

ROSTOCK

by Dougal Thomson

Chapter 1

Mojave Desert. 26 December 2007.

I have spent the last hour locked in a battle of wits with MC Hammer. The lizard pokes his head out of a fissure in the rocks. I'm ten feet away, slumped on the ground, my back against the cliff face. A bottle of mescal, notepad and pen lie beside me. In my lap is a pile of stones.

The lizard ducks down, then pops up again. I scowl at him.

'Hammer... you will pay for your crimes.'

I hurl a pebble at him. He vanishes into the fissure. I take a swig of mescal. I will not pick up the pen until I have struck my target. Before launching a boat, shipbuilders break a bottle of champagne across her bow. I'm doing something similar with pebbles and lizards.

Sometime later, MC Hammer reappears. But this time, crucially, he faces away from me. West, towards the setting sun.

'Hammer... I knew you'd fuck up eventually.'

The pebble whistles through the late-afternoon mountain air. Perhaps, at the last moment, MC Hammer senses trouble. If so, it's too late. The stone whacks into him, knocking him off the rock and into a prickly cactus. He extricates himself and scuttles off.

I get up and stretch. I mark my victory by peeing into the fissure which Hammer calls home. The sun is disappearing behind a remote mountain range. The lizard has been vanquished, but the real foe lies ahead of me. The Demon Reptile, Roy Leyden. No dancing clown, him. And while his powers are strong, at last I feel ready for the task.

#

I met Roy in Dublin. It was during my last year of university, at a house party. We were celebrating the first and last performance of *Rostock*, a theatrical ‘happening’ staged earlier that day in Dublin city centre to considerable offence. Roy arrived with my classmate, Pablo Hynes. I knew Roy by reputation; he and Pablo had grown up together in Clontarf. Roy’s interests, as described by Pablo, amounted to two principal fields: womanising and commerce. When he wasn’t berating his acquaintances that it’s all about the cash, he was reminding them that it’s all about the gash.

I was in the kitchen, talking to Lotte, a Danish exchange student. She had served as *Rostock*’s main crowd-puller by agreeing to appear naked in public. Someone clapped me on the shoulder.

‘Magnus, my man. I’m Roy Leyden.’

‘Oh. Hi.’

‘Listen, that was outstanding this evening. I felt we were experiencing a theatrical milestone. Where do you go from here?’

‘Well, it’s over. That was the one and only performance.’

‘You know as well as I do, Magnus, there’s a growing market for gratuitous provocation. And what I’d like to do is introduce you to three people, five days from now, for a forty-minute meeting at six o’clock in The Stag’s Head, does that work?’

‘Uh. OK.’

‘Excellent. Oh, for goodness sake I apologise. I’ve been completely neglecting your companion, and if it’s absolutely *fine* with you, Magnus, what I’d like to do is immediately make amends for that and discuss something important with her in the bedroom.’

He laid a hand on Lotte’s elbow.

‘Ah.’

‘Wonderful. Come with me, there’s something I want to run by you.’

And that was the last I saw of Roy or Lotte. Actually, I did glimpse them later. As I was walking home along South Circular Road, a taxi flew past with the two of them in the back seat. It was my first encounter with the power of Roy. It was the tiniest hint of what was to come.

Roy Leyden is the only person I've known to live in strict consistency with an avowed world view. Not that Roy spoke of world view. He preferred the German term, *Weltanschauung*. Some assumed he was bullshitting, and he enjoyed playing up to the bullshitter persona, but behind the jargon was a code of conduct. He had rules to live by. They included:

- Get to grips with reality
- Solutions through science
- When opportunity knocks, answer the fucking door

It was Roy who taught me that there's no such thing as getting lucky, and who showed me how psychological principles of perception and attraction direct human behavior. It was from Roy that I learnt how people can be manipulated through heuristics, cognitive bias, the Halo Effect, Erickson's Confusion Technique, Razran's Lunch Theory and the Ten Commandments of Victor Lustig. It was Roy who proved Nietzsche's point that interpretation is a function of power, not truth.

Roy was a man who could conjure up visions, create auras, make entrances, trigger attraction, demonstrate authority, dominate interactions, turn tables and close deals. And having forced me to accept the power and truth of his principles, it was Roy who pushed me to embrace them, goading me to produce an extraordinary document - the greatest sales pitch in history. Thanks to Roy, I have eighty-nine thousand pounds in my current account. Boldly we rode, and well. Until three days ago.

#

London

After graduation, I moved to Paris, beginning work on a master's thesis on "the metaphysics of presence" which for some reason had seemed like a good idea at the time. Afterwards, I spent eighteen months in Podgorica in Montenegro, teaching English to civil servants and gangsters. While I was there, Pablo emailed me to say there was a job opening in

London: Roy Leyden was looking for someone to work with him at a company producing business magazines. I phoned Roy from Montenegro. He was happy to hear from me. He painted a picture of a straightforward, lucrative gig. It sounded like just the thing.

I arrived in London in March. I had lined up accommodation with Hugh Parry, a friend of the family. Hugh lived on Broadway Market in Hackney. He worked in real estate but his passion was the sea. An officer in the Royal Navy Reserve, he was due to ship out to Iraq to spend a year on a patrol boat, pursuing oil thieves around the Gulf of Basra. Hugh needed someone trustworthy to mind his flat while he was gone. He proposed a peppercorn rent.

Roy had set up an interview for me at his company, Westminster Media, with Guy Williams, the firm's commercial director. The interview, according to Roy, was a formality. Apparently, Guy had already agreed to hire me, purely on Roy's recommendation. Roy, who had joined Westminster Media a year previously, was already selling more full-colour, full-page adverts than anyone in the firm's seven-year history. His stock was sky high, his word was golden. Roy had described me to Guy as "one of the fourteen finest wordsmiths these isles have produced." My sudden availability ("he's been running one of Central Europe's most innovative education businesses") represented a unique and unmissable opportunity for the company.

Roy had explained that the plan was to build a new business unit, based around transport. Westminster Media had an existing print magazine, *Road Technology International*. The idea was to create two sister titles, *World Rail Frontiers* and *Port Infrastructure Horizons*. One of the cardinal rules of business-to-business publishing, I was to learn, was that each product's title should consist of no fewer than, and certainly no more than, three words.

The new unit would comprise a sales team under Roy's supervision, and an editorial team (a commissioning editor and sub-editor) under mine. Roy and I would report to Guy, who Roy described as "a cretin". Our magazines would bring in £250,000 advertising revenue per issue, or four million pounds annually. Guy would pocket a significant chunk of this for letting us get on with things.

I hadn't asked Roy what the salary would be. I'd been earning a pittance in Montenegro and was just looking forward to having some disposable income. I had no clear idea of what I wanted from the job, other than seeing it as a way to make a living from writing. I had spent the

last three years trying to adapt *Rostock* into a novel. Set in a Baltic port during the Napoleonic occupation, it had three narrators: an onion seller, a pigeon and a 15th century astronomical clock. I didn't know where the book was going. Pablo, however, had informed Roy that I had broken the shackles of traditional literature and was writing "the first genuinely post-human narrative." Roy had mused on this, informing Pablo that I sounded like "the kind of fellow who'll go a long way under my tutelage."

#

The day of the interview arrived. Despite the name, Westminster Media turned out not to be located in, or even near, the City of Westminster. It was on the other side of London, on Brick Lane in Whitechapel, one of a dozen companies housed in the giant brick hulk of Truman's Black Eagle Brewery, once the largest brewery in the world. Westminster Media was the single biggest tenant, occupying the first and second floors of the building.

Guy came down to meet me in reception. A big man in a pink shirt, he was soft spoken with a Home Counties accent. He greeted me warmly.

'Welcome, Magnus. Your reputation precedes you. Delighted you're here. Any friend of Roy's, etcetera.'

The interview was not grueling. There was no probing for gaps in my work history, no uncomfortable silences, no "Sell me this pen." Guy looked at my cv respectfully. He asked me what I knew about Westminster Media (I had my answer ready: "Roy tells me you're forging a new media paradigm") and what I planned to do in London ("a career in journalism.")

'As far as salary goes, what are you looking for?'

Roy had briefed me on how to answer this. I looked Guy in the eyes and said "What are you prepared to offer?"

He frowned. 'The basic is £26,500, car allowance is... (he typed some figures on a calculator) £4,250, company pension contribution is 8% of salary, and, most importantly, you'll get 3% of your titles' contribution to revenue, paid quarterly. Assuming we hit our forecast, that will let you earn (tap, tap, tap) something in the region of £41,000. How does that sound?'

Roy had advised me that whatever the figure, I should ask for 20% more.

‘Sounds great,’ I said.

‘Excellent. We’d like you to start on Monday.’

He showed me back downstairs. That was that. I was in and out of the building in half an hour. I hadn’t taken much in, apart from noticing a large, glass-walled space from which a loud hum emanated: the sales floor, I supposed. But it had all passed in a blur.

#

I met Hugh back at Broadway Market, told him the good news about the job, and we went to The Dove for celebratory beers. It was a jovial evening. Hugh had gone into Covent Garden that afternoon to get his Royal Naval Officer’s sword engraved, and had brought it with him to the pub. He took it out from under the table.

‘Have a look, my friend.’

I studied the inscription running along the blade: PUELLA•OMNE•PORTUS

‘Eh?’

‘Honour through service.’

‘Oh.’

‘Not at all. It’s *A girl in every port*’.

We clinked our glasses together.

‘To triumph, Magnus. I’ll handle the Persian Gulf theatre, you keep Brick Lane in line.’

We spent the evening eating, drinking and waving the sword about. At the end of the night we swashbuckled happily home, soon to embark on our separate, defining adventures.

#

I arrived at Westminster Media on Monday morning, and waited in reception. Roy came bounding downstairs, arms outstretched.

‘Young Lochinvar has come out of the north!’ he called.

It was the first time I'd seen Roy since the taxi with Lotte. He looked well. He slapped me on the back and laughed.

'Ah, brilliant. It's all ahead of us! You're going to be huge here. Fucking huge!'

He led me upstairs to the sales floor. It was a hive of sound and motion. The back wall consisted of floor-to-ceiling windows giving onto the brewery courtyard. The place was packed with people getting ready for the day, taking off their coats, turning on computers and joking around. The buzz was incredible. There were clusters of PCs and phones, posters and whiteboards with large figures written in red, black and green. I saw silver trophies at a few desks and a dildo on top of someone's computer screen.

'Welcome to my world, Magnus. Each man has his place. I am king of this jungle, I bang its magic drum.'

Roy led me off the sales floor, into an adjoining, smaller room. The noise died away completely.

'This is your playground,' he said. There were about a dozen desks here. People were sitting quietly, tapping at their keyboards or staring at their PCs. It didn't feel like the nerve centre.

'You'll have these three desks. It's just you for now until you recruit a commissioning editor. Then we can shift a sub over to sit with you. The design and production people are over there. Someone from HR will be along to give you a health and safety tour, show you where to take a shit, that type of thing. But all that really matters is this (he pointed at my desk) and that (he pointed at the sales floor). When great content meets great sales, Magnus, do you know what happens?'

'What?'

'You'll see, my man. You'll see.'

Roy walked off to the sales floor. I went around the room, introducing myself to the editors and designers. A quiet bunch, they communicated mostly through whispers and sniggers. Copies of each Westminster Media title had been placed on my desk; I spent an hour looking through them. I had to get up to speed with how the business-to-business business worked. Tom, a cheery young Mancunian in charge of commissioning content for the firm's leisure titles

(*Global Hotel Leadership, Sport Industry Management, Cruise Ship Quarterly*) talked me through the process.

The world of controlled, non-requested circulation, he explained, was one where no reader ever paid for a magazine. Nobody asked or expected to receive a publication; they simply arrived out of the blue. Westminster Media got hold of as many names, job titles and postal addresses as possible, then mailed magazines to the unsuspecting recipients. Tom said they always aimed to acquire ten thousand names and addresses, but that it didn't matter if they fell short. In that scenario, they simply printed fewer copies.

The exact print run for any title was a secret known only to Laurence, head of production. Sometimes, word would get out. Tom told me about a one-off publication, *Kazakhstan Investment Horizons*, created when an entrepreneurial Westminster Media salesman persuaded the Kazakh Trade Development Agency to invest £250,000 in a “global guide to the country’s investment potential”. The Kazakhs were informed that *Kazakhstan Investment Horizons* would be distributed to industrialists and investors throughout Europe, the Middle East, the Far East, North America and Australasia. According to Tom, only twenty copies of *Kazakhstan Investment Horizons* were ever printed. They were posted in a batch to the government official who signed the contract.

Regardless of the final distribution outcome, Westminster Media claimed a “certified circulation of 10,000 copies”, with each magazine prominently displaying the logo of the Audit Bureau of Circulations, who according to Tom provided independent verification of publishers’ circulation figures. Neither Tom, nor anyone else I met subsequently, knew how this oversight worked in practice, nor whose responsibility it was to ensure continued “certification”. The logo was simply copied and pasted onto each issue.

In theory, each magazine was supposed to end up on the desk of someone who had a professional interest in reading it. The media pack for *Road Technology International* contained impressive pie charts showing it was read by CEOs (36%), Other C-level executives (22%), VPs/Heads of Engineering (18%), VPs/Heads of Project Management (14%) and VPs/Heads of Design (14%). Readers were based in the UK (23%), Rest of Europe (34%), North America (16%), Asia (14%), Latin America (6%), Middle East & Africa (5%) and Australasia (2%).

I assumed that the task of maintaining a database of recipients for *Road Technology International*, of researching relevant companies, names and contact details in order to match these precise percentages, was massive and complex. It came as a surprise when Tom introduced me to the database team who managed the firm's readership database (theoretically containing 350,000 senior executives for 35 titles). This vital function was fulfilled by just one person. Pete, Westminster Media's Head of Database, was stuck in the corner behind the designers. He explained that rather than sourcing names himself, it was an expected component of each salesperson's job to "acquire" names and lists for the titles they were working on. Pete simply fed the various names he was given into a content management system. He then assembled a mailing list for each title.

'It's an art more than a science, you could say.'

'Do some people receive more than one magazine?' I asked him.

'It's possible. Yeah, definitely possible.'

'Do some people get *every* title?'

'I can't rule that out.'

Pete explained how salespeople typically got hold of their names. A popular technique was to blag their way into an exhibition or trade event in order to steal the attendee list. There was also a thriving black market between people working at different B2B companies, where databases of names were exchanged or sold.

Pete estimated that 40% of the magazines which Westminster Media posted from London would never make it to the addressee, either because the contact details were wrong or because the person had left the company. He supposed a further 20% of copies would go to someone who had no business receiving it (the wrong type of job, the wrong type of company). Another 20% would make it to the right person's desk but would immediately be thrown in the bin. In 10% of cases, the recipient would perhaps open the envelope, before subsequently binning it. That left 10% of people interested or bored enough to actually read the magazine.

These estimates were not reflected in the company's media kits, or in the upbeat conversations which Roy and his fellow salespeople held with potential advertisers. According to

official Westminster Media narrative, recipients did not just open and read their copies, they treasured them, sharing them with “on average, 3.4 colleagues”, giving each publication a “total reach of 34,000 decision makers”. I asked Pete how the 3.4 figure had been arrived at.

‘No idea, mate. Been in use since Day One.’

After I’d been schooled in these realities, a girl from HR gave me a tour of the premises, pointing out the toilets, fire extinguishers and emergency exits. My induction complete, I went to find Roy on the sales floor. He introduced me to his team: Gary, Sanj, Michelle, Leroy and ‘Bags.’

‘Bags?’

‘It’s on account of my giant scrotum.’

‘Ah.’

‘It’s a sight to behold, isn’t it Michelle?’

Roy whisked me away. He walked me round the sales floor, introducing me to nine other sales managers and their teams, most of which included their own version of ‘Bags.’ Each team was responsible for two or three magazine titles. I’d expected the salespeople to be dismissive or uninterested in me, but I was wrong. Each sales manager considered me carefully before introducing me to their staff. I limited my comments to variations on “Good to meet you”, “look forward to working together” and “why do they call you Kong?” As we proceeded around the floor, heads turned my way. There were comments and wise cracks. The level of scrutiny seemed out of proportion.

The tour over, Roy took me into a side office. He explained that at that morning’s sales meeting, Guy had described me as a content “guru” who had been headhunted to reform WM’s editorial processes and bring them triumphantly into the 21st century. I was here to whip things into shape, delivering a rapid and massive boost to the quality of editorial output, and, by extension, to salespeople’s commissions. Guy had emphasised that I was from Glasgow, and “as you’d expect, not a man who fucks about.”

I reflected on this. I had become a man who didn’t fuck about. I wasn’t sure whether this was good news.

#

That first day, as I settled into my desk and tuned into the conversations around me, I learnt that there were plenty of people at Westminster Media who were very fond indeed of fucking about. According to Tom and the editorialists, the sales floor was home to every known strain of sociopath. There were perverts, deviants, addicts and drunks, homophobes, racists, sadists and thieves. There were fantasists, frauds, bullies and spies. Hustlers, swindlers, wife-beaters and rogues. There was a desperado called Jenson who slept under his desk.

There were people like “Dirty John”, the manager of *Gas Pipeline Prospects*, who took a trip into Soho each Thursday lunchtime to be “violently tugged”.

As the new editor of *Road Management International*, the least I could do was familiarize myself with the world of roads. On the face of it, it was a crushingly dull topic, but Roy said this was as it was supposed to be. In the world of B2B media, the more boring the sector, the greater the profits. Roy explained that people working in “grim industries” were so grateful that media of any sort was taking an interest in them that they responded happily to requests to invest in our publications. I spent two hours skimming through articles on tunnels, street lights, bridges and traffic signals.

At ten to five, as I was staring at pictures of zebra crossings, I realised Roy was standing in front of me. He had his jacket on.

‘The working day’s over. We’re going to the pub. Debrief time.’

I slipped on my coat and followed him out via the sales floor. Everyone else was still at work. Roy muttered in my ear.

‘Always leave before the herd, Magnus. Let them see you go. That way, you send a clear and devastating message: not only am I more productive than you, more successful than you and more highly remunerated than you... I’m faster than you. Fast, fast, fast, like Ali.’

‘Ali?’

‘The People’s Champion. Muhammad.’

We walked across the brewery courtyard, towards the Ten Bells, a Victorian pub on Commercial Street. Roy raised two fingers to the girl behind the bar and led the way to a back table.

‘Well, Magnus, what do you say?’

‘About my first day? It was interesting. I’m looking forward to it. I think I’ll learn a lot.’

‘Aye, you’ll learn a lot. And the more you learn, the more we earn. But we need to get you up to speed quick. Here.’

He handed me a notepad and a pen. The barmaid decanted two bottles of Duvel into glasses.

‘You’re a lucky man, Magnus, a fortunate fella. The wisdom I’ll impart has the power to turn you into a fucking Übermensch. This conversation... in fairness, it’ll be more of a monologue... will speed you on your way. I’m your fairy fucking godfather.’

He sipped his beer, smacking his lips.

‘Here, then, is the situation. These are the rules. You’ll want to write this down.’

I picked up the pen.

‘Trust no-one. Display total confidence. You are the prize and everyone else is privileged to be in your company. When you walk around the office, imagine you’re sparkling like a fucking jewel. Demonstrate value. Speak like an oracle. Be pleasant and cordial but get straight to the point. You’re not here to make friends. You’ve been brought in to make us money. The expectation is that great, transformative events are about to occur. Pots of gold will start materialising. Belief in your powers must be strong. Belief is infectious! Acquire one disciple and he’ll round up three more. They breed like fucking rabbits.’

‘I see.’

‘Whatever content you come up with needn’t be brilliant. Nothing brilliant will ever be said on the subject of roads. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that a small group of people need to *believe* it’s brilliant. Do you see?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

He sipped his beer.

‘Ah, Duvel. Let the masses drink pints. Do you know who I am, Magnus, when I walk around the sales floor? Utahraptor.’

‘Eh?’

‘The most lethal predator ever to tread the earth. Eighteen feet long, fangs like a motherfucker. A vicious master of strategy. The only outcome from an encounter with a utahraptor is total, crushing defeat. I stalk the halls, Magnus. Fearless, powerful and agile. A higher order of being. When I exit the scene, I leave a void. My absence is fucking palpable.’

‘Right.’

I jotted down ‘dinosaur’.

‘Make people feel that whenever you come over to talk to them, they’re entering a magic circle of power. You’re bathing them with your golden glow. Remember who you’re dealing with - intellectual pygmies, delinquents and morons - but never reveal to anyone what you think of them.’

