

C M TAYLOR



LIGHT

STEVE REDWOOD



**WHO NEEDS
CLEOPATRA?**

RAVINDER CHAHAL



thegroup

ED LARK



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C M TAYLOR



LIGHT

reverb

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reverb is an imprint of Osiris Press Ltd

This edition first published 2005 by

Osiris Press Ltd
PO Box 615
Oxford OX1 9AL

www.readreverb.com
www.osirispress.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1 905315 00 7

Set in Baskerville 12/14.2pt
Title font Acerina (www.hulahula.com.mx)

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Printed in Britain by
Lightning Source, Milton Keynes

Published in association with Shed Books



I

Until the morning he arrived at my father's funeral in a wine-stained, white linen suit, I had not seen Will for ten years. It was speculated in the chapel that he was a loan shark from the period of gambling which preceded my father's death. In truth, my friendship with Will spanned much of my childhood; though as he is two years older, it naturally faltered between our staggered puberties, and in the four years before he left for college we were not close. For a long time I venerated our prior closeness: days of arson by his lake, dens and feasting in his elaborate house.

Hours after the funeral he drove me to the station. I had work the next day and needed to catch the last train to London. He stood with me on the platform and I looked at him and liked him. Apparently he was speaking:

"... When my son was born, my parents gave us the house and moved to France."

"Tell me about the suit Will."

He smiled suddenly, then as suddenly again was serious.

"On the day I left the village, your father came to see me. He had a white linen suit which he said no longer fitted him. He said it was perfect for weddings and summer and he made me promise to wear it. The first time I wore it was ten years ago. I drenched it with wine and ruined it. The second time was today."

The train clanged lazily into the station and I shook Will's hand. Through the window, I looked upwards to name and savour the stars before London took them.

•

My father had a long and slender nose, along which his brown-rimmed glasses would travel as he observed a war documentary, a bird's flight or an argument. He had a pale, blank face and a shining oblong forehead draped with weak, capricious hair. He was weak, I think, and surprised by life and his voice had raised eyebrows in it. There was something of the consumptive about him, some waxy

yellow under his thin and shining skin. And something of the saint also, though I concede that the keenness of bereavement naturally sanctifies the dead.

There is a wedding photo buckled with handling. It shows the plump face of my mother and the smooth face of my father. Relatives stand around them, flowers pinned to the slim lapels of chain-store suits – rarely-worn clothes beautifying grim and battling faces. Mother is proud in the photo, her chin is held slightly upwards as she looks into the camera. She is relieved no doubt to escape the teeming house of the many sisters and the patched and re-patched skirts. And she is proud perhaps of her husband; her hard-working, taciturn and kind new husband.

Father is glancing to the left. If you follow his eyes he is looking at the vicar, who proselytises the camera with a wide grin of Anglican teeth. A remote smile lays on his face, his lips are thin and tightly pursed. It is the smile of a dream, perhaps. And even then there is the crumpled circle tensed in his brow, about the size of the tie knot snuggled below his chin. The brow holds some vexation, some anticipation of future events. The puzzle of moving time hangs around him.

If death comes to all, can it be tragic, can it be anything but banal? I don't know. A verdict of accidental death was recorded, so said the local paper. Did they get it right? Partially. Accidental life may have been more accurate. I think he was a beautiful man, and if he were not for this earth, it remains difficult to imagine another on which he would have thrived.

When he was made redundant he would rise at seven, shave carefully across his eczema and slip a clean shirt over his shoulders. Then he would stand in the lounge and drink tea, glancing across his watch. In these first months, she said, he looked like he was listening, waiting for a signal – the blurt of a horn outside or the phone awakened by his boss's volte-face. With my father at home, the small garden was treated, it grew impeccably clipped.

He climbed from bed and sleep-walked through the dark hallway of the bungalow. He was standing in front of the phone table, lifting the car keys off the wooden hook, when she found him. She turned him and eased him towards the bedroom. He awoke and she made

him coffee, and sat through his tears and crumpled owlsh blinking.

He invested his redundancy pay-off with a former colleague. They planned to renovate a barn in the next village and sell it to an interloper. The friend went to Spain with the money and took his cousin's wife. The lawn remained trimmed, the reddening skin shaved.

He visited the Jobcentre for help with his retraining. He was going to be a gardener. They said he was too old, "Too old to dig," he said, "Too old for fucking flowers."

My mother told me that. It was the first time she'd heard him swear. He got part-time work at home, soldering components into circuit boards. It was not enough – the money was dripping out of the house and the drink was growing inside him. On the day of his funeral I found an empty vodka bottle hidden in the garden.

He lost £800 on the Epsom Derby the first time he stepped inside a bookmaker's. It came on that quickly. She sobbed in the worn brown chair and the light frittered through the curtains. The bookies owed him money, so he thought, and he gave them more to get it back. Arguments filled the house. Old hurts recovered by new swirled around the dark sideboard and the deep brown box of the television. Separate bedrooms were adopted, my father's twitching sleep observed by the posters of my former heroes. And my mother weeping in the mirror and combing her hair with the thick black brush she was given by her mother. The brush had wild flowers enamelled on its back and lay on a dulled silver plate. She didn't care about the ring, she only wished he'd asked.

I don't suppose they called themselves loan sharks when he met them in the pub. They were just two men who would lend him the money to get his back. He was absent from the house now as much as he was able. But he had nowhere to go and stayed in bed, listening to the radio under itchy white blankets. Mother's sisters began to visit more often. He stopped leaving the racing papers in the lounge and folded them up and pushed them in a clump under the bed.

My mother didn't want him to move out – she didn't want him to stay either – but he said he had to. It was the shame, he said – easier to take when alone. Shame gangs up with other people, amplifies itself through your love for them. She would drive over to see him in the

bedsit, taking meals for him to freeze in his jammed-up ice box. She missed him. Some habitual pride kept her moving through the world.

My father's landlord stopped coming to collect the rent. Perhaps he couldn't bear to see him, perhaps he forgot. I doubt he forgot. I went to see my father once. I sat down in a sticky vinyl chair. The old kettle whistled as he smiled at me. The smile was like the wedding day smile. "I told you," it almost said. He showed me a picture of his new friend. She had long dry hair. They were sat together in the pub. He looked hearty under her drunken kiss. It cost me a lot, but I said I was glad. I gave him twenty quid and some fruit. He said he'd come and see my new flat in London. We both knew he wouldn't.

The local paper informs us when they called, fins showing. My penniless father hid from them out on the window ledge. He tumbled onto the concrete. It was late afternoon and his body attracted the school children. Fall? Jump? Irrelevant. The body made it irrelevant.

After the funeral, my mother went to stay with her sisters in the States. She tried to have a holiday. She called me once from Disneyland. What was she doing? Living I suppose. Living now with death – laughing with her sisters in Disneyland, California, above the San Andreas fault.

My parents married when they were twenty. When they were my age I was seven. We no longer must wed the first we bed. We have choice. At twenty – at thirty even – we are wedded to the self: education, career, travel, promiscuity. We are bound to the imperative of choice – consuming, democratised individuals demand self-betterment. What can we really choose? Little, I say. But then I believe in chance, not choice: chance and accident. And I think that we are stooges and beauties and children and monkeys: our mistakes really choose for us, and our families, and our wallets, and our love. And character – inexplicable, accidental character – chooses also.

I think I can tell when it's going to rain. I feel the air changing in my chest. Don't cows sit down before it comes? It will rain soon. The wet will fall on trees and roads. Brakes will slowly skid. Accidents will happen.



At nineteen, with no navigable direction, I mooched around my parents' house. I ate breakfast cereal and wore the karate pyjamas I had been bought for my thirteenth birthday. I still have them. I conceived a vague and great notion to travel, worked in local bars, got free rent and board from my folks, and within a year had passport, injections and £8,000.

In India I fell in love. We met at the Taj Mahal. She was an Australian, travelling for a single week before returning to the leper's school which she ran on the plains of Uttar Pradesh. I was braving a two-week skirmish with the dusty subcontinent before returning to my reptilian languor among the beach bars of Thailand. She spent two nights at my hotel. We ate well and laughed. Three years later she left me and I left India with a clearer idea how to teach lepers. Quite why I then followed her back to Australia when she had made it viciously clear that our relations were over, I cannot say. Nor can I explain the three years I spent working on a fruit farm in Queensland. I do not understand these six years of lepers and mangoes – I have only these words: "I loved her."

I met Donald at the fruit farm – another peripatetic labourer. We laughed at each other's jokes as we ricked our spines picking in the field. Is it fair to say that Donald is the only person who has ever made me happy? So far, yes.

Donald taught me how to paint, and he said I was good at it. "You're good," he said. We would come in from the fruit fields after work and go to the barn where the farm owner let Donald keep a studio. We'd open a couple of bottles of cheap wine and get stoned and go at the painting; really go at it, like a couple of household decorators reacquainted with their childhood epilepsy. We couldn't often afford canvas so we used what we could find. My best painting was done on an old, discarded white wooden door. It was a speculative piece called *My Wife's House*. Maybe it's still in the barn.

I was sad when we went our separate ways. Donald gave me one of his paintings and took a plane. I came home then.

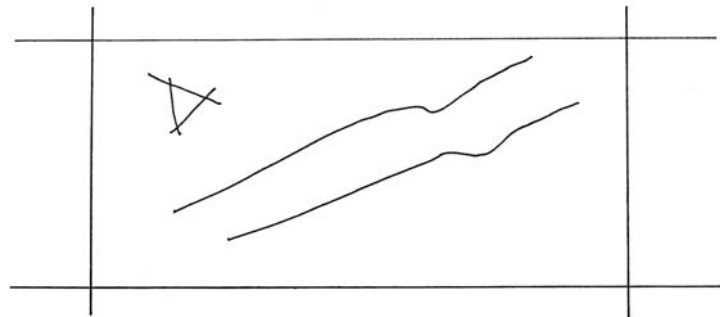
The first few months back were bad. I was broke. Most of my friends had moved away, while those who'd stayed were kind but unavailable – ensconced in pervasive domesticity. I stayed with my parents and felt the imminence of their divorce. I visited the

Jobcentre and was offered work in a mushroom factory or an abattoir. I was twenty six and felt like a teenager. Enough.

I needed cash and I needed out, needed friends also. I massaged my CV to demonstrate a career trajectory, borrowed from my mother to buy a suit, and kept my nerve through a job interview with a media sales company in central London. I worked there for a year, embracing the wage labour, sexual tension and alcoholism that comprise the public face of the capital. I had friends and money and my life began to assume some of the repetitive solidity it had in childhood. I even had sex. I was a grown up. I thought I was going to make it.

Then, as you know, my father died. Seven days after the funeral my mother commenced her long visit to her sisters. Twenty eight days after that I was 'let go'. We all were. *Contemporary Aviation* and its sister title, *Yesterday's Aviation*, went under. They were our main clients. All the ex-staff went out drinking in Soho. We complimented each other and confessed who we'd fancied. There was laughter and we felt better. I went home and looked at my painting.

It's like this:



It's better, though. Like all Donald's work, it's abstract. Donald lives in America now. You can email him on donald_birkin30@thoughtplay.com. I shouldn't give you his address, but he's a nice guy. He'd take it as a chance to make friends. Donald likes old films and he likes to sleep outside. He has a GSOH; smokes fags though.

For two unattractive weeks I was drunk. I was bereaved and clueless and single and poor. I recited mantras of my own inadequacies and grew hostile towards things which reminded me of me. Late at night in loud expensive bars I felt lecherous then bitter, hating my stringy legs and simian head – oh wretched, ugly urban man. Was I falling apart? Was the good ship sinking? It seemed that way.

Then Will called me.

"...Ben, I know you'll be finding things hard, and, because, well I've got an offer... Our gardener-handyman-type person has just died too, and, and I thought well... There's a nice room for you here and you'll get money. Enough to go to the pub and things... I know you're not qualified or anything but you'll be fine. And I'm at home. I mean I'm at home all the time now and it would be fun..."

Beam me up!

Will pulled up outside my flat two days later. I crammed some bags into his archaic sports car and we drove East – *tally ho!* It was seven years since I had lived in the village. Now for one long summer I would live there again.



The driveway unfolded in a lazy ache and I looked up to the house, its wide face rubbed to orange by the late sun. On the far side of the house, ramshackle outbuildings sloped around a pebbled courtyard. Horses strolled in a large rolling field and above the sky was huge. We pulled into the courtyard and climbed out of the car.

Will bounded up the steps, standing half inside the open doorway. "Archie! Jessica!"

He turned and looked at me. He was unshaven and he played with his hands. I was flattered by his nervousness, by the importance of my entrance. I was also surprised. Aged twelve I had read First World War books, some by survivors of the Western Front. When new soldiers arrived, the veterans could tell who would live and who would die in the mud. Some recruits had a glow around them, a smell of luck, and the old hands stuck close to them to share their fortune. When I read of this, I had thought of Will, sensed a glow of survival round him. I venerated him then, I was a willing duckling imprinted on his munificence, on the knack of his coincidental impunity.

And I am still not free of the dazzle of Will; still not over it, even now after the events of that long, wet summer.

Archie arrived. I had not met this little boy before. Each step he slapped on the stone was a potential skull cracker. His father snatched him up and briefly held their faces close, "See, looks like me."

"He does." He didn't. Archie lost his face in his father's neck.

"Where's your mother, Archie?"

"Undun," yelped the boy.

"Who's here with you?" Will asked abruptly.

"Swarze."

He turned to me. "He means Françoise, the au pair. Come in, come in."

He beckoned me forward with his non-Archie arm and I stepped into the hallway.

Little had changed. The furniture still sedate and solid, the floor tiles still cracked and geometric. Old feelings rose. I had always felt envious of Will's home: no, not envious – precision – it had always

made me feel flimsy, like a straw man. Not the size of Will's estate, not the value, not the drip feed of cash from relatives' deaths. It wasn't Will's money that made me feel vulnerable. It was the other wealth that went through the house: the aunts and uncles who played music on the patio and sang well in the bathrooms; the people called 'auntie' and 'uncle' who came and scattered accomplishments through the rooms then drove off to concerts and openings and other friends. It was the godmothers and godfathers and the painters and actors and the linguists and waifs who came to the house. It was the twenty types of everything in the fridge and on the bar, and the cars on the drive and the people on the phone. It was the solidity of Will's life, its buoyancy, the sense that he lived in the centre of a warmly rippling lake, and all he need do was relax and paddle slowly towards the shore. There were always voices in Will's house.

We walked into the kitchen. As before, a long-legged table lay down the centre of the room, cut from the trunk of a single hardwood tree. Jars and canisters and pots stood scattered across the marble surfaces: tea and coffee and malt drinks and fresh herbs and spices and sauces and gadgets. A thin trail of spilled pulses curled at my feet and old panelled walls gave way to the huge back larder. By the window a paint-splattered radio spoke to itself. We sat down, Will and I on chairs, grubby Archie on the floor. Will smiled at me and he opened and closed his mouth. He stood and walked over to the chromium kettle.

"Tea? Jess keeps all these rare breeds, but I'm a basics man."

"Basic's fine."

He sat down and pushed a teapot towards me. I took the top off and looked inside. It was full of weed.

"Keeps me out of mischief now I'm a bored house husband. Help yourself."

I smiled and put the top back on. Will stood again and walked over to the windowsill, picking up a picture frame and handing it to me.

"Always keep this here..."

It was a photo of my family, displaying the gaudy imperfections of 1970s colour processing. I am vain I suspect because I always look at myself first in photos. Perhaps everyone does? I shall ask. In the

photo I am wearing a jacket which I can remember loving dearly. Not because of any intrinsic properties of the jacket, but because my parents didn't want to buy it for me. It was a treasure of self assertion and it was burgundy. My father looked happy. He didn't like to be photographed but here he smiled. I was cuddled under my mother's arm and her hair was pushed back with the wind. I think we were by the sea. There was some thrill of salt air in our cheeks.

The au pair came in and bobbed her eyes about then walked away. There were some magazines under her arm and three large dogs followed her. I looked at the boy on the floor.

"Why 'Archie'?"

