, and saw the top of heads jerking and bobbing violently deep into the throng. Security mobilised quickly to contain the outbreak. Meanwhile, more people, new arrivals, kept pouring out of the escalator, rapidly enlarging the crowd before the Hypercor, so that it had begun engulfing adjacent departments. Soon, the whole first floor would be swamped with a seething mass of panicked shoppers. He had to hurry.

The attendant lifted his index to request that he wait a minute, then disappeared.

As he waited, he turned anxiously to observe the Hypercor's till area. Many shoppers were having to leave items behind,

finding themselves suddenly unable to pay for them. Others were stocking up to the limit. Moments later, a new load of new arrivals blocked his view. The atmosphere was incandescent.

He hoped the looters would not make it to the Corte Inglés before he got out; that they would eventually attempt to sack the Corte Ingleses in and around the capital was inevitable, for everybody in Spain knew that the Corte Inglés had an invincible stock control system. Fuel shortages, transport strikes, blackouts, floods, droughts, heatwaves, crop failures - they meant nothing to the retail colossus: the Corte Inglés had the most robust supply lines, the most efficient contingency plants, the fastest-acting backup operations, the most streamlined distribution infrastructure, the deepest pockets, the best cash-flow, the largest warehouses, the most effective solution to any possible problem, the most thoroughly trained staff, the most intelligent management, and the shrewdest and farthest-seeing proprietors; nothing and no one could beat them - not even the Chinese. Yes, everybody in Spain knew that, and this made the Corte Inglés the looter's El Dorado. The malcontents were probably already running along the motorway, impatient to get their hands on the Corte Inglés' merchandise. It was no wonder they had already secured the perimeter outside with barriers, checkpoints, and batteries of tanks and armed personnel carriers. Now that he had almost fully restored his image, he was determined to protect its integrity, and avoid a repeat of past mistakes, until he had set foot inside his home in England.

'Ha habido suerte,' said the returning attendant. 'Nos quedaba un par.'

'Vale, me los pruebo,' he replied, talking quickly. He was not surprised there was only one pair on the shelves; the continuing infusion of 'migrants' from the Third World, combined with television-centred life-styles and poor diets based on fast and junk food among the declining aboriginal population, meant the average height of Europe's inhabitants had been declining for several decades.

'Muy bien, caballero. Sin ningun problema.'

He sat down and waited impatiently while Smile put them on for him and carefully tied the laces.

The shoes fit.

'¿Cuanto le debo?' he asked, standing up, the smooth soles of the brand new shoes feeling slippery on the carpet.

'Diez mil,' said Smile, smiling.

Prices were rapidly increasing.

Chapter 38

Picasso

The roads all around the Corte Inglés were choked with vehicles, exacerbating the intense heat with the constant pumping of exhaust fumes. As he emerged from the department store, he found himself immersed in an acrid, toxic, grey mist. The sun fulgurated with hateful misanthropy overhead, baker of minerals and oppressor of humans. He desired his suit to remain pristine and he estimated his skin would begin perspiring in less than a minute, so he was doubly anxious to find shelter inside an air-conditioned cab. With controlled steps (so as to delay perspiration), he walked towards the taxi rank, noticing the desiccated tree stumps distributed on the terraced surfaces along the way. Years ago the trees had been alive and their leaves had provided some relief, but they had been unable to survive in a harsh, desert climate. He reached the taxi rank.

'Barajas. Terminal Cuatro,' he said, addressing the cabbie at the front of the queue.

The cabbie, an angry version of a 90-year-old Pablo Picasso, said abruptly, 'Déme su tarjeta.'

'¿Mi tarjeta?'

'Sí, su tarjeta,' insisted the cabbie, instantly irritated, gesturing brusquely with his hand.

'Pero, si ni siquiera me he subido,' he exclaimed, baffled.

'Si se quiere ir en taxi, hay que dar la tarjeta de crédito antes de empezar la carrera,' declared Picasso,

He frowned, offended. '¿Y eso porqué?'

Picasso raised his voice, impatient. 'Porque hay que irle cargando a la tarjeta sobre la marcha.'

‘¿Y porqué sobre la marcha? No puede cargar una vez que lleguemos?’ Picasso’s tone annoyed him.

‘No. Los precios suben y tarifa tiene que ir subiendo sobre la marcha también. Que no quiero que lleguemos y me diga de repente que no puede pagar.’

‘Pero entonces, ¿es que me va a dejar tirado en la carretera si se acaba el crédito?’ He could not believe Picasso was serious.

Picasso, however, was in earnest. ‘Sí. ¿Se sube o no?’

He considered whether to take the cab next down the queue, but he was quickly discouraged by the hostile Black face staring back at him; after his misadventures with the crooked thug from the airport taxi mafia on the evening of his arrival, he preferred Picasso, however rude or suspicious, to the slitty-eyed Morgan Tsvengirai-lookalike. Picasso appeared more concerned about getting paid at all than about gaining undue advantage (he was, after all, acting like an angry victim); and in the event of trouble, at least Picasso being White, would not be able to file bogus charges of racism against him.

‘Ya veo. Vale. Dése prisa, entonces,’ he said, handing over his credit card, confident, despite the congestion, that the €70,000 of remaining credit would be more than sufficient to cover the fare and his return ticket.

‘No me voy a dar prisa,’ replied the cabbie, irritably, ‘Hay mucho tráfico. Tardaremos lo que tardemos. Si pierde el avión, coje otro y ya esta.’

He frowned, indignant, but decided to be generous. Sitting inside an air-conditioned cab for several hours was preferable to standing for one inside a cramped train packed with hot, sudorous, stinking humans. *Viejo cascarrabias*, he thought, all the same, as he boarded the vehicle. At least he would arrive at his destination in a new suit and polished shoes.

Picasso pulled off with a rude jerk, sending their occiputs on a collision course with their respective headrests. Not satisfied, Picasso began aggressively honking the horn. Irritated, he ran his fingers through his hair, pressing it down with the palm of his hand in an effort to flatten it against his skull. His ungelled, floppy, long, straight hair was going to prove a serious nuisance.

‘¡Me cago en DIOS!’ shouted the old man, waving his thin, short-sleeved arm at some other motorist. He, sitting diagonally behind Picasso, observed the latter’s head turn jerkily back and forth, alternating between the steering wheel and the offending motorist. ‘¡Apártate ya, joder!’

He opened his mouth to say something, then hesitated, unsure whether it was wise to advise calm. .

The cab lunged forward, then came to an abrupt halt as Picasso slammed the breaks. This sent objects inside the vehicle flying forward, and once again messed up his hair. Picasso's knobbly, hand slapped the steering wheel, pumping volley of angry horn honking to his opponent. '¡Deja salir, hijoputa!'