The barmaid brought us two hickory-smoked bison burgers. They looked and smelt delicious.

‘*Esse est percipi*, Magnus. Our friends on the sales floor judge operate through perception. So you must feed them material to perceive. Like Grandmaster Chime.’

‘Grandmaster Chime?’

The name sounded familiar.

‘Is he one of the Wu Tang Clan?’

‘You’re a funny man, Magnus.’

He pushed back his sleeve, revealing an ornate gold watch.

‘Patek Philippe’s finest achievement. Now, I’m not really interested in what time it is. I always live in the present moment, Magnus. But the Grandmaster fulfills a vital function. He’s a magnet for chumps’ eyes. He grabs their attention and transmits a precise message. You need to start thinking about how you’re being perceived. Look at the barmaid!’

An attractive brunette wearing a Sonic Youth t-shirt was standing behind the bar, chatting to a couple of young men in beards.

‘What sort of perception has she formed of you, Magnus?’

‘I don’t know. None.’

‘Correct. Now as for me, on the other hand, she has very clear perceptions, which I’ve created for her. I’ve carefully crafted an elaborate, multi-faceted concept of myself in her mind. This is fundamentally important, Magnus, you must learn how to build concepts in other peoples’ heads.’

That didn’t sound easy. I took a bite of the burger.

‘She’s a sleeper.’

‘Mmm... a what?’

‘Someone who I have seduced without her being aware of it. She’s deeply attracted to me on an unconscious level. We have a fantastic degree of rapport. And I’ve never spoken to her, other than to order drinks.’

‘Right.’

‘But I observe her, Magnus. I watch her like a hawk, I overhear her conversations. I’ve learnt what her values are, her desires and fears. And when I come into the bar, her sphere of activity, I demonstrate those attributes which are important to her – self-assurance, creativity and humour. You know, whenever I want to awaken a sleeper...’ he clicked his fingers... ‘it’s the easiest thing in the world.’

‘Oh.’

‘I’m talking about the principles of attention and attraction. Observe me carefully, Magnus, and you’ll pick them up. Let’s get back to perception. Take responsibility for how Westminster Media perceives you. You don’t need an expensive watch. You need different kinds of symbols, things that identify you as an intellectual. An Einstein.’

‘This burger is really good.’

‘Magnus, forget everything you’ve done up to this point. The past is irrelevant. All that matters is now. You can reinterpret and reinvent yourself, it’s an amazing opportunity. The old Magnus is dead! The new Magnus is alive! Do you know what I put on my cv when I applied here?’

‘No.’

‘I threw in a curio, an attention grabber. Under hobbies, I put “bullfighting”. So in the interview, Guy says “What’s all this about?” I told him I’d been all-Ireland bullfighting champion at the age of sixteen. Because that’s *exactly* the sort of crap that appeals to a sales director. Bear in mind, I knew I would be an enormous asset for Westminster Media. I was doing Guy a huge fucking favour by tossing him that curio. *Mundus vult decipi, Magnus, ergo decipiatur.*’

‘I’ve no idea what that means.’

‘The world wants to be deceived, so let it be deceived. You’ll never meet a more easily manipulated group of people than salesmen. It’s marvelous. You know who every salesman wants to be? James Bond. So you are going to be their Q. The guy producing miracle gadgets. Ergo, you need a mad professor look. Tweeds, a bow tie, I don’t know, you’ll figure it out. People have it on Guy’s authority and on my authority that you’re a fucking genius. Dress accordingly and that belief becomes reinforced, branded into their brains.’

I wrote down ‘tweed’.

‘The costume’s one thing, but there’s more to it. When you talk, project authority. People, especially the kind we employ, are conditioned to defer to authority. So be the authority. Show them who’s in fucking charge! If you act like an authority, that’s good enough for them. Move with an aura of power and purpose. Be confident.’

‘OK’.

‘Here’s a good trick. Never ask questions. Just talk in statements. Every word out of your mouth will sound like a golden fucking nugget. Drop in jargon that you know people won’t understand. They’ll appreciate that. It reassures them that you have specialist knowledge, insider access to information. When you say something really profound, walk off immediately. Leave the fuckers hanging on your words.’

‘Right.’

‘People seek explanations, they don’t want to have to figure things out for themselves. Bewilder them, keep them guessing... then provide the answers! But don’t act superior. Whenever anyone says anything, even if it’s drivel, nod your head, act like it’s fucking Confucius speaking. They’ll love you for that.’

‘You’re in a privileged position, Magnus. You’re a lone editorial wolf. You don’t need to rise in the hierarchy, to play any power games. But we need to be in agreement about the person you’re going to be. If you want to work here, it’s on the understanding that you’ll be this guy we’re talking about. From when you walk in the door tomorrow till the moment you fuck off over the horizon. Do you accept?’

‘Aye. That was a great burger’.

‘No shit. I’ve just demonstrated the power of Gregory Razran’s luncheon technique. People are more favourable to persuasion, arguments and invitations when they’re eating. The burger, the beer, the leather seats, the music, the Nordic barmaid... they all influenced how you responded to my messages. Do you know what I do? Do you sense it? I pile incremental factors on top of each other, stacking them high until I’ve assembled a fucking tower of power.’

I frowned, and sketched an Eiffel Tower on the pad.

‘Razran taught psychology at Columbia University, Magnus, these are established scientific principles. Do you think I take anybody’s word for anything? Never! I’m an empiricist. I’ll believe it when I see it, and I have seen the methods working. Now I’m applying them myself, to devastating effect. I’m twenty six years old and the best salesman of my generation. Competence multiplied by confidence equals accomplishment. I’m talking about human *progress*, Magnus, the long, winding path which mankind has stumbled along through the ages and which culminates in Roy Leyden. Jesus! You’re lucky to be sitting there.’

‘Eh?’

‘Accessing my knowledge. It’s like Christmas morning for Magnus and there’s a big, shiny, Roy-shaped present under the tree. You’re unwrapping a life-changing package of benefits. You’ll make money, learn new skills, sleep with some staggering women.’

I was staring into space.

‘Magnus! Look at me. Do you want to enjoy life?’

‘Uh, sure.’

‘Here’s your opportunity. Fucking seize it.’

‘OK.’

When we left the pub, Roy beckoned me across the road to a cash dispenser.

‘Come here, I want to show you something.’

He tapped the metal buttons.

‘Look at the screen.’

It showed his bank balance. Fifty eight thousand, seven hundred and forty pounds.

‘That’s what I’m talking about. It’s fucking great being successful. And we’ve only just scratched the surface. Now that you’re on board, things will really get motoring.’

#

Walking back from the pub, exciting visions presented themselves. I felt I was marching confidently towards new horizons, that London was sparkling through a diamond prism. I could do anything I wanted, be anyone I wanted. I would cease wasting time on *Rostock*. It was time to embrace the real world, not the fictional one. By applying myself to learning Roy’s science, I would become the B2B magazine world’s editorial colossus, a guru to the two hundred salesmen of Westminster Media. My photo would adorn their mantelpieces. I would transform our publications with the deft touch of a word surgeon. And then, one day, out of the blue, I would be gone, walking off into the sunset, casually ignoring the staff’s desperate pleas and promises. The company would sink into mourning, preceding its descent into barbarism and bankruptcy.

On the strength of my reputation, media companies would clamor to employ me. I would reject offer after offer until the right call came, something impossible to resist. A plea from 10 Downing Street to be the UK’s Creative Industries Ambassador. I would travel the world, lecturing my followers, clicking my fingers, awakening sleepers.

I was strolling along Regent's Canal, nearing home. I stopped and leisurely peed into the water. I was laughing out loud. Roy was brainwashing and manipulating me, just as he had done with the Ten Bells barmaid. I sensed it, but I didn't mind. I was intoxicated.

Chapter 2

The following day, I rummaged around Spitalfields Market at lunchtime, assembling my mad professor outfit. I bought two tweed waistcoats, three pairs of cord trousers, a pair of brogues, some desert boots, a pipe and a monocle.

On Wednesday, I was ready to go. I strutted down Columbia Road, admiring myself in the shop windows, stopping for an espresso on Brick Lane, where I nodded knowingly at the female barrista. At ten to nine, I met Roy in the courtyard outside Westminster Media's front door. He looked me over. I was wearing a tweed suit, green bow tie, yellow socks and orange brogues.

'Fucking yes, that's what I'm talking about!'

I got some strange looks from the editorial room people, who generally wore T-shirts and jeans. But it was time to get down to business. By the end of the week I needed to have an editorial plan for the next issue of *Road Management International*, outlining what items would go where. This would allow the salespeople on Roy's team to begin selling pages of advertising. Four weeks from now, the magazine would go to print.

Roy walked in with Norrie, the lead salesman for Roads.

'Norrie here will give you the lowdown. In the traffic management community, he's Mr Big.'

Norrie, a friendly Brummie, explained what kind of content was most useful for his purposes. His wish list covered articles on road marking technologies (i.e. paint), traffic flow software, fibre optic sensors, lighting, toll booths and crash barriers. I listened, taking notes.

After he walked off, I went to find Roy.

‘I don’t get it. Aren’t there more interesting things we could be writing about? The future of urban transport. Electric cars. The world’s most dangerous roads.’

Roy smiled.

‘Good topics! Here, look at this.’

He opened the previous issue of *Road Management International*. As he flicked through the pages, I saw how the layout and themes followed a strict rule of symmetry. On the left hand page was an article on a particular topic – paint, crash barriers, lights. And on the right hand page was an advert from a company producing the same article.

‘Magnus, I can read you like a book. I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, my job here is to produce content that people want to read, that they will find useful or inspiring. Content that will enlighten them, that will produce in them such a glow that they’ll keep *Road Management International* within arm’s reach at all times, even taking it home for the weekend.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Snap out of it! Let me tell you something. Norrie, god love him, can do one thing well. Sales. He fucking excels at it. He finds out what the customer’s needs are and he meets them, quickly and efficiently, to their entire satisfaction. He has a client list of sixty companies who are happy to give him their money. Because Norrie always delivers.’

‘Life is a delivery business, Magnus. You’re in a delivery function, I am, everyone is. If you can rationalize that and accept it with humility, you’ll be happy and successful. Respect the house rules! If you fight them, you’ll lose. You’ll grow bitter and you’ll leave here a poorer person. Nobody wants that! I want you to be rich and successful. You want that, too. So recognise the rules. Embrace them for what they will give you. Love the rules!’

I frowned.

‘Play the game, Magnus. Games are fun!’

#

I reflected on this over lunch. My vision of crafting sublime editorial content had taken a hit. The task had revealed itself as mundane. I wouldn't be landing the role of UK Ambassador for Creative Industries by churning out articles on industrial paint. Still, the job was what Roy had presented it as: an easy foot in the door of the media business. I would make the most of it, taking my pleasures where I found them, trading up when the opportunity arose.

Back in the office, I drafted a plan for *Road Management International* which met with Norrie's enthusiastic approval. I'd learnt from Tom that the magazine's previous editor, a heavy coke abuser, had stopped showing up for work a month previously, leaving Norrie nervous about the title's (and his own) future. Now, not only did *RMI* have a new editor, the magazine was set to become part of a stable of cutting-edge transport titles. From Norrie's perspective, things were looking up.

I also learnt that I had an editorial budget to play with, enough to outsource 50% of the articles to freelance journalists. Tom explained that three long-standing contributors produced copy for the entire range of WM publications. A typical commission might be to write a piece on emulsifiers for *Food Processing Panoramas*, an article on artificial hearts for *Medical Device Management* and something on cluster bombs for *Military Technology Quarterly*. These hacks could bash together articles on any topic, on a two-day turnaround, for £200 a page. It was production-line journalism. My role was essentially to oversee the machine, keeping the deliveries on track. Whether anyone read or enjoyed what we published was neither here nor there. I decided I could probably ease off on the tweed.

On my fourth day at Westminster Media, Roy walked in from the sales floor and sat down opposite me.

'Magnus. It's all about scale.'

'Ah?'

'You have one title and three salespeople. Norrie will bring in £50,000 a month, Ajay and Dan will bring that in between them. We need to quickly scale up to three titles and nine salespeople. In fact, eleven salespeople, my idea is to have two floaters... I need a better name for them... who will sell across all the titles, going where the money is. We have two weeks to recruit eight

salespeople, plus a commissioning editor to help you with the content. I'll take charge of the sales recruitment but you need to find the editor.

'OK. Can we put an ad somewhere?'

'You only need someone half-decent. You'll only get someone half-decent on a £20k salary. But they'll get 2% share of the team's profits, which should double their earnings. You need to draw up a job spec and show it to HR. They'll authorize it and away you go.'

'Right.'

I thought about the type of person we needed: someone smart, resourceful, thick-skinned and happy to use the job as a means to an end. I created a job description which trod a fine line between truth and fantasy.

EDITOR JOB! An exciting opportunity has arisen at a fast-growing media company, writing, editing and managing content for a range of market-leading publications. Competitive salary PLUS generous bonus scheme. OTE £40k. Must be available immediately. Phone Magnus on 0207 576 8253 or email your cv to editorjob@WM-media.com

I sent the ad to jobsites and to colleges and universities which offered journalism courses. I printed a hundred copies and spent the afternoon fly-posting them around Spitalfields, Shoreditch, Clerkenwell and Farringdon.

#

By the following Monday, I'd received thirty applications. I discounted those who hadn't attached a cv, those living in other continents and those who seemed unqualified for the job. I was left with one person.

Carla was Australian. She had seen the flyer in a launderette on Old Street. Along with her cv, she had attached a cover letter, which read as follows:

"Shallow men believe in luck, while strong men understand cause and effect. In a year's time, WM person, when you reflect on my application for this post and your subsequent decision to hire me, tallying up the benefits which it generated and ruminating on my accomplishments, an easy option would be to assign it to luck. But we'll know, you and I, that luck played no part in it.

It was fact-based analysis which steered you towards the right hiring decision for your firm. My diligence and dedication did the rest.”

“The attached cv lists my skills, experience and accomplishments. They are many and varied. But a cv can only say so much, so I invite you to invite me for an interview. By spending some time together, you’ll discover that I’m as enterprising as Catwoman, as resourceful as Calamity Jane, as goal-oriented as Lieutenant Uhura and as even-handed as Our Lady of Guadalupe. I’m as industrious as Liza Minnelli, as results-driven as Little Red Riding Hood and my capacity as a self-starter has been likened to Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

I looked at the cv. Carla had studied design in Sydney, and had recently arrived in London after two years teaching English in Tokyo and Eastern Europe. Her last employment had been as “Founder and Director, the Renaissance Academy, Minsk”, a role that had lasted for one month. She had attached a black-and-white photo of herself, wearing a beret and smoking a cigarette.

I invited her in.

Roy, meanwhile, was engaged in his own, grander recruitment drive, with eleven positions to fill. He had agreed with the other sales managers not to actively recruit from their teams, and had simply posted up a notice in the kitchen, announcing the new roles. Anyone interested in applying had to clear it first with their current manager.

Three hours after posting the announcement, sixty salespeople had told their managers they wanted to apply for a role on Roy’s team. I saw him disappearing into talks with Guy, then with the other sales managers. When they emerged, Roy told me they’d agreed that a maximum of seven Westminster Media salespeople could transfer to the new team, and no more than one from each existing sales team. Roy would recruit the other four salespeople from outside the firm. He was satisfied with that outcome, as among the applicants were a number of top performers. Roy’s stock on the sales floor was so high that people assumed they would earn more under his mentorship, especially with a bona-fide editorial genius providing the content (Jenson, the desperado who slept under his desk, had stopped me in the corridor the previous day, asking to pre-order five copies of *Rostock*. The word on the sales floor that the book, in addition to being written from a non-human perspective, was being composed in Morse code.)

#

The following day, I was bashing out an article on the National Highways Authority of India's plans to introduce a toll road between New Delhi and Gurgaon, sprinkling in lurid, fabricated quotes from 'government officials familiar with the matter' such as "this spells bonanza for foreign paint and gantry providers" and "for the really juicy contracts, we're appealing to your readers to get in touch". I inserted attention-grabbing photos of the Taj Mahal and a Bengal tiger to fill up the space.

Roy came over and told me it was time for lunch. I grabbed my jacket. We walked down Brick Lane, turned right on Whitechapel High Street and then left towards Tower Bridge.

'Your first field mission, Magnus. An important milestone. I want you to observe every detail of the operation.'

'I thought we were going for lunch.'

'We are. A business lunch.'

He tapped a laptop bag that hung over his shoulder. From the way it was swinging, it appeared empty.

Just before the bridge, with the Tower of London on our right, Roy led me down some steps.

'Here we are. The Tower Hotel. One of my happiest hunting grounds.'

Roy led the way into the lobby of an upmarket hotel. He walked purposefully up a flight of stairs to the mezzanine level, striding past the registration desk for a business conference. Hostesses and conference delegates were milling about. Roy walked to the end of the reception area and pushed open a door. A big crowd of people were having lunch, queueing for food at buffet stations, standing and eating at small round tables. Signs indicated a choice of Indian, Thai or Italian dishes. Roy took a plate and started filling it. I followed suit. We took our food over to a small table where a man and woman were already eating.

'Hi. May we join you?'

'Of course, please do.'

Roy extended his hand. 'Tony Grealish.'

'Geoff Biggins.'

‘Hi, I’m Kathryn.’

Roy scrutinized their delegate badges.

‘Essex County Council? We do a lot of work there. I’m with IBM. As is my colleague, Hector. What do you two do at the council?’

‘We’re working on a transformation project for ICT. Corporate and back office functions related to social care.’

‘Excellent. Really good to meet you both. Hope you have a productive day.’

Roy let them drift back to their private conversation. As I picked at my food, I noticed his eyes scanning the room.

‘Eat up, Hector. Time for us to go and collect our material.’

We headed out of the lunch room and back to the registration area. Roy said “Stay here and watch”, and walked purposefully over to the registration desk. I saw him talking to the hostess manning the stand, who picked up a clipboard containing a sheaf of pages. She was searching for something, presumably a name. While Roy talked to her, he pointed in four or five different directions. Then he drew her attention to a photo he was holding. He put his hand on her shoulder and turned her around to face me, pointing me out to her. She looked at me with a confused expression. Roy kept on talking and gesturing; he had his hand on her elbow now and seemed to be giving her instructions. She was nodding. He took the clipboard from her and replaced it in her hand with the photo. He patted her on the shoulder and walked calmly away, slipping the clipboard into his laptop bag. I followed him down the staircase and out through the lobby. I caught up with him outside, by the taxi rank.

‘Job done, Magnus. Another successful business lunch.’

As we strolled back along St Katherine’s Way he brought out the clipboard.

‘What have we got? About two hundred names, job titles and companies. And look, email addresses and mobile phone numbers for all the conference speakers. I’ll give this to Database Pete when we get back and two hundred contacts will be credited against my name. Did you

know you that each month, the salesman who brings in the most contacts gets a grand? I've won the grand every month since I started. All thanks to the Erickson method.'

'What's the Erickson method?'

'On any given day, London has about fifty business conferences taking place. I pop into three at week; the most promising ones. Today, it was an event for IT Directors. I checked the website beforehand. Knew it was our kind of people. Readers but also advertisers. If an organisation can afford to send people to a thousand pound-a-head conference, they can afford to buy advertising from Westminster Media.

'How did you get the delegate list from her?'

'Psychology. Applying scientific principles to the field of human interaction. Because Magnus, it's all about dominating the situation.'

'Oh.'

'You witnessed the power of Milton Erickson's Confusion Technique. It's a form of hypnosis. You bombard someone with a series of unrelated statements and requests that continually shift orientation. You force the person to work really hard to process what's happening and to work out what they're being asked to do. Erickson teaches us that confusion opens people up to suggestion. That girl was struggling bravely to establish what the fuck was going on: why my conference registration had been faxed to an office in Ipswich, why I'd pointed you out as the hotel's designated fire safety officer and why I'd shown her a photo of a dog. At the height of her suffering, I offered her a way out. I suggested she perform a positive act by handing me the clipboard. There was no good reason for her to do so, other than escape. I offered her a clear and understandable suggestion to cling onto, a chance to get away from the madness, and she grabbed on for dear life.'

'Wow.'

'Now let's say that her colleague had been watching and challenged me as I was walking away with the delegate list. I'd simply launch into my Erickson spiel again. But you know what? People *never* challenge what you're doing as long as you're behaving in a congruous manner. Conferences are full of people walking around with clipboards'.