Will's gaze rested on a tea cup, "We were down in Exeter when Jessica was pregnant. She'd never been and we wanted, well it was Remembrance Sunday and we went inside the Cathedral. There were hundreds of little palm crosses behind the altar, and I was just looking at them. They all had little messages on them. One was,

Archie Higgins 1920 – 1939
I Love You,
Vi

I just got thinking, and the woman who wrote that had been in love with a dead man for nearly sixty years. It just stayed with me. And when I was at the birth and I saw him, I just shouted 'Archie', which was a bit embarrassing. Then the nurses started calling him it, which Jess said was unprofessional. And it just worked out that way. Jessica hates it, says it's my name."

I looked over his shoulder, looked out into the garden and watched the dark begin to cluster slowly among the branches and the flowers and leaves. It seemed a beautiful story. My grandfather fought in the war. He wore a beard to hide his scars. He wasn't called Archie, though. Albert was his name. Archie's a nice name.

We fetched my boxes and bags from the car and Will showed me upstairs to his parents' old room. It was big and sported a four poster bed and a suit of armour. I calculated how much certain Americans would pay to stay there.

"Not a bad room for a handyman," Will said, plumping a pillow.

"A non-handy handyman at that."

"There's not much to do really, it'll be fine. I'll take you round the gardens before it gets too dark. Jess has devised some 'tasks'."

The descent of a wide, slowly curved staircase took us to the door, and we walked across the pebbles of the courtyard down into the long back garden. The last swifts deferred to the veering tack of bats and the lawn was sad as jade. Cuckoos repeated what cuckoos repeat. We walked down the crumbling stone steps into the vegetable garden, a tangled mass of non-linear root crops and burgeoning, fibrous stalks.

"First thing. Get the veggies into the kitchen. Our old gardener failed to do that. Don't know why really. Grew huge things and left them."

More steps took us down to the walled gardens. Trained pear trees grew geometric shoulders, and huge roses tangled up from kidney-shaped flower beds. A broken wooden bench rotted by the pond and reflected across the orange daubs of listless fish.

"Second thing, get the heating going in this garden."

As I knew from my childhood, a small shed below housed a boiler which connected to pipes running through the walls – up which tropical plants could grow through temperate air. But, as I also knew from my childhood, the boiler was cantankerous, expansive and unfathomable. Will walked towards the shed and I followed him. We stepped inside. The air was musty and dense. White spores grew on the soil floor. Mostly broken tools lay in corners and rusting cans of god-knows-what trooped wonkily along dust-grey shelves. The dull metal of the boiler loomed on the left. Will's mobile phone went off.

"Excuse me." He stepped outside.

I walked forward and picked up a spade from the corner of the shed, weighing it in my hand. Its flat, chipped face was ruttled with rust. I mimed digging. After one year of computer screens – the mailing of pitches and promotional circulars; the intranet strategy groups and projected quotas – this digging, this actual doing, would seem absurd.

Will extended his head around the doorway.

"Jessica. On her way. Driving. She'll be here in an hour."

We walked from the garden, down more steps and through the avenue which led to the lake. We stood for a moment under a high pine, its branches hugging over towards the water. I looked across the lake to a colony of geese on a small island, then beyond them to the barns on the far side of the water.

“Sue lives there now,” Will said, nodding at the barns.

“I thought they were derelict?”

“They were but Sue fell in love. She’s having them kitted out. They’re going to be amazing.”

“Who’s Sue?”

“You’ll see. She’s having a party tomorrow. You’re invited. You’ll probably recognise her, she’s been in the papers recently. Went to college with Jess – poor Northern girl, Jess claims. Says she discovered her. Sue’s done very well for herself... I’ll let you into a secret. It’s Jessica’s thirty-first soon and Sue’s organised a surprise for her. All will be revealed tonight. Come on.”

Will turned and walked back up the garden, his hands in his pockets, a boyish whistle rising from his lips. I took a quick look back to the lake and the barns then followed him.



She arrived as we sat in Will’s study, rolling peaty whiskey round thick and crystal glasses. It was about 10:30. I had never met Jessica before. She stood in the doorway, freeing her long hands: one yellow glove’s fingertip nipped in her childish white teeth as she disengaged the other. Her hair was cropped up against a nifty skull and she wore no make-up. She was breathless and she smiled at me. It was a burnished and slight smile, inviolable and moneyed. A smile which knew its strengths. Her lips looked sticky. She flipped her fingers forward and glanced down her nails, stepping forward to shake my hand. She may have been drunk. I stood and lunged my hand forward. The wands of her fingers flitted into my palm.

“Jessica. Pleased to meet you. Will’s told me much. Much. Nothing too bad. Sit down. So, the garden and the heating and the lake will need dredging. A drink darling. Something long. White spirits. Had to pop to the flat.”

She collapsed backwards into an enormous chair and pulled her knees up under her chin, then she peered exhaustedly forward, inching off her shoes and rubbing the ball of her left foot, an ear cocked towards the window.

“No deer tonight?”

“Too early love.” Will handed her a glass.

She sloshed her ice around a little, prodded her lemon and looked at me.

“We have deer barking here at night. Sometimes right through. They’re very rare though and sweet. Quite small. Settled in?”

I nodded. She rolled forward and looked at me, her lips and forehead taut.

“I heard about your father. Soz... Will does love you, you know – childhood summers, shit pies, bike ramps and all that. I’ve heard it all. He was nervous about you coming, thought it meant more to him than you and that... and that you wouldn’t know each other I suppose.”

She clapped a palm down onto a chair arm and a little dust rose.

“Will’s in a rough patch so be nice.”

I looked at Will and felt warmth cluster in my throat and cheeks. I did not know if the warmth arose from shame or affection. Will shifted feet and stroked the crown of his hair, staring at Jessica.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I’m going to fix you up with Sue. You’re obviously the sort of person she’ll like.”

“What sort of person is that, Jessica?”

“Oh god, you know.”

She stood and moved to the door, throwing some words over her shoulder.

“Got to change. See you for dinner.”

I turned to Will. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yes but no but there’s nothing to say.”

As the vegetarian au pair was cooking, and as Jessica claimed intolerance to gluten, and Will insisted on bulk, we ate a meal of microwaved jacket potatoes with salad and cheese around the huge kitchen table. The cutlery chimed loudly, then grated across emptied plates.

The au pair sloped off in heavy socks to watch TV in her room and Will

went upstairs to check on Archie.

With a confidential movement of her wrist, Jessica poured me a glass of wine.

“We should be friends. We should talk. Will hasn’t got any money left, his family are virtually paupers. He just strolls around this big house and everyone thinks he’s loaded. He should be working. Not doing this bread-baking daddy thing. I think he’s lost it. *Will-o’-the-wisp* I call him.”

“And what do you do Jessica?”

“I do very well.”

The phone rang. It was a friend of Jessica’s wanting travel advice. Jessica gave her some travel advice.

Will came down and joined me at the table, then he stood and walked to the fridge, sliding a hot dog sausage from an open can and biting it in half. After many goodbyes, each increasing in proximity to the next, Jessica put down the phone.

“There’s someone here to see you Jessie.”

“Who? Are they nice?”

“I’ll bring them in.”

Will came back with a short, wide woman, her huge hair wrestled backwards by a tattered yellow band and a carefully thrust pencil. Her teeth were grey and her eyes were reddened, lively with amiable contempt. She was very cigarettes. She wore an old black sweatshirt and loose black trousers. I liked her. She moved towards Jessica, her hand held out. Jessica lowered hers.

“Hello Jessica, I’m your birthday present. I’m Maggie Twist.”

“Maggie Twist?” Wondered Jessica unconvincingly.

“I’m an artist.”

“Do you sell?”

“I am bought.”

“She won the Constable Prize last year,” aided Will.

“Oh yes, I do remember, *Wrecking Bassoons*, the video piece.”

“Right. I believe you know my husband.”

“Do I?” Jessica again wondered unconvincingly.

“Yes. Pavel.”

“Oh yes, Pavel. So you’re my present?”

“Sue’s commissioned me to paint your husband, your son and

herself. She wants to call it ‘Three People Who Love Jessica’...”

“... What a present!”

“I’m painting over at Sue’s. Part of the present is for you to watch the work. I’ll be staying there until it’s done.”

“She paying well?”

•

Later, I walked down to the lake and sat cross-legged on a low stone pedestal, its deposed Grecian urn wrapped in ivy at its base. The water was still. Geese absorbed the moonlight and lights blazed from the roofs of the old barns. I saw a figure on the far side of the lake. Sue maybe. A boozy female laugh jumped into the trees. I couldn’t make out her face.

I sat for a while, coveting the stars then I walked back inside and stood outside the kitchen door. Evidently Maggie had departed.

“We said we wouldn’t leave him alone Jess.”

“Why do you think we’ve got the au pair? I had to go.”

“The au pair’s a kid.”

“Why have her? You worry too much. Sacred bloody baby.”

“Who did you see in town?”

“Oh god what is the point.”

“You tell me. I’m just...”

“You’re not even listening to me.”

“I’m just...”

“You’re not even listening to me.”

I padded up to my room.

STEVE REDWOOD



**WHO NEEDS
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reverb

12: THE CRUCIFIXION CONSPIRACY

And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death.

*And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.
(St Luke)*

Bertie Senior's new-found happiness didn't last very long. It wasn't his son's latest grisly death, which he took in his stride; it was something far closer to the bone. One night he discovered three of his new wives wantonly disporting themselves with dildos in one hand and copies of his bank balance in the other, and came to three reluctant conclusions: first, that he wasn't perhaps as great a lover as he had believed; second, that dildos were an international conspiracy against the male sex; and third, that the young women had only married him for his money. Luckily, they hadn't been Temple marriages (which are for eternity), so he soon got shot of them. Quite literally, according to some evil tongues.

This unfortunate experience naturally led him to question the validity of the Mormon faith. He had, he decided, been a bit hasty in converting so quickly. Not only had the standard of Bertie's mother's cooking gone down in vengeful proportion to the number of wives he took on, he had also recently felt a couple of sharp pains in his chest. They might have been the result of his renewed marital activity, but they might also, he feared, be a Sign, a warning swish of the Reaper's scythe. It was time to search again for a dromedary-friendly needle.

I had a horrible fear that he might send us to check up on the origins of other religions. I didn't fancy that one bit. Sweltering in the Arabian desert with Mohammed? Starving with Siddhartha Gautama? Discussing the prophetic secrets of pyramids with Charles Taze Russell (before the end of the world in 1915, obviously)? No, thank you!

But we were saved from that. He decided to stick with the religion he knew.

"We still don't know if there are aliens or not," he mused one afternoon, as we looked out over the city he virtually owned, "but

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reverb is an imprint of Osiris Press Ltd

This edition first published 2005 by

Osiris Press Ltd
PO Box 615
Oxford OX1 9AL

www.readreverb.com
www.osirispress.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1 905315 03 1

Set in Baskerville 12/14.2pt
Title font Lithos Bold

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Printed in Britain by
Lightning Source, Milton Keynes

reverb

perhaps this isn't so important after all. There's an even greater question. Despite Moroni's trickery, we know there is a Creator, because Cain actually met him, and you said you might even have spotted him yourselves chasing Adam. But what about the story of Jesus? In particular, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection?"

I knew what he really meant: had Jesus truly sacrificed himself for *all* men, including filthy rich magnates like himself whose life had been as pure as snow driven through a chimney?

And I also guessed what this was leading to. I had a very bad feeling about it.

If, as I suspected, we were at least partly responsible for the very mysteries we were solving, might we not also somehow become responsible for the murder of the Son of God if we went to investigate it?

And if we did, there was Someone who might take it rather badly. The same Someone who, as far as I could see, had spent most of the Old Testament taking things rather badly. The Middle East still isn't very densely populated.

I put forward a host of irrefutable reasons why we shouldn't go to that particular place at that particular time. Bertie Senior listened with his usual attentiveness.



He didn't want to be accused of sending us back to film the Crucifixion just for the sake of sensationalism. The whole Programme, after all, was predicated on the idea of solving old mysteries. So, apart from finding out whether the Crucifixion ever really happened at all, we were told to try to solve the mystery of the two thieves.

St Luke says that one of the thieves crucified with Jesus believed in him, saying 'Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.' And that Jesus answered: 'Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise.' Very heart-warming, and the kind of uplifting conversation that ought to grace all good crucifixions. But then both Mark and Matthew tell us that 'they that were crucified with him reviled him'. Not so nice at all: quite down putting, in fact.

So our first job was to see which of these two versions, if either, was correct.

Rather significant, I thought, that Bertie Senior should be so concerned over the fate of sinners.

Our second job, though, was the important one. Crucifixions were the in thing in those days, a way for the Romans to display their advanced civilisation to the surrounding barbarians. Six thousand followers of Spartacus had died in that manner along the Appian Way seventy years before as proof of Imperial enlightenment. So being crucified was nothing to write home about, even if your hands had been free to do so. Rising from the dead, though, was, even then, considered a pretty clever thing to do. If we could show that Jesus really did manage to pull off that little trick, then that would go a long way to proving that he was who he said he was. And as our technicians swore that they had now improved the TM enough for it to stay for up to five days in the past, we were confident we could come back with an answer.

"Oh, and if you can also film the Turin Shroud and the Oviedo Sudarium you might be in line for a bonus," added Bertie Senior, as he waved goodbye to us. I had no idea what the Oviedo Sudarium was, but it didn't sound very nice, so I mentally decided to forget that small task.

It was only as the Machine was about to take off that I had a disquieting thought: if Moroni was behind the Mormon religion, could he also have been behind other religions as well? Islam really didn't seem his style, not enough razzmatazz. But the Jesus story itself? When I thought about it, I realised it could easily have come from Moroni's twisted imagination: spirits impregnating virgins; water being transformed into a popular alcoholic beverage; evil spirits hitching suicidal rides in pigs; a saviour getting bumped off by the very people he's come to save; a prophet who acts as if his willy is no more than an irrelevant accident. Yes, this absurd story certainly bore all Moroni's hallmarks.

No, it couldn't be. I shrugged off the thought. I was getting obsessed.

What we were NOT expected to do was solve the mystery of the Nazca Lines in Peru.



“So you think you’re the first? Haven’t you ever asked yourselves,” said Jesus, “just why there was no room at the inn when I was born?”

He was in the courtyard of the Roman fort, and, far from being shackled, was wandering around among the soldiers.

We hadn’t. “Filled with paparazzi trying to get an exclusive on the Three Kings?” Bertie suggested. “Brits chasing the winter sun?”

If this strikes you as a not wholly appropriate manner to address the Son of God, bear in mind we’d just had our Time Machine confiscated the second we materialised, and not only that, but when they’d seen it, the Time Police drafted in for the event had laughed their helmeted heads off, treating my great invention as a prehistoric relic!

“Dr Flintstone, I presume!” one of them had quipped.

Sassy bastards! OK, so they had foldaway models they could slip into their shirt pockets, but where would they have been without my prototype? “You’re just pygmies standing on the shoulders of a giant!” I yelled (Jesus frowned), but they didn’t understand: ah well, culture was already well on the way out when we left: *Hello Magazine* had become required tertiary education reading.

Perhaps it was a good thing they didn’t understand. I recalled what their colleagues had said about being able to get round Temporal Paradoxes, and held my newly re-implanted tongue.

As for Bertie, after his recent experiences there was very little that could faze him.

Jesus almost came up to my left armpit, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Engelbrecht the Surrealist Sportsman immortalised by Richardson and Hughes. You can see why we were initially a bit doubtful about his claims. I personally believe that his small stature may well explain the mystery of Why the Stone was Moved, but we’ll get back to that.

Jesus didn’t seem to notice Bertie’s tone, anyway. “Time Travellers, that’s why! Hundreds of ’em! Supposed to have come to honour me, and then hog all the accommodation, leaving me and the Womb in a stinking manger!”

It struck me as a bit odd that he should refer to his mother as ‘the Womb’, but I suppose he might have picked up that way of thinking from the Holy Ghost. Some wasps, so I’ve read, have a similar habit of laying eggs in other creatures. And no one says how wonderful that is, or starts a cult to the Virgin Hymenoptera!

You think you got a big audience for your birth? I thought to myself. Just wait and see the full house when you snuff it! OK, as it happened, that’s exactly what he was doing, but I wasn’t to know that then.

I must admit that I felt no more friendly towards the other Travellers than he did. Until now, I’d assumed that we were the world’s only Time Travellers – apart from the Time Police, and, perhaps, Moroni – and when we get here, the place is packed out with them! All from our own future, of course. The ungrateful bastards could at least have stopped off en route, and shown their gratitude by leaving me a few bottles of far-future whisky.