He turned to look out of the vehicle, and noticed a badly rusted blue Citroen, a C5 Carlsson, preventing the cabbie from joining the road. Behind the tinted glass of the Cs's passenger door, he glimpsed the face of a flat-nosed man in his- forties, arrogant, overweight, ill-bred, giving the cabbie an indifferent, half lidded stare. Next to Flat Nose was another man, thin, full of silent swearwords, bared teeth, and obscene gestures. Teeth honked his horn, slamming the palm of his hand on the steering wheel, wide eyed and with comical vehemence, his lips contracted into an astersik. Picasso retaliated immediately, honking with equal vehemence, before finally pressing the steering wheel hard with both bands and filling the air with a strident, kilometre-long honk. |

Teeth rolled down the passenger's window and held his middle finger aloft for Picasso's benefit, before jerking the C5 forward. Picasso responded with a volley of obscenities, and lunged forward once more, joining the flow of traffic just behind the C5.

'¡Acomplejao! ¡Maricón! Hijo de la gran puta!' shouted the cabby, waving a fist in the air out the open window.

He reconsidered alighting and selecting another driver from the taxi rank (not Tsvengirai, obviously). However, he was dissuaded when Teeth decided to stick his head out the window and fire odium rays back at Picasso.

Oh!

Was that Obama?

He examined Teeth's features carefully, turning his face slightly to one side and hiding behind Picasso's bald pate.

No.

Teeth's head was rounder and had a pug nose. He exhaled with relief.

Yes, it was better to stay cocooned inside the cab, however recklessly driven by the irascible nonagenarian. Improving his choice of driver was not worth a chance encounter with Obama. His inquisitor was probably somewhere out there, fuming with hatred, desperately elaborating a tortuous plot

designed to have him re-arrested, convicted, and sent to an Israeli prison camp. He entertained no doubts that Obama would neither forgive nor forget. The Black man would be relentless in his pursuit - if before a corrupt opportunist seeking promotion, now his sworn enemy.

Queues to join the roundabout ahead halted the flow of traffic. This gave Teeth the opportunity he needed. Teeth alighted from his C5 and began walking towards the cab, making a show of his aggressive swagger.

Oh, come on now! he thought, impatiently, once more flattening his hair against his skull.

A dissonant symphony of angry horns suddenly erupted behind them. Picasso joined in, sticking his head out the window and treating Teeth to a torrent of obscenities. Teeth stopped and looked startled for a moment, then turned to look behind and noticed that traffic had begun moving and that he was now blocking the road. Unwilling to confront dozens of violent motorists, Teeth turned around and ran back to his car.

Two racially-indeterminate men suddenly materialised, running angrily towards the C5, just as Teeth was slamming the door. The two racially-indeterminate men reached the C5 just as it was pulling off. Their response was to punch and kick the vehicle while it was still within their reach, running along it for some distance before giving up with a curse. They then turned around and ran back to their vehicle, situated some distance behind the cab, and now the reason for the car horn symphony's second movement.

Idiots, he thought.

'Puede poner el aire mas fuerte?' he asked, sensing an imminent outbreak of perspiration.

'Esta al máximo,' said Picasso, feeling harassed.

He sighed, tense. Despite the unbearable discomfort, he decided against loosening his tie: it was preferable to suffer than to compromise on his appearance.

The taxi meter had already clocked up €550.

Retrieved his PostAPhone from his breast pocket and launched the browser, anxious to ascertain the probability of reaching Barajas in the next three hours, and whether there was any sense in booking his flight.

As soon as he began scanning the news reports, it became clear that three hours might prove somewhat optimistic. The economic crisis, which had been brewing before Christmas, had exploded during his detention. The Euro was in free fall;

prices were rising rapidly; panic buying was clogging supermarkets and petrol station forecourts; in some neighbourhoods in the capital, there had been riots; checkpoints in and around the capital had been instructed to seal the affected areas, and to restrict traffic to all others. The government denied that there was a crisis; yes, there had been an adjustment - a necessary one - but they had known about it since August and had made ample provisions to stimulate the economy short term and return to growth by next year; increased demand was the result of consumers taking advantage of bargains. The army had been mobilised purely as a precautionary measure, as they had intelligence that violent neo-Nazi groups were attempting to exploit the situation. There had been no riots, the government claimed: only a few frustrated shoppers, irritated by the heat and the hustle and bustle of the shop floor.

He sighed, his patience already exhausted, as he abandoned the news websites. Hyperinflation would not normally concern him, for he had engineered his finances with the expectation that it would eventually occur; but it was just his luck that it would happen to strike at the time when he was most vulnerable and least prepared. The credit card currently being phlebotomised by Picasso was the single thread connecting him home; had his wife stopped the card while he was in detention, or had it been near its credit limit, he would have been stranded in Spain, completely penniless, and helpless, until the politicians decided it was time to enact a currency reform. i

The metre reached €1,000.

He held the Port-A-Phone in his hand, hesitating, knowing he had to call his wife, but apprehensive about what he would hear. He looked out the window, and thought about it for a moment, considering possibilities. Part of him was terrified, imagining what she might sound like. Another part of him dreaded learning about possible press reports covering his arrest, and the damage these might have caused. He could very well find himself with a wound up company; or one on the verge of bankruptcy, his clients having abandoned him, professional trust having evaporated. He braced himself, and dialed his home number.

'Hello?' she said, murkily.

'It's me,' he replied, attempting to sound calm.

He heard a gasp. Then silence. He waited anxiously.

'I am in Madrid,' he began, 'I was arrested and held in detention three weeks ago-'

'You're alive!' she exclaimed, 'You're alive! Thank goodness! Thank you thank you thank you! I've been so worried! I've been so sick with worry! Where are you? Are you OK? What happened? Oh, my goodness, I can't believe you are alive!'

'I am OK. I am in Madrid,' he resumed, interested in her reaction, and listening out for cues. 'I was arrested and held in detention -'

'Arrested? Why? What happened? Are you OK?'

He exhaled with relief: his arrest and detention had not been in the news, otherwise she would have known. His professional reputation was salvageable, then. His company might still be there upon his return. 'I don't even know myself. But I've been released

'Are you OK? Do you need anything? I am flying over this evening!'

'No, no need,' he interjected, quickly, 'I've been released. I am perfectly fine. I am on my way to the airport.'

'What happened? Why were you arrested?'

'I don't know. Mistaken identity, I guess. I'll tell you when I get -'

'When do you land? When will I see you? I can't believe you are alive! I am so relieved!'

'Hopefully tonight. I am going to catch the first available flight.'

'Hurry! Please hurry! It's been horrible here. I've been so depressed. I can't believe I'm going to see you! When is your flight? What time?'

'I don't know yet. There's been - there is congestion. Long queues on the motorway. I think there's been an accident -'

'Please be careful! I want you home safe! I am so relieved!'

'I am in a cab. I don't know how long it'll take to get to the airport -'

'Pay them whatever they ask! Don't argue with the cab driver. Just get here quickly!'