I looked at him, trying to process this.

‘Magnus, this is just the fucking introduction. If you want to dominate human interactions rather than be dominated, make it your business to learn these techniques. Abandon your skepticism! The science works – there *is* such a thing as a free lunch.’

Chapter 3

Next morning, I conducted my interviews for the editor role. In addition to Carla there were two internal candidates. Diya, a British-Indian girl from Ealing, had been snared through a previous Westminster Media ad for “exciting role in a fast-growing media company”, finding herself working for Dirty John on *Gas Pipeline Prospects*. She had already survived three months, two months longer than the average tenure under John. A smart, funny literature graduate, Diya was determined to get out of sales and into an editorial role.

Then there was Pete, the company’s esteemed Head of Database. I wanted to be as fair as possible with the interview process. I planned to spend half an hour with each candidate, inviting Roy to sit in on the interviews. I had also prepared a 30-minute practical test, to devise a rough editorial plan for the launch issue of *World Sewage Horizons*, an imaginary WM title aimed at sewage plant managers in five continents.

Pete was first up for interview. He brought with him an air of desperation.

‘What motivated you to apply, Pete?’

‘Enough is enough.’

A bright fellow who had unwittingly made a disastrous career decision, Pete had been stuck for five years with the same role and salary. It was an uncomfortable encounter. He looked at me pleadingly, appealing “to be given a chance”. I listened sympathetically whereas Roy snorted derisively.

Next up was Diya. She was smiling, self-confident, articulate and positive. She had embraced the craziness of Westminster Media and was keen for more, but on her own terms.

‘What motivated you to apply, Diya?’, I asked.

‘Don’t be fucking daft, Magnus’, Roy chipped in.

It was clear he liked her, and I did too. She had an attractive cynicism, and made a compelling case.

The final interviewee was Carla. When I collected her from reception, she was standing, staring out of the window, wearing a trench coat, red neck scarf and long leather boots. She had light brown hair and was tall, maybe five foot eleven in the boots. She was stunning. She resembled a hero of the French resistance.

‘Carla?’

‘Yep. The woman before you.’

‘Great. Welcome. I’m Magnus. Come with me.’

Roy had been looking forward to Carla’s interview, having proclaimed her application letter “a work of genius”.

‘Carla, this is Roy, the sales manager. Roy, this is Carla.’

‘Outstanding’, Roy muttered. They shook hands.

I invited Carla to sit down. I’d printed out a copy of her application. Roy was reading through it, grinning.

‘Thanks for coming in,’ I said. ‘I’ll tell you something about the company and the job, then we’ll ask you some questions and finish with a practical test. Does that sound OK?’

‘Sounds good, Magnus. Let’s get down to it.’

Roy chuckled.

I launched into a description of the WM business model. I was honest about the company she was potentially getting into, stressing that the role was a foot in the door of the media industry and a great opportunity to build editorial skills.

‘So Carla, do you have any questions for us?’

She smiled. She was calm and relaxed.

‘Well, Magnus and Roy. Roy and Magnus. Let me see if I’ve got this right. You’re looking for someone bright, capable, entrepreneurial and self-confident. Someone thick-skinned, not a shrinking violet, who can hold their own in a macho, sales-dominated environment. Someone who enjoys writing and who is good at it. Someone who will accept a pretty shitty salary and who will work hard to increase it through bonuses. Someone you can trust. Someone who doesn’t take themselves too seriously. Someone who you’ll enjoy spending time with. Someone with the right skills. Above all, someone with an attitude that is totally spot on. Magnus, Roy. Roy, Magnus. Have I understood you gentlemen correctly?’

‘Um. Yes.’

‘You’re looking at her. The person you seek is me.’

‘Right. Ah.’

I gazed down at her cv. Roy was no help, he was just grinning away.

‘What happened in Minsk?’

‘A dismal scene. A shame really, because I went there with high hopes. I wanted to teach Belarusian youth about design, literature, music, sociology, politics, art history. I wanted to awaken their consciousness. In hindsight, Minsk was not ready for that kind of project.’

‘I see.’

‘Was it a mistake? No. As Joyce said, “a person of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery”. The experience played its part in the development of the woman you see before you. It taught me that I need to be operating in an open-minded, multicultural environment. London fits the bill. I’ve started writing a book. I’m looking for a job where I can hone my writing skills further. Guys, I’m bringing a fuck of a lot to the table.’

‘What’s the book about?’

‘Sex.’

‘Ah. Right... Roy, do you have any questions?’

‘When can you start?’

When it came to the practical test, Carla aced it, devising lurid but lucid articles such as “12 months in sludge, a review in pictures” and “Blockage: when pipes go bad”. Diya played it safe but well, proposing features on drain technology, upcoming Asian wastewater projects and a photo reportage from London’s Victorian sewer network.

Pete panicked. He protested that *World Sewage Horizons* wasn’t a real publication, asking if he could devise stories for an existing title instead. I told him to get on with the task in hand. Eventually he came up with two ideas: an interview with a recent retiree from the sewage industry, discussing career highlights (“if there are any”) and an unsavoury piece on “how different national diets produce different types of shit.”

Afterwards, Roy and I convened in the Ten Bells.

‘What we have here, Magnus, is a simple choice, one of the simplest you’ll ever need to make. On one hand you have Diya, a capable, trustworthy, pleasant, funny and solid option. Somebody who we know gets on well with the sales floor, who understands our business and who would be a low maintenance report. I like Diya. She likes you, by the way. So you’d have to factor that in.’

‘Ah.’

‘Sexuality in the workplace. It’s a subject I need to study further, but my feeling is that it’s fine to have one direct report who wants to fuck you, as long as there’s no more than one, and that you don’t actually fuck them.’

‘Right...’

‘Now on the other hand, you have Carla. A weirdo, a quirk. A fucking oddity. A woman who set up a Renaissance Academy in Minsk and who is now writing pornography.’

He looked at me.

‘Mediocre managers hire safe, non-threatening people to work for them. That’s where they go wrong. If you’re aiming for greatness, hire the brightest talents you can find, however odd or challenging. Those are the people to break through barriers, to shoot for the stars.’

‘Yep.’

I had been jotting down numbers on my pad.

‘Roy, we’ll have three different magazines to produce each quarter. We’ll need forty pages of editorial content for each issue. That’s three titles multiplied by four quarters multiplied by forty pages a year. 480 pages. The budget allows us to commission half the content from freelancers, at £200 a page. That would mean 240 times £200, meaning spending £48,000 on freelancers.’

‘Aye. Go on’.

‘Why do we need to farm this work out to hacks? Their stuff is awful. Imagine we hired Carla and Diya. Between the three of us, we could write all the content, and even if we had to pay them both full bonuses we’d save the company £20,000 compared to what we’d have spent on freelancers. And I guarantee the copy would be better than any other Westminster Media title.’

‘Well, well. You guarantee it, eh?’

‘Yes... certainly.’

‘Magnus, I’m disappointed in myself. I should have thought of that before you. Can you type it up in a note, throw in a bar graph or a pie chart? I’ll take it to Guy tomorrow.’

#

Guy needed little convincing once he saw the bar graph. It was agreed that Carla and Diya could both start the following Monday as commissioning editors. In the meantime, I got back to work on the editorial plan for *Road Technology International*. Norrie came to see me, looking pleased with himself. He’d brought in a big deal, having sold four pages of “advertorial” to Invest in Macedonia, a government agency.

‘Good work! Remind me, what’s advertorial?’

‘Editorial content that the client has commissioned. It looks and feels just like a regular article, except that it has a little ‘Advertorial’ at the top of the page. Sort of a disclaimer.’

‘Who writes it?’

‘You do.’

‘What about?’

‘Whatever the client wants. Sometimes they’ll have a clear idea, sometimes you take the lead and suggest something. In this case, they want an article that promotes the concept of Macedonia as Europe’s future transport hub. There’s a lot of content on their website which you can recycle.’

‘Hmm. OK, I’ll take a look.’

I went online and looked at a map of Europe. Macedonia was hidden away down in the south-east corner, squeezed between Kosovo, Albania, Greece and Bulgaria. There was no sign of a motorway system. The most one could say, and even this was a stretch, was that the country looked well positioned to be a future transport hub between Kosovo, Albania, Greece and Bulgaria. I went to see Roy.

‘This is difficult. We can’t claim Macedonia is Europe’s transport hub, we’ll look like fucking idiots.’

‘I know that, Magnus. You are, of course, correct. The situation is an awkward one for you. It sucks. But you know what? If a situation sucks, get a straw, stick it in, stir it around, and suck away. You’re a cynic, Magnus, an iconoclast. You want to kick back against the system. That would be the worst thing you could do here. Within these walls, advertorial is our sacred cow. We revere it. It underpins the whole fucking business. This is no time for skepticism. Worship the cow, Magnus. Worship the cow.’

I frowned.

‘Perhaps my words seem harsh. They’re intentionally blunt. I’m trying to help you. Do yourself a favour, Magnus. When a battle cannot be won, do not fight it. Accept your situation’s reality. Embrace it.’

‘Hm.’

‘Look at it as an amusing and inconsequential intellectual challenge. That’s all this represents for you. But for Norrie, it’s his fucking pay cheque.’

It was pointless arguing. He was right. I knew the house rules. I would treat it as a quirky editorial game. As a fucking curio. If I could make Macedonia’s case for being Europe’s future transport hub, I could argue anything. I visualized an imaginary straw, sucked up the situation and got to work.

#

A day later, the Macedonia feature had come together. Assuming that the majority of Westminster Media readers would have no knowledge of the country, I intended to start with “Ten Fascinating Facts”, which after some fruitless internet research was scaled down to Three Fascinating Facts: the birthplace of Mother Teresa, a lion as a national animal and a motorway speed limit of 81 mph.

I put together attention-grabbing “before and after” maps, showing South-East Europe’s motorway network as it currently stood (next-to-non-existent) alongside an artist’s impression of how things might look in 2025, achieved by superimposing thick blue lines (symbolizing motorways) over the roads connecting Skopje, Macedonia’s capital, with the capitals of neighbouring countries, then continuing the lines outwards until they linked up with actual motorways. An impressive wheel of motorway spokes now radiated outward from a Macedonian hub.

I found a Macedonian economist’s quote that the 2004 Athens Olympics (strictly speaking, 500 miles away in another country) had served as a “catalyst for Macedonian economic development”. I fleshed that into half a page, illustrating it with photos of Greek Olympic infrastructure.

I lifted text directly from the Macedonian Investment Agency’s website, items such as “Thanks to Macedonia’s world-class transportation infrastructure, it only takes 36 hours to transport a truck of lambs to Gdansk”. I inserted a stock photo of two gentlemen in suits, signing a contract in an official-looking ceremony, inserting the caption “NOW is Macedonia’s time (World Bank).”

After all this, I still had half a page to fill, so created a text box with the heading “They’re poised to make millions in Macedonia” over a list of well-known civil engineering and infrastructure companies. I added a big “Are You?” at the end of the list. I printed off a colour copy and took the piece over to Norrie. He sat down and read through it, carefully, in its entirety. When he looked up at me, there were tears in his eyes.

‘Thanks Magnus, that’s amazing. They’ll love this. It’s so much better than the last advertorial we did for them.’

At five o'clock, I walked out feeling better about the situation. I joined Roy in the Vibe Bar on Brick Lane, where he updated me on the sales team recruitment. He'd selected seven star prospects from the mass of in-house applicants, and had ten external candidates coming in the next day to fight it out for the remaining four positions. Roy hadn't needed to do any external advertising. Plenty of WM staff had recommended the role to acquaintances, in the hope of earning £500 via the company's "recruit a friend" scheme. He'd sifted through the hundred emailed applications and chosen the most promising candidates.

'I'd like you to sit in on these interviews, Magnus. You don't have to say anything. In fact it would be better if you just sat there being enigmatic. I reckon we'll be spoiled for choice.'

'OK.'

'We'll have the whole team in place by next weekend. And on an unrelated note, if you don't have any social plans for Saturday, and I'm assuming you don't, I'm inviting you to join me on a Century Project night out.'

'On a what?'

He took out his Filofax (he was the only person I knew who still owned one), flipping to the map section in the back pages. He opened out the map of the world, where I saw dozens of tiny red dots. On France, Italy, Japan, the United States, South Africa, Brazil, Australia...

'My New Year's resolution from last year was to sleep with women from a hundred countries inside two years. At the start, I applied a slapdash approach; it was all a bit fucking haphazard. I accepted whatever chance threw my way. Then, I started taking the challenge seriously. Look, you can see that I've got most of Europe covered, North America, Australasia. But there are just a few random dots everywhere else. I'm stuck at seventy-eight and there's seven months left, which means I'm ahead of schedule. But it gets trickier now. We're getting into the niche fucking nationalities.'

'Right.'

'I'm applying the science, Magnus. I'm establishing where the greatest concentration of these niche nationalities lies, directing my efforts where they'll be most fruitful. I've found the fucking mother lode. SOAS.'

‘Eh?’

‘The School of Oriental and Asiatic Studies at the University of London. On Russell Square.’

‘Uh huh.’

‘Fact 1, SOAS has the highest number of nationalities in its student body of any university in the world. 117 countries. Fact 2, it’s 70% female. Fact 3, they have a student’s union disco on Friday and Saturday nights and anyone can get in with a student card. You can flash any old crap at the doorman. I show him my gym card. Once you’re inside, it’s a fucking United Nations of gee.’

‘A United Nations of what?’

‘Fanny, Magnus. I’ve been three times so far’. He stubbed his finger on the Filofax map.

‘Bahrain. Nepal. Kenya. Do you fancy it? You could start your own Century Project.’

‘Ah. OK, why not?’

‘Good. We’ll meet at the Marquis Cornwallis at nine. Dress casual. You’re in for a treat. Me hunting for gee is a sight to behold.’

I could believe that. He’d found seduction easy back in Dublin. What level would present-day Roy be functioning on?

#

The next day, the external candidates for Roy’s sales roles showed up for their interviews. He’d scheduled twenty-minute sessions for each of them.

‘Watch and learn, Magnus. Watch and learn.’

They were hostile interrogations. The candidates were all of a type: smarmy, money-hungry egotists. Roy began by asking the interviewees to tell him everything he needed to know in 60 seconds about their “reality as a human”. Most ran out of things to say, or started repeating themselves, half way through. Roy then threw a series of rapid-fire questions at them: what types of products have you sold, what kind of people have you sold to, what monthly targets have you been working to, how do you generate leads, how do you get past gatekeepers, what’s the toughest objection you’ve managed to overcome, what’s your most successful closing technique...

After that barrage, Roy took some notes, leaving the interviewee stewing during two awkward minutes of total silence. Then came a new set of questions:

‘In a fight between a sting ray and a baboon, who would win and why?’

‘Those people who don’t like you... what is it *exactly* they don’t like?’

‘Tell me what a spiral is, in words. No using your hands! If I see your hands move, you’re out.’

That last one stumped them a bit. I assumed Roy was expecting me to provide some feedback, so had brought a notepad and pen. I found it difficult, though, to differentiate between the candidates and to work out what I should be judging them on. The cockier and more irritating they were, the likelier they were to succeed at Westminster Media. The few notes I took, in an attempt to be helpful, tended to be one word scribbles: “liar”, “wanker”, etc.

The last question Roy asked was “Why do you want to work here?” The answers made it clear that our commission structure and earnings potential compared very well with the rest of the industry. These people weren’t interested in development opportunities or company culture; they wanted the cash. Our base salary was set low to discourage anyone who wasn’t motivated by sliding-scale commissions. Our commission rates were generous and rose quickly, depending on deals done. As Roy put it, “we expect the four people we hire today to earn £70,000 in their first year.”

At the end of the allotted time, Roy said ‘Well done. Thanks for that, you’re free to go.’ As the relieved interviewee was putting on his coat, Roy added ‘Wait, there’s just one thing. I have ten people here today competing for four jobs, and the question I’m asking myself, Darren, is, “Why YOU?” Quick, give me a SEVEN word answer.’

Nobody exited the room as cockily as they’d entered.

Chapter 4

The following day, Saturday, I joined Roy on his Century Project mission. When I arrived at the Marquis Cornwallis, he was sitting at an outside table with a bottle of Duvel. He seemed happy and relaxed.

‘Welcome, Magnus. Get yourself a beer. I have more knowledge to impart.’

I fetched a pint, which Roy looked at dismissively, and sat down opposite him. He gave me a long stare, took a drink from his Duvel and launched into his spiel.

‘Always define the goal. Articulate it and keep it constantly in mind. What’s the goal here, Magnus?’

‘Umm. Your goal is to sleep with somebody from one of the missing countries.’

‘Correct. To bag an exotic woman. It’s not to start a relationship with anyone. I don’t want any Sunday trips to Greenwich market or any discussions about feelings. No, no. Just sex. What’s your goal?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll suppose I’ll keep my options open.’

‘Do what you like, Magnus, you’re a free man. Tonight, above all, is a first-class opportunity for you to observe me in action. Study the methods! Later, you can reflect on what you witnessed.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Something that will probably strike you is how all of my behavior, at all times, is oriented towards the goal, aiming to facilitate and hasten its completion. Anything that doesn’t support the goal is a distraction. You follow me?’

‘Yep.’

‘We’re clear on the goal, so let’s consider the target. A SOAS student. She may be an undergraduate, she might be doing a masters or a PhD. She could even be an employee. The crucial thing is, she must come from some remote and godforsaken land.’

‘OK.’

‘Build a mental image of her now, Magnus. Can you see her?’

‘Yes...’

‘Good. So what you do is, you put yourself in her shoes. London is a big, scary metropolis. It’s a tough place to get your head around. It’s fucking expensive. There’s lots going on, but how do you know where, when and how to access it? Exotic Woman is studying hard for a qualification, she’s serious and conscientious. But the fact that she’s at the disco tells us something else. She has social needs too. Sexual needs. She’s no fucking fool, Exotic Woman. She knows the SOAS disco is nothing to write home about. But she doesn’t yet have the knowledge and contacts to get the most out of this city. Her friends are foreigners like her. These are salient points, Magnus, I hope you’re fucking taking them in.’

‘Sure.’

‘Now, imagine she had an English boyfriend. Wouldn’t that be great? Everything would be so much easier, she could get the most out of what London has to offer. Ah, Magnus, if only she had someone to take her to concerts, museums, cinemas. Someone who’d introduce her to a whole social circle. If the boyfriend had any disposable income to speak of, so much the better, given that she’s probably skint.’

‘OK. That figures.’

‘Exotic Woman wants a good time. Come *on*, if you’re going to spend a couple of years in London, make the most of it! She wants to be socially and sexually fulfilled. She deserves that much, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘So, Magnus. Who am I here?’

‘Eh?’

‘I am the great provider. The man to unlock London’s secrets and deliver good times. Restaurants, romantic walks, weekends in the country, astonishing sexual experiences. She’ll bask in the glory of having a successful, handsome and generous English boyfriend. She’ll be the envy of her exotic friends.’

‘You’re not English, Roy.’

‘British Isles, Magnus. For Exotic Woman’s purposes, it’s close enough. You’re Scottish, I’m Irish, in the rest of the world’s eyes that makes us English. We are natives. This is our city. You’ll witness me emphatically demonstrating how this girl’s life will change for the better in myriad ways, by going home with me.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘It’s nine o’clock. Right now, she’s putting on her make-up and fiddling in the mirror. Preparing herself, mentally and hormonally, for the possibility of meeting me.’

‘Ah hah.’

‘Now Magnus, the thing about students which you need to bear in mind, and it’s especially true for arts or social sciences students, is that they like to think they’ve evolved beyond judging people on appearances. They believe they’re fair, unprejudiced and objective. Entirely wrong! They’re actually *more* judgmental than the rest of us. They’ll classify you on the basis of your ideas and your politics, in addition to all the usual things we judge people on: looks, clothes, gestures, who they hang around with, smell, accent, taste in music, the whole fucking lot. And it’s *because* these cunts are so judgmental that they’re so easy to manipulate with heuristics.’

‘With what?’

‘The world is an overwhelming place. Look around you. Look around you, Magnus!’

I obliged him.

‘Listen. Feel. Tune in to all the different stimuli. Can you identify them all? No. You can’t listen to all the conversations, you can’t focus on the million objects in your field of vision. Life, in its complexity, is impossibly fucking multifarious. The only way to cope is through mental shortcuts

called heuristics, which categorise what's happening, allowing us to process events so we can come up with a suitable response. Most of the time our heuristics work fine, they steer us towards the right course of action. But because they're subjective, they can be manipulated to influence our judgement for the worse, rather than for the better. That's called cognitive bias, Magnus, and until you grasp the importance of cognitive bias you know fuck all about the human condition.'