Unlike Moroni, none of them seemed to pay any particular attention to Bertie. A few of them had vaguely heard of us – all right, of him! – but that was all. I began to wonder whether I’d been wrong in assuming Moroni to be from our future.

At that moment, a Roman soldier passed by, and for no reason at all, gave Jesus an almighty shove. Incensed, Bertie sprang forward, and knocked him to the ground. I expected him to be beaten to death by the other soldiers lounging by, but they just laughed, and one of them even offered him a cigarette.

A cigarette?

“You’re coming on well,” said Jesus, as he got up and dusted off some dried sheep dung and nodded approvingly at the man who’d just pushed him, “but you forgot to sneer and spit in my face.” He turned to us. “A few have got into the spirit of the thing, as you see, but some of them are such poor actors, it’ll look more like a medieval miracle play than a crucifixion! And there still aren’t anywhere near enough soldiers. I don’t suppose you’d mind slipping on skirts and helmets, and looking pitiless and aquiline for a bit?”

“You mean, these soldiers aren’t real? I mean, real soldiers?”

“Good Lord no, all the original soldiers got murdered by a Christian fundamentalist Traveller who came into the past to Save me. Before I could explain that I didn’t want Saving, she’d zapped the lot with some sort of Death Ray. Typical female emotional overreaction! Nearly ruined everything. The Time Police frisk the lot the second they arrive now, of course.”

As we knew to our embarrassment. When we’d stepped out of the TM in the early Friday dawn, two Teepees, dressed just like the ones who had brought us back from St Petersburg, in black uniforms (why

do these types never wear pink or turquoise?), had stopped us.

“Spoilsport or Pervert?” they asked.

“I don’t understand,” I said with as much dignity as is possible when one is being lifted, turned upside down, shaken, and frisked. They confiscated my pork scratchings.

“Most people who Travel here either want to stop the Crucifixion – without much success, as you must already know – or indulge in a bit of the old *schadenfreude*.”

The frisking suddenly became extremely – one could say *too* – thorough. “What’s this?” one of them sniffed suspiciously. “Why’s it hidden there?”

“It isn’t hidden,” I said, squirming, “it’s... it’s for my haemorrhoids.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but I didn’t feel like explaining that the surgeons had misplaced a couple of minor items when they were trying to put us back together after Roswell.

I thrust away the bowel-wrenching memory. Jesus went on:

“Trouble is, word’s got round that I spell trouble, and even the locals are keeping low-key now. Haven’t seen a Scribe or Pharisee for days! Pilate’s also been giving me a bit of a headache, tried to resign twice yesterday. Worried about his reputation. I’ve had to promise him a place on God’s right hand side in Heaven (luckily, he never thought to ask me just how far from his right hand side). Why, even the unclean spirits have made themselves scarce!”

I was beginning to think that this chap wanted to get himself crucified.

“I’m beginning to think you want to get yourself crucified,” I said. I usually like to say what I think, though I frequently have to make an exception with Bertie’s father, of course. And, these days, sometimes, with Winnie, too.

“What else do you suggest? I have to do something. Father’s obviously never going to shuffle off his immortal coil. Still fit as a bloody fiddle. A million press-ups – at his age! – and he doesn’t even break sweat! I’m heir to a throne I can never inherit. Unless I seize it by force.”

This I could understand. The same thing had recently happened in England, when Prince Charles, just before his fifty-eighth birthday, had finally lost patience and, after confiscating all her dogs and hats,

had the Queen locked up in the Tower. Her presence there greatly increased the revenues from tourism.

However, I couldn’t see how being crucified would help Jesus, unless he intended to take the nails with him and hammer them through God’s unsuspecting head.

“My crucifixion will be a great PR job. Future ages will worship me, not Father.”

I’m a real softie, as you know. Look how I’d forgiven Mabel for abandoning me in the Land of Nod! I didn’t want him crucifying himself for nothing, so I pointed out that God, in fact, was still worshipped – in my time at least – despite nagging doubts as to why he’d had to use the Holy Ghost instead of pleasuring Mary himself.

Jesus smiled. “Ah, but that’s just the first couple of millennia. People will finally come to realise that sending me down to be crucified to save the world, instead of having the guts to do it himself, was morally reprehensible. Only slightly less savage than Saturn eating his children, really. Hardly paternal. There’ll be a hate campaign on something called the Internet. By the third millennium, so the Time Police have told me, Christians will worship me alone, with Father seen as a servant of the Devil.”

I was a bit suspicious about what the Teepees might have told Jesus about the future state of Christianity. They must have realised that, just in order for them to exist, the Crucifixion, and everything that followed from the spread of Christianity, had to go ahead. In such a situation, they would not hesitate to tell little white lies to make sure the Crucifixion did go ahead. Indeed, I was later to find out that their pressure went beyond this. As for what they had done to the woman who had killed the original Roman soldiers, I dreaded to think.

And look what the bastards tried to do to us afterwards!

“But how will this help you get the throne?” I asked.

“When the angels find out that Father has just let me die, without lifting a blessed Finger to save me, I’m pretty sure they’ll back me in a coup.”

“Will you win?”

“I’m not a fortune-teller! But yes, I think I will. You see, God is only as powerful as the number of people who believe in him and worship him. And whatever happens, I’ll be treated with a bit more respect, that’s for sure!”

At this point he was felled by another ersatz Roman soldier hoping to make a good impression on him. This one remembered to spit. Wiping the spittle from his face, Jesus looked up, thanked him, and said with a rather cocky expression: “Oh, by the way, I intend to rise from the dead, wander around a bit before Ascending. Might take a stroll to Emmaus, always wanted to go there. Don’t you think that’s a rather super idea?”

I forbore to answer. I was pretty sure the Teepees had given him that idea, too.

(Judas later told us that Jesus was already dying from some horrible disease, picked up from all that laying on of hands and raising dead bodies without washing the divine digits after, and so he was simply trying to make the best of a bad job: better to go out with the glory of a Crucifixion than an ignoble wasting away. Maybe so. But Judas didn’t strike me as a particularly honest fellow. Come on, thirty pieces of silver just for pointing out the shortest chap in Jerusalem! Daylight robbery!)

I still wonder which came first in this ridiculous loop. Jesus had decided to get himself crucified because the Teepees (and other Time Travellers, no doubt) had told him that in the future he would be worshipped because of this act. But presumably they (like me) only got the story from the Gospels because it had already happened. But it only happened because Jesus had been told it was going to happen. Unless, of course, the Gospel writers had made the whole thing up, which meant that Jesus was about to do something which had never happened in the first place. In which case, he would be altering history, after all. But then the Teepees wouldn’t have allowed that to happen. But then they themselves would be the product of an alternate history.

Another of those endless circles. At least, all that had nothing to do with us. My earlier fears dissipated.

I scratched my head and dragged Bertie off for an early breakfast. Nothing but bloody unleavened bread: I’d forgotten it was still the Passover period.

I knew Jesus wasn’t due to be crucified until the third hour, which for some reason I never understood actually meant nine in the morning, so we struck up a conversation with another Traveller from the twenty-second century who was also being roped in as a substitute

Roman, and who had arrived a few weeks before us. An ornithologist, apparently, who’d spent his whole life studying hummingbirds. He revealed that the Gospel writers had indeed been a bit creative with the truth. The five loaves and two fishes, for example: in actual fact, that’s what had been left *after* the Sermon. It also transpired that the unclean spirits who drowned with the Gadarene swine were really a largish group of smallish Ayon pygmies, Travellers from Papua New Guinea, who had roused Jesus’ ire by a spirited defence of animism and an equally gutsy apologia for cannibalism. He chased them through the streets. A moneylender, still smarting from an earlier outburst of the prophetic wrath, told them how Ulysses had escaped the Cyclops Polythemus by clinging to the underside of the giant’s sheep, and persuaded the Papuan pygmies to do the same with the crazed pigs. No one, however, had mentioned the cliffs. It also seemed that Lazarus, although he *had* been raised from the dead, had tottered around in circles for a few seconds, groaned, said “Christ, I feel like death warmed up!”, picked his nose, and then keeled over again, as dead as a Monty Python parrot. Elisha had done a much better job.

Now, of course, all this wasn’t to say that Jesus wasn’t really the Son of God, simply that things weren’t as cut and dried as some would have us believe.

Anyway, we agreed to go along with his plans, and got our Roman uniforms. Bertie looked rather sweet; his Regenerated legs were surprisingly shapely. There were about a hundred of us in on the act. The other Travellers knew nothing – their function was to return to their own times, and confirm the historical reality of the Crucifixion. I must admit we felt a bit superior with our nice uniforms and our little secret. If only we’d known!

Well, I guess you all know the story, so I won’t repeat it, just clear up a couple of errors.

Judas, for example. We’d grown kind of fond of Jeez, eccentric or not, so we strung Judas up, made it look like a suicide, and used the pieces of silver to pay for snacks during the Crucifixion. That was the technicality the Teepees later used against us. (Yes, I know all about that story in Acts that, ‘falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out’, but that was just a bit of exaggeration by Peter, hoping to distract people from the three cock crows.)

The thunder and earthquake, of course, was just future technology, as was the Star of Bethlehem, which I was told normally crowned the Dome of the future World Stock Exchange.

But I do want to tell you about Bertie. I owe it to him. I know I may sometimes have spoken of him with a certain asperity, but when it really mattered, he came up trumps. British pluck at its best.

It will also help to clear up some apparent contradictions in the Gospels.

First, though, I have to refute those who accuse Jesus of being a cry-baby for shouting out on the Cross, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”. Let me tell you that he displayed amazing fortitude throughout the whole proceedings, and that when he uttered those words, he winked at Bertie and whispered, “That’ll turn ’em against him!” He was a credit to all people of unostentatious stature.

Ah, you say, and how come Bertie was so close, how come no one else saw the wink? Yes, well, those contradictions I mentioned...

You see, one of the thieves, cottoning on to the fact that the Roman soldiers weren’t soldiers at all, and feeling insulted at the prospect of being crucified by blackleg civilians, did a bunk half an hour before the Crucifixion was scheduled! No sense of history, of occasion.

“I’ve got to have two thieves!” yelled Jesus, who by this time was, not unnaturally – he’d been up all night – showing signs of tension. “Symmetry!”

Symmetry my foot! It was those Teepees putting pressure on him again. Well, they stepped in, made us draw lots, and poor Bertie drew the short straw. I’d like to think that this was an entirely aleatory event, even if the same unfortunate appearance that had secured us instant access to Leonardo’s studio probably influenced the distribution of the straws. And yet I now suspect there was something almost pre-ordained about his choice. As if all his other trials had been somehow leading up to this final apotheosis.

I could, I suppose, have tried to summon the SMM to get us out of there fast, but I realised that if I succeeded (unlikely, with the Teepees guarding the TM), I would in fact be changing the past. Jesus had died with thieves on either side of him. The Travelling zipper had created another hole in the past, and Bertie’s destiny was to fill it in.

Bertie himself seemed a bit doubtful about the honour.

“Fuckit, fuckit, fuckit!” said he.

For a moment, I thought he was conjugating a long-forgotten Latin verb, but then realised it was a heartfelt, if rather selfish, complaint against his destiny.

But Jesus whispered, “Don’t worry, I’ll see you’re all right!” After that, I didn’t feel so bad about it, and indeed was rather hurt by the mute reproach in Bertie’s eye.

We bade tearful goodbyes, and up went Bertie with a martyred expression.

“Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,” he said, remembering to keep to their funny way of speaking, and Jesus swore he would, and that they’d share a bottle or two that very night in Paradise. But then he realised they could be heard, and he whispered to Bertie, “You’re better start reviling me, quick, or they’ll get suspicious”, so Bertie dutifully weighed in with some really vile insults, to which the other thief added heartfelt refrains.

But I noticed one Jew, who gave me the impression of being a doctor, scratching his head in surprise. He’d been even nearer than me to the cross, and must have heard the earlier part of the conversation. I guess the other gospel writers later dismissed his astonishing testimony, but St Luke chose to believe a fellow physician, and included a (doctored) version in his gospel.

Jesus got a bit more than he bargained for, poor chap. He was all hyped up to take his Crucifixion like a Man, and even used his knowledge of carpentry to coolly criticise the shoddy construction of his cross and the poor quality of the nails, but he hadn’t counted on the three crosses being so near to each other. That, I’m sure, is why he, supposedly a god – or, at this stage, a demigod – died before the other two, who were mere mortals. If you were on a cross next to Bertie, and if you happened to be so short that your head was not far above Bertie’s lower regions, wouldn’t you too yield up the ghost as soon as possible? And divine nostrils are well known to be particularly delicate.

It also explained why the group of mourning women were keeping their distance and ‘beholding afar off’, as the Gospels so tactfully put it. I asked someone which one was Mary Magdalene, wondering whether she’d be up for a quick drink afterwards.

Still, despite Bertie, Jesus managed to hang on for six hours up there, including three hours in almost complete darkness (something

arranged by the Teepees for effect), and it wasn't till the middle of the afternoon that he finally died.

At this point, I noticed two rather badly-dressed Sadducees get up and walk away, chuckling and eating bananas. I overheard one of them say: "So much for empty threats! Didn't have to wait long, did we?" It was impossible, of course, but I thought I recognised them.

The Teepees were ready, and the veil of the temple was rent in twain, the earth did quake, the rocks rent, and the ersatz soldiers went off to their nearby encampment for a celebratory drink, and, as they believed, to receive their Crucifixion Medals, before returning to their own epochs. My humming bird enthusiast invited me to join them. I gratefully accepted the offer, and had started to follow them when he said:

"I meant, well, of course you'll want to stay with your friend till... well, you know. We'll keep some drink back for you."

"Thank you," I said, my thirsty leg caught embarrassingly mid-air, "of course I couldn't leave while... See you later."

To pass the time – why did Bertie always have to do everything so *slowly*? – I secretly filmed Jesus being taken from the cross. Mary Magdalene had now approached, but not the other women. Was this a sign of interest in me? I do have a rather imposing figure, a noticeable air of rugged nobility, I can't deny it.

"Hsstt!" said Bertie, trying to catch my attention.

I moved closer, carving 'Maria loves N madly and rightly so' on the True Cross in order to disguise my real intention. "What?" I whispered.

"Jesus is dead now, isn't he? Can't you get me down now? This is bloody painful!"

I thought rather resentfully that it hadn't been that comfortable for me either, six hours on my feet like that! But before I could do anything, Mary Magdalene stopped her silent weeping, looked across at me and hissed:

"Oh no, you don't! You two have caused enough trouble. We're not having any more hitches. Shove off!"

As she spoke, her hood slipped back for a moment. I was only able to see her head for a second, but that was enough – Mary Magdalene was a Teepee!

I mouthed "Sorry" to Bertie, and went off to think about things.

Cross or no Cross, you don't cross someone as cross as her!

After pondering deeply, I decided I would, after all, join the other 'soldiers'.

Now there has been a lot of misunderstanding and quite unnecessary ill-feeling about this. I've been accused, not only of allowing Bertie to be crucified, but also of going for a booze-up while he was still hanging on the cross.

That has to be seen in the context of the following problem:

Our original brief had been to stay and film the Moving of the Stone as well, but Bertie's crucifixion had put that idea in jeopardy. It was impossible for me to save him, and I couldn't keep his corpse here for three days, because it might begin to decompose, and make it impossible to Regenerate him this time. The medics had been tetchy enough after the last Trip.

On the other hand, if we Travelled back now, it would leave the job half done. Jesus' dying was no proof that he was really a god. A lot of quite ordinary people have chosen that way to leave the world throughout history. The locals Jews, in fact, perversely took it as an obvious proof that he wasn't a god. The real test would be whether he would rise in three days or not.

Though the Teepees had assured him that this would indeed be the case, even Jesus himself wasn't a hundred per cent sure that he could manage that nifty little number. Towards the end, it had finally clicked as to why the Teepees were so desperate to help him. "If my body doesn't rise from the dead, history will be changed, and you lot are well and verily buggered," he said bluntly, "so you'd better make sure that if I don't manage it by myself, my body isn't there when they move the Stone."