'Don't worry. I'm getting out of here as fast as I can. I'll catch the first flight that has a free seat.'

'Yes! Any class! Any airline! Just pick a good one. Get here safely and quickly!'

'Will do.'

'Let me know as soon as you book your flight so I can pick you up.'

'Yes, of course.'

'I don't care what time you get here. If it's three in the morning it's three in the morning.'

'OK. I'll let you know.'

'I am so happy to hear your voice!'

'It's a great source of comfort to hear yours, at last. I could think of nothing else but be back home and have everything back to normal.'

'Everything will be back to normal, most beloved. I'll get you home and you'll be able to take off your shoes, lie on the sofa, and relax, and sleep on your comfy bed tonight, with me.'

'I so badly longed for that...'

'I did too! I did too!'

'Well, I'll let you prepare. I will tell you about my troubles tonight.'

'OK. Please be careful.'

'Yes. And... Ah...'

'Yes?'

'What's the situation over there? There's been riots here.'

'The Sainsbury's in Cranleigh has been ransacked. The police have cordoned off the high street. Helicopters all over the sky. Tanks in London. The government has declared state of emergency.'

'Nowhere to run. We should have moved to Antarctica!'

'And use our gold-backed Dream Dollars.'

'Exactly.'

'You should have ordered more.'

'We can always use pre-decimalisation British coinage and the CPI from the 1700s, or the 1400s... In Ceylon they had coins with denominations as low as one quarter of a farthing!'

'Well, at the rate we are going, the lowest denomination bank notes we will end up with will be one quarter of a quadrillion.'

He checked the meter: €2,350.

'Ah...'

'Yes...?'

'Please don't tell anyone I was arrested.'

'I won't.'

'If anybody asks - I'll just say you had an accident.'

'No! Don't say that! Say—'

'I'll say you caught a virus...'

'No, no! Just don't tell anybody anything. If anybody asks, tell them that I am fine, that everything is fine, and that I'll be back tonight. We'll explain when I get there.'

'OK. My lips are sealed.'

'Good. I'll speak to you later, from the airport.'

‘Muah!’

The sun reached 18 degrees below the horizon; the queues extended as far as the eye could see. Traffic was completely stationary most of the time. The meter was now reading €18,980, and its display had not stopped accelerating.

The cursed himself for not having been more cynical, and donned a pair of gold cufflinks before he left England weeks ago. He had a collection of them, which he had always viewed as an insurance policy against hyperinflation, only he had decided against wearing them on this trip, not expecting to be arrested and held in detention for long enough for a monetary breakdown. Although, in the age of electronic money, hyperinflation could develop much more rapidly and reach higher numbers than on a pure paper money economy, even then inflation normally took months to gather momentum, and back in December hyperinflation within the Euro zone appeared still several years into the future. Since then, inflation in America had reached one trillion percent, and Europe been forced down the slippery slope of the printing press.

A positive consequence had been the disappearance on the motorway of the swarms of pushy vendors. Not content with staying at home sleeping or watching football matches on television, however, they had swiftly adapted to the new economic climate, evolving a new business model based on commodity muggings. Now, instead of prowling the lanes offering convenience wares, they prowled the lanes offering knife wounds and bullet holes. The younger motorists, originally from regions of the world where motorists were accustomed to this type of entrepreneurship, drove vehicles well equipped with electric truncheons and pepper spray, and were prompt to barter offering blindness and electrocutions. The older motorists typically indigenous to the continent and therefore bewildered by the rapid pace of globalisation, lacked the instinct to barter and, to avoid trouble, feebly handed over their assets.

Picasso, never anxious to prove genial, was cast in the Buster Martin mould: for the most part, he was uninteresting to muggers because his car was old and in the darkness they could not see his elegantly-attired fare sitting in the back seat, but when two young thugs approached the vehicle and attempted to intimidate him, Picasso wasted no time in disabusing them of their ageist perceptions: by means of a truncheon, he relieved the first of them of three of his incisors; he then used the same

method to enforce eight months of pornographic abstinence on the second thug by adding extra joints to his *forearms*. The two youths consequently decided to seek opportunities elsewhere.

He flattened his hair against his skull, taken somewhat aback by this gruesome scene, and still wincing at the crunch of the second youth's bones.

Not all of the individuals prowling the motorway were unregulated entrepreneurs: a growing number consisted of ordinary citizens whose vehicles had either developed a mechanical fault or ran out of petrol. These vehicles were further contributing to the congestion, as not all of them had made it to the shoulder and, in any event, the shoulder was being used as an additional lane. He dared not look at the stranded motorists - standing about with the hoods open, their t-shirts drenched in perspiration, and jabbering on their mobiles - lest he jynxed himself and ended up joining their ranks.

He straightened his tie, keeping an eye on the meter: €24,590. It occurred to him that purchasing such an expensive suit and pair of shoes might prove a more costly appeasement of his vanity than he had realised - he still had to purchase a airplane ticket.

Helicopters continued to fly overhead. He wondered whether some of them were not from the Ministerio de Hacienda, filming the broken down vehicles and their owners, and using licence plate recognition technology in an effort to detect hidden assets or income - in this case through the ownership of luxury vehicles not fiscally in accord with recent declarations. In a hyperinflationary environment, he reasoned, it made sense to delay paying taxes, as inflation reduced liabilities in real terms; and, because the government knew it, they had probably instructed Hacienda to enforce deadlines, investigate individuals, and penalise evaders with inflexible rigor, and to proceed with confiscating assets the second a late filing occurred. The only problem was that any bailiffs would be stuck in traffic, like everybody else, so they would be piling up the charges and cranking up the interest, in order to cover their own costs before the hyperinflation caught up with them. He could imagine burly bailiffs, working in pairs, stuffed inside tiny, fuel-efficient vehicles, one punching the steering wheel in frustration, the other with a calculator, listening to the radio in order to keep up with the latest economic developments. Time was of the essence!

€28,730.

The numbers on the taxi meter were rapidly becoming meaningless to him. Yet, he could not help but momentarily to reflect on what he would have been able to purchase with that amount of money only a few weeks ago: probably a bespoke suit from Gieves and Hawkes, complete with programmable electric fabric, containing a music player, scientific calculator, email, and an array of productivity tools and business applications. He was exasperated by having to witness the fruit of his creative effort and applied labour evaporating on something as banal as a taxi fare. Indeed, Obama's selfish, childish, odious voracity for status and power had already proven infuriatingly and exasperatingly expensive - financially, professionally, and reputationally, and, still, the consequential losses continued to mount up, on and on, endlessly, uselessly, and pointlessly. If only he could instigate a suit for defamation, trauma, and loss of earnings. If he could, were he assured that it would not be a complete waste of time and money that the corrupt system and the bureaucratic courts and the politically correct laws would not ensure a gross travesty of justice (suing a Black man automatically triggered a counter-suit for racism), he would be telephoning his solicitors and unleashing the legal hellhounds on his cocksure inquisitor - he would flog Obama with lawsuits until the Black man found himself sleeping in the street and surviving on the charity of passers-by and soup kitchens. Like the corrupt airport cabbie, however, Obama knew that, when it came to his interactions with Whites, White-sponsored anti-discrimination legislation protected him, allowing him to do whatever he liked.