'Oh.'

'Tonight you'll see me taking advantage of heuristics, bombarding Exotic Woman with data and stimuli which generates and reinforces a particular idea: that I am a hugely attractive option. These are exactly the same techniques that I use in sales. And why do they work, Magnus?'

'Tell me.'

'They work because deep down, we all want to be seduced.'

'I see.'

'Once I cross the threshold, Magnus, whether it's the Westminster Media sales floor or the SOAS disco, it's "enter the utahraptor". Because it's all about confidence. Advance with no fear, and you shall succeed. I'm comfortable in my surroundings. I'll have a casual look around, scoping the place for targets. Then, bang! Into action. Do you understand me, Magnus? Have you understood?'

'Yes.'

'I've told you before about not asking questions. The thing is, Magnus, most men, and I bet you're like this because I have severe doubts about your capacity for sexual manipulation, when they're trying to pick up women, ask questions. "Where are you from? Do you come here often? What are you studying? What kind of music do you like? Wait, why are you leaving?" Gimps like you assume that once you get a girl talking about herself you're making inroads, and then you're confused and bitter at the end of the night when she fucks off with me instead. Does this sound familiar, Magnus? Of course it fucking does.'

'Hmm.'

‘Not me, Magnus. I never ask questions. I make statements. Confident assertions, enigmatic asides. I sound like a complete fucking authority on whatever I’m talking about. Because *that’s* how you get someone to really listen to you.’

‘Right.’

‘Sentence structure is part of it but I’m operating on many fucking levels. I’m using eye contact, gestures, building rapport, establishing commonality... “oohh, we like the same things!”... demonstrating authority, constantly reinforcing the Roy value proposition until... there’s a magic moment, Magnus, once the heuristics have done their work, when Exotic Woman reaches a particular sexual threshold. All her triggers turn on, her endorphins go wild, her face lights up like a fucking Christmas tree. Whenever I see those rosy cheeks, I hear the sound of a cash register - kerching!’

Roy drank from his beer.

‘I’ve said enough. Let’s get going. It’s time for you to see theory in action.’

We finished our drinks and walked the short distance to the SOAS students’ union on Russell Square. It was a squat, nondescript building. We flashed our student cards (a gym pass and a travelcard) at the bored-looking sentinel and paid £5 each to get in. We went down two flights of stairs, through a set of swing doors, and there it was: the disco. In a list of London’s thousand top nightspots, SOAS wouldn’t feature. There were, however, plenty of foreign-looking students, sitting at tables or milling around. The female/male ratio looked encouraging. The dance floor was already busy at ten o’clock. Two dark-skinned girls walked past me, laughing. I glanced at Roy. He was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

‘Ah, Magnus. It’s like shooting sloths in a barrel.’

#

The following Monday, our new editorial team assembled. When I arrived, Diya was already sitting at her new desk, looking blissful. Dirty John had taken her departure badly, apparently storming off on Friday lunchtime for an extended session of violent tugging.

‘All right, Diya?’

‘Oh yes.’ She looked at me for an uncomfortably long time.

I excused myself and went downstairs to wait for Carla in reception. She had just arrived. She was wearing a tight-fitting, New York Herald Tribune t-shirt.

‘Morning, Magnus. First day in the media circus. Will you show me the ropes?’

I led her up to the sales floor. Roy swooped over and insisted that he give Carla the grand tour. It took them a while. Every salesman she met seemed to need a lingering, personal introduction. As she moved from one group to another, I heard whoops, hollers and guffaws. Backs were slapped. I noticed some horse play with the dildo. The atmosphere was juvenile and euphoric.

After I’d introduced Carla to the editors and she’d been shown the fire exits by HR, we held a meeting with Roy and the sales team to discuss the launch issues of *World Rail Frontiers* and *Port Infrastructure Horizons*. Our new editorial team needed to hit the ground running; we had just one week to produce editorial plans for each title and a further four weeks to assemble and edit the copy. The sales team trooped out happily. Roy grabbed me as I was leaving.

‘This is it, Magnus, the tipping point. We’re on the verge of greatness. We’ve inspired them. The fuckers believe. Let’s take advantage of the opportunity. Capitalize!’

Roy was right. The atmosphere within Westminster Media was buzzing. The main generator of enthusiasm was not however the new editorial team of Carla, Diya and I, but the upcoming summer party. Everyone on the sales floor, in the editorial room and in the database corner was up for it; the mood was of mass arousal.

Tom filled me in on the background. Twice a year, in June and at Christmas, the firm hired a venue and provided free drinks for three hours, giving rise to a Bacchanalian rampage. The previous summer, they had hired Madame Tussauds, resulting in thirty thousand pounds of damages (the Doctor Who aliens came in for particular mistreatment) and the finance director’s conviction (overturned on appeal due to witness irregularities) on charges of riotous behavior.

The 2005 Christmas party at the London Dungeon had been especially destructive, leaving the Sweeney Todd exhibit a charred ruin. The 2004 summer party had been held at Stamford Bridge football ground, where the firm’s CEO, Caspar Blok, was a season-ticket holder

and where the night's events (which included someone taking a shit in the manager's dugout) had led to his ticket being revoked permanently.

Westminster Media took its parties seriously. The staff set themselves the challenge, individually and collectively, of combining sex, violence and disorder into imaginative new forms of mayhem. The results, invariably, drew attention. Recent events had welcomed attendance from representatives of London Fire Brigade, the Metropolitan Police, the London Ambulance Service, the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Her Majesty's Coastguard.

The editors maintained a list of the different party-related criminal charges accumulated by Westminster Media employees. It included gross indecency, violent disorder, supplying controlled drugs, passing counterfeit notes, firearm possession, housebreaking, trespassing, kidnapping, arson, endangering the safety of railway passengers, brothel keeping, theft of a wheelchair, driving a vehicle on a motorway against the flow of traffic, stealing a hovercraft, endangering a ship by misconduct and firing upon a vessel of HM Customs (the last three from the 2003 summer party in Brighton).

The parties had given rise to custodial sentences, employment tribunals, marriage breakups and a burglary-related letter of complaint from the Indonesian High Commissioner. At the 2003 Christmas party, Andrew Lloyd Weber had been bottled off stage.

All this had created a powerful company folklore. The parties were anticipated eagerly for months. The venue for this summer's shindig, London Zoo, had been a popular choice. The troops were gearing up for battle.

#

By Thursday, Carla and Diya had produced viable editorial plans for the launch issues of *World Rail Frontiers* and *Port Infrastructure Horizons*. I'd given Diya the ports title, thinking the topic would be too dull for Carla. Railways seemed a bit more romantic and likely to appeal to her. Guy had stopped me on the stairs a week previously and asked me to "reimagine" our strictly symmetrical editorial structure, whereby if an advertiser bought page ten to promote air filtration systems, page eleven had to be an article on developments in air filtration systems. Apparently it was no longer "fit for purpose".

‘I’ll be sorry to see it go, Magnus. There’s a beautiful simplicity about the model. But Caspar has decided. Go it must.’

Since then, I’d come up with a new editorial template.

1. Editor’s letter
2. “What’s new?” industry news snippets
3. “The big interview”. A conversation with a prominent industry person.
4. “Project report 1”, thematically linked with whichever advertiser bought the space.
5. “Country focus 1”, geographically linked with whichever advertiser bought the space.
6. “Project report 2”, as above
7. “Country focus 2”, as above
8. “Project report 3”, as above
9. “Facts and funnies”. This would be the last page, opposite the inside back cover. If it proved too difficult to find any “funnies”, it would be called “Fun facts”.

This structure could serve as the skeleton for all our titles. I knew from Roy that Westminster Media’s salespeople were deeply conservative, fearful of any change that might negatively impact the quantity and quality of their deals. I sat down with Norrie, Jason and Adam to talk them through the editorial structure. I used my most reassuring, airline pilot voice.

‘You’re getting the best of both worlds, in fact, with this new flexible format. On the one hand, we retain the crucial ability for clients to influence the content which appears alongside their adverts. On the other hand, we’re delivering an attractive, twenty-first century editorial product that readers will value and keep, and that advertisers will be proud of.’

I made confident eye contact with each of the trio, bracing myself for their whining objections.

‘Cool, man.’

‘Sound.’

‘Like it.’

They trooped out. Perhaps it was the upcoming summer party, perhaps it was Carla’s bewitching influence. The vibes from the sales floor towards our editorial team were respectful and positive. Things were going easier than I’d anticipated.

Before she'd started, I'd wondered how Carla would fit into Westminster Media life. I needn't have worried. She was relaxed and confident, giving out as many filthy wise cracks as she received. She was an instant hit.

I'd arranged my, Carla's, and Diya's desks in a triangle, to facilitate team bonding. During the first week I frequently found Diya staring at me when I glanced at her. Often, I found myself gazing at Carla, snapping out of it, then glancing guiltily at a watching Diya. I realised the triangle wasn't such a good idea.

Carla kept us updated on the various chat-up gambits being used against her. During her first week, she was invited to a karaoke night in Romford, to pose for a sculpture, to attend a Sikh vegetarian feast, to experience the magic hands of a Reiki master, to go indoor skiing in Milton Keynes and to have sex on Hampstead Heath during the full moon. Jenson told her "your eyes are like spanners - each time I look into them, my nuts tighten".

Meanwhile, Roy strutted about as a utahraptor and deals were being brought in at record rates. Each day yielded new successes. Whenever an advertorial deal was signed, Roy handed me a copy of the contract, spelling out the article the customer required. In one 24 hour period we sold features on "Shipping containers, from here to eternity", "What next for thermoplastic paint?" and "Implants 2050: Towards the Bionic Penis".

'The Bionic Penis?'

'It's for our medical devices magazine. 80k deal. Back cover and a four-page spread.'

'But Tom's the editor of Medical. He should be doing it.'

'Caspar wants you to do it. Perhaps Tom's busy with other things.'

I looked over at Tom. He was watching football on YouTube.

'Right. I'll talk to him anyway. Hey, I wanted to ask, a lot of these advertorial contracts list Charles Sterling as the salesman. Who's he? I don't remember meeting him.'

'He's half the people on the sales floor. A few years ago, someone started using it as a nom de plume. It caught on. Sounds solid, trustworthy. Better than Sanjay or Jez, or whatever their real name is.'

‘But what happens when someone rings, asking for Charles Sterling?’

‘Anyone fields it. They just say “Speaking”.’

‘Ah. Right.’

The following week, Roy slapped a contract down on my desk. Metrofirm, a Russian engineering conglomerate, had been persuaded to pay over-the-odds money for their oligarch owner, Anatoly Filin, to be the subject of *World Rail Frontiers*’ first “Big Interview”.

‘It’s a big fucking deal. Filin’s in London now, his PR firm wants us to interview him today.’

‘OK. Carla can handle it.’

‘Of course she can. I’ll brief her.’

At 11 o’clock, Carla headed off, notepad in hand, for a lunch meeting with Mr Filin at the Mandarin Oriental. She arrived back at 4.50, drunk, singing Goldfinger and swinging a small, new leather handbag.

‘Hey! How did the interview go?’

She swung the bag at me, connecting with my chin.

‘Are you feeling it, Magnus? Are you Filin the quality? Caress the leather! It’s python, or chameleon, or something. A leaving gift from the oligarch.’

She turned it upside down. A business card fell out. I picked it up. It felt like velvet.

‘Höfspäten Imperial Ivory, Magnus. Blind embossed, gold foil. £30 per card. Minimum order a thousand.’

‘Eh?’

‘I just made that up.’

Diya studied the card’s content. It didn’t take her long, as there were only two words.

‘Anatoly Filin. That’s it? He’s not giving much away.’

‘Turn it over’.

In a flourish of blue ink, he'd written a phone number.

'Sweet!' said Diya.

'So I guess the interview went well.'

'He was all smiles. His assistant asked afterwards if they could have his photo on the front cover if they paid double. A hundred and twenty thousand, instead of sixty.'

'Jesus. I don't see a problem there. Good effort. Have you told Roy and Jason?'

'Will head over there now.' She was beaming.

'Hey, well done Carla. You're an ace.'

I looked back at my computer screen, sensing that Diya was frowning at me but not wanting to check.

Chapter 5

Friday was the big day. The day of the zoo. Precious little work was carried out by anyone. At lunch, there was a mass exodus from the sales floor to the pubs around Spitalfields. By three, the only people left in the building were the editors and the HR stooges. Database Pete had long since fucked off.

‘Carla, Diya,’ I said, ‘what avails it to fight the system? Let’s go to the pub.’

We spent a fun few hours with the rest of the editors in the Hoop and Grapes, a run-down pub in Jack the Ripper country. When we strolled back to Brick Lane, the scene outside the brewery was, in keeping with the occasion, chaotic. Most of the salespeople were in fancy dress. I saw Captain Hook, the Pink Panther, King Henry VIII, a high-ranking Nazi and two cavemen. A pantomime horse was being ridden enthusiastically by Satan. The Pope stood propped against a wall, pissing into a beer can. Sales managers were handing out bottles of beer from buckets while the HR stooges struggled to usher people on board three waiting coaches. A circus ringmaster, decked out in a top hat and red velvet coat and tails, stood to one side surveying the scene. When he saw me looking at him he cracked his whip. I noticed he was holding a Duvel.

‘Hey, Roy. Master of ceremonies, I see.’

He held out an arm to Carla, and we boarded the coach.

The Westminster Media party arrived at London Zoo just as the last “normal” visitors were leaving the premises. Zoo staff were on hand to funnel our unruly horde into an open space in front of the lion’s enclosure. An official in a high visibility jacket was standing on a podium, holding a clipboard. He shouted into a megaphone.

‘Welcome, Westminster Media! Welcome to ZSL London Zoo! The Zoological Society of London is an international scientific and educational charity whose mission is to promote the worldwide conservation of animals and their habitats. Over the years ZSL has been home to a number of famous animals, including Guy the gorilla, Goldie the golden eagle...’

A shout of “Wanker!” met with a loud cheer, stopping him momentarily.

‘Our priority is to take care of our animals and the safety of our visitors. Please stay within the confines of Zone A, covering the penguin, gorilla, chimpanzee, cheetah, rhino and sealion enclosures. Please be aware of the zoo’s hazards. Read all warning signs. Do not enter any enclosures. Do not feed the animals. Do not throw anything at, or otherwise provoke the animals. Do not climb on railings, walls or trees. Thank you for choosing ZSL London Zoo as the host for your...’.

‘WANKER!’

The zoo official consulted his clipboard then swiftly exited the podium. His place was soon taken by the cavorting pantomime horse.

A Hawaiian-style beach bar had been set up to dispense free drinks. It was quickly besieged. A sound system exploded into life, blaring out Roots Manuva. I heard monkeys shrieking. The festivities had begun.

I spent an hour drifting from group to group of revellers. When I was chatting to Carla and Diya in front of the penguin pit, the ring master appeared, carrying a bottle of Becks, a can of Becks, and an empty glass.

‘Right, clowns. I want to demonstrate something. Can you handle some intense knowledge?’

‘Did a man in a circus outfit really just call us clowns?’ Carla asked Diya.

‘I assume it’s some form of self-mocking, post-modern irony.’

Roy grunted dismissively and handed me the can.

‘Take a sip. Concentrate on how it tastes. Experience it!’

I did. The beer tasted like a can of Becks always tastes. It was passed on to Diya, then Carla.

‘Right, now have a drink from the bottle. Concentrate, you fuckers.’

We did as instructed.

‘OK.’ He poured the beer from the can into the glass. ‘Now, try this. You’d better be fucking concentrating, Magnus.’

‘Yes, Magnus, concentrate, you fucker’, said Diya.

I drank from the glass and looked at Roy, nonplussed. Diya did similar. Carla, however, drank, smiled and nodded.

‘Ha, you see? She fucking gets it, Magnus. Carla knows the score!’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I’m talking about the psychological impact of the receptacle, you dunce. An object produces a different effect depending on the medium. You didn’t experience those three sips equally, yet it was the same beer. All sorts of factors are at work here. Carla might have liked the bottle more, Diya might have preferred the can, because for each of them it brought back happy beer-drinking memories, whether eating barbecued kangaroo on Bondi beach or huddled over a can of beans in a grim Ealing slum.’

‘That’s EXACTLY how it was,’ confirmed Diya.

‘Eh?’ I said.

‘It’s neuroscience. The way you feel about what you’re eating or drinking stems more from psychological factors like memories, than from the actual ingredients of the thing. When you do the Pepsi Challenge under laboratory conditions, 50% of people say they prefer Coke and 50% say Pepsi. But if you show people what they’re drinking, 75% say they prefer Coke. And why’s that?’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted.

‘The Halo Effect, Magnus. A form of cognitive bias in which your impression of a person, or in this case a brand, influences how you experience its properties. When you understand how the Halo Effect works, you can start to manipulate events and behaviour. Magical things become

possible! Because experience, clowns, is all about context. Jesus! Is any of this fucking sinking in?’

‘You’re right, Roy’, Carla said. ‘Or rather, you’re half right. Do you know why I preferred drinking from the glass? Colour. Colour has a huge influence on how you experience things. With the glass, I get to see the amber nectar. Reds, oranges and yellows work on the subconscious, making you salivate, getting you excited. Lager, when you pour it out, is a happy colour. It cheers you up just seeing it. Drinking from a green bottle, or from a can, you don’t get any of that.’

Roy looked at her.

‘There’s an experiment that shows that if you give someone strawberry yoghurt in a white bowl, it tastes nicer than the same yoghurt served in a black bowl. What do you think of that, Roy?’

Roy took off his top hat and scratched his head.

‘Well, that’s what I’m fucking talking about! Yes, science holds the answers. Fucking hell, Carla, you’re an ideas woman, a woman after my own heart. Yes. In your own way, you’re somewhat of a female me.’

‘We were saying that just before you arrived,’ confirmed Diya.

‘Eh? Ah. Hmm.’

Roy stared at Carla, then at me, flicking his whip agitatedly. It was the first time I’d seen him lost for words.

I broke the silence.

‘Carla, why don’t you tell Roy how your book’s coming along?’

‘*Olga’s Awakening*? I’m writing it with Mia, my flat mate. It’s a pornographic homage to the Oxen of the Sun chapter in *Ulysses*, where Joyce parodies a bunch of different narrative styles. Roy, as a Dubliner, you’ll know what I’m talking about.’

‘Naturally,’ said Roy.

‘I write two pages of pornography in, for instance, a hard-boiled detective style. Then I choose a different genre for Mia and she has to continue the story in that style, then she chooses another one for me again. We’ve written about thirty pages now. I just did a paranormal scene, now Mia’s doing a picture book chapter. You should meet Mia, by the way, Roy. You’d like her.’

‘Where’s she from?’ asked Roy.

‘She’s Welsh.’

He shrugged.

‘Been there, done that. Do you know any Gambians?’

While Carla pondered this, we heard loud, distressed screeching. Three members of the *Military Technology Solutions* sales team were urinating through the bars of the capuchin monkey cage. Somewhere in the distance a bottle crashed, prompting an angry feline roar. The gloves were coming off now. The party was entering Phase Two.

#

That was the night, as I staggered back along Regent’s Canal, veering perilously between the bushes and the water, that I admitted to myself I was in love with Carla. My history with women up to that point had been chequered and inglorious. I’d been in two long-term relationships, both of which I’d scuppered through immature stupidity. My time in Paris had at least exposed me to imaginative erotic techniques, but I was as far as you could get from a confident seducer. Carla, I thought, was incredible – beautiful, intelligent, funny, self-confident. That night, I couldn’t sleep. Rather, I chose not to sleep, enjoying conjuring up a hundred variations on a fantasy where, one day in the office, Carla asked to speak to me in private.

‘*Certainly, Carla, what is it?*’

‘*I can’t hide it from myself any longer, Magnus, or from you. I’m madly in love with you. Take me away from this place. Let’s live naked in a teepee in Alice Springs.*’

#

On Monday, Roy summoned me for a chat in the courtyard.

‘Right, Magnus. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Did Abraham Lincoln say that? It might have been Hitler. Anyway, I know I’m not Carla’s type. But fuck, what a woman. I’ve been thinking about her all weekend. Have you noticed her tits? She must be sensational in bed. So let’s give it a go. I may crash and burn, but what matters is to be the man who flew towards the sun. Who gave it a fucking lash.’

I felt sick hearing this.