I don't wish to sound unchristian, but perhaps Jesus was so insistent on this point because he didn't want future ages to find his bones, and learn how short he really was. People have certain minimum requirements of their gods. Religious discrimination of the lowest sort, but there you are.

In short, if I didn't leave Jerusalem quickly with Bertie (or Bertie's body) it might rot beyond Regeneration; but if I did leave, I would have no way of knowing whether Jesus really did rise from the dead or whether the Teepees moved his body for him. In other words, our mission would have failed completely.

But then I had an idea!!

It was such a good idea that I make no apology for having given it a paragraph by itself and two exclamation marks.

It concerned the little get-together that the hummingbird enthusiast had invited me to.

Those ‘soldiers’ all came from well into the future. So they would almost certainly have advanced medicines as well as advanced machines. Because, however advanced those Machines, there must always exist the risk of an accident, of being trapped in the past. Therefore, wouldn’t it be logical for them to have anti-decomposition tablets, sachets of formaldehyde or something, to preserve them until they could be rescued? And if so, and if I could procure some, then I might be able to keep Bertie in good condition, and so be able to stay here the planned three days, and complete the mission.

I was almost feeling optimistic as I strolled towards the camp.

Because of the whistling, I didn’t become aware of the unusual silence until I arrived there. The trestle tables, plastic mugs, and empty crisp packets were still there. The Travellers weren’t. The encampment was deserted.

But not completely. There was one person still there.

A Teepee!

“Ah, I was waiting for you!” he said.

Funny how a far-future weapon looks so similar to our own. Though the one now pointing at me was probably capable of sprinkling bits of me in the asteroid belt.

“Can’t leave witnesses,” he said.

My first thought was that this sounded ominous; my second, that it sounded really ominous. I was beginning to piece things together. Jesus had said that some well-intentioned Time Traveller had massacred all the original Roman soldiers. So the Teepees had ‘bussed’ in a hundred new ‘soldiers’ so that he could go ahead with his highly eccentric plan to seize ultimate power. They clearly hadn’t been expecting Bertie and myself, but a couple more soldiers made no difference.

But a hundred people who knew what had really happened couldn’t be allowed to return to their own time to reveal that knowledge. Because then Christianity, at least in its traditional form, would be recognised as a put-up job, and that too would inevitably alter history.

I reacted to this slight contretemps in my usual way: I fell to my knees, and pleaded for mercy. My detractors have chosen to regard this as an act of cowardice. Nonsense: history teaches us that if you fall to your knees and plead for mercy, you sometimes *receive* mercy, which may give you a chance later on to skewer the balls of the bastard who made you plead for mercy in the first place.

OK, the blubbing might have been a bit over the top, but, come on, we all have our little idiosyncrasies!

“Oh stop that idiosyncratic blubbing, I’m not here to kill you,” said the Teepee, his voice hinting a contempt which showed clearly that the obtuse fool was unaware of the deep cunning of my strategy.

“So why are you pointing that thing at me?”

“Because it makes people blubber, and that’s one of the perks that make up for my low salary and this ridiculously tight and cod-sinister-looking uniform.”

“Oh, I see.” I stopped blubbing. “So what did you mean about ‘can’t leave witnesses?’”

“Actually, I phrased it rather badly. In fact, that’s exactly what they are going to do: leave the witnesses. Here, in the past, in order not to have witnesses anytime else. Well, not exactly here, of course, but somewhere else, where they’ll never be found.”

“Why do you say ‘they’? You’re a Teep... from the Time Police, aren’t you?”

“Well, in a manner of speaking. By ‘Time Police’, I suppose you mean the people who confiscated your Time Machine this morning?”

“Of course.”

“Yes, they are Time Police. But what makes you think there are Time Police from only one era?”

I had to think a few seconds.

“Of course! Each generation, there’ll be new Teepees! They’ll evolve, just as our police did from the Bow Street Runners!”

I began to feel a great relief.

“So you come from a different time from the Teepees who frisked us?”

“That’s right.”

“But your uniform...”

“...is exactly the same. Just because I’m wearing it doesn’t mean it’s necessarily mine. Couldn’t it have belonged to someone else?”

I glanced at his weapon. “You mean...?”

“I do, indeed.”

“So why are you here?” I asked.

“I’ve been sent to help you.”

“Sent?” My mind immediately leapt to Moroni. “Who sent you?”

“That doesn’t matter. The important thing is that you and Bertie return to your own time with your Time Machine!”

Of course! My TM was the prototype. If it got stuck here in first-century Palestine, the later more advanced Time Machines might never get built.

But the Teepees – the other ones – must also have known this. I said as much to my new ally.

“Of course they know that! They fully intend to return your *Time Machine* to when it belongs. But without you and Bertie. They believe other machines will be constructed anyway, whether you are there or not, because the engineers will still have your plans.”

I didn’t point out that I had never let them see the original plans,

“But they still risk changing their own past! What have they got against us? Why, they even rescued us in St Petersburg after the Rasputin affair!”

“Maybe so. All I know is that this time they were ordered by someone from their future to stop you and Bertie returning, and that I was ordered by someone else even further in the future to stop them from stopping you and Bertie returning. For all I know, there may be other Time Police from still further in the future being told right now to stop me from stopping them from stopping you! So I suggest we get a move on!”

Just then, a strange tube-like object materialised beside us. Three Teepees – at least, I assumed they were Teepees – leapt out, with weapons already trained on us. Before anyone could fire, however, a net snaked down from above, enveloped the three, and swept them wriggling up into the sky, where they promptly disappeared.

“You see?” said my Teepee, lowering his weapon. “They’d been sent to stop me, and someone else was sent to stop them. You can’t imagine the stress in this job! We get a special bonus called the Philip K Dick Paranoia Dividend. There could be a thousand different factions playing leapfrog along the time waves, each one trying to stop the other from making illegal changes. Most unauthorised

changes do get Rectified sooner or later, because the further you go along the Line, the more potent the Time Custodians are, until you reach the Ultimate ones, but sometimes there are annoying delays. Once someone bugged around so much with the past – my past, your future – I found I was a women’s hairdresser with a lisp – a hairdresser, the indignity! – for three months until things were put right again. Another time I woke up in the morning and found my wife had three-foot-long pubic hair! It’s OK for everyone else: things change overnight, but since they change too, they are quite unaware of this. So if a woman suddenly sports three-foot-long pubic hair, they believe it has always been this way. But we have trans-temporal chips implanted which enable us to remember how things really were. We wouldn’t be very efficient otherwise.”

He shook his head sadly.

“And just when I’d got used to the Tuft of Venus, in fact found that I couldn’t really get turned on without it, some officious Custodian Rectified it!”

I wasn’t interested in these follicular follies.

“So what do I do now? Bertie’s still hanging around on the cross.”

“I know. They’re just waiting for you to take his body back to your Time Machine, where they’ll capture you, put you with the others, and take you where no one will ever find you.”

“But how did you know I’d leave Bertie on the cross and come here?”

“It was a fair guess. We do study the people we get involved with, whether it’s to save them or to kill them. We call it Profiling.”

I decided this wasn’t a good time to be offended.

“So what do I do now?” I repeated.

“Can you control your Time Machine from a distance?”

“Not the Machine itself. Only the Spatial Mobility Module.”

“That will do. Bring it here. They won’t try to stop that. They’ll be waiting in or around the Time Machine for you to arrive there with Bertie’s body.”

“And then what?”

“I come with you, and fry all the guards.” He looked lovingly at his weapon.

“Do you enjoy your work?”

“This aspect of it, yes.”

I wasn’t happy at the thought of all this cop killing. After all, they

had saved us in St Petersburg. He understood my expression.

“They’ll only be dead for a time, of course. They’ll be Snatched back into their own time, Resurrected, and given a day’s extra holiday as compensation for their death. Or maybe a month’s hard labour for cocking up!”

“There are Teepees at the Cross too,” I informed him.

“Hmm, they *are* being careful! This Bertie appears to be more important than I thought.”

I flushed.

“They’re after me too,” I said rather haughtily.

“Yes, it seems that you play some small part too.”

“Some small part!”

“Teepees at the Cross, too, eh? Let me guess... one’ll be Mary Magdalene, I bet, that’s their style, another... yes, another, I wouldn’t mind betting, could be the other thief, as backup...”

I hadn’t thought of that!

“But how do...?”

“The police mindset, the mindset. Well, no matter. We’ll have the element of surprise. Summon the Mobility Module now, time’s running out.”

I did so, and then cowered down behind a rock

“There may be Teepees in it. I don’t want to get in your way, under your feet,” I explained.

But the Module arrived safely, and empty.

“Come on, get in!” ordered my protector. “We have to move quickly now.”

I allowed myself to be thrust into the SMM.

“Golgotha ho!” he yelled.

We arrived in almost no time, and he blasted Mary Magdalene before she had time to even lift her hood or utter a ‘hail Mary’. He’d been wrong about the other thief, who was hanging there quite dead (unless there’d been a double-cross on the cross), but he blasted him too, just to be sure.

“Bloody hell!” said Bertie.

He wasn’t dead yet! Stubborn little bugger!

“Get him down! We’ve got about five minutes before the Teepees realise something is wrong.”

Just when you need a claw hammer you can’t find one! I yanked

and tugged, but couldn’t get Bertie’s nails to move a micron. I really didn’t see why Jesus had complained about their quality. I recalled Longfellow’s poem about the crossbill which had also tried to pull the nails from the Cross with its bill, getting it rather twisted in the process. And, yes, you guessed it, it also failed.

“Come on,” yelled my protector, “if we take too long, they’ll send a force to investigate!” I had no choice. The cross itself was too big to fit into the SMM. It was a Mohammed-Mountain situation: if I couldn’t pull the nails out of Bertie, I’d have to pull Bertie out of the nails.

Have you ever tried to remove upholstery from an Edwardian chair? Where bits of fabric are always left like untidy halos round the tacks? Well, the same thing happened with Bertie, though the left hand did come off quite easily for some reason.

Bertie screamed and swore at me something rotten. I forgave him, he’d had a rough day.

I got most of him off the cross, and into the SMM, then off we went at the same breakneck speed towards the Teepee control point where we’d been searched earlier. I spotted my Time Machine in a compound. Surrounded, as my new ally had surmised, by half a dozen unprepared guards.

I docked and, at a signal from him, opened the airlock into the TM. He plunged through, mowed down two Teepees who were in the way, then burst through the main hatchway into the compound, blasting away joyfully.

But one of the Teepees inside the TM wasn’t dead, and I spotted him raising a weapon in my direction. Acutely conscious that it was of paramount importance that I survive in order to get Bertie safely back to our own time, I put aside my natural warrior’s instinct, and selflessly used his body to shield myself. I congratulated myself on the wisdom of my decision as I felt at least three bullets thud into him. I knew he would thank me when he realised why I had done it.

“Right then, that’s it, mission completed!” said our ally, appearing at the entrance again. He noticed the surviving Teepee. “Tut tut!” He finished him off, sheathed his weapon, leapt in, and dragged the two bodies outside where he piled them on top of the others.

“It’s been an honour to serve Bertie – and yourself, of course. And I get a bonus! Have a safe journey.”

He slipped his hand inside his uniform – and disappeared. Another miniaturised Time Machine, I supposed.

I looked briefly at the carnage outside – however could Bertie be so important? – and set course for home.

Bertie didn't speak: the bullets had finally killed him.



Well, I was faced with the usual incomprehension and ingratitude when we got back. Bertie once again got all the credit, although all he'd done was dangle indecorously from a cross for a few hours, and receive a few bullet wounds, while I'd had to make all the difficult decisions.

After again showing his displeasure, which necessitated my immediate hospitalisation, Bertie's dad made me alter a few details. In the public version, for instance, Bertie insisted on sharing a cross with Jesus, and also told him a few jokes towards the end to cheer him up. Almost at once a cult sprang into existence hailing him as the new Messiah, with myself cast in the role of Judas.

Compared to his treatment at Roswell, Calgary had been a doddle for Bertie, although he himself didn't see it that way. Broken legs, bit of internal stretching and a few holes – our medical team, now with great experience and always prepared for the worst, had him up and moving in no time.

I spent a long time wondering what happened to the other 'soldiers'. And the thief who'd done a bunk. Had the Teepees murdered them? And then, one day, I was sitting with Maria watching a programme on Nazca in Peru, and marvelling at the long parallel lines and the enormous drawings created there in the red desert rock around two thousand years ago. In total, they cover an area of two hundred square miles, and the designs are so big that they can only be appreciated from the air.

Including an enormous hummingbird!

So that's where they took them! Those Teepees made damn sure they couldn't return to their own times to reveal what really happened in Jerusalem. No doubt they destroyed everything the Travellers tried to build, any messages they tried to leave. But they had forgotten the obvious. The mindset, the mindset...

Their landing strips still stretch into the distance, a constant reminder – to me at least – of how close these chronicles came to never being written.

As for Jesus, I guess I'll never know for sure what really happened. Maybe he really did do it by himself (after all, he only just failed with Lazarus) or maybe the Teepees shifted the body, to leave the tomb empty.

But last night I had a dream in which he appeared and said, "This is an oneiric circular. Thanks a million, you lot. It did the trick." Behind him, an enormous caged and fettered figure with a very loud voice – I'd say a voice of thunder if I didn't think you'd accuse me of exaggerating – was threatening all kinds of things, from plagues and boils to floods and meteor impacts.

I woke up, feeling rather pleased that Jesus really was the Son of God and not just one of thousands of madmen who have claimed to be divine throughout history.

Then I remembered Joseph Smith's visions, and once again was filled with doubt. Could Moroni be playing with me as he had played with the Mormon Prophet? Neither Bertie nor I ever heard or saw anything that actually proved that Jesus was a god.

And with beings like Moroni and, it appeared, even more menacing characters hanging around in the far future, and way too interested in Bertie and myself, it no longer made any sense to accept Pascal's famous wager.

RAVINDER CHAHAL



the group

reverb

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reverb is an imprint of Osiris Press Ltd

This edition first published 2005 by

Osiris Press Ltd
PO Box 615
Oxford OX1 9AL

www.readreverb.com
www.osirispress.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1 905315 01 5

Set in Baskerville 12/14.2pt
Title font Mutagen (www.fontmonster.org)

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Printed in Britain by
Lightning Source, Milton Keynes

reverb

13: LUBRICATION

Dennis still makes me nervous. He never seems to finish any of his sentences. And he has some disconcerting personal habits that make it difficult to retain eye contact. Blowing his nose on his tie. Tearing the corners off notepads and using the paper to clean between his teeth.

Maybe it's a deliberate ploy. The walls of his office are lined with those international business best sellers that share with us gems such as the seven previously unknown habits of highly effective people.

Perhaps he's testing out some radical piece of research from one of his books: 'How to gain the upper hand in a meeting and keep your opponent off-balance through farting, belching and picking your teeth.'

He does all of that and more in his meeting with me, during which he spends most of the time checking his emails and taking 'important' calls.

And he doesn't know my name. He keeps calling me Karim. It's all very tragic, as I don't correct him at my first and only opportunity. 'How do you feel about the new challenge Karim? Up for it?'

'Actually I'm not sure what it is yet.'

'The digital age Karim. That's the only game in town,' he says, swivelling round in his chair and throwing his arms wide open from his scrawny body as if he's rehearsing giving a keynote speech in front of an audience of his rapturous peers. 'It's the future. Our shared future. And it's already upon us. Are you ready for it? Are you ready for the future?'

His voice drops to a near whisper. He pauses to cue his killer-line. He looks directly into my eyes to ensure emotional buy-in and goes for the payoff.

'Are you ready for the future now, Karoosh?'

'Err, I think..'

'Yes you are Karrrrerm, yes you are,' his voice rising, as his eyes shift back to his screen. 'You're a switched on young man. You understand that technology is the key. You are the new wave, pushing forwards. The envelope, yes the leading edge. Pushing through. To the other side.'

He stops cold, as confused as me by what he has just said, but he quickly rallies and manages to push on.

‘We need people like you to drag Silverback forwards. Kicking and screaming if needs be.’

‘Yes Dennis, what exactly do you have in mind?’

He swivels in his chair to face me again, fiddling maniacally with his glasses. ‘Great things Karim. Great things. I need people like you with me. Are you with me?’

‘Err yes, I..’