He wiped the sweat off his neck with his fingers, anxious not to stain the collar of his crisp, white shirt. The motorway seemed to increasingly crawl with undesirables, walking up and down between the lanes, looking for victims. Although they appeared uninspired by the boring design of Picasso's '80s Renault, the undesirables represented a constant source of added tension: they were probably unable to see him sitting in the interior gloom of the vehicle, but were Picasso to decide to switch on the overhead light, or were any of the subhumans outside to chance a closer look, he would materialise before them like a goose of golden eggs.

€35,880: they had only advanced a few hundred metres. By now it was clear that he would have to telephone Shis wife and ask her to arrange a bank transfer to pay for the airplane ticket. It was maddening that the congestion made his time of arrival

at Barajas completely unpredictable: every minute that passed made his plane ticked more expensive.

A young brown man in a Vespa rode past, squeezing through between lanes, his nude torso slick with perspiration.

He looked up in the direction of the looming cliffs of massified housing flanking the M-40. Tomislav Sunic had once said that while Communism had fallen in the East, it had triumphed in the West, only in more subtle and sophisticated forms. Accordingly, architects with arrogant socialist ideas had over the decades concreted over the countryside, wiping out ecosystems, extinguishing rare animal and plant species, bankrupting ornithologists, and pumping the air full of hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and diesel soot and aerosols, such as sulfates, silicates, ash particulates, and metallic abrasion particles. Huge apartment blocks and tightly-compacted skyscraper complexes had been erected in the name of the socialist utopia, where every human existed within a monolithic and omnipresent logic of equivalence and repetition, equally-valid and interchangeable parts of the social machine, irrespective of race, gender, age, size, creed, or sexual orientation. But the utopia had failed. Crammed inside their modernistic hovels, a rapidly-procreating lumpen proletariat of unemployable rejects, vulgar scroungers, disturbed loners, tattooed weirdos, drunken wife-beaters, self-mutilated body artists, defective weaklings, subsidised drug-addicts, smuggled labourers, ape-like prostitutes, glue-sniffing truants, religious fanatics, and political desperadoes had caused living conditions inside the dozens of interlocking estates rapidly to decline, transforming them into fermenting cesspits of violent crime and human degradation. Socialist politicians had looked at these estates with perplexity, unable to comprehend the resilience of their dysfunction in the face of drastic regeneration programmes and ever-more-prodigious avalanches of tax-payers' money. Surely, they had reasoned, equality of opportunity needs necessity to translate into equality of outcome; unequal outcome, therefore, meant unequal opportunities, and this in turn meant that the social machine required radical modifications: more (and more detailed) regulation; harsher legal penalties; more (and more detailed) monitoring and surveillance; stricter law enforcement; and, of course, higher taxes and additional borrowing, to both level the playing field and finance the new battery of social programmes and their corresponding administrative bureaucracies. Unfortunately for them

(and everybody else), any government measures had only served to further stifle creativity among the productive minority and further accelerate fertility among the unproductive majority. Democratic electoral mathematics ensured that such maladaptive policies perpetuated themselves as ever-exacerbating trends.

He noticed movement in the balconies of the apartment blocks directly overlooking the motorway. Dark, anthropomorphic gargoyles, half naked and fierce of aspect, were standing on balconies, sitting on verandas, and peering out of windows, shouting imprecations, hurling missiles, and holding bedsheets with crudely-daubed and orthographically-chaotic Marxist slogans. Those anatomically female, stood with angry faces, beating blackened pans and pots with ladles and serving spoons. The panic had already caught up with these grim neighbourhoods and, in the absence of grocery businesses to ransack, housewives had resorted to *cacerolazos*. Soon, the more resourceful and better-connected among their male counterparts would start producing and distributing fire arms, arming the malcontents and haranging them with revolutionary diatribes, before sending them running towards government quarters and the few remaining affluent neighbourhoods. Perhaps they had begun already.

The meter topped €50,000.

Damn that idiot, he fumed, flattening his hair against his skull once more as his thoughts returned to Obama.

Obama had been taken off the case, most likely victim of his own intrigues, and his inquisitor's vengeful colleagues had engineered the release of his prisoners as part of a contrived plot designed to embarrass their opponent. At least, that is what appeared to have happened. Whatever the case might be, these developments had coincided - and why would it be otherwise? - with a catastrophic currency crisis and social unrest. And now, there was he; Lily White, attired in a brand new suit, looking the part of a serious businessman, surrounded on all sides by teeming, crumbling estates, boiling over with angry mobs and Communist revolution.

€53,110.

'¿No conoce un atajo, por casualidad?' he said, addressing the cabbie.

Picasso's eyes glared at him on the rear-view mirror, shooting odium rays under a threatening frown.

‘¿Atajo? ¿Pero es que usted se cree que estoy aquí por placer? ¡Joder!’

‘Pues, es una pregunta perfectamente razonable, mire usted.’

‘Puede que sea viejo, ¡pero no soy idiota!’ shouted the cabbie, emphasising each word with irascible vehemence. ‘Si estamos aquí es porque así se llega al aeropuerto.’

‘A lo mejor hay menos tráfico yendo por carreteras comarcales,’ he said, trying to sound reasonable.

‘¡No! ¡No hay menos tráfico, cono! ¿No ve usted que esta todo colapsado?’

‘Bueno, vale. Si ve que se despeja un poco o se acuerda de algún atajo, apriete el acelerador - sin miedo.’

‘Al aeropuerto se tarda lo que se tarda,’ said Picasso, impatiently. ‘Y tampoco me voy a matar para que usted no pierda el avión. Si lo pierde se las aguanta, que hay muchos aviones.’

He shook his head, exasperated by Picasso’s furibund stubbornness. *You’re costing me money!* he wanted to say.

€61,760. He was not going to make it.

It suddenly occurred to him that Obama would probably also be somewhere along the motorway, also heading for Barajas, and also heading for London. It would have taken approximately the same amount of time for the staff at the police station to process the release of a detainee as it would have taken Obama to clear his desk. Obama was either slightly ahead of him or slightly behind him. It was almost certain they would encounter each other at the airport, unless he somehow selected an obscure airline or booked himself into an awkward flight Obama would never think of. Perhaps he could find a carrier from Swaziland, Liberia, or the Democratic Republic of Congo, operating just over the threshold of an EU ban or blacklist. He might indeed end up plunging to his death inside a titanium bratwurst, but that would be quicker and less painful than spending the rest of his life in the gulag. He retrieved his Port-A-Phone and went online, to search for Third World airlines - on second thought, of non-African origin - with long and unpronounceable names and poor safety records.