‘Oh. Well, good luck.’

‘Magnus, I’m not telling you this out of professional politeness, or so you can wish me luck. I’m roping you in. You have a role to play here.’

‘What?’

‘Remember what I said at the zoo? It’s all about context. What I want you to do is get you and me invited over to Carla’s place for dinner. We’ll watch DVDs with her and whatshername, the flatmate, smoke a hookah pipe, compose pornography, I don’t fucking know. Four mature adults, relaxing in each other’s company, heuristics going wild.’

‘You want me to invite us to Carla’s house?’

‘Piece of fucking cake. She’ll be delighted.’

I had no idea whether she’d be delighted or not. I knew I wasn’t, but I didn’t see any way to postpone or sabotage Roy’s plan. I hadn’t met Mia, the flatmate. Perhaps Roy’s attentions could be diverted in that direction.

As often happened, Roy’s instincts proved correct. When I casually broached the issue with Carla, saying the four of us should get together sometime, she immediately agreed. The next day, we fixed a date to go for drinks in Old Street, followed by dinner at her flat in Dalston.

I told Roy the good news. By now, the unwelcome image of him brainwashing and ravishing Carla was high-jacking my nightly fantasies.

‘Can I speak to you in private, Magnus?’

‘Certainly, Carla, what is it?’

'I can't hide it from myself any longer, or from you. I'm madly in love with Roy. We're leaving together this evening. We're going to live naked in a teepee in Alice Springs.'

#

Next morning, Roy's expanded sales team assembled for the first time. The external recruits, internal transfers and Norrie's existing team gathered in a meeting room for a team talk. Carla, Diya and I had been asked to attend. We sat at the back. The atmosphere was boisterous. The salesmen (and they were all men) were chatting noisily. The new recruits blended in seamlessly with their shiny suits, purple ties and hair gel. The room was set up like a classroom and each seat was taken. We all sat there, facing the vacant front of the room.

Roy flung open the door and marched in. He had a spring in his stride and was beaming. 'Morning all!' He high-fived the people in the front row. 'What a time to be alive! Gentlemen, welcome, I have wonderful news for us all. Sit down, shut up and lend me your ears. Now the first bit of good news is... we've managed to recruit FOUR of London's finest sales professionals to join our team. Where are they? Gary, Ray, Jez, Gary, stand up! Put your hands together and clap, colleagues! Four star performers that we have pinched from our competitors. They will fucking fly here!'

Gary, Ray, Jez and Gary stood up to accept the acclaim.

'The second bit of good news, and most of you know this already, is that for the first time in our company's history we can boast of a world-class team of editors. I'm talking about talented creative professionals. It's a far cry from the gin-soaked hacks we put up with for too long. Having Magnus, Carla and Diya on board is a massive fucking coup for us. Their specialized knowledge and skills will produce outstanding editorial products. With their support, we will smash last year's sales figures. Give them a hearty fucking round of applause!'

A hearty round of applause followed.

'Right, the third bit of good news. *World Rail Frontiers* and *Port Infrastructure Horizons* are ready to launch. These products will generate so much money for everyone in this room that I've taken it on myself to oversee the preparation of the marketing database. As I speak, thousands of top-level executives are sitting by their desks, drumming their fingers, waiting in anticipation for

their magazines to arrive. And they're in for a treat! The content that Magnus, Carla and Diya are putting together, and I hope they'll forgive me for revealing this to you, is top fucking notch. People will fucking lap it up! Jason and Adam will tell you which sections you'll be selling on. We'll have launch meetings at nine thirty, right after this.'

He paused.

'Would you like more?'

Nobody spoke.

'Would anyone here care for some *more* good news?'

'Yeah!' came a cry from the back.

'I can't reveal the details yet. But I want to tip you off that preparations are well advanced for a revolutionary new product enhancement which, if my calculations are correct, will boost everyone's take-home pay by at least 25%. Yes! Imagine that! I am working hard behind the scenes to bring this off. But I'm going to ask you to keep this to yourselves for now. Mum's the word. Pretend you never heard me mention this.'

'What is he on about?' asked Diya.

'No idea.'

'And there's one last thing. Pay attention, please, gentlemen, because there is something important I want to discuss with you. In my experience, and doubtless yours' too, it's crucial to understand the difference between bullshit and facts. Because let's face it, in our walk of life, and in this company in particular, we hear a lot of bullshit. It can be difficult to establish what's really true. Am I right?'

Heads nodded. He had everyone's attention.

'Most of the people sitting in this room will have heard, one way or another, that I'm Westminster Media's top performing salesman, that I book more revenue than anyone in the firm's history. It's OK, we all like to chat about these things - who's sold what, who's got the biggest dick... me in both cases, as it happens. I want to reassure you, this kind of chatter is

natural and normal in a sales culture. It's who we are. So. You have heard the rumours, but I want to give you the truth. I want our relationship to be based on openness and honesty.'

'He's going to get his cock out', said Diya.

Roy pulled out some papers and handed them to a shiny-suit in the front row.

'Here are my last three pay cheques. Darren, pass them around. Take-home pay in July, £8,813. August, £9,592. September, £10,647. I'm not boasting here, I just want you to know the facts about how much you can earn here if you apply yourself. Terry! Where's Terry?'

A hand went up. It was one of the internal transfers.

'Terry, be honest. Why did you want to move onto my team from Pat's?'

'To make more money.'

'Exactly. Now, I'm not saying Pat's a worse salesman than me. Far from it! Those words will never cross my lips. But what I *will* say is that I am a better salesman than Pat. And why's that?'

No answers were forthcoming.

'I'm no smarter than Pat. I'm a simple man of average intelligence. But I have *applied* myself to learning the science of sales. I have worked out how to get people to say "Yes", and how to get them to sign contracts.'

There was a knock at the door.

'Come in!'

It was Gina, who worked at the Brick Lane Beigel Bake. She came in bearing a tray piled high with salt-beef, cream-cheese and smoked salmon bagels.

'Put them down, Gina! You all know Gina, right? Of course you fucking do! They're the freshest, most delicious bagels in London. Everyone, help yourself. Get out your seats. Grab one! It's the breakfast of champions. Quick about it, then sit back down.'

The salesmen got out of their seats and pillaged the tray.

‘Sit down! OK, what was I saying? That the science of sales, gentlemen, allows me to take home, on average, nine thousand pounds a month. Do you know what the great thing is? I am you. Yes indeed! I’m just like you. You’re just like me. If I can earn that much, we all can, and I’ll prove it to you. I’m going to make it happen. I am going to transfer what is in my head to yours.’

He tapped his forehead then fanned his fingers out, wagging them at the room.

‘I’ll teach you the science, I’ll give you the tools and the techniques. You like that? Do you like that?’

Every head was nodding.

‘But, before I do... you need to promise me something. Because here I am, assuming that you’re ready for this great leap forward, that you want to make that sort of money. But who knows? Maybe I’m jumping to conclusions. Maybe this isn’t right for you.’

‘This is virtuoso stuff,’ Carla whispered in my ear. I tried to snort dismissively, but it came out as a choke.

‘Sit back in your seat for a moment. Let’s take a moment to establish the truth about who we are and what we want. Please, ask yourself this. And be honest with yourself, it’s all about honesty. Do you want to earn £9,000 a month? Do you want to come into work and feel fucking great because you know you’re going to be taking home that massive amount of money? Do you want that?’

‘And please, think seriously about it. Because we’re talking about a free choice. This is your decision, and it’s an important one. It’s going to have major implications for your life, for your career, for your social standing. I want you to know that it is absolutely fine for you to come up to me after this and say, “No, Roy, you know what, I’m not quite ready for that level of professional success.” I’ll shake your hand and we can move you on to a slower-paced team.’

‘So this is the question I’m asking you. And I want an honest answer. Are you on board? Do you want to participate in this success? Do you want to join me in the VIP room of life, where we drive performance vehicles and eat the finest pussy London can offer? No offence, ladies.’

‘None taken,’ said Diya. ‘What is it they say? You are what you eat.’

‘Do you want it?’ Roy continued. ‘Because it’s here. Reach out. You can have it. It’s here for you.’

He stretched out his arms wide, like a preacher.

‘Come on. It’s time. Who’s in? Put your hands up if you want it. Who’s with me?’

Everyone’s hand was up. I pictured Gregory Razran chuckling in his grave.

Chapter 6

One day, while Diya and I were debating whether a news snippet about eighteen Iraqi Kurds who had stowed away in a shipping container in Kuwait, believing they were bound for Hamburg but who ended up in North Korea, where they were promptly executed as spies, qualified as a “fact” or a “funny”, an email arrived from Westminster Media’s Chief Executive, Caspar Blok, a man I had shaken hands with on my first day and never met since. I eyed it apprehensively. It was a one-liner. “Pop by my office, would you?” was both the subject and the content.

I left Diya wrestling over the Kurdish conundrum and headed upstairs to the CEO’s glass-walled office. His assistant Jenny, who had her own smaller, adjacent glass-walled office, motioned for me to knock at his door. Caspar, who was talking on the phone, beckoned me in, pointing towards a seat.

‘How are their cash flow and liabilities? ... What’s the gearing like? ... What?? ... No, FUCK that, Giles, obviously I want control but I need proper claw backs...well, bash heads together. Bye.’

He hung up.

‘Sorry about that. Good to see you.’

He reached over the desk and shook my hand.

‘Been hearing great things about you everywhere I go. Guy, Roy, everyone’s singing your praises. A magic editorial touch, they tell me. If Jenson’s to be believed, you’re applying

revolutionary linguistic techniques developed by the KGB to write fiction that can control people's minds. '

'Ah. Well. He isn't.'

'Good to have you on board, Magnus. Let me tell you what's on my mind. Here at Westminster Media, we've always been perceived, rightly, as shysters. It's an identity we've willingly assumed. It suited the age, the business model and the kind of people we needed to employ. But the times, they are a-changing. We both know where media is going. Controlled, non-requested circulation won't cut it any longer. MDs won't sign off on full-page ads any more, it's all being handed over to marketers, the sort of tedious cunts who ask annoying questions about return on investment. Agreed?'

'Absolutely.'

'This place is a dinosaur, Magnus; a relic. We need to move away from the junk mail model, towards an opt-in subscriber base. And the only way to do that, as you know better than anyone, is through first-class content.'

'Indeed', I nodded.

'Here's my proposal. We make you Head of Content, put you in control of the whole editorial operation. Magazines, websites, the lot. Our content output has lacked leadership and direction since... well, always. It's imperative that you provide it. Can we agree about that?'

'Um, yes. Certainly.'

'Great. I'll sort it out with HR. Keep reporting to Guy. I'm relying on you, got it?'

'Yes, sure. Thanks.'

'Good man. Off you go. Show me the novel when you're done with it.'

#

I walked back down the stairs. Half way down, Roy was standing on the landing.

'How'd it go?'

'Uh. Fine. I'm now Head of Content.'

‘The news has been very well received on the sales floor. What pay rise did you negotiate?’

‘I didn’t ask for one.’

‘Naturally.’ He slapped me on the shoulder. ‘And Caspar’s probably thinking he played you like a chump. But take a look at your work contract when you get back. The remuneration part. You’re in for a pleasant surprise.’

Back at my desk, I dug out the contract. It mentioned that I would receive a 3% share of contribution to revenue of “projects under my editorial control”. I had walked upstairs with three Westminster Media titles under my editorial control. I walked back down with thirty five.

‘Fuck...’

#

That Friday, Roy and I had our double date with Carla and her flatmate, Mia. I had been dreading it all week, whereas Roy (and worse, Carla) had been talking enthusiastically about it. Diya put on a brave face.

‘Remember Carla, no S&M on a first date. Keep him keen.’

We met in The Reliance, which was heaving with after-work drinkers. Mia was short and quirky, with a dyed black bob, a striped sailor’s shirt, miniskirt and red patent leather shoes. Roy laughed out loud when he saw her. She laughed back, eyes sparkling. It was a warm evening. We took our drinks to Hoxton Square and sat on the grass.

‘Where are you from, Mia?’ I asked.

‘Rhyl. It’s by the sea. Do you like to be beside the seaside, Roy?’

Roy cackled.

‘The action is in cities, not by the seaside.’

‘Ooh, I like action too. It’s all around, even by the sea.’

Roy shrugged. Carla winked at Mia.

We spent an hour chatting on the grass, then walked up Kingsland Road, stopping to buy wine. Mia said she worked as a primary school teacher in Peckham. I told her I wished I'd had a primary teacher like her.

Back at the flat, Mia and Carla disappeared to the kitchen while Roy critically appraised their book, music and DVD collection.

'*Les Enfants du Paradis*. You must watch this, Magnus, there's some useful insight there about the human condition. Oh, for fuck's sake... they've got Dylan's worst album. I can only assume it was a practical joke on his part.'

Mia served up the meal: plenty of spaghetti, meatballs, chocolate ice cream, red wine and shots of vodka. Roy was all smiles and charm, listening attentively, nodding sympathetically. Mia was talking about the challenges of getting six year-olds to develop a love of reading.

'It's an excellent point, Mia', said Roy. 'It's all about literacy, I've been saying that for years. Give a child a book and he reads for a day. Teach him to *read*, and he reads *every* day.'

'Uh, right' said Mia. 'More wine?'

'Fire away.'

'Hey Magnus', said Carla, 'when are we going to get to see your novel? The latest rumour is that it's written entirely in limericks.'

'Eh?'

'There's a competing claim circulating that you're only using two vowels and five consonants to write the entire thing.'

'That sounds fucking brutal,' said Roy.

'But none of that's true,' I protested. 'Anyway, I don't have anything I can show you yet.'

'Magnus is a perfectionist, ladies. He will take this project with him to the grave. It will crush him. What he needs to do, in my humble view, is apply the same ruthless editorial pragmatism to *Rostock* as he does so successfully with *Port Infrastructure Horizons*. We would all be better off for it.'

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ I conceded.

‘Of course I’m right. That’s practical advice, based on knowledge gained through experience. Phenomenology, Magnu.’

Mia, sat beside me, bumped her glass against mine. ‘I’m sure you’re a brilliant writer, Magnus. If you like, you can help me with the next chapter of *Olga’s Awakening*. I could do with a second opinion.’

‘Uh...’

I looked across the table, noticing with horror that Roy had his arm behind Carla’s back and appeared to be stroking her. Worse, her eyes were closed. Worse still, she was smiling. I felt nauseous.

‘Ah. Sure.’

‘Great. Come on then.’ Mia grabbed my wrist and led me to her bedroom. I trudged, head down, like a convict on his way to the scaffold.

In Mia’s bedroom, a red candle provided the only light.

‘Take off your shoes and lie down on the bed. I’ll read you the latest chapter.’

I did as instructed.

‘Um, do you have any music?’ I had a sudden fear of hearing Carla moaning in pleasure.

‘Sure! We’ve got a great Dylan album. I’ll get it.’

From the next room, I heard Mia say ‘Carla! Naughty.’ I looked at the ceiling, willing it all to be a dream.

‘Here it is!’ Mia put on a CD. It was Bob Dylan singing “Here Comes Santa Claus”. I closed my eyes.

#

When I woke up next morning, light was streaming through the window. Mia was sleeping. I lay still, wondering how I could get out of the flat. The thought of watching Roy paw

Carla at the breakfast table was grotesque. As I pondered the viability of exiting through the window, I could hear someone whistling in the kitchen, turning on water, filling a kettle. I was trapped.

Perhaps I could stay in bed with Mia until Roy eventually fucked off. Unfortunately, she was already stirring. Digging deep, I bent over and kissed her, and we spent the next half hour having unsatisfying sex. The sound of the front door slamming brought me to a climax.

When we emerged, Carla was sitting at the table, drinking coffee. She was wearing a big, baggy T-shirt and, it seemed, nothing else. Her beauty was breath-taking. I tried not to look at her.

I wolfed down some toast while Mia and Carla exchanged glances, raised eyebrows and grins. Five minutes after sitting down for breakfast, I was standing up again to leave.

‘Have to dash, unfortunately. Carla, see you on Monday. Mia... it was very nice to meet you.’

‘You too!’ She blew me a kiss. I waved at her feebly.

I stopped half way back along the canal walk, and threw stones into the water. I stood there for a while, watching the ripples. I could hear a buzzing noise, growing louder. Two juvenile delinquents were riding a moped at high speed, aiming right for me. At the last moment I leapt backwards, falling into a bush.

‘Wanker!’ the ten year-old pillion passenger shouted over his shoulder.

I watched them depart, unable to extricate myself from the bush, getting stung by nettles and gouged by thorns.

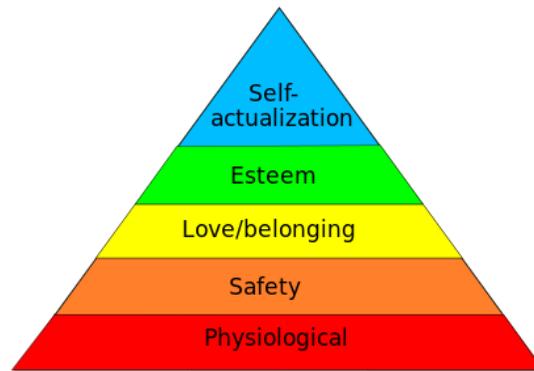
#

On Monday, I dragged myself into work. Carla had brought in a box of donuts. She greeted me with a big grin, Diya with a frown.

‘Carla’s been telling me you hit it off with her flatmate, Magnus.’

‘Ah. Um. Hm.’

I picked up a donut and started eating. At some point I would probably have to speak again, but I was determined to delay that moment by as long as possible. I was rescued by Roy. He marched over, gave a businesslike nod to Carla, and slapped a sheet of paper down on my desk. I looked at a giant, multi-colour triangle.



‘Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Magnus. The answers are all there.’

It was too early in the day for this. Too early in the week. Or perhaps it was too late for me. I didn’t know.

‘The answers to what?’

Roy helped himself to a donut, relaxed and self-confident in the presence of the woman he had brainwashed and the man he had crushed.

‘Maslow devoted his life to the study of human motivation. The hierarchy of needs is his greatest achievement, his fucking legacy. It spells everything out. At the bottom of the pyramid you have people’s most basic bodily needs, the things that keep the human race alive – food, water, sleep, sex.’

He winked at Carla.

‘The next level up is shelter and safety. It’s only once you’ve got those bottom two levels sorted that you can start to accomplish things. After that, you get into psychological needs: human interaction, friendship, community. Another level up relates to people’s need for success, self-esteem and status. And then you get to the top, which is our desire to realise our full potential.’

Where in God’s name was he going with this?

‘Do you know what this is all about, Magnus?’

‘No. No, I don’t.’

‘I’m talking about a quest, Magnus. A quest for fulfillment.’

‘Right.’

As Roy munched on his donut, I tried to calculate the repercussions if I killed, or at least seriously maimed him. I pictured myself smashing his face into the desk and running away.

‘Forget people’s basic needs, Magnus. The top three levels of the pyramid are where the action is. Diya, you know what I’m talking about.’

‘I do? That’s encouraging to hear! Here was me, thinking I had no fucking idea what you were ranting about.’

‘Look, this isn’t complicated. How do we make money as a company? We ask CEOs to take out adverts in business-to-business magazines. Do we fulfill their higher needs?’

‘If they pay enough to have their face on the front cover, then yes,’ said Carla.

‘But only one person can have that. What we need is a pluralistic model which allows us to meet the higher needs of groups of people at a time. Are you ready to learn how we’re going to do that?’

‘I think we are, yes,’ said Carla. ‘Are you ready, Diya?’

‘Put it this way. I’m as ready as I’m ever going to be.’

‘OK. Here it is. The Westminster Diners Club.’

Roy gave me a knowing look and a nod of the head, expecting me to grasp what he was talking about.

I looked blankly at him.

‘What?’

‘Imagine, Magnus, that you work in sewage, or IT, or roads, or for a local authority, or anything. We’ll call you Brendan. You’ve worked your way up to a senior position. Given your

responsibilities, you're expected to keep up to date with workplace developments. Read magazines, join an association, attend courses and the like. Now as far as the outside world and civilized society is concerned, you're a boring cunt. You find your job interesting, but when you explain what you do at parties, on the rare occasions you're invited anywhere, people walk away. Your world has a total lack of glitz, glamour and romance. There are no attractive colleagues, there is no tinsel or magic dust. Just sewage or IT, and lots of middle-aged cunts in cardigans.'

'It's a touching, beautiful picture', Carla said.