‘Good, good. That’s what I like to hear. You see, Silverback, is like a big engine. Lots of cogs and gears. Interlocking, all vital. Working together, moving, unison, in unison, yes, forwards, meshing together.’

His words have started to trip into each other, as again he appears to work himself up into a twitchy fit. His eyes are glassy, and I feel as if I could almost slip away unnoticed.

‘And I’m the engineer,’ he pauses for a moment as if pleased by this new thought. ‘I look at the whole machine. I tweak and I twiddle. Order new parts. Tighten the screws, fix any leaks. Keep it ticking over smoothly and uhmm, headed in the right direction. Mmmm yes purring along. Smoothly. Like a big cat. A big, beautiful, ferocious cat.’

‘Yes, and how do I fit in?’ I ask with increasing alarm.

‘Oil and grease Karim, oil and grease.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You are the oil, Karim. You are the grease. Oil for the engine to keep the gears from grinding. To keep the cat purring. I know you understand the business, but you stand slightly outside of it, so you’re uhmm, not a cog or a gear, you see.’

Just as I think he has blown himself out, he picks up a new thread and takes off again mumbling breathlessly. ‘And I know you understand technology, the benefits. You get to the core of it immediately, see past all the window dressing. That’s why I need you. Yes, I need you to be the oil for a new project. I need you to feed the cat. Lubricate it, so it slots smoothly into the Silverback machine.’

‘So what do you need me to do?’ I say over him. Both our voices rising in this airless little fishbowl office. I’m trying to talk over him to make him stop.

‘That’s what I like to hear Kerrrumm, Kerrrr yes that’s right, enthusiasm. Can do. This is a great opportunity for you, a real step up,’ he says shouting yet louder.

His eyes are darting round the room and he is now busily dismantling a biro. ‘We’re taking on the digital age. Grasping the ummm ...grasping it with both hands. You know how? Karrrr... do you know how?’

I shake my head at him, careful not to look at the sticky blue mess that now covers his hands and trousers. I’m getting short of breath.

I think I might be having an anxiety attack.

‘I’ll tell you, Kareesh. Let me tell you. We are going to build it together. You and I. We’re going to take it on. We going to stare into the void and we’re going to master it. Aren’t we Khalil?’

‘Yes. I mean no. I mean I don’t understand. What do you want me to do sir?’ My head is spinning. I feel frenzied and confused.

‘We’re going to make an... extranet,’ he sinks back into his seat, with a sigh, a dreamy look in his eye and a satiated glow to his face.

I feel as if I should say something; something that shows my awe and gratitude. But I stay silent and feel nothing but a creeping nausea at the thought that I’ve been violated in some unseen way.

Dennis is lying back in his chair, he flicks a lever and it tilts back to near horizontal. He seems to be staring sightlessly at the ceiling, licking his lips.

I can now see the hairy gap, between his Walt Disney socks and his frayed turn-ups. His shiny trousers have bunched up around his crotch.

His voice is now a low murmur. I can only catch every other word or phrase. ‘Linking it through to the website... feeding it all through... backend... knowledge management... Seamless. Beautiful... just beautiful.’

I’m not sure what this all means or what I’m supposed to say. I hear a strange voice that’s not my own, strangle out something like: ‘Extranet, sir. Fantastic sir. I couldn’t agree more sir. Do you want me to find a design agency sir, I’ve worked with Torrid sir, they’re a client sir, I’ve worked with them sir. I have sir.’

He turns his head slowly towards me, I can see a shiny line of spittle, drooling towards his chin. He wipes at it, leaving a blue smear

across his lips. I feel horrified. 'No need,' he says. 'We have all the capabilities in-house. We'll use our IT guys. Tap into their knowledge. Involve the designers. Get them together and let's rock and roll.'

'Yes sir, great idea sir, totally agree, sir.' By now I'll say anything to get out of there.

He lurches forwards towards me, his hand outstretched. I jump up to my feet, not sure of his intentions. But all he wants is to do, is give me the power-shake.

14: PEST CONTROL

Our building is being fumigated. The pest-controllers have turned up with poisons and masks. Canisters of gas and heavy-duty gloves. What look like traps and baits.

But no one knows why they're here. It's not clear what we're supposed to be infested with.

They were called in by the building managers. The building managers claim there was an emergency request from our office manager. Our office manager says she received an emergency order to evacuate the building from the building managers. At very late notice. Barely time to inform the staff and rearrange meetings.

Confusion reigns. Recriminations. Phone calls are made. Explanations demanded. The partners are not happy. Not happy at all. Dennis looks on. He's fascinated by the equipment.

He picks up a sprayer that's been set down while things are being sorted out and starts to fiddle with the sinister looking nozzle, pointing it directly towards his eye. Squinting. Looking right at it. Finger dangerously close to the trigger. Until he's noticed by a gruff looking pest-control technician with rock-and-roll sideburns and an impressive pompadour, and told to put it down. Immediately. Which he does. Red-faced. Twitchy.

A senior person from the management company turns up. He's got printouts of emails in his hands. From us to him.

Our office manager denies ever sending them. She quickly counters with faxes of her own. They eye each other suspiciously. And then the senior building manager man shows us why he's the

senior man. He points out that the faxes sent to us are on the correct fax paper etc etc, but they've been sent from the local copy centre. It's clearly visible in small print at the head of every faxed page.

Our office manager demands to look again at the emails that have been sent from her email account. And notices a small difference in the name of the sender. Her email address has a dot in it separating first name from second. The email address that is printed out on the senior building manager's paper trail does not.

Again he shows his worth. Shaking his head in a knowing way.

'What is it?' asks our office manager, clearly out of her depth.

'Can't you tell?' asks the senior building manager. 'Disgruntled employee. Clear case.'

I feel hot and guilty. But it wasn't me. I just wish it had been and have to wonder if it shows on my face.

'Want us to give you a once over anyway? As we're here like,' asks the gruff looking Elvis fan in the boiler suit.

15: PUSHERMAN

Tom and I are at it again. Drinking red wine when we should be at home. Just before six his resolve weakened, early in the week and he asked me if I fancied getting together for a quick one after work.

He knows something is up. As Quentin's right hand, he probably had some prior knowledge but no real details. And the rumours have already started.

I'd been seen in Quentin's office and then in Dennis' and the talk soon followed. Rhys and Gemma forming a hasty alliance to share intrigue and opinion. Rhys even making a clumsy attempt to engage me in pally conversation.

I'm surprised at the attention, but we're all a little bit bored I suppose. Other than the fact they might see something in it for themselves, either an opportunity to advance or a chance to vent some frustration, I don't really see why any one of them should care at all about what's happening to me. Office gossip I guess.

It's simply a distraction, a break in the monotony, and one that serves to illustrate how bad things are in our desperate little team.

When we're chugging along, we just accept and get on with it, but when an event gives us pause for thought, forcing us to examine ourselves and our relative position within the group, we have to acknowledge how awful the dynamic really is.

So as long as the issue remains unsettled and things are up in the air, we'll have paranoia, grumbling and chatter. Which is why Tom wants to get to grips with things quickly.

He is far more decisive and capable than Quentin, who instinctively leaves things for Tom to sort out. While some people insist that training and technique build management skill, it is in fact empathy and a human touch, which Tom has naturally in abundance.

He takes his time before broaching the subject. We talk instead about quitting Silverback as usual, leaving an open segue point for me to step through.

I resist for a while, and talk as if nothing is different, but Tom is patient. No pressure. He just lets me talk. It's difficult to hold out any enthusiasm for the deception with Tom. It takes two for that relationship to work. Sure, I could simply feed him inaccuracies, factual errors and misinformation, but you need somebody who will bite; a reaction of some kind, a change of behaviour that you have authored for any real satisfaction.

No Tom is too measured. Calm. He sees all sides and hears all the voices. Understands where people are coming from. And he won't rush. Not himself or those that he's dealing with.

So eventually I break off my holding pattern and tell him my news and ask what he thinks.

'Quentin said something about Dennis wanting you for a new job, but I didn't know what. Have you thought it through, I mean it sounds a bit sketchy, what does he expect you to do exactly?'

'Tom, to be honest with you, I don't really know what he wants. Or why he chose me. But it's a neat little solution: he wants someone to work on his pet project and Quentin needs to get rid of someone.'

Tom says nothing. A familiar trick. He'll gain more by listening than by spouting off. But for once I'm not buying it: I just don't feel the need to have him take my side and strangely, I don't really want to let off steam either.

'Tom. It is what it is. I can take it or leave it. My choice in the end.'

'Well yeah. You're right. Ok.'

Another pause.

'When you make up your mind, we can think about what you want to tell the others,' he says.

'I know you don't like Rhys and Gemma or Ben not knowing, but really, what's it to do with them? What's it matter what they think?' I ask, feeling a little annoyed, that I'm not at the centre of his thinking.

'It's just good for people to know what's going on.'

I can sense him bracing himself for an attack but I can't muster the energy. I am resigned to the fact that change has been forced upon me.

Instead I ask him something else. Perhaps to distract myself.

'Don't worry Tom, I understand. I'll let you know as soon as I decide. We can't keep them waiting and gossiping forever. But just think about it for a second; there are so many ways we could break the news you know? We could say anything. We could have a field day. Especially with Rhys. Don't you think?'

Again Tom waits for me to go on. He won't even want to bad-mouth Rhys, which is a common sport, without hearing more from me and getting the lay of the land first. I'm beginning to feel quite cheated, which is why I carry on, wanting to bait him into saying something.

'I could tell him whatever I want. He's so eager to hear something right now. He's primed and ready; he'd lap it up. Asking for it really. Almost a shame not to give him what he wants'

'What would be the point of that?' asks Tom warily.

'I don't know. Just for fun I guess. Just to see how far I could push it. You know what I mean. Don't you ever wonder how far you could take something like that? Just to see?'

'Not really, Khaled. It's not the sort of thing that gets me going.'

Something in the teacherly tone of his voice makes me quite unwilling to drop it now. So I keep pushing. Just a little further. To get that reaction.

'Don't come the innocent Tom. You could easily do it. You know you could.'

‘Yeah I could, but why would I want to? It wouldn’t be difficult to lie to someone. Especially someone like Rhys, so what’s the point?’

‘No that’s exactly it. That’s the reason right there. You said it yourself. “Someone like Rhys.” You’re right he’s easy. He so anxious and so blocked up, he wants to be told something. He’s waiting for it. You’d almost be doing him a favour. And whatever the lie is he’ll twist it round, and make it fit into his own little view of the world. He’ll make it true.’

‘Yeah so what does that prove? Rhys is a bit fucked-up. We all know that. There’s no need to go on about it. It might make him a bit vulnerable or a bit gullible. And I know he can be a pain, but still that’s no excuse. It’d be like picking on someone who’s smaller than you.’

‘No, you’re right, it would be. But you’re missing my point Tom. I’m not saying pick on someone easy just because you can. I’m saying I wonder how far you could take it. Not just Rhys. You’re right it’s obvious with him. He’s fucked up. But there must be something for everyone. Something that will make them want to believe.’

‘Well yeah. Everyone’s got a weak spot. We all like to think we’re not gullible but it just depends. It’s all about pushing the right buttons I guess.’

I wonder if I may have pushed some of Tom’s. His voice has a little more feeling to it. A touch of irritation, which suddenly has the blood pumping a little faster.

‘Yeah maybe, I don’t know. But that’s not what I mean. What I’m saying is. Once you know what it is. Whatever it may be. And the person is swallowing what you’re telling them. I just wonder how far could you push it.’

‘You know what mate? You’re beginning to sound like one of these wierdos now, Khaled. You know, one of those people whose neighbours say, “Oh I didn’t really know him. He kept himself to himself. But he seemed like such a nice polite young man,” says Tom laughing, a little tightly perhaps. ‘Just what is it you’d get people to do?’

‘No mate, you don’t understand. Lying to people is easy. You said it yourself. Getting them to do what you want probably isn’t that difficult either. I mean if you have enough conviction and sincerity,

you can get them to believe what you say and get them to act on it. No, the thing I’m talking about is, how far can you really take it? I mean, could you lie to someone, get them hooked? Get them believing in something because they want to, for whatever reasons they have of their own, and then tell them it was all a lie? Would they listen to you then or would they just want to keep believing the lie that they’ve made their own?’

Tom is looking at me. Silent again. The thought I’ve just expressed is new to me. Maybe something that doesn’t sound so good out loud. A little intense, or perhaps just weird like he says.

I’ve pushed and prodded perhaps a bit too far. I fall silent and look away from Tom’s face. I reach for the bottle of wine that sits empty on the table between us. I put it back down and attempt to pull myself back over the line.

‘Listen mate, I don’t know what I’m going on about. Just talking shit. You know I’ve got a lot on my mind at the moment and I just need to stop thinking about it and make a decision. I’ll let you know as soon as I do. The way I’m feeling, I’ll probably give it a go. I may not have much choice but you know it may be a good thing. I could do with a change. Yeah, I’ll probably give it a go. See what happens, hey? But I’ll definitely let you know as soon as I know what I’m doing.’

16: ASK THE DUST, CRAB-KILLER

Dennis’ big project. A total nightmare from start to early finish. Our Chief Engineer certainly talks a good game. And he definitely left his mark on me. It took me two days to scrub away the last traces of blue ink he smeared across my hand.

He takes his cues from *Management Today*, *The Wall Street Journal* and Harvard Business School. Heroic visionary thinking, laid out in tough bombastic words. I’ve read the articles. They’re all very do or die. But short on detail.

And when I look to Dennis for direction or even a practical brief of some kind it becomes apparent that he has no idea what any of this involves. Neither do I.

My team is no help either. A couple of sullen IT support staff that talk in impenetrable code, and then moan that no one understands what they do. And two designers who both wish they were working in an advertising agency or a fashionable magazine, rather than being asked to produce crappy covers for reports and corporate brochures.

They are nothing but delinquent attitude; overgrown boys who refuse to grow up. And like all boys they like to bully. They try to intimidate me. Again unwilling to share the precious secrets of their trade. Precious. Haughty. Difficult. Little princes who look down at people who do not share their obsessive minority interests.

And at the bottom of the pyramid there is Sammie, a young, awkward, put-upon assistant. Very pale skin. Shy. Uninspired. Clumsy. Quiet. A shoe-gazer.

All of us stuck at the end of corridor next to the stationary cupboard, opposite the photocopiers. From little acorns. Yeah right.

An invisible team of backroom support staff misfits. I soon realise why I've been asked to do the job. No one else in the company would take it. I wasn't the first to be asked. In fact I wasn't really asked at all. And when they tried to hire someone in to do the job, they couldn't find anyone for less than sixty-five grand a year.

And the job soon becomes scaled down; all of it put on the back-burner in less than a month, when it becomes apparent that there is no budget, a total lack of skills and complete resistance from everyone within the company.

So I'm left in charge of the photocopying and PC-crash crew. Dennis tells me it's an opportunity. Open-ended. Tap into their skills. Unlock their potential. Lead them into new areas.

He says that he wishes that it were him in my shoes. Just before he forgets all about us. He's onto his next new project, something about producing video broadcast releases for our clients. Apparently it's the future of PR.

☆

So here I am in complete limbo. I have absolutely nothing to do any more. No role to perform. Quentin won't take me back and if I kick up too much of a fuss with Dennis I could end up losing my job.

I'll have to keep turning up and try to look busy. Sounds ideal but

very soon the novelty wears off and the boredom kicks in.

And there is a particular grinding texture to the boredom I endure in the silence of an office in which I have become an employment zombie. I just turn up to pick up my pay and sit silent for days on end.

I remember those long colourless afternoons of unemployment where the enemy was loneliness. Loneliness that comes from the fear of facing people who might guess what you are.

Now there is nowhere to hide away. I'm highly visible and exposed on all sides, but I'm still as cut off as ever from the moist, warm bodies that breathe the same air as me.

Minutes turn to treacle. I sit and wait. Breakfast runs. Email checking. Mid-morning coffee. Newspapers. The joy of lunch, which you put back as long as possible, so it will eat into the afternoon. Toilet breaks. Popping round to see people you don't really like to say hello. Anything that takes you away from the prison of your desk. And then just watching the clock, waiting until someone speaks, or someone leaves so you can follow.

There have been other times when the task in hand has been so brutally mindless and repetitive, I have managed to escape my physical body to daydream away the hours. Sometimes the technique of the job itself can even become a focus for abstraction, so that every bag of sawdust I stuffed or plate I washed would become a triumphant masterpiece in itself.