€66,400. He would have to ask his wife to transfer the difference now; he hoped Picasso would accept that method of payment.

Picasso switched on the radio. The station was in the midst of reporting an update on the monetary crisis and the consequent disturbances. The Ministerio del Interior attributed the latter to ‘neo-Nazi gangs’, who blamed the crisis on the Jews. Scepti-

cal, he looked out the window once more to see if he could detect evidence of Estoric Hitlerism. Yet, like the tennants in the apartment blocks some way back, the dark figures populating the balconies were holding sheets and improvised placards with Marxist slogans. Similar slogans were being displayed by the tennants across the motorway, although it was difficult to make them out in the dim orange glow from the irregularly illuminated motorway. Perhaps, he thought, radicals from both camps were seeking to gain from the crisis, and the, aforementioned gangs (if they even existed) were concentrated elsewhere; but the slogans being displayed on either side of the motorway - however illiterate - were definitely Marxist slogans.

He flattened his hair once more. €68,030. He tried to imagine flying saucers suddenly appealing in the sky, bearing swastikas and shooting Vrill rays. It would not be such a bad idea, he thought, if some of those rays hit the apartment blocks on either side, and wiped out those grim estates before the rabble had a chance to evacuate them. From what he had read, the Esoteric Hitlerists were nature mystics and preferred organic rural communities, so it was likely that were they to take over now, they would bulldoze the rubble away and allow the grass and the trees to grow once more.

€71,220. The meter display began flashing.

Picasso now suddenly switched off the engine and yanked the credit card out of the PDQ terminal. 'Se acabó. ¡Fuera!' ¹⁴⁴ barked the cabbie, annoyed, handing the card over to him.

He took the card, his heart racing, and darted a glance outside: two Black youths in shorts and t-shirts were leaning into a Mercedes. They were mugging its occupants. He would not survive 10 minutes outside the vehicle.

'¿Cómo que se acabó?' ¹⁴⁵ he demanded, feigning surprise while attempting to sound calm and serious. A calm and serious manner, he hoped, would lower the temperature inside Picasso's head, increasing the chances of flexibility.

'Se le ha acabado el crédito. Bájese del coche.'

'¿Pero, cómo me va a dejar en medio de la autopista? Usted siga. Cuando lleguemos a Barajas le hago una transferencia.'

'No me meta cuentos. Usted no tiene dinero. La carrera ha terminado. Así que se baja del coche y sigue a pie.'

'Pero, a ver. Si le digo que le hago una transferencia cuando lleguemos a Barajas. ¿A usted que más le da si le voy pagando sobre la marcha o le cancelo la diferencia cuando lleguemos?'

‘Porque no me fio. Vamos a llegar a Barajas y usted no va a poder hacer la transferencia. Lo sabemos los dos perfectamente. Así que, fuera. No se haga el listo y bájese ya de una puta vez.’

Picasso’s bad faith tested his patience, yet he had to negotiate the situation with care - firmly but logically. ‘Pero es que esto es insólito. No le estoy diciendo que no le voy a pagar. Le estoy diciendo que le voy a hacer una transferencia en cuanto lleguemos. Así que, por favor, arranque el motor y prosiga.’

‘Yo no arranco nada y no vamos a ninguna parte. Usted se baja del coche. Ya no tiene dinero en la tarjeta así que ya no me interesa usted. Si tiene otra tarjeta, vale. Si no, fuera.’

‘Tengo medios para hacerle una transferencia cuando lleguemos¹⁴⁶. Ya no se lo voy a repetir más. Como taxista, su trabajo es llevar a la gente de un punto A a un punto B. Así que, por favor, arranque el coche, y lléveme a Barajas.’

‘Yo sólo trabajo si me pagan. Usted no puede pagar, así que no me ande con puntos A y B. Que no nació ayer.’

Picasso left him no option. ‘Pues no me bajo, a ver.’

‘Bájese!’

‘Que no me bajo.’

‘¡Bájese le digo!’

‘No.’

‘¡Oiga, que yo me sé defender! ¡Como no se baje se va a enterar!’

A Barajas. Terminal cuatro.’

Picasso exploded into action: grabbing the truncheon, which he had left on the front passenger seat, he turned around as

fast as his age allowed him, kneeling on the front seat, and brandishing the weapon.

‘¡Bájese!’

He tensed his muscles, readying for an evasive manoeuvre. ‘Lo siento. No me bajo.’ i

Picasso swung the truncheon, meaning merely, to frighten him; he, beholding the weapon, leaned sideways and downwards, instinctively cringing. Unfortunately for Picasso, however, the latter miscalculated and, as he swung the weapon, he hit the headrest of the front passenger seat, causing the truncheon fall out of his hand and onto the gap between the front and back passenger seats. He, observing this, quickly grabbed the truncheon, blocking the cabbie’s attempt to recover it first.

‘A ver si nos dejamos de tonterías ya¹⁴⁷. Barajas, terminal cuatro,’ he said, firmly, using the newly acquired truncheon to

indicate to the cabbie that he should face forward and continue driving.

Picasso, aware of the *cacerolazo* and judging it unwise to stand disarmed outside the vehicle, decided to risk completing the journey.

‘Vale. Veo que se ha puesto cabezón. Le llevo a Barajas,’ he grumbled, angrily. ‘Pero como lleguemos y vea que no tiene fondos para hacer la transferencia, llamo a la policía!’

Picasso faced forward, and started up the engine.

He sighed with silent relief.

Chapter 39

Wiped Out

The accelerating flow of macro-economic events had eventually turned his paranoia into an unaffordable luxury. After an hour of navigating around scaffolding and construction work (Terminal 4, although open, was still undergoing repairs), while attempting to book a seat on flights operated by Middle Eastern, Micronesian, and Latin American airlines, the realisation had been forced upon him that inflation was likely to overtake him before he was able to identify a viable carrier. Other than on British Airways, there was not one flight remaining that (1) was not fully booked, (2) flew to London, (3) was not likely-to appeal to Obama (4) would accept bank transfers as a method of payment, (5) would accept Euros at all in any form, and (6) had not yet suspended operations due to strike or bankruptcy. With prices multiplying hourly, trying so methodically to avoid Obama, might have ended up costing more money than he held in all his various banks accounts. Already a precious three quarters of an hour had been wasted attempting to convince Picasso that the funds his wife had transferred to pay for the fare had in fact (a) been sent, (b) arrived, (c) not been recalled, and (d) not been ordered recalled. The fare alone had wiped out two of his current bank accounts, leaving them both overdrawn. British Airways was still operational, but the airline had already begun cancelling flights, including some with passengers aboard the aircraft.