'Essentially, Brendan, you've made it most of the way up Maslow's pyramid, but you've come up against a brick wall with the esteem part, the social element. And you won't get to self-actualization until you acknowledge that, confront it, and remedy the fucker.'

'Right.'

'Pass me a donut please, Carla,' said Diya. 'Us bottom-of-the-pyramid types need a boost.'

'And this is where *we* come in.' Roy looked at me. 'Brendan, can we agree that a career in sewage brings with it the necessity for continuous professional development? As the technology changes, you need to learn about it, correct?'

'Sure.'

'Brendan, if you had the choice between attending a session on sewage technology at a conference room in Slough, or meeting your peers for an evening's discussions over gourmet food and fine wines in the private dining room of Le Gavroche, or Hakkusan, or Sketch, which would you choose? Eh?'

'I don't know any of those places.'

'That's right! You don't know any of those places. You've never dined there, they're way out of your league. I'm sorry to be honest, Brendan, but why deny it? You'll never eat in any of them, unless... unless... what if you received an invite to join the Westminster Media Diners Club, and the opportunity to meet up with a small group of like-minded Brendans for an enjoyable evening in one of London's most exclusive restaurants, to discuss developments in sewage technology? The group is limited to twelve senior sewage executives, and the dinner will be hosted by Diya here, the attractive, young female editor of *World Sewage Today*.'

‘It’s what my parents always dreamed for me,’ said Diya.

‘Brendan, the best thing about this is that we are *inviting* you. You’re our guest, it is completely free of charge. We’d like you to join us at Le Gavroche on Thursday the 10th of October. Can we go ahead and confirm your participation?’

‘OK, Roy. It’s a compelling proposition. But we’re *inviting* them for dinner?’

‘Yes, we’re inviting twelve sewage plant directors for dinner, which costs about £125 per head at London’s most exclusive eateries. If there are fifteen people there, the food and drink bill will be £1,875. And when it’s time to leave, we’ll arrange taxis for everyone and give them a vintage bottle of claret to take home. That brings the costs up to about £2,300.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘It’s unfair. How come Diya gets to be editor of *World Sewage Today*?’ asked Carla.

‘Ignore that crazy woman, Roy. She’s dangerously unhinged,’ said Diya.

‘Magnus, forget Brendan for a moment. Now imagine you work as Head of Marketing at one of Europe’s biggest wastewater technology firms. It’s your job to ensure that when sewage plants upgrade and when contracts get allocated, you get the business. Your name is... fucking hell, I don’t know... Brendan. And the reason I’m calling you, Brendan, is that in exactly six weeks’ time, directors from twelve major UK sewage plants will be holding a private dinner in Central London to discuss industry developments, focusing on technology’s role in improving operations. There’s the opportunity for one company to host the dinner, giving you two seats at the table and the opportunity to make an eight-minute presentation demonstrating your company’s leading position. I’d like to give you the chance to sign up for this, before I talk to Brendan at ShitSolutions.’

We sat there silently, considering this.

‘The best thing about the whole scheme,’ said Diya, ‘is Roy’s decision to call everyone Brendan. A touch of genius.’

‘That’s neither here nor there. Consider the facts. The next time you take a dump, it will trickle its way through pipes and sewers, ending up at the Beckton Sewage Treatment Plant. Thames

Water, who operate the facility, have just announced a plan to upgrade it by building six new aeration lanes and sixteen circular settlement tanks. How much do you reckon that's going to cost them?'

'Oh wait, I know this!' said Diya.

Roy glared at her.

'No, hang on, sorry, I was thinking of how much it would cost to send a baboon to Pluto. Another thing altogether.'

Carla choked on her donut. Roy was oblivious.

'£187 million pounds, Magnus. For a relatively minor plant upgrade. THAT'S what I'm talking about!'

He looked at me triumphantly.

'Ah ha,' I said.

'So how much would you say the opportunity is worth to Marketing Brendan, to sit his CEO at the same table as twelve sewage plant directors? Total exclusivity, no competitors allowed within a mile of the building. Meaning that the next time one of those twelve sewage Brendans needs to spend a hundred million pounds on an upgrade, he'll remember Brendan's speech at that enjoyable, fancy dinner when he groped Diya's arse and she slipped him her phone number.'

'In fairness, I can see that part happening', Diya confirmed.

'Think, Magnus. Would you say it's worth investing £20,000 for that kind of unique business development opportunity? Twenty thousand up front, to open the way for multiple, £100 million contracts. How does that sound? Does it sound like a *reasonable* proposition?'

'Yes, why not.'

'Do you know what Immanuel Kant said?'

'Was it something about glow-worms?' asked Diya.

'Of course it fucking wasn't. He said reason is the arbiter of truth in all fucking judgments. The logic of the Westminster Diners Club is flawless. It comes from a calm, clear-headed acceptance

of who we are. We publish trade magazines for industries which attract sociopathic dullards but which are, however, awash with cash. We are their voice, friend and partner. We have the authority to summon the Brendans of this world. If it's an invite to a conference room in Slough, Brendan will politely and rightly tell us to fuck off. But if... IF... we were promising an evening of fine dining, excellent conversation and hints of debauchery in one of the world's most exclusive restaurants, as part of an exclusive club... Brendan will want that. He *needs* it, because it offers him a leg up Maslow's pyramid. Esteem and self-actualization! After a night at the Dining Club, Brendan will stagger through his front door feeling like a fucking GOD. And we will monetize his natural human needs at a premium.'

Carla, Diya and I sat there, eating our donuts.

'I'll say this. You've clearly given it a lot of thought,' Carla said.

'It opens up a whole new level of greatness. I've worked out some figures for how this could grow. Let's say we start modestly and do two dinners a year for the big utility and infrastructure firms. Two for sewage, two for electricity, two for natural gas, two for water, two for airports, two for telecoms, two for roads, two for rail, two for ports. Eighteen dinners at £20,000 a pop equals £360,000. Each dinner will be a hugely fucking enjoyable experience, so much so that the Brendans start emailing us, asking when we'll be holding the next event, and can they bring their friend, the Managing Director of East Anglian Sewers?'

'Don't toy with us, Roy,' said Carla. 'We all know that friend is called Brendan.'

'In year two, we start holding the dinners quarterly and revenues go up to £720,000. And it's a *lean* business. Our existing salespeople can sell the dinners. If you're already selling pages of advertising to ShitSolutions, you simply bundle in the Dining Club. It's the cherry on the turd.'

'That's magical,' said Diya.

'We only really need to create one new role, someone who can phone up the Brendans and entice them to attend. As long as we get the right person, these will be quick wins.'

'Who do you have in mind?' asked Carla.

'What we need is erotic capital. A seductress. Someone sophisticated, classy, debonair, suave, yet able to modulate up and down the filth scale at will.'

‘Good fucking grief,’ said Diya.

‘This calls for a targeted recruitment drive. Laser focus. We know the kind of voice we’re looking for. Who have voices? Actors. Who need regular jobs? Actors. Here we are.’

He placed a flyer on the desk in front of us.

A headline said *Earn £££ from your acting talents!*

Carla read it aloud. “*A unique opportunity has arisen for a talented female voice artist to work with one of the UK’s leading media companies on an exciting multi-media project.*” Multi-media project?’

‘The phone is one medium, email is another. It’s all about multi-media now.’

She read on. ‘*20 hours (flexible!) per week can earn you £25,000 a year. If you can seduce through the power of words, phone 0207 959 3674 and ask for Magnus.*’

‘What?’ I asked.

‘I’ll explain later. Keep going.’

‘*Actors with recent experience of playing The Whore of Babylon, Madame de Pompadour or Miss Money Penny are strongly encouraged to apply.*’

Carla put the ad down. We all looked at it.

‘Well. Seems like a watertight plan to me’, Carla said. ‘Diya?’

‘I’m temporarily lost for words.’

Roy nodded.

‘She gets it. Carla knows the score.’ He took another donut and perched himself on Carla’s desk.

We sat for a while, eating.

‘This,’ Carla said, ‘is the best place I’ve ever worked.’

‘I’ll see you later’, I said, and got up.

Chapter 7

It was too much. I couldn't take it anymore. I'd hit a limit of some sort. Whether of patience, or tolerance, or fortitude, I didn't know. I just had to get out. I grabbed my jacket and left. Over my shoulder, I noticed Roy and Carla kidding about and Diya looking at me. Fuck them.

I walked through the brewery courtyard and out, past Hawksmoor's church and Spitalfields Market, to Bishopsgate. It was 10 o'clock on Monday morning, the end of the morning rush hour. I crossed the street and went into Liverpool Street station. I wandered over to the departures board, looking at it blankly. There were trains leaving for Cheshunt, Ipswich, Enfield, Shenfield, Chingford. I bought a ticket from the machine and boarded the 10:13 to Southend-on-Sea.

I sat by the window and spent the time gazing outwards, thinking of nothing as Essex rolled by. The train was empty. When we arrived in Southend I heard seagulls. I walked down the High Street, towards the sea. Reaching the esplanade, I bought a toffee apple, then sat on the sea wall. The tide was in. In front of me, a pier stretched out to sea. A sign proclaimed it "the longest pleasure pier in the world". I set off walking along it. Thirty minutes later, the toffee apple long eaten and the wind howling in from the North Sea, I was still walking. When I eventually reached the end, there was a grim-looking café and gift shop. I sat down on a bench, and looked out to sea, squawking gulls swooping in and out of view. Some time passed.

'Awright chief?'

An old man, shabbily dressed, sat down beside me. He had a half-eaten sandwich and a half-full bottle of Famous Grouse. He poured some into a plastic cup. As he drank, I considered the

options. I could say nothing, and/or get up and leave (whereupon he'd consider me a cunt), or say something (revealing that I, like he, was Glaswegian).

'Not bad.'

He tilted his head appreciatively, then poured another drink and handed me the cup. I gulped it down.

'Fuck ye daein' oot here?'

'I don't know. I fancied getting out of London.'

'You don't fucking know! Ah know that feeling.'

He had another drink then poured another for me. I knocked it back.

'I'll tell you something. Mark my fucking words, boy. The thing about London is... dae it on yer own terms or don't fuckin' dae it at all.'

'Right.'

He went into a coughing fit, then spat a gob of thick yellow phlegm onto his boot. He stretched his leg out in front of him, admiring it.

'Tap us twenty quid?'

I fumbled in my pocket and gave him a fiver.

'Fancy hitting the pubs?'

'No, you're alright. I'll look around here for a bit.'

He turned and stared at me.

'Mind whit I fuckin' telt ye.'

'OK.'

I got up from the bench and started the long walk shorewards. By the time I got back, the toffee apple stall was being attacked by gulls and I was at peace with myself. I had identified a coping mechanism. I bought a pen and a pad, and got the next train back to London.

#

Rostock, 1810

Gulls squawk, hawkers trade, urchins squabble. The Saturday market bustles with bargemen, boatmen, ostlers, threshers, swineherds, tailors, cobblers, jewelers, weavers, silversmiths, basketmakers, cheesemongers, glassblowers, embroiderers, organ grinders, perfumers, rugweavers, woodcarvers, vintners and dung carters. Beggars, bards, cutpurses and quacks work the crowd. Two gravediggers come to blows over a strumpet.

In among the herring stalls, sausage stalls, fruiterers and egglers, a man dressed in green is peddling potatoes. He calls to the crowd.

*'Right, stop what you're doing, 'cause I'm about to ruin,
The image and the style that you're used to.*

*I look funny...but hey, I'm making money,
So world, I hope you're ready for me.*

*Now gather round, I'm the new fool in town,
And my spuds come straight from the underground.*

*I'll drink all the Dopperbock you got on your shelf,
But first let me introduce myself.*

*The name's Leyden, pronounced like Haydn.
Dropping rhymes like my man John Dryden.*

*Word! I like the girls with the boom.
I once got busy in a Düsseldorf bathroom.'*

He is ignored. A tall, young woman approaches. Modestly but stylishly attired, her golden brown hair glints in the sunlight. She is tall, slim and stunning, resembling a hero of the (future) French resistance. She gestures for the potato seller's attention.

'Excuse me, the potatoes you sold me were rotten. I would like to return them.'

'Get fucked! Go on, fuck off out of it.'

'Please, I'm asking you to refund me. I used my last pennies to pay for them.'

'Are you fucking deaf as well as poor? Fuck off!'

The man takes up a cudgel, making an ugly swing at her beautiful temple. By good fortune, a handsome young cavalry officer is passing by. Weighing up the scene in an instant, he interposes himself between the maiden and the scumbag, smashing his powerful fist into the brute's ugly, degenerate visage. The lout flies upwards and backwards, landing far away in a pile of rotting fish heads. The maiden turns to her protector, her eyes welling with tears of gratitude.

'Please allow me to introduce myself' he says, 'I'm a man of wealth and taste. Capitaine Magnus of the Imperial Guard.'

The young woman faints gratefully into his arms.

Chapter 8

When I went into Westminster Media next day, nobody quizzed me on my absence, although Carla and Diya looked at me curiously. As far as I was concerned, as far as the Carla/Roy situation was concerned, I had worked my way through denial, anger and depression and reached acceptance. I dropped Roy an email inviting him for a beer after work, which he accepted.

‘You alright, Magnus? I liked your disappearing act yesterday. Enigmatic. Just the right kind of stunt to pull.’

‘Yeah, fine.’

‘Now, about Carla. I just want to say...’

‘You don’t need to say anything.’

‘I just want to say that the sex was... disappointingly humdrum. I doubt I’ll be giving it another lash. Thought I should tell you.’

‘Umm. OK. Good to know.’

With that out of the way, Roy brought me up to speed on the Diners Club, which turned out not to have been an elaborate practical joke on our expense (Diya’s theory) after all.

‘I’ve spoken to Guy about how we should structure this, internally. He’s all for it, of course. Why wouldn’t he be? His gratitude was as touching as it was fucking tragic. The thing is, I’ll earn the kudos from the powers that be and my cut of the profits, but the Terrys and Garys of this world have to think the Dining Club is a company-driven initiative, rather than a Roy project. So to create some distance, Mata Hari will be part of the editorial team.’

‘Who?’

‘Our telephone seductress. She’ll sit with you, rather than sales. It makes sense, in a way. She won’t be selling anything, as such, other than the promise of good times.’

Roy cackled.

‘It’s fucking win/win for you, Magnus.’

‘Hmm. OK.’

‘Excellent. You’d better get started on the recruitment drive.’

‘Where should I look?’

‘Fucking hell, I don’t know; wherever sirens congregate. Use your initiative. We need someone as soon as possible. I’d like to start selling these dinners next week.’

The following day, I traipsed around London’s theatre schools, putting flyers up on notice boards and handing them out to anyone who looked like a siren. While walking through Covent Garden, I got a text from Mia, inviting me to join her for a drink at Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese on Fleet Street. That stopped me in my tracks. I looked at my phone, then at the sky, then at the ground, waiting for inspiration. Mia was that rarest of commodities, one of a tiny handful of women ever to romantically pursue me. But continuing to see her would effectively scupper any prospects with Carla. But did I have any prospects with Carla? Probably not, I concluded bitterly, and texted back *OK xx*.

She was standing outside when I arrived.

‘What is this relic?’ I asked.

‘It’s one of London’s great pubs. Dickens drank here. It was a brothel in the 18th century.’

‘Ah. You certainly know how to make a young man feel special.’

I queued at the bar to get us some drinks.

‘Cheers Mia’.

‘Iechyd da.’

‘How’s work?’

‘Easy enough. Are you familiar with Farmer Duck?’

‘Ah, no.’

‘A huge hit with six year-olds. What about you? What have you been up to?’

I handed her my last flyer.

‘Madame de Pompadour. Carla told me about this. She believes Roy needs urgent brain surgery. I think she’s bringing a saw in tomorrow.’

‘Right.’

‘She does seem to love it at your place. She’s always talking about you and Roy. She really admires you.’

‘What, she admires me and Roy?’

‘No, more specifically you, I’d say.’

‘Ah. Well, that’s nice.’

‘I want to ask you something. I’m going to Edinburgh next month. Some friends from Wales are staging a puppet show at the fringe. Do you fancy coming? We could go together.’

‘Uhh.’

I looked at my pint of beer. In addition to being one of the tiny number of women to have willingly had sex with me, Mia was a delightful human being.

‘Um. That’s a great offer, thanks.’

‘You’re welcome!’

‘But I don’t think I can do it.’

‘Ah.’

I took a long drink, then made eye contact.

‘Mia, I should have mentioned this... I have a girlfriend. She’s... a geologist... in Bulgaria.’

‘Ah hah.’ She considered this. ‘A geologist. In Bulgaria.’

‘Yes...’ My mind was blank. I couldn’t think of any further embellishments.

‘Well. Right, then. Never mind.’

Neither of us had much to say after that. We finished our drinks. Mia jumped on a bus and blew me a kiss. I muttered a curse and trudged down Fleet Street, the start of a long, sad walk home.

#

Next morning at work, Carla and Diya were already there when I arrived. Carla gave me a disappointed look. Diya seemed intrigued.

‘You’re a dark horse, Scotsman,’ she said.

‘Um.’

Luckily, my phone rang. It was our first aspiring Mata Hari. The calls kept coming over the next few days. Diya and Carla helped with the screening process. Anyone who sounded half-decent was asked to email through their cv. By 5pm on Friday, we had thirty-six applications. I printed them out, switched off my computer and reached for my jacket.

‘Magnus, just one thing,’ said Diya.

‘Yes?’

‘A GEOLOGIST... in BULGARIA?’

I scooped up the applications and went to find Roy in the Vibe Bar.

‘What kind of crop have we reaped?’

‘Hmm. A bit of a mixed bag.’

‘That’s humanity for you. OK, no need to look at the freaks.’

‘Well, that’s pretty much most of them.’

‘For fuck’s sake.’

‘Of all the people we spoke to, two sounded excellent on the phone. A Northern Irish girl and a South African. They’ve both worked as professional voice artists. Both available immediately.’

‘Can’t have a South African.’

‘Why not?’

‘Why not? Are you fucking joking? What if the person she’s phoning is black?’

‘Uh. I don’t know.’

‘Jesus, Magnus, think.’

‘That leaves one, then. Lesley.’

‘Pass me the number, I’ll call her.’

He called her from his mobile.

‘Hi, is that Lesley? Roy Leyden here, Westminster Media. ... yes, that’s us... you spoke to my colleague Magnus... Excellent... This is a quick follow-up call. I’m glad to say you’ve made it onto our short list. Would you do something for me? Great. What I’d like you to do is give me an example of how you’d pitch something seductively, over the phone. Are you happy to do that? ... good... OK, let’s see. Invite me to a Boyzone concert.’

Roy stared into space, phone clamped to his ear, concentrating. An eyebrow rose. He flashed me a big grin and gave a thumbs up. He liked what he was hearing.

‘Lesley! That was first class. When could you start? Good. Hmm. What?’ He shot me a concerned look. ‘No, we want you onsite. It’ll boost morale. £25 an hour? Hold on.’

He put his phone down, and jotted some figures on his beer mat.

‘OK, it’s do-able. A one week trial, starting Monday. You know where we are? Grand, Lesley, see you then.’

He hung up.

‘Fucking hell, Magnus. That was a fucking masterclass. We’re dealing with a pro here, a maestro.’

He glanced down at his crotch.

‘Jesus. She actually got me semi-erect, Magnus, at the thought of attending a Boyzone concert in Hull. Can you believe that? Ha! What a find!’

We knocked our beer bottles together.

‘She asked if she could work from home. Not having that. Then asked for a one-week trial. 25 hours at £25 quid an hour, guaranteed. Fuck it, we can afford that. We’ve found a voice in a million. She’s coming in on Monday at nine.’

‘Nice. One less thing to worry about.’

‘Worry? Who’s fucking worrying about the Diners Club? Get excited, Magnus! Unstoppable momentum is developing.’

‘OK.’

I took a drink.

‘Ah, Roy, on an unrelated matter, are you planning on seeing Carla again?’

‘Funny you should ask. I was just mulling it over. Like I said... lacklustre in the sack. But to be fair to her, she has fantastic tits. Her work clothes don’t do them justice. I think I might head back for another spin. But what I’ll do first, is warm her up with a take away.’

‘Eh?’

‘A thing I like to do, once I’ve embedded the Roy value proposition in a woman’s mind, when she’s grasped what she has to gain from being with me, when it’s dangling tantalizingly before her eyes... is withdraw it.’

‘What good does that do?’

‘The take away is one of life’s most crucial skills, Magnus. Until you master it, you’re a pawn. Fucking hell, it’s a good thing I’m here to help you take a giant evolutionary step forward during our time together.’