But even this becomes an impossibility when your days are utterly blank. A boredom discount factor comes into effect, proving that everything is always entirely relative. I crave the solace of people and conversations that I would normally walk to other side of the road to avoid. And find myself reading story after story from a vast array of news sources on the internet, not so much to absorb the information, more to simply give myself a task that takes up some time.

I wander aimlessly around, lost on the web, clicking one link after the next, searching for something to amuse. I download music that I'll never listen to again, disks and disks of it. I've become an obsessive collector, trying to capture and catalogue something that I know will never be complete. I shop online and take part in auctions for obscure junk. I've signed up to numerous alerts, desperate for the trivia and

the amusement that I've always scorned others for seeking out and wasting their time on.

But worst of all I've become a pest, because I share each minute detail of every last thing I'm up to. The type of person who interrupts others who are trying to work. Who starts off stories that have no end, or middle, or any meaning at all. I hover when others are talking. I butt in and I jar the nerves of those upon whom I have imposed my presence. I've even attempted to write one of those stupid emails that you hope will be passed on from person to person around the world.

And then there are other things that I do that border on the bizarre. Little jolts of anarchy inspired by the pest controller. Minor stuff that alleviates the unyielding nature of the day. I never flush when I've gone to the loo, leaving a little surprise for the next person who happens along. I steal a page out of every newspaper that sits in the common room. I readjust people's seats and the height of the screens. I misfile documents and return folders upside down and out of sequence in the shared archive. I take things from desks and leave them elsewhere. Whenever someone is away from their desk, I leave them voicemails that are garbled, unclear, but mention their names. And their client names. I leave cryptic messages on whiteboards, in meeting rooms and on photocopiers all over the building. Little nonsensical pieces of surreal poetry, that mean nothing but scream insanity.

But I know I have a shadow. Someone more prolific and inventive than even myself. He is the arch prankster, who works on a grand and daring scale. His is a sustained campaign that has gone largely unnoticed but has targeted us all. And he now has a name.

We were all sent a beautifully wrapped empty box, marked with the name Arturo B. We opened it and cast it aside, vaguely disappointed at the thought of yet another pointless teaser campaign.

Several weeks later a desk calendar arrived, again marked Arturo, completely plain, but instead of marking the days of the week, it only showed the weekends, two weeks in August and the week from Christmas to New Year. The rest of the year completely blank. Again, no one really paid any attention; we looked at it in the morning, wondered what it was all about and forgot all about it by lunchtime.

Other little strange things kept happening but nothing you'd link together as part of a campaign, unless you know he's out there. I noticed a small sign buried on the noticeboard, alongside all the dated appeals for removals men, good plumbers in South London and details of people looking for non-smoking flatmates with GSOH to move in with. It simply said 'Help Wanted', signed AB.

Little labels from a Letraset started appearing around the office, in meeting rooms, in the kitchen and on people's desks, saying cryptic things like 'Bankrupt', 'My Other Car's a Ferret' and 'Work makes us free'. Stickers appeared in the lift next to the buttons and the display saying things like 'Floor 2 and half – sort of in between' or 'Going Down, Down, Down' or 'Now wash your hands'.

And then there are other things that continue to happen on an occasional basis that target specific people. Several of the partners, including Quentin, received gold embossed invitations to attend a gala dinner and awards show from DBX, the Directorate of Business Excellence, but when asked to RSVP on their behalf, their secretaries found themselves dialling a premium rate gay chat number called DIRTBOX.

Nothing's happened to me as yet, but just last week the Corporate Property team returned from a team lunch to find their screensavers set to a picture of an unknown black footballer. It was only the next day that they realised that their email signatures had been changed to read Arturo Blisset.

Nothing's happened to me yet, but I'm keeping my eyes and ears open. I wonder if Arturo, whoever he is, has noticed my own little acts of sedition. I can't imagine who he could be, but he has become a guiding light; I'd love to know what he thinks of my work even though I know I'm nowhere near his league. But even so, some acknowledgement would be nice. I imagine what it'd be like if we could work together, but there's simply no way either one of us can make ourselves known.

We'll each simply have to continue as autonomous cells of bored resistance, each of us doing what we can and making sure we don't get caught. But at least knowing that he exists, someone just like me, gives me hope, while searching for signs of his passing and clues to his identity helps break up the monotony of these fallow days.

17: LE PATRON EST FOU

Today is the first day of the rest of my life.

I've been ghost-walking for far too long. It's beginning to affect me. I'm regressing, turning into a shadow. At work I've gone days without speaking more than ten words to another soul.

And at home I just lock myself in my room, not sleeping because in my mind sleep has become the cousin of death. Instead I stay awake smoking weed every night with the door shut, making the entire flat smell stale. I sit there alone ignoring Jun when he comes to my door, asking me to turn the music down.

I'm so tired. My eyes are permanently red. And my skin is turning grey. Hanging from my sides. Fatty pouches from ice cream and salty snacks from strip-lit convenience stores at one in the morning.

My cough is deep and bubbling. I can't get hard, or even muster the energy to masturbate. But the thing that finally shakes me out of my haze is when I see blood in the toilet bowl after two days of constipation.

I have to pull myself together. This can't go on.

I know that work has been dragging me down, and so, I decide to meet the problem head on. I must throw myself into work. Throw myself into my team. With zeal and enthusiasm. For my own sake.

They are taken aback to say the least. Unresponsive. Resentful. Aggressive. Feathers all ruffled up. Squawking noise at me.

Whispering behind my back.

But there can't be any turning back because I know that my melancholy hasn't gone far. It's waiting patiently in the wings, keeping my dark thoughts company. They take a ticket and wait for their number to come up once again. The sticky green weed offers a helping hand. The red wine and vodka send me a postcard. Wish you were here?

And I know myself. I'm so very easily bored. Like a child. Disruptive. And distracted. I need something to keep me interested and amused.

It isn't going to be easy. I'm totally unsuited to this new job. I'm forced to face up to my limitations. Which isn't pretty.

Making decisions is a big one. It's not easy to admit, but now that I'm in the hot seat, commanding the enterprise, I find I'm no Captain Kirk.

Instead, I'm being exposed as a bit of a ditherer. And when I go the other way, against my natural disposition, I'm guilty of being rather too rash. A bridge-burner. Easily offended, defensive and somewhat spiky in my dealings with people.

I can feel myself becoming every useless boss I've ever had. I no longer produce anything of intrinsic value. I could so easily be airbrushed out of the picture. No-one would notice. And I'd have nothing to keep me from slipping back into that dark corridor I've just left behind.

I have to fill my time with something altogether more fulfilling. First day of the rest of my life. It has to be. For my own good.

I think again. I re-examine my position. Take stock. Re-evaluate.

I'm in charge. They have to do what I say. Daunting at first, but then I think 'what would Arturo do?' and eventually the possibilities become clear.

18: CHOCOLATE CAKE

My team is suffering from low morale.

In fact, all these cunts ever seem to do is moan about how no one takes them seriously or bothers to listen to them.

Which is true, but what do they expect? They have absolutely nothing to say.

Joe and Dave, our IT duo look as if the only female they've ever had came delivered in plain brown wrapping paper. And even then they'd probably spend more quality time with the instruction manual.

And then I have Stefan and Martin, our two design gurus, both devotees of postmodern cool. Aloof. Ironic. Disdainful. Grazing on culture like a pair of pure-bred sheep.

But take away the ill-advised haircuts, the geezer-boy accents, the Star Wars toys and the Lara Croft figurines that litter their desks, and all you have left is that unfortunate kid who got picked on at school for being too fat, too skinny or because he couldn't afford brand name trainers.

And finally there is Sammie. Our boyish assistant. Tall and skinny, yet to fill out, in a cheap static-electricity suit and clumpy slip-on shoes. Pale skin, blood thin lips but mostly silent and unseen. The one who causes me least trouble.

And it's my job to raise their self-esteem.

My only frame of reference is Quentin and his well-meaning attempts to boost moral.

'If you are not part of the solution, you're part of problem.' If I try hard enough I can almost hear his voice reciting his mantra.

I try to think how I can apply this thinking to my new situation.

The problem. The person who is not a team player. The disruptive influence. The one who can't take things seriously. Who won't join in. Refuses to take part. The boat-rocker.

How can you argue with logic like that? Either do as I say without question or be singled out as the problem.

God, that sort of shit used to drive me up the wall, but now that I'm a team leader, in a position of great trust and responsibility, I can, for the very first time, see the potential upside.

I even seem to be picking up the lingo.

And I can see that it will be essential to weed out any individual who won't go along with the group, even if the group is being led up the garden path.

With Arturo as my spirit guide I start to see for the first time that the peculiar ways in which we are expected to behave in the corporate environment lend themselves rather well to the ridiculous. And it's no great leap to move from the well intentioned to the purely mischievous.

I can think of plenty of examples of awful group exercises that I've had to endure, where we've all resentfully gone along with whatever misguided activity we've been asked to perform. Only in my case, it won't be misguided. But who, honestly, will be able to tell the difference?

I remember one trip to rural Ireland particularly well. If I can top that, I'll have done particularly well. Quentin's idea of a team-building weekend. All of us forced to wear corporate fleeces and brightly-coloured baseball caps at all times. Quentin yelping like an exuberant puppy, asking us over and over to guess what he had in store for us.

A predictable schedule of orienteering, mountain biking and an army-style assault course in the driving rain. Encouraged to work together to solve mental and physical challenges, shouting half-hearted Americanisms to gee each other along.

I remember sniffling and sneezing and stumbling in the leafy mud as the day just refused to come to an end, until Rhys vomited decisively through a combination of cold and fear as he stood shivering and unwilling at the top of a rope slide. Gemma, already close to tears, tipped over the edge into hysterical screaming as the oily yellow liquid showered down onto our upturned faces.

And then that evening, despite the mutinous feelings within the group, we agreed again to be split into two teams with instructions to go forth into the unsuspecting village. Imposing our self-absorbed games upon the hostile locals.

With typical breezy insensitivity, we were told to find out the price of a Guinness from three local pubs, have our picture taken with the Irish flag, sing and learn a shanty and other such ill-advised nonsense. Play was abandoned when the thick-fingered, dark-eyed men in one craggy little pub, unhappy at the big city interruption on their turf, started singing IRA anthems with gusto and menace. About face and a swift return to the hotel, where Quentin quickly retired to his room, only attempting to gloss over events with a shaky smile the next day on the way to the airport.

In the past, my knee-jerk reaction would have been to reject all that team-bonding stuff as forced and synthetic and a particularly cruel and unusual waste of time.

But that was the thinking of the dispossessed, when I was a non-stakeholder. From this side of the fence, I can, for the very first time, see the point of forcing people to do completely pointless things.

The only person who doesn't have to take part is the one in charge. All I have to do is look sage, observe and try not to laugh.

The first thing I do, is give them a common enemy to unite against. It has to be Sammie. The only one who doesn't really deserve it, but also the only one in no position to argue.

After leading by example, I positively encourage the others to pick fault with him whenever the possibility occurs. Not surprisingly, they take to it like naturals.

RAVINDER CHAHAL

I give them a week or so to act out and then, as soon as I grow tired of this game, I rein them in.

All this disunity and bickering. I can't be seen to allow that to fester. We can't have a blame culture. Bullying will be severely reprimanded. This team has deep-rooted problems.

What we need here, are some bonding exercises of our own.



When I first set them loose on the grey streets of Holborn armed with a recipe for chocolate cake and no money, I fully expected them to come back empty-handed, annoyed and disheartened.

For my part, I had already mentally rehearsed a series of infuriating responses to their complaints that this was an impossible and quite unreasonable task.

Step 1 – Send them back out the first time they return having admonished them for failing to get into the spirit of the challenge.

Step 2 - Once I had pushed them far enough, I'd hit them with something mindless like:

'The important thing is that you tried. And that you tried as a team. The cake was just a symbol. A way to get you to gel.'

'If you used your initiative to tackle the problem together, then that's the real icing on my cake. That's what's really important. If you learned to work together then we have not wasted our time. And you know what they say about having your cake and not being able to eat it.'

Step 3 – And to finish, single out the slimiest, most earnest head-nodding, ass-kisser of the bunch for singular praise, in order to heighten resentment among the rest of the group.

But just as I was beginning to miss them, impatient for the chance to recite my carefully planned provocation, they return, triumphant. Laughing and joking as one.

Arms round Sammie. Offering me a thick slice of home-made chocolate cake.

ED LARK



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reverb is an imprint of Osiris Press Ltd

This edition first published 2005 by

Osiris Press Ltd
PO Box 615
Oxford OX1 9AL

www.readreverb.com
www.osirispress.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1 905315 02 3

Set in Baskerville 12/14.2pt
Cover font Kelmscott

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Printed in Britain by
Lightning Source, Milton Keynes

reverb

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The son arrived first at the bombed factory. His breath was hot and dry and desperate in his throat as he ran and searched amongst the toppled walls. The night was hot and the building still burned and looking up through the blackened rafters he saw that the moon was orange, seemed coated in fire like the earth.

He found them both, their cleaners' uniforms melted across their chests and arms. A girder lay kinked across his mother's neck and his fury tried to lift it. But he could not make the girder move and the metal cut his hand.

The villagers came and they dragged the son from the factory and still it was hot and the fires were in the rubble and still the moon was orange and high.

The son fell forward, fell to his knees, and they stood him up and they dosed him with brandy and then passed the bottle around. The click of the insects seemed nervy and sharp and the people cried and they pressed shabby bank notes to the son's bloody hand.

Some villagers turned away and moved off sadly through the brush; others stayed and coaxed the son to return with them. But he stood still and said nothing; he stood so long that reluctantly, in time, all save one of the villagers departed.

The villager who stayed was called Jane. She called the son by his name and asked him to leave with her, to come to her home. But the son just stared ahead.

The son felt alone at the broken factory. He felt hungry and numb and the air was peppery with dust.

He stared at the rubble.

Grief crashed down on him.

A man stood up from inside the rubble. He was short and heavy and dressed all in black. The man turned his head until he saw the son and he pointed at him and then began to walk slowly away, across the mounds of brick towards the brush. The son wanted to follow the man but he did not move and instead watched him walk into the brush.

Moving off in the direction of the city, the man disappeared.

The son looked again at the factory. The rubble was moving again. A hand emerged from beneath a pile of brick. Then quickly a figure; a laughing giant

holding a huge sack, a flamboyant codpiece jutting from his flowing harlequin trousers. The giant blinked and grinned. Another figure stood up from the rubble; this one smaller, a spade of beard jutting down from a stern philosopher's face to rest against the neck of his harlequin frock coat.

The giant turned and slapped the bearded figure heartily on the shoulders, lifting much dust from his frock coat. Two more figures emerged from the rubble: a woman, tall, knife-thin with a sullen face, wrapped by a dark harlequin cape; then a man, small, bespectacled, wearing a three-piece harlequin suit topped with a bowler hat. The small man smoothed the woman's cape with agile fingers as she stared into the night. A black tulip swayed out from the crown of the small man's bowler hat.

The harlequins did not see that they were being watched. The giant harlequin even looked straight at the son, but still he did not see him. So the son watched the four harlequins unobserved.

The son saw the small harlequin point into the brush in the direction of the desert, the opposite route to that which the first man had taken. A small animal appeared from the rubble. It had a cat's body, a girl's face and a huge, plumed tale. It shook the dust from its coat and leapt towards the giant.

The harlequins moved across the rubble: the giant ahead with his cat, both of them skipping side-to-side, and the woman at the rear, silent and lean and swaddled in her harlequin cape.

The son watched them go, and still he felt alone.

1

I was early. Maybe the trains were faster, the track smoother, the city closer. Yes, maybe the city was closer. Though it had seemed far away all my life. But now I was here. And here I stood in Waterloo Station watching the people move past me. They were so white, the blood hiding deep inside them. The bandage on my left hand uncurled and flapped down against my bag. The hole in my palm began to throb. I felt hot. I looked at the people and I began to feel light. Adrenaline skipped into my stomach and up into my throat. I bought cerecives from a woman who looked at me, then forgetives from an old man who did not. I felt that it was time to walk and headed towards the exit. At the top of the steps I looked East, seeing the lip of the Colosseum glide above the shops and offices. More people.