His ticket had obliterated most of his and his wife's remaining bank accounts.

'Are we going to be alright?' she had pleaded, seeking reassurance. She knew the score as well as he did.

'Yes, we will just have to start selling our gold - in very small amounts at a time.'

He could not help feeling responsible for their total loss of liquidity. Inflation would quickly decimate the value of their overdrafts, and they did hold reserves. Renminbi-denominated accounts, but these would provide only emergency relief, and would be good only for electronic payments. The difficulty would be to convince his clients to pay in Renminbi: most of his clients were based in the Eurozone and they received their payments in Euros; the United States was a war zone and the Americans simply did not get paid at all; while the Chinese preferred to deal first with fellow Chinese, then with fellow Asians, and finally with the rest of the world, in that order - except when the net flow of resources went in their direction. Moreover, the Chinese currency, although strong (since the Chinese were culturally debt averse), lacked presence in the West, except as a reserve currency for governments and large global corporations. China constituted the world's largest and fastest-growing economy, but the Renminbi had yet to achieve the status enjoyed by the U. S. Dollar during the apex of the American empire. This was partly because the U.S. Dollar (and now also the Euro) had collapsed sooner than anticipated, and partly because the Chinese had resisted making their currency as easily available as the Americans had made theirs in the decades following the Second World War. The Chinese had also witnessed what can happen when two thirds of a country's money is held by foreigners outside the national territory: once the United States government had exhausted all known subterfuges for levitating their debtcrippled economy, they had been left with no option but to run the printing press; the consequent acceleration in the Dollar's decline went into overdrive once foreign governments and investors lost confidence in the currency and exchanged their Dollars for stronger currencies. The Chinese, therefore, favoured greater control over their money. And he, therefore, would have to rely on the gradual liquidation of his physical assets.

Of course, sooner or later, the government, or the ECB, might seek to outlaw the private possession and hoarding of gold, and order its immediate surrender under pain of prison. There existed, after all, precedent across the Atlantic in the form of Presidential Executive Order 6102, issued on 5 April 1933, by the then United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The possibility of gold confiscation had been factored into his calculations, of course, and to that effect he had made sure

not to leave a paper trail when originally converting his cash savings into the precious metal. Unfortunately, however, it had made little difference in the end: Obama had surmised that he was a gold hoarder, and would no doubt be alerting the HMRC, who would respond by launching an investigation and obtaining a court order to physically search his home and his offices.

Conclusion: there was nowhere to run. He spoke English, Spanish, French, and German, but these languages no longer enabled him to live in a stable country: the countries where these languages were spoken were all economically, politically, and legally inter-related and inter-dependent; bar the United States and the banana republics (where conditions were even worse), they all used the same currency; they all elected the same politicians; they all obeyed the same laws; they all signed agreements with one another. Conditions would be identical, if not worse, anywhere he went. Were he to be deemed a criminal in one country, he would be deemed a criminal in all of them.

He could not have predicted the consequences of accepting the Sceptic account. But he regretted not having been even more pessimistic, and not having made more paranoid provisions for a monetary crisis. Or rather, he regretted not having been more *realistic*, instead of thinking that 'there was time', thus allowing himself to fall prey to inertia and a false sense of security. Had he not known all along? Was he not well enough informed on monetary and the wider political issues? His flawed decisions - and, more importantly, his *inaction*, his *silence*, his *policy of avoidance and adaptation*, as opposed to *confrontation and resistance* - had resulted in the devastation of not only his own wealth, but also that of his wife. The countless hours she had spent toiling over her manuscripts, creating characters and adventures and worlds for them to exist - the reward for thirty years of considerable and sustained creative effort, destroyed.

He rubbed his forehead, pressing hard with his hand and screwing his eyes, the truncheon of exasperation drumming his brain while the tourniquet of guilt wrenched his stomach. There would be nothing left for their old age. | He remembered what that grumbling historian had remarked a few weeks ago - something about it being the duty of the custodians of government to look after the country which is put into their guardianship. Yes, the custodians of government

had neglected their duties - they had been neglecting them for over a century - that was well known and proven beyond all reasonable doubt. But, had *he* not also neglected *his* duties as a custodian of the civilisation that had been entrusted into his guardianship by the generations before him? Indeed, civilisations fell, and ultimately for the same reasons; the names, the places, the dates, the individual events in the chain of cause and effect all changed, but they never altered the overall morphology of history. The fall of the West was inevitable - events had only re-inforced this conviction. But, did the history of Western civilisation have to begin its downward flow *exactly* when it did, and *as quickly* as it did? He still felt justified in blaming his immediate predecessors for not minding the shop - with probably all politicians accepting bribes, favours, and donations from foreign or corporate interests, without a single politician from any party to stand up for the interests of the nation, of Europe, and of the White race, his immediate predecessors would have been impotent within the framework of electoral politics. But perhaps, somehow, even at that late hour, a band of determined men would have been able to effectively fight the Socialist plutocrats - to expose their corruption, disrupt their machinations, frustrate their 'reforms', starve their hinders, discredit their discourse, and, perhaps, even sweep them out of power. He still felt justified in resenting the fact that he had been bequeathed a broken world, where the likes of Mr. Tony Blair and Mr. David Cameron - and Mr. Bill Clinton and Mr. George Bush and Mr. Barack Obama - won election after election, until only the most radical action and extreme fanaticism - until only international terrorists like Hendrik Mobus and Esoteric Hitlerists with flying saucers and futuristic weapons - would dare offer the White Man a future. Yet, blaming his father's generation, and pretending that the rot was too far advanced for him to have acted on his private opinions, was to rationalise a craven abrogation of responsibility. What if he had been less realistic, and more idealistic? Perhaps he would not have been able to stop the march of history, but would not his contribution, and that of others like him, have helped alter its path? Would his active engagement been entirely futile, and less rewarding than passive avoidance? In retrospect, there might have been greater wisdom in testing his fate with the chance of arms, than in adapting in advance to a de facto capitulation: active resistance *might* have caused conditions to improve; but passive accep-

tance had *certainly* allowed them to deteriorate. What was more, did not the men of rare gifts and superior ability bear double the responsibility when a civilisation was entrusted into their guardianship by the generations before them? His neglect had not been total - he *had* advanced the frontiers of human knowledge; but his actions had not been in accord with his well considered and lucidly articulated *private* opinions: rather than a link in a chain of generations, morally obligated to those before him, ultimately answerable to those after him, he had operated as a discrete civic unit, preoccupied with immediate personal concerns, while oblivious of any wider human purpose. Professional reputation, social standing, personal safety, and material comfort certainly improved quality of life, but they were fragile in that they were dependent on the system's existing categories and power relations, and history provided many examples of the adage that those who are in power today might well be in prison tomorrow. Devoid of a wider purpose they were purely cosmetic, meaningless, superficial; they conferred no inner dignity and self-respect; because they symbolised, in his case, a lifetime of compromising, of complicity through silence, evasion, and lack of opposition - a lifetime of worming his way through the rotten system, avoiding detection and responsibility; they conferred no inner dignity and self-respect, because they had not been acquired *in spite* of the corruption around him, but because he had *avoided interfering* with it; they conferred no inner dignity and self-respect, because they secured his passive compliance, if not his active collaboration. Again, his neglect had not been total: he *had* advanced the frontiers of human knowledge; however, as a man

with superior endowments, he had neither contributed to the human gene pool, nor (other than in a narrowly-defined and specialised sense) contributed to leave the world a better place than he found it: his main contribution were technological tools, but tools were morally neutral, and without a virtuous social context within which to utilise them, they were just as likely to advance malignant aims as they were to] advance benign ones. In the ledger of his life, then, his credit as a scientist was cancelled by his debit as a man.