‘Hmm.’

‘How do you make a woman want you?’

‘I take it that’s a rhetorical question.’

‘You demonstrate your unique value – funny, clever, rich, whatever. You paint a picture of transformative change. Then you take it away. You tell her she can’t have it.’

‘Huh.’

‘And now, because she’s learnt she can’t have it, she’ll discover she really fucking wants it. She’ll call, she’ll beg, and when I tell her she’s got one chance to prove she deserves me, she grabs it. She fucking grabs it.’

‘So... you’re going to tell Carla you’re not interested.’

‘Yeah... maybe. Who knows? Haven’t made up my mind. Great tits, though.’

#

Rostock.

The slum district. Filth and uncleanness abound. Foul-smelling, malnourished children run wild, their skeletal, sore-covered bodies trailing diarrhea across fetid courtyards. In the dark tenements, families live eight to a room, sharing their solitary bed with a colony of rats. Out in the street, a poor old woman bends over and coughs up blood. The undertaker eyes her greedily.

A man in a green greatcoat strides through the slum, striking unsuspecting infants with his walking stick. A vicious dog (part Doberman, part wolfhound, part wolf) pads menacingly behind him. The man stops in front of a modest building. It is the local free school, offering reading and arithmetic lessons to the poorest and most vulnerable. He hammers on the door. No answer.

‘Open up! Open, I say!’

A young woman’s face appears in the doorframe. Her golden locks frame a face of perfect beauty. She is an angel.

‘Oh, good day, Mr Leyden. Have you come about the rent?’

'No, you daft cunt, I've come for the good of my health. My doctor advised me to visit as many pox-ridden hell holes as possible.'

'Ah.'

'Enough small talk! The thousand thaler you owe me, this instant, or I'm burning this shit hole down, with you and the snot-nosed brats inside it.'

'We... we don't have the money.'

She weeps copiously.

He takes out a milk bottle filled with paraffin, sticks a rag in the mouth, and sets fire to the rag.

'Well boo fucking hoo! I'm sorry to say, I'm taking away your existence opportunity.'

The fiend readies to throw the bottle through the open window, watched anxiously by the small children inside. Then a strong arm grabs him from behind, lifting him by the throat. The cad kicks furiously, desperately.

'Fang! Fang! Bite the fucker!'

But the dobermann/wolfhound/wolf has, wisely, fled for its life. Held in a vice-like grip by his unseen assailant, the green-clad bastard chokes.

'What... who...'

'That's on a need to know basis.'

The stranger flings Leyden's body high into the air. It soars over the gabled roof, landing two hundred yards away in a manure pit, where it is ripped apart and devoured by weasels.

The young woman emerges from the building. Her gallant rescuer steps forward, offering his hand. She faints gratefully into his arms.

#

That Sunday we had a barbecue to celebrate my housemate Hugh's impending departure for Iraq: he was due to ship out in two weeks. About fifty people showed up; extended family,

university friends, work colleagues and acquaintances from the pub. I manned the barbecue, growing less effective as the day wore on and more bottles of beer were consumed.

I'd invited Carla, more in hope than expectation. She arrived in the early evening, bearing a home-made Black Forest gâteau. I stuck a finger in the cream and licked it.

'Mmm. Is there anything you can't do?'

'I'm a sloppy taxidermist. Everything else, I rule at.'

I stuck my finger in again. 'I see that. Can I offer you a burnt sausage?'

'Absolutely not. But you could find me a drink.'

I returned with two bottles of beer and my housemate Hugh. He had a pirate's hat on, his Royal Navy sword swinging jauntily from his belt.

'Magnus, you imbecile! You never told me Carla was such an outstandingly attractive young woman. "Face like a bucket of smashed crabs", Carla, that's how he described you. It's a fucking outrage.'

He slapped me in the back of the head then bowed low, doffing his pirate hat.

'Would you do me the honour of accompanying me to the living room? I shall introduce you to some reprobates and you can have a feel of my sword.'

'Where have you been all my life? Let's go.'

Hugh stuck the pirate hat on Carla's head, and ushered her inside. I stabbed the last sausage with my fork, repeatedly, then ate it.

Chapter 9

On Monday I got into work early, ready to welcome Lesley when she arrived. I was alone in the editorial room when Roy came over.

‘Magnus! You can be the first to know. I’ve developed a new accomplishment-based method.’

‘Uh?’

‘I was with this Togolian girl on Saturday. In the taxi back to my place, I looked at Grandmaster Chime. It was *exactly* one o’clock.’

‘Hang on. Togolian?’

‘From Togo. I don’t know what the adjective is.’

‘I don’t think it’s Togolian.’

‘I was looking at the Grandmaster, thinking, what will me and the Togolian be doing at two o’clock, and at three o’clock, and at ten o’clock. You know, erotic fucking reveries.’

‘Right.’

‘But then, inspiration! I thought, why not start living life one hour at a time, *all the time*. Every hour, on the hour, I’ll think of something I want to accomplish in the next sixty minutes, something challenging but achievable. Fuck a Togolian on the neighbour’s roof, sell a four-page advertising spread, etc. Fifteen accomplishments a day, that’s a hundred a week. Five thousand accomplishments in one fucking year, Magnus! The great thing about the accomplishment method is that it’s where pleasure meets productivity.’

‘Ah.’

He looked at Grandmaster Chime. ‘Stay where you are,’ he said. ‘I’ll pop downstairs to fetch the lovely Lesley. I’m getting aroused already.’

The fucker. While I was wondering whether to mention the Togolian to Carla, Roy came back into the room. His face was like thunder. He stared at me, furious.

‘That was quick,’ I said.

‘We’ve been fucking double-crossed! I should have known it was too good to be true. For fuck’s sake!’

‘You mean she didn’t come? Give her a chance, it’s only five past nine.’

‘Oh, she’s here, Magnus. She’s fucking here, all right. Why don’t you go down and get an eyeful. Perhaps you’d like to give her a whirl. I’m washing my hands of the fucker.’

He stormed off towards the sales floor.

‘Hang on, you mean she’s waiting in reception?’

It was too late. He was gone.

I got up from my desk and walked downstairs. There was nobody in reception, apart from Jane the receptionist and a scruffy teenage lad. She must have cleared off. I turned to go back upstairs. Half way up, I stopped. I walked back down.

‘Excuse me’, I said to the boy. ‘Are you Lesley?’

‘That’s me. What happened to your colleague? He seemed upset.’

‘Right. It’s just that we were expecting you to be... a woman.’

‘Are you Magnus? I thought we’d established that you were looking for an exceptionally talented, female voice artist, available immediately. Sorry if I picked that up wrong.’

‘Well, yes, but that’s just it. A female voice artist.’

‘Exactly. A female voice artist.’

We looked at each other. This wasn't going well. Then he opened a folder, handing me two letters. I noticed a BBC logo.

'Do you watch Fireman Sam? Probably not. I do all the female voices. I also do the Cadbury's Caramel adverts. I'm sure you've seen those.'

He showed me a letter from Fallon, an advertising agency, engaging Lesley Baird as a voiceover artist for a Cadbury's TV ad campaign.

'Wait a minute. What? You're the voice of the cartoon rabbit? The sexy, west country rabbit?'

'I am.'

I looked at him.

'Bullshit.'

'Turn round. Face the other way.'

I did.

I then heard a completely different, instantly recognizable voice.

'Magnus, you ought to relax for a while. Experience how the thick, Cadbury's milk chocolate melts into the dreamy, soft caramel.'

'What the fuck?'

I whirled round. Jane the receptionist had got out of her seat.

'Fucking hell! He is and all,' she said.

Lesley nodded at her, then at me.

'Right. I see.' I pondered the situation.

'Jane, can you call Roy's number?'

She did, and handed me the receiver.

'Roy, it's Magnus. Do me a favour, listen to this for a second.'

I passed Lesley the handset.

‘Hey, Mr Roy. Why are you beavering around? I’ve got a surprise for you, a Cadbury’s Caramel. I’ve been saving it just for you. It’s been melting away in my hand. Shall I put it in your mouth?’

He handed me back the phone. I listened. The line was dead.

Lesley, Jane and I exchanged looks.

‘Well, ah, thanks for coming in,’ I said. ‘I’ll let you know.’

Then a door burst open and Roy came running down the stairs. He grabbed Lesley by the shoulders, pushing him out through the front door. ‘Magnus, we’re leaving’.

Roy marched Lesley up Brick Lane and into the Beigel Bake, where he shoved him down on a stool at the counter.

‘Gina, three bagels. Right, you. You’re a fucking freak. I don’t like freaks. But as PT Barnum said, they’re the pegs on which the circus tent is hung. You understand your business, I know mine. I’ll pay you £25 for everyone you can convince to attend one of our dinners, but you work from home. If we’re happy after the first week, I’ll raise it to £30. But you tell nobody you work for us. And I don’t want to see you in our building again, ever.’

He handed Lesley a bagel.

‘Deal?’

Lesley took a bite of his bagel. He chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then looked at Roy.

‘There's only one person in the world who's going to decide what I'm going to do, and that's me.’ The booming voice was that of Orson Welles.

Roy glared at Lesley. I thought he was going to strangle him. But then Roy laughed. Then laughed again, loudly. And again. He was red in the face and wheezing.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake! Ah Jesus! Fucking hell.’

He punched Lesley in the stomach.

‘You’re some boy. Fuck me...’

He stood staring at Lesley, who was happily munching his bagel.

‘Right, then,’ said Roy. ‘Fuck off home. We’ll be in touch.’

#

Roy chattered away happily as we walked back down Brick Lane.

‘What is intelligence, Magnus? It’s the ability to adapt according to circumstances. Adaptation! That’s what sets man apart from the beasts.’

‘Ah. OK.’

‘Emotional bias, Magnus, watch out for it! Distorts your ability to make wise decisions. I’ll admit, discovering Lesley was a man was a blow. A bitter pill to swallow. But I gulped the bastard down, because the rational decision was to hire him.’

‘Right.’

‘He’s clearly a genius. The boy has more natural talent than *me*.’

He stopped walking and looked at me.

‘Just take a moment, Magnus. Let that sink in.’

‘OK.’

He started walking again.

‘What Lesley has grasped, and what he exemplifies, is man’s ability to transform one thing into another through suggestion alone. The guy is a fucking natural.’

‘Cool.’

#

Rostock

In the slum district by the river Warnow, factories belch out toxic black smoke. Life here is short and brutal. The sick have no access to doctors or medicine. They have no hope. Or do they? In a small, dark, ground-floor room, people wait patiently for attention from a volunteer health worker. A saintly, kind, delightful, wonderful young woman, her name and origins are a mystery. She is known simply as ‘Die Engel’. Squeezed into this space are thirty unfortunate souls,

sporting all kinds of wounds, sores, coughs and wheezes. An infant vomits blood onto the floor. An old woman topples over, dead. But 'Die Engel' will tend to everyone, living and deceased.

The door is kicked open. A young man in a green coat enters.

'Which one of you cunts is the quack? I fucked a Togolian and my cock's turned black.'

Spotting Die Engel, he grabs at her violently, causing her to jump back. The ailing baby she is holding falls to the floor, cracking its skull.

'Get to work! I've a date tomorrow with a Mongolian, I need my cock shipshape.'

He throws money at her.

'If you're quick about it, I'll throw in a fuck.'

'I... I'm sorry, but you'll need to wait your turn along with everyone else.'

'Like fuck I will!'

He opens his flies and drops his trousers, revealing a revolting, malformed, foul-smelling, below average-size penis. At the sight of it, two people nursing heart conditions keel over, dead. The intruder walks menacingly towards Die Engel, twirling his penis round and round, like a grotesque, abnormal, very small propeller.

'Heal Roy's cock!' he barks at her, backing her into a corner.

Suddenly, the room fills with white light. A tall, handsome, commanding man marches in from outside, seizes the green-clad monster and, holding him tight, brings a mighty fist crashing down on the fiend's ugly, misshapen, not-much-to-look-at head. The blow is so powerful that the degenerate is driven deep into the earth, disappearing through the tile floor, the soil underneath, the clay beneath that, and down through the earth's crust and mantle, all the way down to the fiery pits of hell. The ground closes after him. Those who are physically capable to, break into cheering. The dead bodies on the floor miraculously arise. The baby with the cracked skull skips for joy. 'Die Engel' faints gratefully into her rescuer's arms.

#

The following day, I worked on a telephone script for the Diner's Club invitations, a template which could be used for all kind of industries, all kind of Brendans. Roy endorsed it.

'But here's the thing, Magnus. We've got nine dinners planned. We've already sold the first two, they're in the diary. And they'll need to be fucking top-notch affairs. Someone's going to have to organise them. Book venues, arrange menus, send people the details, print name badges. That kind of humdrum shit.'

'Ah.'

'It'll have to be Diya. I suggest telling her she's been promoted to Operations Manager.'

'Hm.'

Luckily, Diya was fine with it.

'Promotion, eh? Excellent. I could do with some extra cash for my new Bulgarian geological venture.'

She booked Le Gavroche for the first two dinners. I emailed the telephone script to Lesley, with contact details for 500 invitees, and gave him a quick briefing.

'OK, I'm clear. Just one thing, Magnus. What if it's a woman I'm calling?'

'What do you mean?'

'What voice would you like me to do? Tom Jones? Sean Connery?'

'Um. Whatever you think.'

We were ready to go.

#

The next day, I was working on the editorial plan for *Food Processing Frontiers*, wondering whether a story on the illegal use of horsemeat in fish fingers would attract or repel advertisers, when the phone rang.

'Hello?'

'The ring has awoken, Magnus. It has heard its master's call.'

Unexpectedly, Gandalf was speaking to me.

‘Eh?’

‘Sorry, man, I’m just shitting you. Listen, I’ve got fifty acceptances for the dinners.’

‘What? Fifty emailed acceptances?’

‘Yep. Twenty five for each dinner. You owe me one thousand, two hundred and fifty pounds.’

‘How many people did you speak to?’

‘Fifty eight.’

‘Jesus. Well, brilliant. Send them through. I’ll get back to you about what to do next.’

Lesley emailed me a zip file with fifty email acceptances to attend the inaugural Westminster Media telecoms and sewage dining club events. I forwarded it to Roy. A moment later, I heard a bell ringing on the sales floor and loud cheering. Roy came over.

‘Unbelievable. And yet, entirely believable, given the potential I recognized in Lesley. I’ve been saying it for years, Magnus, it’s all about the relationship between person and event.’

‘It’s about time people started taking you more seriously,’ said Diya.

‘Do you realise what we have here? Magic fucking beans. Now everyone on the sales floor wants to sell dinners. I’m going to talk to Guy. See you later.’

Soon, Roy had scoped out a bold new business plan for an events unit, christened “WM Connect”. We would run business breakfasts, lunches and dinners, starting in London then fanning out across the UK. Soon after, the marketing collateral was ready, four new salespeople were being hired and Diya had been promoted again, from Operations Manager to Head of Events.

‘The money will come in handy, Magnus. My Bulgarian geological venture has hit a hitch. Landslide, poisonous gas, explosion, etcetera. Many dead.’

Roy planned to sell six breakfasts, six lunches and nine dinners every three months, generating £300,000 per quarter or £1.2 million annually. All of this relied on the “telemarketing division” (Lesley) delivering a thousand confirmations in each three-month period. Lesley

considered this perfectly achievable, and at £30 per acceptance, he stood to earn £30,000 every quarter. He remained barred from the premises by Roy, however, “for obvious reasons”.

Chapter 10

During the next two months, Westminster Media went from strength to strength. A year's worth of WM Connect events were sold to gullible clients, with Lesley working around the clock. Fortunately for me, the events fell into the happy catch-all of "projects under my editorial control", earning me a 3% share in their profits. My June pay had been £2,400. In August, by which time I had thirty-five magazines and an events portfolio under my editorial supervision, I took home £5,400. Caspar, the CEO, promoted Roy to a new role as Head of Business Development, raising him above the eight sales managers who had hitherto been his peers. "First among unequals" was how Roy described it. To celebrate and reinforce his new status, Roy invited the entire sales floor for post-work drinks at The Great Eastern Hotel. Caspar splashed out on a new executive box at Stamford Bridge, registering it under Jenson's name to work around his life ban. With less fanfare, Guy was quietly shunted into a 'Chief Operations Officer' role. He remained, nominally, my and Roy's line manager, yet increasingly we took our instructions from Caspar or from no-one. Guy was now rarely seen around the sales floor or editorial room. Unkind rumours began circulating that he'd become a necromancer and was living wild in Epping Forest.

Roy and Carla's rapport, to my annoyance, remained relaxed and intimate. Rather than being appalled by Roy, Carla seemed amused by him. I couldn't get my head round this. I felt sick when I saw them together. I didn't know and didn't want to know what was going on between them. I just knew that it was wrong. Couldn't Diya talk some sense into her? I didn't want to broach the issue with anyone, though. I let it lie.

At least I had my new-found wealth to distract me. I bought a Persian rug, a giant cactus and a plasma TV for Chris's flat. I spent £400 on a two-day writing retreat in Dorset ("experience

the three stages of creativity in idyllic Okeford Fitzpaine”), run by Daphne Saint-Médard, a New Age poetess. I’d emailed her a copy of *Rostock*, which had become an incoherent mess. When I arrived, I discovered I was the only customer. Daphne had arranged some stones and crystals around and above my writing desk. She said *Rostock* had left her “profoundly moved”, suggesting she hadn’t read it, but that it lacked “harmonic convergence”. Daphne spent the weekend sunbathing naked in the garden, her pre-Raphaelite behind exposed to my view. Perhaps it was done to inspire me. But I made little progress. I spent most of the time thinking about Carla and never found out what the three stages of creativity involved.

In August, I took two weeks off work and embarked on a meandering, overland trip to Istanbul. It was the first holiday I’d had in years. I hopped on and off trains and buses, stopping in Bratislava, Budapest and Sofia. On a Belgrade park bench, I was mesmerized by a beautiful young woman taking photos of leaves. She was the spitting image of Carla. She invited me to a clothes shop, tried on a red dress and asked me to buy it for her. I did. Then she disappeared.

It wasn’t a dream holiday so much as a holiday of dreams. Each night, I dreamt of Carla. They were all variations on a theme. I would be on the brink of kissing/seducing/undressing her, when a cackling Roy would appear, thumping me on the back, slapping Carla on the arse and destroying my hopes.

I was relieved to get back to work. I’d brought Carla and Diya holiday gifts: tea towels from the Bulgarian Museum of Geology.

‘You’re a sick man, Magnus,’ said Diya.

Roy came over, wearing a sharp new suit. He had a white carnation in his buttonhole.

‘Morning. Are any of you familiar with NASA’s approach to mission inception?’

‘Ah, wait. I know this.’ said Diya. ‘Is it what goes up, must come down?’

‘Incorrect. Each time NASA launches a major project – building a space station, sending a beagle to Mars, that kind of thing – they follow the same set of five phases. Conceptual study, preliminary analysis, definition, design & development, operations.’

‘Uh huh.’

‘While Magnus was whoring around the Balkans, I was working through phases one to four. That activity is now complete. We are now in a position to strap the beagle into its seat and blast it into space.’

‘I could be wrong, Roy...’ said Diya.

‘You’ve been wrong before,’ said Carla.

‘With terrible consequences,’ admitted Diya. ‘But isn’t the Mars beagle a robot, as opposed to an actual canine?’

Roy scratched his head.

‘That’s neither here nor there. There’s a sales meeting at eleven o’clock. The three of you are invited. All will be revealed.’

He gestured a rocket taking off, sniffed his carnation, and left us.

‘Looks like I picked the wrong day to give up skunk,’ said Diya.

At eleven, there was an exodus from the sales floor. Two hundred people squeezed into the large meeting room. All the chairs had been removed and people sat squashed together on the floor, or stood around the walls. There was a din of excited chatter. Carla, Diya and I took the last bit of floor space, down at the front, where a stepladder stood.

At eleven, Roy and Guy came in. Guy stood beside the ladder and called for order. I noticed that he’d grown a long beard since the last time I’d seen him.

‘Hello, everyone. Thanks for coming at short notice. I’m going to hand over to Roy, who has some exciting news to share with us.’

Roy clapped Guy on the back then climbed up the step ladder. He sat down on the top step, facing his audience. He winked at Carla.

Then he stood up. The ladder lurched. Guy moved behind the ladder, holding the structure firm. Roy stretched out his arms.