I paused for a moment, watching the people sweep past me. I smiled. Finally I was where I had wanted to be. But I had nowhere to go. Out of the throng a man stepped towards me, he was short and heavy and dressed in black. A white letter A danced on his shoe. He handed me a scrap of paper and walked on. The paper had some writing on it which said *Come and join the Crystal Realm*. An address was written below those words. I read the address and put the paper into my pocket. Already, fresh to the city, already I had an invite.

I walked into the streets. My movement was out of step, village-slow, clumsy; I banged into the city-fast people. Then I relaxed, relinquished I suppose, and took their strides. I was happy and vacant and alone. I walked for a long time in this way. The greatest of all walkers they used to call me... But none of that now. Now I was here. The streets were packed, side streets and main both full with people moving fast. Above them all, nets strung between the buildings. Here the past was dead: there was no *why* in this city of orphans, just now. And now I had an invitation to join the Crystal Realm.

When I grew tired of walking, I hailed a cab, climbed inside and it took me across the city. We arrived, and because I was young and because I had red country cheeks the driver charged me too much. I let him, he had nice hair. I climbed from the cab and stood outside the house for a while. A cat walked towards me then slinked around

my legs. It was always the same: I was a magnet for animals and imbeciles. I rang the bell and waited. I looked around me, noticing the huge cars and bay windows of a wealthy area. I felt a fumbled pressure in my head then a voice said, "Hello." The door clicked open and I walked in. A complex spiral staircase twisted up above me; sleek marble stairs and wrought iron banisters, like money's DNA. I walked it, checking the numbers on the doors. I found the flat and knocked. The sound of my knuckles on the real wood scared me. I waited for a while then the door opened – a beautiful face with question marks for eyebrows.

"Hi, I'm Juan."

"You're early."

We walked down the hall. She was wearing excellent trousers. I asked her name.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Call you it."

"Not too much?"

"Not too much, no."

"Keeku. I'll get Sarah."

"Sarah?"

"You're in her flat."

I sat down on the sofa, facing towards a window covered by a slatted blind. The room was huge and cream and four more doors led off from it. I stood and walked to the blind. Lifting it, the city's neon brushed my eyes. To the West of the flat rose the honed white limbs of King's College chapel, and behind that the lawns and squares of the Tuileries gardens and the drear hulk of the Pergamon museum, into which all history had rushed, to make itself available. I came round, into this flat. Keeku was moving from room to room. Too busy to smile, precious and serious. She was stupid with self importance. But what did I know? She'd only just answered the door to me. Who did I think I was? Calling a girl with excellent trousers stupid? I was the one who was stupid.

I watched her trousers some more, then turned to see that another woman had entered the room.

"Hi, I'm Sarah, I'm holding out my hand so you can kiss it. Or you can kiss my cheek if you prefer."

I kissed her cheek.

"You are young though. Did Alex send you here?"

"Who's Alex?"

"He wears an A."

"Oh yes, it was him. Alex sent me here."

"So like him. Always talent spotting. Did he find you at the airport or at the station?"

"The station."

"Well, Alex must think you are gifted. He only sends me people who are special. I'm glad you came. It is early for you to be here though."

"The journey was quick. The city's closer than they said."

"Yes. It is. The city's getting closer all the time. It's moving in, folding up like a scrotum in the sea."

"I've never seen the sea."

"I'll take you Juan."

Good. I wanted to be taken, wanted to be accepted.

Sarah disappeared out into the hall and I looked across to see Keeku still moving in and out of doorways, still busy with things I did not understand. She paused for a moment, "I'm going to change. Let Bob in when he comes."

I sat for a while and found that I was thinking. I stopped and searched for the visuals. War most channels: well-dressed air strikes. Clean footage. Slick movie. Then faces. I flicked. Medical channel, an operation: green sleeves in red holes. Better. Flick. Sport. Crabs sidling across roads. Ancient Egypt. Car crashes. I kept flicking. Then a strange pressure in my head, like someone trying to reach me, some agitation, and then the door bell rang. I guessed this was Bob and walked over to answer it. The screen showed a man with a very big nose. He was dressed impeccably so I buzzed him in the door and a few moments later into the flat. He glanced around the room to see if anyone else was there, then he nodded at me in a way suggesting he was unsure if I was a guest or a servant. He went over to the drinks table, his left leg twisting strangely as he walked.

"Where's Sarah?"

“She’s around.”

I turned away and heard him move over to the table and fix a drink. I heard the poured water swerve round shoulders of ice, moving to the bottom of his glass and I looked out of the window, picturing the cork of his Adam’s apple bobbing with the movement of the water. He limped towards me and sat down on the sofa. I turned the visuals off.

“So...”

“... Juan.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I only arrived today.”

“Organic meat. Keeku will be pleased.”

“She didn’t seem to be.”

“Indifference is her seduction technique.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s an artist?”

“What type?”

“Sex and sculpture.”

“So,” I thought I’d better ask him, “what do you do for a living?”

“Crack new markets.”

I must have appeared puzzled because he huddled in towards me, adopting taut and eager mannerisms, “We asked ourselves what was left in abundance that hadn’t been colonised. We came up with three latent niches, all woefully under-marketed: unemployment, schizophrenia and impotence. And we’ve just opened up some innovative flanks in the incontinence market. We deal in stalkverts a lot too, but mainly we pass things around and time things.”

“Are you telling the truth Bob?”

“Yes. Say, Jono, you’re unemployed aren’t you? Can you get it up?”

“I’m not for sale Bob.”

“Sure you are. Come into the office, might have something for you.”

He moved a small silver baton across my eyes and I felt his numbers move into me, “Think me. Let’s do some.”

Keeku emerged, she was wearing a bicycle dress, its wheels curled

around to cover her nipples and the saddle was jacked up in front of her pubis. She came over to us and smiled at Bob, saying his name almost silently. He blinked and gave a small nod. Then she held out her hand to me, “Juan, come into the plastic room. We’ve arranged a welcome present for you.”

We walked across the lounge and into the room nearest to the kitchen. It was huge and empty except for a large reclining chair and two naked people.

Keeku turned to me, “They’re plastics, you’re going to get your face done. But I’m first.”

She sat down and the plastics moved towards her, “Nose work,” she commanded.

I saw that their palms were glowing silver. She closed her eyes and they placed their hands in a stack on her face. The silvery glow increased until it covered all of Keeku’s face. The plastics were smiling in a way I disliked. They raised their hands slightly and then quickly pulled them away. Keeku opened her eyes and stood. A mirror appeared in the wall, she walked over to it, and examined her nose. Her nostrils had been stretched. She turned and smiled and guided me over to the chair, “He’d like his eyes done, that green doesn’t match his hair. And make his skin whiter, the red makes him look like a farm hand.”

When it was over I walked to the mirror. My eyes were blue now, the blue of shark stars. I liked them. My skin was white. I liked it also. Keeku placed her hand on my shoulder and turned me to face her. She scrutinised my face. I couldn’t tell if she liked the changes, but she took my hand, leading me into an adjacent room.

Keeku said, “Begin,” and what I thought were walls turned out to be screens. Rippling blue images filled the room and my body began to feel light. I looked over at her.

“It’s an image pool. Move your body or you’ll drown,” she said, as she moved hers. I felt a little stupid but pushed out with my arms. My feet came off the floor and I moved forward. Then I kicked my legs out behind me and moved forward again. I reached the end of the room and stopped, turning my back to it and kicking gently with my feet. My clothes began to feel wet. I looked at Keeku, she was smiling.

"I'm swimming," I said to her. "Swimming."

I began to feel good. And now Keeku swam to me and her breath tasted and her skin felt like ever. She pulled away from me and said, "Change."

The blue screens rolled; a lighter blue with patches of white. My clothes were dry now and they rushed against me. I looked down and the city was beneath me, rushing, rushing upwards; the neon glow and the old and the new towns pushing up to me and getting closer. Because the blue was the sky and the white was the clouds and I was falling.

I felt something above me. Then Keeku floated down level with me, and we were together – attached to nothing, floating in the bubble of the Crystal Realm. Me with my new eyes and my plastic city pallor and Keeku beside me, suspended in nothing by nothing. I reached into my pocket with my one good hand and felt for my cecrectives.

I awoke early in a huge bed. I was alone and light came in from a picture window. The night before twisted through my mind and excited me. Sarah came in.

"Morning Juan. News just thought me that the beach has arrived. Get up, I'll take you."

"Is Keeku coming to the beach?"

"No. She has some business."

"Sarah, why are you being so kind to me?"

"I'm kind. No suspicions. You're Crystal now."

We left the flat and walked down the staircase and out of the front door. It was very hot. We took a cab and drove through the city.

"Where is this beach, lady?" asked the driver.

"Near the Sagrada Familia."

A mile beyond the Sagrada, a line of skyscrapers moved into view, curling in a semicircle around what we guessed was the beach. The cab got snared at lights and the driver flicked his windscreen to visuals. More war. I suggested to Sarah that we walk the last part of our journey. She turned to me with apprehension, "Do you think it will be alright?"

I reassured her, and thrilled and decided she said, "Okay, I'll try it."

We paid and climbed out of the cab. The pavement was hot, and although it was morning, the sun was directly overhead – it looked like the beach had it fixed at midday. Sarah slipped her mind in mine and I thought I heard it flutter. She placed her hand in mine also. I felt happy at the slenderness, the weakness I suppose of her knuckles and I squeezed her hand twice.

Above the streets, nets were strung between buildings. I looked up at them and Sarah said, "It's monkey netting. Crystals use it to swing the city."

A single road pushed straight through the scrapers and down to the beach. Kids bounced past in kangaroo boots. Shops lined the road selling beach paraphernalia and pro- and anti-sun products. We walked down and came level with the scrapers which curled against the lip of the beach. Then we made the sand.

The sea fanned out forever and yet found time to roll into the shore. The sand was soft and sieved and felt fine on the bottom of my feet. It was too hot. We moved to a patch of beach with cooling. Aqua vendors crawled out of the sea and Sarah bought two red waters. I felt good. We took off our clothes and went into the sea. The water was not as fresh as it had been in the image pool. It was drier and less realistic. Still, it was good to be here with Sarah. The waves crashed over us and Sarah didn't seem to think of her hair. The owners of the beach had provided some fish and they swam between us. I began to love Sarah.

We walked back onto the beach and Sarah was laughing as she lay on her towel. She looked good. I told her. She laughed again and told me I was yesterday, but I could see that she was pleased. A tinted bubble pushed up from the sand and covered us. We could see out onto the beach still, but now could not be seen ourselves. Sarah explained, "It's a courtesy bubble, for Crystals. It's protection. The beach must pick up who's euro'd and who's not," Sarah pointed across the beach to a dishevelled group of people crouching in a circle near the water's edge, "like those Intrans."

A couple of Crystals came over to see if we wanted a screw. Sarah declined and they made their way down to the sand to join a group of friends.

"They're going to have a body glut," Sarah explained. "They all

multi-task. They'll do anything to anyone. Anyone who's Crystal."

I watched them for a while as they began to contort and ebb into a ball of pleasure. I wanted to join in. Sarah looked bored as she watched them.

An old woman approached our bubble and sat next to us on the sand. Sarah looked over to her, "She's an Extra, looks safe enough though, let's talk to her."

Sarah popped the bubble and turned to the old woman, "What can you do?"

"I'm not your normal Extra, busking to the Crystals, love."

Sarah laughed, "So you can't do anything."

"I can read your fortune."

"You're in finance?"

"No, I tell the future."

Sarah looked scared, "Then tell it to leave. I know the future; thousands of moments like this, but different from this. Thousands of moments that have nothing to do with each other, nothing to say to each other. The future is now, only then."

The Extra stood and shrugged and walked off.

We lay back on the sand in silence. It was time for a shark feed and a couple of Extras were dropped from a boat by two women wearing municipal uniforms. The sun was way too hot so Sarah brought it down for us. I asked her to take it right down. I thought a sunset might cool her off. Maybe it would make her happy. The old Extra had walked off with Sarah's smile.

"Look at the sun, Sarah." But she didn't so I did. It moved slowly down onto the water, bleeding on it. I wanted to be like Sarah so I got bored of it too.

"Shall we go and get some food Juan?"

Outside the restaurant, Sarah euro'd the driver. A cat came up to me and I stroked it. We went inside. A man greeted us and took us to our table. We sat down and a screen hovered over while we waited. It was trimmed with orchids and tuned to battle. Sarah excused herself and I did some war. She returned from the toilet with different hair which I said I liked. I wanted to ask Sarah about the Extras and the Intrans, but didn't know if I should. Was it bad for a Crystal to be interested in them? I asked her anyway.

"Extras are disposable, broken people. They are mad, alone, practically useless. If it wasn't for their menial functions we'd call them all."

"And the Intrans?"

"The Intransigents are a little different. They're pretty useless too, but they've got reason, or think they have. They're not broken like the Extras, they could seriously euro if they wanted to but they choose not to. Can be dangerous. They have grudges. I've met some very smart Intrans who could have been Crystal, but they won't let go. They say they're against the city, but in most cases, they're only against themselves. There are far more Extras than Intrans. To be an Intrans is too hard, it makes you bitter and angry. I mean how could you oppose the city, what could you do? We've offered to make the Intrans fashionable. They just don't want it."

I asked Sarah if that was it: Extras, Intrans and Crystals? She explained about the Shapers, "The Shapers are above the Crystals. The Crystals move with the city, but the Shapers move faster than the city and they make it. Alex shapes. I would have thought the Shapers brought the beach."

"And what was I when I arrived in the city – I wasn't a Crystal then, was I an Extra or an Intrans?"

Sarah blinked at me in surprise, "I thought you knew Juan. When you arrived, you were nothing."

We sat in silence for a while. She had changed.

"Juan? Are you going to get some work?"

"Bob said he'd get me something."

"Good because Alex will send some new down soon and we'll need your room."

The food arrived but Sarah didn't touch it. She said she was going to go back to her flat.

"Have I done anything wrong Sarah?"

"No Juan, I'm ill. We all are. You can find your way back?"

I nodded. She stuffed some euros in my hand and left. After the meal I paid and walked outside, in the direction of the old district. My hand began to hurt. A small drop of blood appeared on the bandage in the centre of my palm. I looked up. Beyond the monkey netting, the moon had been placed quite high and was almost full.

I walked down a wide straight road with spaced sodium and pockets of vendors' neon, then I turned into an alley and the lights began to snake more, to move in curves. Small side streets led quickly into each other. I was in the old town. It was darker here, the air was sweet and weary.

I walked past the Colosseum and through the Grand Place. I felt I knew where I was going. The greatest of all walkers they used to call me... Alleys bred. Extras moved around me; alone, walking slowly alone. A woman's form picked out by the light, leaning back against a building, curving her back to its shape. She began to mumble and cry, staring at the moon, eyes full of solace and rapture. I too looked upwards, then moved into the shadows and leaned against the stone. I began to think of my home. I felt the stone against my back, sucking me in, pulling me down, deeper into memory. A cry rose into my throat. A cab rounded the corner, rolling sleekly through the slender streets. It passed me and for a moment I saw inside; two Crystals, laughing and drinking water. I saw my reflection on the car window.

I moved away from the wall and walked down the street, following the cab.

ONE

The sun was already hot when it rose above the dunes. Alberto was awake, the tulip in his hat turning slowly to face the sun as he kindled the embers of the previous night's fire. He lowered a coffee pot onto a stone in the centre of the fire. Louis awoke and brushed sand from his beard, squinting at the rising sun and steadying himself as he prepared to sit up. Sansu awoke and shivered, deep scars visible on her arms before she wrapped a harlequin cape around herself. The giant Gargantua opened his eyes and let out a lion's yawn which pulled the growing flames towards his mouth. The girl cat crawled out from his shirt and stretched in the sunlight. He pulled its feathers and kissed it.

Gargantua walked behind the dune and in a moment his happy voice boomed out, "I'm pissing a river Alberto. You could drown three midgets in my stream."

Louis exhaled long-sufferingly. Alberto smiled as he pushed a stick into the fire and fished out the steaming coffee pot. Sansu stared into the desert, smoking and smiling distantly. She produced a small, black book from her cape and began to scratch tiny words on an empty page. Gargantua came back and they all sat down to drink coffee. The giant poured a large dose of brandy into his tin mug and laughed. Louis scowled at him. Alberto set about preparing breakfast; he boiled some water, took some rice from Gargantua's sack and added it to a cooking pot.