The ratio of passengers to police and army personnel inside Barajas Airport had been decreasing steadily as he laboured deeper into the evening. As the accelerating monetary collapse devastated wages and savings, it became progressively more difficult for ordinary people to travel. This had resulted in an

elevation of the standard of travellers circulating inside the airport - as far as he was concerned, a not unwelcome development on any other occasion. Unfortunately, however, on *this* occasion he required tightly compacted crowds, within which he could lose himself and evade the hate-filled Obama - for he was certain that his inquisitor was there with him somewhere inside Terminal 4, already on the telephone with his solicitors, preparing a law suit against him for racism and discrimination.

Terminal 4 was now full of uncomfortably large empty spaces. Were it not because the infrastructure had aged and budget shortfalls had eroded standards of maintenance, it was like going back to 2007. The only difference was that an entire section of the main terminal building was now closed; while a forest of scaffolding had been planted in many other areas following the December bombing. Police and army personnel presence had doubled since his arrival.

He had walked quickly and with his head down, darting glances through the corner of his eyes, on the lookout for his oval-headed nemesis. On two occasions he thought he had seen the Black man waiting in a queue or staring at a plasma screen; on both occasions he had proven himself paranoid.

Security had been nerve wrecking and, as usual, humiliating: he had been required to not only take off his jacket, his belt, his tie, his shoes, and his socks; not only to hand over his mobile, his wallet, and his keys; and not only to have everything and himself searched, X-rayed, filmed, photographed, sniffed by dogs, logged into a database, and checked against centrally held records, to confirm that he was who he claimed to be, that the items he was carrying actually belonged to him, and that no one had interfered with them at any point; but he had also been required to subject himself to an individual interview with the Guardia Civil, where he had been asked a never-ending battery of invasive questions, all of which presumed him a terrorist, a smuggler, a fugitive, or a spy until proven otherwise. All the while, he'd had to feign relaxation while fearful of Obama's coincidental proximity and glad detection, lest the Guardia Civil assumed his nerves were somehow connected with his inexplicable lack of luggage.

The shuttle to the concourse had contained only a handful of business executives and wealthy travelers - most were White, some were Chinese. Their faces had exhibited placid distraction and blank serenity, suggesting that his fellow travellers held Yen and Renminbi-denominated bank accounts, owned

immense gold hoards, and had enough resources to survive a Great Depression, even if it lasted twenty years. Why could he not be like them, he wondered. If Obama had ridden that shuttle, frowning darkly and with an airport novel tucked under one arm, it had been on a distant carriage.

At passport control, he had been treated like a criminal once again. His passport had been swiped, scanned, X-rayed, and checked against a centrally held database; his face had been scanned, his retinas read, his DNA sampled, and all had also been checked against a centrally held database. The record of his detention had elicited a frown, which had been followed immediately by telephone calls and further excavations on the computer. In turn, these had been followed by additional scans and X-rays, this time of his person, which had concluded with the ruin of his shoes: the officers had misread the X-ray and had desired an ocular inspection of the inside of the heels. Reluctantly and not without another nerve-wrecking delay, he had eventually been allowed through.

He now stood at some distance from the gate, keeping a watchful eye on the faces of his fellow travellers while partially concealed behind a column. The lights overhead flickered intermittently, the overloaded and cash-strapped national powergrid teetering on the verge of failure. He assumed that, if Obama had purchased a seat aboard his flight, the Black man would be hiding somewhere near, crouched behind a row of plastic chairs maybe, keeping a watchful eye on fellow travellers, anxious to pounce, his oval head spinning with nikhodemia.

He flattened his hair against his skull: not only was he now humiliatingly illiquid, but all the shops inside the terminal were closed; even a jar of pomade was beyond his reach.

He used his phone to access the internet. On Monday the United States' Federal Reserve had issued new bank notes with denominations of \$500,000 billion and \$1 trillion. South Western United States, meanwhile, had seceded and was seeking annexation with Mexico; the secession had followed a referendum where the Hispanic majority had voted overwhelmingly in favour of this measure. The South, on the other hand, had descended into anarchy. 'Neo-Nazi and White Supremacist militias' (as they journalists phrased it) had deprecated the Federal government and issued a proclamation of secession. President Duke was currently in New Orleans with the Provisional Confederate Congress, drafting a constitution. The Con-

federate States of America, as they referred to the new republic, existed tenuously, however, and was recognised only by the single-digit White minority. Several ethnic warlords were, in fact, fighting for control over the region. Vermont had followed suit, declaring independence on Tuesday.

The news services report celebrated the secession of Aztlán in the South West and condemned the revival of the Confederacy in the South East. The former was equated with democracy and self-determination, the latter with fascism and ethnic cleansing. He was most surprised, however, to discover that he recognised President Duke. The Confederate leader had been standing before him only weeks ago, while held in the large detention cell the morning of his arrest. This revelation finally confirmed his suspicion that the well-mannered gentleman in question was well connected, and that his fear of engaging him in conversation (for fear of potential links to a politically incorrect psychologist!) had been a costly mistake. If only he had known! Did not history provide many examples of another adage, that those who are in prison today, might well be in power tomorrow?

Fool!

He remembered his conversation with Dawn Bergemann, and wondered how authors survived in such an economic and socio-political environment. Perhaps she, like probably his wife, would need to rely on her Mandarin, Begali, Punjabi, Urdu, and Arabic translation rights for a while - although whether she would be able to collect royalties from non-Western publishers as efficiently and as reliably as she had from their Western counterparts (at least before the moral fabric of Western businesses had been broken down by hyperinflation, overtaxation, over-regulation, and multiracialism) was another matter. For now it was unfortunate that the signed volume he had secured from Bergemann the night before his arrest was left behind at the hotel. His niece would be disappointed. And because, as far as Ciro's management were concerned, he had disappeared without settling his bill, they had probably cleared out the room, destroyed his possessions, and maybe even hired Ibrahim to hound him about the outstanding balance. In this context, it was a source of comfort to know that Sharia Law was not yet operating in full force across the EU, and in as radical a fashion as it did in some parts of the world: in Northern Nigeria, for example, the punishment for theft since 2000 has been amputation of a hand. He could well

imagine Ibrahim carrying an amputation machine in his briefcase for this purpose.