"Well Alberto, what do we do today?" asked Louis.

"We walk, we find Juan."

"We would be better served raising an international army of workers," asserted Louis in rehearsed, indignant tones.

"More coffee," demanded Gargantua.

Alberto poured and turned to Louis, "No, one by one, we agreed." He turned to Sansu, "Sansu, will you eat today?"

She didn't respond.

"Sansu, I ask you."

She nodded but continued to look out across the dunes.

They finished their meal and cleared up the camp; Alberto

kicking over the ashes of the fire while Gargantua did many press-ups and laughed, the girl cat sitting on his back. They set off to walk – climbing over dunes and rolling down them, Louis at the back, debating with himself, and Sansu at the front, moving with loping, elegant strides. The sun leered down in their faces as they followed it across the sand. Gargantua chatted with Alberto about space travel. He claimed to have designed a rocket which was powered by eggs. The girl cat purred on his shoulder. Alberto put the realistic case to Gargantua, but it made no impression.

Vapours of heat lifted from the sand, like adders charmed from baskets. Two palm trees appeared on the horizon, inviting them to shade. Gargantua did a somersault, as did his cat, which landed neatly back on his shoulder. Sansu reached the trees first and saw a small pool of water curling between them. Two camels drank at the pool. They were wild and hissed as the travellers approached. The troubadours rested for a while in the shade and ate the remains of what they had cooked for breakfast.

Louis sat on his own, reading a thick old book. Gargantua moved over to him and asked him what he was reading.

“Of man’s inhumanity to man,” replied Louis.

Gargantua nudged him hard in the ribs, adding to it, “There’s another page for you, beardo.”

Louis hit the giant who laughed and picked Louis up by the coat, swinging him round. Louis spewed oaths until Alberto intervened and coaxed the giant to cease revolving the philosopher.

“Why do you study this?” Asked Gargantua when Louis had recovered from his dizziness.

“It is the condition of the world,” replied the stern philosopher. “The worst always govern the best. It is what we must overcome,” he added, clenching his fists with intense defiance. Sansu and Alberto looked at each other and smiled. Gargantua stood up and assumed his debating posture, his codpiece jutting threateningly forward.

“No, I put it to you that the world is splendid and full of joy. People eat, they make love, babies are born. There is kissing and music. People drink and they piss. It is simple. We have our bodies, they are made for pleasure. To each is available happiness; all seek and sin and learn. That is the condition of the world, my stupid, morbid friend.”

Louis stood up, smacking his lips with his tongue as he readied them for rhetoric, “No, my naive friend, some live in prisons created by others. Many toil while few take the fruits of that toil. To few are available the joys of happiness. Some men are dogs. Others are kings. Look around you.” Louis wafted his hand, invoking the gravitas of the horizon.

“I see only sand, you buffoon.”

Louis snorted through his nose and his beard quivered for a moment in his nostril breeze. He rushed at Gargantua, his face screwed up with anger. But Gargantua put out his arm and placed his hand on Louis’ head, keeping him at a safe distance. Louis swung many blows but all missed. Gargantua improvised a song as he restrained the raging philosopher:

*Oh he reads so much,
And he gets it wrong,
He is so weak,
I am so strong.*

Alberto whispered to Sansu who stood and walked over to the camels. She knelt close to them and again they began to hiss. Sansu looked into their eyes and began to move her hands in front of her face, miming the scuttle of the scorpion. The camels grew still. She roped their necks and brought them over to Alberto. He pushed his spectacles flush to his nose, “Gentlemen, your attention.”

Louis stopped swinging at Gargantua and the giant lowered his hand.

“I propose a test.” They eyed him warily. “A camel race. You see those dunes over to the West?”

They both looked, turned back to Alberto and nodded.

“Race round there and back. If Louis wins, the world is black, if Gargantua wins, it is white. Whoever cheats cooks for a week. Agreed?”

They again both nodded and reluctantly walked towards their camels. There was a squabble over who got the healthier looking beast which was settled by Sansu who suggested that Louis had it because he was less likely to win.

“Pah,” cursed Louis with faux indignance. But he did not refuse the camel. They mounted and Alberto shouted, “Go.” The giant and the philosopher made off and Alberto and Sansu sat down.

“Peace,” sighed Alberto and he and Sansu laughed. They began a game of chess.

The great philosopher took an early lead, his frock coat flapping out behind him and his body bouncing up and down on the rolling hump. The giant was behind, his cat clinging to his left shoulder and his legs dragging along the ground and slowing his camel. He leaned forward and whispered in the camel’s ear and it picked up speed a little. His codpiece jolted into the camel’s neck and he grimaced. In a few minutes, they rounded the first dune where Gargantua knew Alberto could not see him. He whispered to the plumed cat and it made a huge leap and landed, its claws sticking deep into the flank of Louis’ mount. The camel veered off course, running away from the dune. Gargantua laughed loudly, which was a mistake because Alberto heard this and smiled, “He’s cheating.”

The cat jumped from Louis’ camel and scuttled back towards Gargantua’s, leaping back on to his shoulder, its feathers pluming out behind as they increased the pace. Gargantua began to enjoy the ride, but as he came behind the second dune, he was deftly struck on the back of his head. He looked down to see a book falling to the sand, then behind him to see an angry Louis and an angrier camel gaining ground on him.

“Ha, you fool. Getting what you deserve,” shouted Louis.

“He’s cheating as well,” said Alberto. “Excellent, no cooking.”

The camels were level as they appeared from behind the dunes. Gargantua and Louis bobbed and swayed atop their mounts and the camels ran faster and faster. They were both out of control now, and still level. They made the oasis and could not be stopped, rushing right past Sansu and Alberto. They appeared again some minutes later, both without their camels. They were arguing and slapping each other. They arrived beneath the palms.

“I was first by three hundred and seven metres,” said Gargantua.

“Alberto, it was plainly I,” asserted Louis.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t looking,” said Alberto and he and Sansu

giggled. “I’m sure it was a draw.”

“It wasn’t,” they both said and turned to face each other.

“I am the better man,” said Gargantua.

“You fool, it is I,” replied Louis.

Alberto entered the fray, “Well, I don’t know who the better man is. But you both cheated.”

They looked at Alberto, ashamed, briefly in sympathy.

The argument raged all afternoon as the four harlequins walked through the desert. The philosopher and the giant were up ahead: “Life is a garden”... “No, it is a prison”... “To own is a blessing”... “No, it is theft.”

Alberto and Sansu walked behind and Sansu sang to the gentle one. Her voice was sweet and moved out across the desert, slipping for miles across the bare shoulders of the dunes. Alberto turned to Sansu, hesitancy detectable in his small face, “Do you think we’ll find him, Sansu?”

She nodded and continued to sing, her voice as old as the sand. They spent that night at another oasis, sleeping beneath four tall palm trees.

2

Bob was already at the office when I arrived, “Good morning Juan, looking good.” I wasn’t. I didn’t look at all spectacular. My clothes were out of fashion until lunch, but until I was earning I couldn’t afford to dress pure Crystal.

“So Bob, where do I start?”

He nodded towards a Crystal working at a desk in the corner of the room, “Tony runs our trading division. He is going to spend the day showing you around, so you can make a real start tomorrow. We’ll see what area you respond to.” And with that, Bob hunched off, and Tony stood and walked towards me.

Tony was a try-hard Crystal; not quite there with the clothes, not full enough of indifference to be a real contender, but he was definitely making an attempt. His face was plastic in many different ways and his hair was feathered. He had the remains of a hole in his neck from when tracheotomy was fashionable, and a huge watch inlaid into his right palm. His left hand was missing. I liked Tony – he wasn’t competition. But I could tell Tony didn’t like the look of me.

“Let’s start with the hostage trading. Think you can handle it?”

I lost control of my face and glared bitterly at him. I didn’t know what hostage trading was, but if Tony could handle it, I could handle it. I would succeed. It was what I wanted. I was on my way, I was living the Crystal life.

“Now,” Tony continued, “I’ll run through all this pretty quickly and then if you’ve got any questions, you haven’t been listening. Nearly every day a Crystal or sometimes even a Shaper gets taken by one of the terrorist groups we might be in the process of eradicating, or by the opposition in one of the wars we might be winning. It’s unfortunate, but it’s business. Once taken, these hostages are stashed. Usually it’s not bad for them, even the lamest terror has good war hospitality. But that doesn’t matter, the point is to get them home and more importantly, to be seen to get them home.

“So *the enemy*, as we call them, usually waits for a few hours till we put our information out: ‘Ten taken hostage in terrorist swoop!’ They give us time to begin the concern process, the stickiness and breadth

of which increases with the worth of the hostage. Okay. They’ve got the hostages, the public’s involved. If they’ve got a Shaper they might cut him and mail a bit round. They’ll get a good plastic in though and the hostage usually has some say over what’s removed. So, if he’s never liked his nose...

“Then they send their price in. The terror guys have got good accountants and they usually get it right. Now we get in touch with our stalkvert department. We let the stalkvert boys know how much we’re looking for. What we’ve got to raise to get our boys home.

“Our stalk people have a look at the Hostage Index to see what they’ve got to do. Say our boy is worth three thousand euros, that’s what they’ve got to raise. So they start to look at the terror people, they might be Sastrians or Slavs. Let’s say they’re Sastrians. You look at the Index and it tells you that your average Joe Sastri, your non-rich, non-diplomatic Sastrian on the mat is worth one thousand euros. We’ve got to raise three Sastrians at a thou’ each to get our Shaper back to us – plus of course whatever the terror boys are charging in holding fees. So the stalk boys get three verts ready, set them, and send them out. There are some ground rules. It’s bad form to stalk a temple – it’s rude, like taking a golfing Shaper. Bumps up the hostage price. Compensation.

“So the verts are out, they find their targets. They get inside them: the targets start buying booze, bikinis for their daughters, doing war. The verts are taking them over, reducing difference, making them like us. So although these guys can be in their homes, they are pathologically similar, we’ve got them. We don’t even have to deal with war hospitality. When we’ve got three thousand euros of Sastrian all minded up, we invoice the terror and set up an exchange. They send us our boys, we call off the verts, everyone gets publicity, and we charge the government a fat commission. You follow?”

I nodded and Tony moved over to the next section of the office, “Guys, this is our new Crystal.”

The guys turned round to look at me and waved. They were both impeccable young Crystals, peacocked up in all the new male garb.

“This is Bernard and this is Tissy, they’re our Traders, you’ll be working with them,” he paused, “if it pans out for you here. They’ll explain how it all works.”

Tony walked off into the next office.

“Sit down Juan,” said Bernard. I did.

“So,” Tissy launched straight in at me, “here we trade schizophrenia, impotence and unemployment. They’re innovative markets. We’re just picking off niches where we can, and putting them in long kennels. The unemployment market’s a tricky dog to walk. Example. We get a call from a Crystal with a bulk unemployment order. Woof. Woof. Great order. But you’ve got to be careful. Everyone loves to be a hero, but you don’t want to sell too much – if we did then no one would be working. And if no one’s working, no one’s buying. Don’t get me wrong, we love the short term here, but this could scratch up the woodwork. The schizophrenia market is small but growing. It’s good for sales in general, keeps people in the present, keeps the fleas biting. We’re working on some ‘Buy’ voices at the moment, should make an attractive implant for a lot of companies. The impotence market is mainly poodle-sized orders. Example. A repulsed wife flops her husband. But mostly you’ll just be making things up.”

“Fine.”

Bernard and Tissy turned back to their screens and I stood behind them for a while, watching them work. Their heads were ringing and their phones were busy. I remembered all I’d been told, filed it all away. Tony came over, “Okay boys, take a break. Bob says you should take the new boy out to play.”

Bernard and Tissy stood up from their screens and turned. They walked past me and I followed them out of the office. I noticed that Bernard had some difficulty walking. We hit the top of the stairs, slipped into our monkey arms, came out onto the roof and swung up for the netting.

“Where we going?” I shouted to the traders who swung quickly ahead of me.

“Thought we’d do some war down at the Traders’ Palace.”

As we swung over the Alhambra, Bernard pointed out West and I got a great view of Vesuvius, its sides steep and even, vines climbing over its Northern side. We moved towards the river. It was swollen. Two dead Extras floated across its surface. A huge blue building came into view and we swung into its forecourt. A cat ran across the paving slabs to sniff at my feet and I paused to stroke it.

At the entrance to the Palace, Tissy and Bernard were met by a

doorman who handed them each a long grey coat and a sabre. As they pulled their coats on, the doorman asked them a question which I couldn’t quite hear. They nodded and he quickly scanned their faces with a small silver baton. After a few moments, I was also handed a coat and a sabre and the doorman asked me if I was going to fly. I looked at Tissy and he smiled and nodded. I told the doorman that I would and he scanned me. I put the coat on and slipped the sabre into my belt.

“What is this place?” I asked.

Tissy turned to me and grinned, “Traders’ Palace. The Tsar’s old winter palace in St Petersburg. After the revolution, an art gallery. Now it’s here. Fine kennel.”

We went into the Ice Room and drank from the vodka fountain, then moved into the War Room. I looked around me, the ceiling was high and vaulted, its arches moving down to touch the tops of soaring windows. Paintings hung on the back wall. The bar was an old tank. Tables dotted the floor and around thirty traders lolled around the room in various states of drunkenness. The walls not covered with paintings were screens. They were all tuned to war. In the corner, two ex-generals sold punditry. We sat down at a table, the glass top of which was war; techno scenes, faces kept out of it. Tissy explained, “We only get the hardware shots. No refugees, no close ups. They keep it sporty in the Traders’.”

Stats rolled onto the screens, indicating excellent warage from our pilots. Cheers ripped through the room and some traders stood and rattled their sabres. A pundit announced that ground troops were going in at 3:10pm next Monday and not at 2:30 as he had been previously informed. There were more cheers from the traders. “We are victorious,” shouted one as he threw his sabre at the wall. There was drinking.

“It’s nearly time,” Bernard said as he stood up from the table and practised a golf swing with his sabre. Three joysticks rolled up from the table and Tissy told me to grab one. All the screens went blank apart from the largest on the front wall of the War Room. It now displayed thirty or so small jets, hovering in a line, a face on each of the wings. The planes were above a desert in which it was early morning. Tissy pushed forward on his stick and turned to me, “Fly Juan, fly.”

ED LARK

I began to move my stick and a plane with my face on its wing flew forward, “What do I do?”

“There’s four people in the desert. Whoever hounds them out first gets to fly for real.”

Tissy explained as he moved his plane forward: in return for investment from the Traders’ Palace, the government let the traders fly a sortie everyday; a real sortie. This was the way of deciding who got to fly it.

I looked up to the screen, seeing my plane lagging far behind the others. All around the room, traders shouted and whooped as their planes moved out. A couple of traders who’d been in the Ice Room a little too long started a dog fight with each other, they swung around and fired, missing their targets but taking out some of the other planes. A brawl started to my left but quickly collapsed over furniture. It occurred to me as the other planes vanished from view, that the target didn’t have to be ahead of me. I slowed my speed and swung my cross-hairs round and down onto the sand. I saw a small pool of water ringed by four palm trees, wagging slightly in the desert breeze. I looked closely and saw a foot jutting slightly out from beneath the canopy of palms. I dropped height and flew back round. I made out four sleeping figures dressed in harlequin costumes. Cross-sights appeared in front of me, and with a flick of my wrist the figures were caught within them.

“Hey, Juan’s found them,” shouted Bernard as a bunch of planes wheeled back towards me. My palm began to throb as the figures slept in my sights. Bernard and Tissy were staring at me, waiting for me to act. I pulled my hand away from the stick and stood up from the table, running towards the toilet.

In the privacy of the cubicle I continued to sweat. I breathed deeply, failing to control the alarm of my pulse.

Some time later I came out and sat next to Bernard and Tissy.

Tissy turned to me, “What happened Juan? You had them in sight. Bernard took them out. He’s flying for real now.”

I looked towards the front of the hall. Bernard’s cross-sights settled on a small, dark block, his thumb twitched and the missile moved outwards, impacting on the factory with near-simultaneous explosion.

Bernard altered the course of the plane, sat back and lit a cigarette. The ex-generals re-commenced their punditry.