His heart skipped a beat.

A well-dressed Black man appeared on the concourse in the distance, walking towards his departure gate. He allowed his hair to fall over his face and pressed his mobile against his ear, observing the Black man carefully as he nodded and pretended to hold a quiet conversation with one of his clients (even though it was well outside business hours).

The Black man had a book tucked under his arm.

His cardiac muscle thumped forcefully inside his thorax.

The Black man's gait was smooth, relaxed, and confident.

Hot adrenalin irrigated his abdomen.

The Black man also had an oval head.

His torso felt hollow, full of butterflies.

The Black man, however, was not Obama.

He sighed with relief, suddenly deflating.

He followed the Black man with his gaze until the subject reached the gate. There, the Black man, finding there were no seats available, took a standing position at some distance before the desks. As he stood wailing, the Black man, clad in a dark grey suit, bobbed his head slightly; he was listening to music. The book under the Black Man's arm said Yosef Ben-Johchannan. He had never heard of the author.

The Black man's attire and grooming were impeccable. He could not help but momentarily envy his cool and aggressive poise - the poise of a man without fear; the poise of a man who would take his seat aboard the aircraft, and sit, and read, and listen to music, able to close his eyes and completely ignore his fellow passengers; the poise of a man who would walk across the long term car park at Heathrow Airport, enter his shiny BMW, and calmly drive away, without consulting his rear view mirrors in case he was being followed. The Black man would regale his ears with music on his way home, and pass through the various checkpoints along the motorway, untroubled by them or by what he might discover upon arrival. The Black man would be greeted by his family, enjoy his dinner, and spend the rest of the evening watching television, safe in the knowledge that he would sleep in his bed and not be woken by an unexpected knock on the door in the early hours of the morning.

He flattened his hair against his skull once more, vexed by the temporary deficiencies in his own grooming. *Anything for a tube of pomade!*

The flight attendants emerged from the loading bridge and took their stations behind the desks. He observed them intently, looking for signs of a possible flight cancellation: it was still a possibility. For the moment, the flight attendants - of Vaishya Indian and Afro-Norwegian extraction respectively - typed on their terminals, talking to one another in a business-like fashion.

A hundred metres down the concourse, a man stood facing the travelers seated by one of the gates and emphatically waved his arms in the air before them, intermittently forming an X with his forearms. This caused the travellers to jerk into motion, angrily grabbing their hand baggage before making their way back to the terminal. By now at least some of them would be stranded.

This was not an encouraging sign.

The display above his gate was still on. He checked that it displayed the British Airways logo and the correct flight information. It did. The flight attendants continued to type frantically on their keyboards, making occasional telephone calls.

The Black man checked his watch: a gold Rolex. Already two hours had passed since the scheduled boarding time.

Outside, activity on the tarmac was minimal. Two ramp agents, one of Moroccan and the other of mixed Amerindian extraction, both slick with perspiration, were busy loading the aircraft, pulling luggage off the bag cart and dumping in onto the bag belt. Given their body language, these gentlemen were either seriously lacking in motivation or they rejoiced in performing the task as brutally as possible. It was obvious that any wages they earned by the end of the evening would be wiped out by inflation before they managed to spend it in the morning. He imagined that they would probably grab their cash at the end of their shift, run to their rusting Ford Kas, and rush to the nearest open bar or supermarket, in order to spend all their money in dinner and booze. Whether they would find an open bar or an Aldi or a Lidl was another question, however, and they were probably aware of the unlikelihood of this event. Therefore, it was possible, he speculated, that their immediate superior had threatened them, with words and with a weapon.

The lights above him flickered.

He flattened his hair against his skull, begging the gods to keep the power stations running long enough for his airplane to get airborne.

The travelers seated by the gate had their eyes trained onto the flight attendants manning the desks. The latter typed ceaselessly, absorbed in the bureaucratic form-filling and pre-boarding procedures. The atmosphere among the travelers was tense. Most were too nervous to read; others sought refuge on their mobiles; all of them were hot, their faces glistening with perspiration.

He considered taking an early position before the desks. By now he deemed it unlikely that Obama would be 'aboard his flight, and boarding early would offer rapid concealment inside the aircraft, where Obama was unlikely to detect him, should his nemesis be inside the terminal, scanning every concourse. Then again, the fact that Obama had not yet materialised did not necessarily rule out the possibility that Obama would not be sharing the cabin with him: Obama could be, just like him, waiting in the shadows, out of sight. In fact, Obama might have

well detected him already, and be biding his time, to lull him into a false sense of security.

He decided to remain where he was, standing by the column.

The Afro-Norwegian attendant, a woman in her early thirties activated the communication system. She said, 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is the pre-boarding announcement for the British Airways flight 5898308 to London, Heathrow. We are now inviting those passengers with small children, and any passengers requiring special assistance, to begin boarding at this time. Please have your boarding pass and identification ready. Regular boarding will begin in approximately ten minutes' time. Thank you.'

Home free!

Scanning the horizon, and once again the faces of his fellow travellers, he darted towards the desks, cutting in front of the Black man, while attempting; as best he could, to seem unhurried and relaxed. With heightened peripheral awareness, he allowed a flock of hair to fall on his face. He stood in the queue, keeping his back straight, but his eyes averted, his gaze fixed onto the back of the business suit in front of him.

At any moment, he expected Obama's hand to clasp his shoulder. Or Obama's voice to announce his nemesis' jubilation.

Aha!

When prompted, he handed over his passport and boarding pass.

'Enjoy your flight,' said the attendant, without smiling. He grabbed his documents and entered the loading bridge, his stride decisive and businesslike. His heart thumped synchronously with his heavy footsteps, and arrhythmically with those of his fellow travellers before and after him. The loading bridge vibrated in his vision; it suddenly-seemed inordinately long, bending this way and that, only to reveal further corridors.

The aircraft appeared ahead of him. The door was open. Two attendants stood by, immediately inside, greeting passengers. One of them was a Black man.

With an oval head.

And an airport novel tucked under his arm. But it was not Obama.

Deep laughter rippled behind him - the voices belonged to Black men.

He dared not look, but managed a furtive glance as he stepped into the aircraft.

He saw only the Black man with the grey suit and another walking alongside him, clad in a black suit and a colourful tie. They both had broad smiles on their faces: two friends, who had chanced into one another.

He flattened his hair against his skull, and quietly greeted the flight attendants with perhaps an overly courteous nod.

Home free, yes!

Home, free?

Yes?

But, for how long?