‘Friends, colleagues, welcome! Make yourselves comfortable. Settle in. This is going to be good. Who likes good news? Come on, put your hand up if you like good news.’

A few hands went up.

‘I love good news. The only thing better than good news, in my experience, is fucking GREAT news. And that’s what this is. I’ll reveal everything in a minute. But first, I want you to get ready. Get excited. Great news is coming! Sit back and enjoy the ride.’

‘He’s invented a robot beagle. You’ll see, it’ll come barking into the room anytime now,’ said Diya.

‘Colleagues, let me ask you this. When was the last time you experienced something that made you go “Woah! Fucking WOA!” Because that’s what we have for you. It’s on its way.’

With Roy becoming more animated, Guy had to work harder to maintain the ladder’s equilibrium.

‘We’ve made great strides in the last six months. Agreed? Of course we fucking have. Giant leaps! You know it. But! We’ve only been scratching the surface of what’s possible. I’d like to tell you something that you don’t know. Since May, a revolutionary research project has been under way, designed to raise our salespeople’s achievements to a new level of greatness.’

‘I believe you’re right, Diya,’ said Carla. ‘It’s the mechanical hound.’

‘University College London is one of the world’s great centres of learning. It has the best neuroscientists anywhere. I’m talking about real fucking geniuses, mad professors with giant brains. They spend their lives studying human behavior and our decision-making processes. Some of you, perhaps, will be familiar with the amazing breakthroughs these boffins have made.’

He looked at Cruise Ship Keith, who nodded thoughtfully.

‘It’s time to let you in on the secret. For the last five months, I’ve been meeting UCL’s neuroscientists twice a week, working on a remarkable project which harnesses everything science teaches us about cognitive behavior, and applies it to a specific challenge – how do you persuade people, over the telephone, to buy advertising? It has been a long, complex process. Hundreds of hours of work have gone into this. And the great news is, we’ve succeeded. Success!’

Roy threw his arms up, Guy struggled with the ladder. He paused to let us take this in.

‘These scientific prodigies... it would be fair to describe them as wizards... have performed hundreds of experiments, analyzing millions of data points. It’s been a monumental effort, and it has allowed them to create something truly astonishing. A sales script that makes people, that literally *forces* people, to say “YES”.’

There was an excited buzz.

‘And do you know something wonderful? It’s going to be our exclusive property. Us, the people in this room. It’s for our exclusive use, to use for our pitches. As I speak, (he glanced at Grandmaster Chime) the sales script is going through final testing. I have seen it, I have heard it and I have witnessed its power. You may take my word for it. It is fucking dynamite.’

‘UCL will send through the finished script in exactly one week. You’ll discover it then. It is simple, powerful and impossible to resist. You’ll learn it quickly, and once you do, you will be fucking UNSTOPPABLE.’

The buzz in the room grew ever noisier. People were shifting around in their seats.

‘Once we have the script, once people hear how many deals you’re bringing in, everyone working in the media business will be desperate to get hold of it. But this is a controlled scientific experiment, funded by the UK taxpayer, and I’ve had to personally promise UCL that we will guard this intellectual property with our lives. Yes, it is that valuable. A year from now, the science will be made public and salespeople around the world can start benefiting from it, but until then it is OUR’S. This is our window of opportunity. Seize it! It will be YOUR pitch, these will be YOUR deals, this will be YOUR money. If I were you, I’d start planning how you want to spend it.’

‘In my case, settling Bulgarian lawsuits,’ said Diya.

‘I know, this is a lot to take in. So what I want you to do now, is take a moment to relax. Get comfortable. Close your eyes. I’m going to show you something in your imagination. Come on, trust me. Close your eyes.’

I looked around the room. Everyone had their eyes shut. Even Guy, as he clung to the ladder.

‘Just relax. And imagine yourself floating up into the air. Up... up... up... If you look down, you can see a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Look at it. It’s the greatest predator ever to roam the planet. That’s

you, that is! Now float down and get inside it. Inhabit the dinosaur. Get inside it. OK. Are you in? Now gnash your teeth. Feel the power of your bite. Stamp your feet. The ground fucking shakes! Feels good, doesn't it? Now have a look around. Start searching for prey. Because that's what you do. You hunt the weak, and you fucking kill them. Look to your right, there's a fat herbivore down by the river. See him? Scare the fucker – roar!

Everyone started roaring.

'Well, it's finally happened,' muttered Carla. 'Roy's hit peak mentalness.'

'Open your eyes, everyone, and look at me. Good. Are you READY for this script? Are you ready for this once in a lifetime opportunity? Are you ready to make insane amounts of money? Are you ready to feel fucking great? Come on, tell me! Are you ready?'

'Yes!' people shouted.

'Me too! I am fucking READY! Success is a CHOICE. Fuck waiting, let's have success NOW. We're going to do this! Jenson!'

Jenson, sat near the base of the ladder, flicked a switch on a ghetto blaster. A thumping beat started, followed by "Let me hear you say Yeah!"

'Up on your feet everyone! Here we fucking go!'

It was 2 Unlimited's *No Limits*. Roy punched the air with his fists. Guy struggled desperately to hold the ladder upright. Everyone in the room was jumping around, chanting and waving their arms.

Roy climbed down off the ladder and shook hands with a relieved Guy.

With the revelry in full swing, Roy walked out of the room, gesturing for me to join him. We went down the stairs, out through reception, and onto Brick Lane.

Roy stood on the opposite kerb, looking across at our building. He sniffed his carnation contentedly.

'Some men are born great, Magnus. Some achieve greatness. Others have it thrust upon them. I am all three of those men.'

‘Roy, what’s going on? I mean, that was a nice performance. But seriously, what the fuck?’

‘Ah, Magnus, don’t be naïve. Haven’t you’ve grasped the power of symbols?’

‘Eh?’

‘Remember the summer party? What Carla said about colour psychology? It got me thinking. One thing led to another and I came up with the scheme. It’s all about credulity. People’s natural willingness to believe in higher powers. Credulity is endemic among salesmen, Magnus. We are the least skeptical fuckers alive. We want to believe, because when we believe, we achieve.’

‘But you can’t fool an entire company.’

‘That’s entirely wrong, Magnus. It’s easier to fool large groups than individuals. And the greater something’s implausibility, the readier its acceptance. That’s Leyden’s Third Law.’

‘Hmm. But... how are you going to produce a magical sales script?’

‘I think you know the answer to that, my friend.’

I had a sinking feeling.

‘You know what’s required. We’ve only got seven days. I’d get cracking if I were you.’

He strolled off down Brick Lane, destination unknown. I remained outside, trying to take things in. This wouldn’t be easy. I would need help. I went back in to find Carla. I told her to grab her jacket, telling her we’d be going offsite for a while.

‘You never take me anywhere any more,’ complained Diya. ‘It’s like that weekend in Stoke never happened.’

We headed across the road to the Italian café.

‘Let me guess, Magnus. Roy’s UCL professor friends, the mad boffins. They’re not entirely one hundred percent real, in the strict, phenomenological sense.’

‘Yep.’

‘And consequently, the revolutionary, science-based sales script, due to be unveiled in front of an awestruck audience this time next week, will need to be produced by others. By non-scientists.’

By people with the most rudimentary grasp of cognitive neuroscience and of how the brain interacts with its environment. People, in short, like you and I.'

'That's basically it.'

'Well... fuck me.'

She looked me in the eyes for an uncomfortably long time.

'Don't worry, Magnus. I know what we need to do. It's a time for cool heads and sober reflection. I suggest we leave town, going our separate ways, never to return.'

'Oh.'

'Cheer up! I'm kidding you. We're capable of this. We'll create something spellbinding. A magical, devotion-inspiring script. Roy's no fool, he understands the placebo effect. You know, Magnus, this project represents the most pragmatic and rational thing I've heard Roy come up with since I've been here.'

'What? Really?'

'Unfortunately not, Magnus, I'm joking again. The project is lunacy. Roy is as mad as a shithouse rat. I'm leaving for Madagascar tonight.'

I stirred my coffee glumly. I looked at her. She was grinning.

'Come on, Magnus. We can do it. It'll be a laugh.'

As we talked it through, I realized Carla was right. We *were* capable of delivering the goods. All we needed was something which looked the part. A Frankenstein script, built by grave-robbing elements of science, pseudo-science and quackery.

'It's a good analogy, Magnus. We'll stitch it together, breathe life into the fucker and send it out to wreak mayhem. We'll boil the ingredients into a fucking word stew. It's just about choosing the right elements and tossing them in the pot. Rhetoric, persuasion, propaganda. We'll squeeze it all through a mincer. Mince, stew, whatever. It'll be delicious.'

'Hmm. I suppose so.'

We formulated a plan. We would spend the next three days at the British Library. Carla would read up on rhetoric and oratory, studying great speeches. I would look at psychology, persuasion and linguistics. We would both study sales science, seduction, advertising and copywriting. By Thursday we aimed to have fifty pages of notes, quotes and ideas. On Friday we would choose the best elements, decide on a structure, and distil everything down into a magic, five-minute script. We'd work over the weekend if required, to be ready for the great unveiling on Monday.

We took the tube to Kings Cross and were in the British Library by eleven. We split up. I found a library assistant and explained what we needed. She suggested some suitable texts, and I sat down in a quiet corner with Richard Bandler's *Persuasion Engineering*.

Bandler, I learnt, was the founder of neuro-linguistic programming and an affable conman. His book was a guide for salesmen on how to apply NLP techniques. I noted down his suggestions: "Get their attention first... build a rhythm... ask questions that provoke Yes answers... hit them hard enough and the ideas will go in..." I ended up spending all day on that book alone.

At five thirty, I went to find Carla. She had a headset on and was taking notes in a pad.

'Jesus, this is tough going,' she said.

'What are you listening to?'

'JFK's inaugural address. You know... Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.'

'That doesn't sound too grim.'

'No, it's a great speech. It's just that at this stage, they're all blending into each other. I've gone through "Give me Liberty or Give me Death", "Four Score and Seven Years", "I Have a Dream" and "We Shall Fight Them on the Beaches". I've read Charles De Gaulle's Appeal of 18th June, Demosthenes' Third Philippic, Socrates' Apology, Lou Gehrig's Farewell to Baseball and Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. If I've learnt anything today, Magnus, it's that you can have too much of a good thing.'

'Fair enough. Anything else, apart from the speeches?'

‘I got some ideas from Aristotle and Cicero.’

‘Uh huh?’

‘Aristotle divides the art of persuasion into three techniques. Logos, using logic to appeal to people’s reason. Pathos, appealing to their emotions. And Ethos, basing the appeal on the personal character of the speaker. And I like this from Cicero: Nothing is so unbelievable that oratory cannot make it acceptable.’

‘That’s Roy in a nutshell. Interesting. That’s brilliant, Carla, there’s lots there we can use. Let’s call it a day. I’ll see you at 9.30 tomorrow.’

#

Next morning, I sat down with Robert Cialdini’s *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. Cialdini, an American professor, wrote about how the nuances of human psychology make us vulnerable to people, like Roy, who understand how they work. The right word, spoken at the right time, triggers an unconscious compliance reaction. Cialdini also wrote about social proof, where we decide what is the right thing to do based on what others are doing, or on information from an authority.

Carla spent the day studying videos, interviews and biographies of great salesmen from history.

‘A guy called Joe Girard worked at a Chevrolet garage and sold six cars a day. Six cars, every day. He talks about establishing credibility, and how enthusiasm gets people to really want to listen to you.’

‘Right.’

‘My personal favourite is this wanker, Tim Shaw. He’s an Aussie, “The King of Knives”. He was on TV when I was a kid, flogging sets of knives. “But wait, there’s more!” was his catchphrase. His approach boils down to 1) present the value proposition, 2) take away risk and 3) tell a story that people can relate to. All done with enthusiasm’.

‘Cool. But enthusiasm is an emotional state. It’s a tone of voice, not scripted.’

‘I suppose that’s Roy’s job. He’ll get the salespeople excited about the script, which they’ll pass on in their delivery.’

‘True. Anything else?’

‘We need to establish the client’s problem, then demonstrate how we can solve it. We must show life as it is, then give people a glimpse of life as it could be. We should talk about cutting costs, saving time and increasing profits. We should say the person’s name once a minute. We should say *maximize*.’

‘Right. OK, well that’ll do us for now. We’ll resume tomorrow. Good work, we’re getting there.’

#

The next day, Thursday, was our last day of research. We needed to make it count. This time, we focused on coming up with ideas for powerful words and arguments, as well as stylistic tricks. I’d look into advertising. Carla would study seducers, preachers and conmen.

In David Ogilvy’s *Confessions of an Advertising Man* I found a list of “words and phrases which work wonders”: New, Now, Announcing, Introducing, Improvement, Amazing, Sensational, Remarkable, Revolutionary, Startling, Miracle, Magic, Offer, Quick, Easy, Compare, Bargain, Hurry and Last Chance.

Elsewhere, I read bold claims for the powers of You, Discovery, Guarantee, Safety, Save, Health, Love, Proven and Results. I found endorsements for Appealing, Exciting, Perfect Combination, Growing Demand, Thriving, Rewarding, Investment, Boost, Dynamic, Attractive, Excellent and Transformation.

I read about the psychological impact of “obviousness” words, learning that just putting “obviously”, “clearly”, “we all know that” or “of course” in front of a statement makes people much more likely to agree with it. Cialdini’s book had an account of a Harvard researcher who approached people waiting in a library queue and asked “Can I use the photocopier?”, 60% of people let her jump the queue. But when she changed the question to “Can I use the photocopier because I have to make some copies?” the magic word “because” produced near total compliance: 93% of people agreed. As Cialdini said, “people simply like to have reasons for what they do.”

By now, my head was full. I went to find Carla.

‘How are you getting on?’

‘I didn’t learn as much as I thought I would from the world’s great seducers. Casanova was a flatterer. He showed women he was fascinated in them and asked open questions. Cleopatra’s reputation seems to have stemmed from her blowjob technique.’

‘Ah.’

‘What else? We could steal St Paul’s line about riches, and wisdom and knowledge.’

‘OK. How about the con men?’

‘I looked at Frank Abagnale, the guy from *Catch Me If You Can*. He could pass himself off as an airline pilot, a doctor, a teacher, any fucking thing. And Yellow Kid Weil, the “King of the Con Men”. One day he would pose as a scientist, the next as a horse breeder. He credited his success to people’s desire to get something for nothing.’

‘Ah.’

‘The last guy I looked at was Victor Lustig, “The Man who Sold the Eiffel Tower”. He was a maestro. He spoke six languages and had 22 aliases. Before he died, he wrote down the "Ten Commandments for Con Men". Do you want to hear them?’

‘Sure.’

‘OK, they are: Listen patiently. Never appear bored. Wait for the other person to reveal their opinions, then agree with them. Wait for the other person to reveal their religious convictions, then have the same ones. Drop hints of sexual attraction. Never discuss illness. Never pry into a person's personal circumstances, they’ll tell you themselves eventually. Never boast, but let your importance be quietly obvious. Never be untidy. Never get drunk.’

‘Nice. There’s some good sense there.’

‘Yeah. What’s clear from the con men, and Roy exploits this very well, is that people *want* to believe something, and are capable of believing basically anything. The great con artists just nudge people along, making the process of believing as easy and as enjoyable as possible.’

‘Ah.’ I had an image of Roy nudging Carla towards the bedroom, and her enjoying it.

‘Well, forget the con men. What else did you look at?’

‘I read about figures of speech. Rhyme and rhythm, alliteration, assonance, consonance. Repetition is good for reinforcing a key message. Use an adverb to amplify the verb. Anecdotes make a listener receptive and sympathetic. And we need to build up to a big final impact.’

‘Alright.’

I looked at the desk. We had fifty pages of notes, easily.

‘OK. So now, we need to boil all this down to a five-minute pitch. We’ll need a structure and some sort of narrative. It’ll be easier said than done.’

‘Jesus, Magnus. If anyone’s capable of pulling this off, it’s you and me. One last push! See you tomorrow.’

Back home, as I sat drinking wine, flitting between watching “100 Great Bridges” on Discovery Channel and outré pornography on the MacBook I’d bought with my latest pay cheque (along with ten more giant cacti, which I’d dotted around Chris’s house), I was mired in thoughts of Carla. How could she acknowledge Roy as a conman and manipulator, and still tolerate his sexual advances? Why wasn’t she repelled? How was this situation, which made no sense, possible? Was it just me? Clearly I knew nothing, nothing at all, about the female psyche. I poured another glass and searched online for “cactus sex.”

#

Rostock.

Behind the wharves and quays lies the red light district, a warren of bars, seedy lodging houses, Turkish baths and brothels. Streetwalkers turn tricks for sailors in dark alleys. Napoleon’s soldiers prefer to frequent the bawdy houses, where red lights gleam in the window. A group of officers knock on a door, and enter.

‘Soyez les bienvenus, messieurs,’ says Madame Bertha. ‘Please take your pick from the menu. The house special tonight is a Ruthenian midget.’

'You fellows go ahead,' says Capitaine Magnus. 'I shall wait for you here.' While his comrades select their paramours, Lieutenant Pozzo splurging on Estonian twins, Magnus settles down in an armchair and opens a volume of improving literature.

A minute later, a bedroom door bursts open. A naked man, wearing a green leprechaun's hat, hops out, in great anguish.

'Aaarrggghh!!! Me bollocks! She's got bees up her gee! Bees!'

Madame Bertha rushes in from the parlour.

'What's going on here?'

The jigging nude gentleman has grabbed a prostitute by the hair and pulled her out into the hall.

'Her cunt's infested with bees! Bees!'

Capitaine Magnus sees with horror that, indeed, a swarm of bees is buzzing around the girl's vagina.

'And I've a fucking scorpion on me flute!' wails the Irishman. A quick look confirms that a predatory arachnid has, indeed, embedded its sting in his rancid, deformed, diminutive organ.

'Explain yourself, young woman!' snaps Madame Bertha.

The prostitute looks unperturbed. Magnus is transfixed by her fair features, golden brown locks and enchanting green eyes. This cannot be! He is looking at the saintly, honest schoolteacher/nurse. It's Die Engel! How is this possible?

'There's a simple enough explanation', says the girl. 'I spent my day off gangbanging deviants. They fucked me with a giant cactus.'

'Nooooooooo!' shouts Magnus, jolting himself awake.

#

Next morning, feeling groggy, I travelled into the British Library to meet Carla. We spread our notes out on a table.

We divided the pages up and read them through, highlighting our favourite words, phrases and techniques, which we noted down in a new document. Then we mapped out a timing structure. We figured out when to articulate the problem, when to introduce the solution, when to provide the social proof. We selected a place for an anecdote. We chose where to stoke desire, where to explain how our solution worked and where to reveal the value it created. We decided how we would pre-empt objections and quantify the return on investment. At the very end, we would ask for the business.

We worked away productively. By four o'clock, we had a draft script. It was good, but it was too long. It needed to be under five minutes. We timed ourselves reading it, stripped something out, then repeated the process. The fifth time I read it, Carla stopped her watch.

'Four minutes fifty six,' she said. 'Bring da motherfuckin' ruckus.'

She reached across the table and high-fived me.

I called Roy on his mobile.

'The eagle has landed,' I said. 'I repeat, the eagle has landed... yep, four minutes fifty six... what?... but how?... eh?... who?... well... ah... OK... I'll see what I can do'.

'What is it now?'

'He wants something else. A giant diagram of the brain, showing the neural processes which govern language comprehension.'

'Of course he does. I'm surprised I had to ask. Maniac. Why does it need to be giant?'

'He's going to have someone posing as a UCL scientist, to introduce the pitch to the team. Lab coat, glasses, clipboard, the works. He said something about the cognitive consequences of clothing.'

'I see.'

She looked into space.

'Do you remember ten seconds ago, Magnus?'

'Uh. Yes.'

‘Remember when I described Roy as a maniac? It was wrong of me. I spoke hastily, without thinking. I’d like to take that back.’

‘OK...’

‘What I should have said, in fact, and what I’m saying to you now, is that Roy is out of his fucking mind. Where is he going to produce a fake UCL professor from?’

‘He’s paying Lesley to do it.’

#

Our work done in the library, we headed off to join Roy in The Reliance. He explained how the plan to “blind them with science” would work in practice. When I protested that Lesley, just eighteen years old, might find it difficult to pass himself off as a neuroscientist, Roy berated me for “knowing nothing.”

‘It’s all about the power of expectations, Magnus. If Gary, or Ray, or Gary’s *expectation* is that Lesley is a Professor of Neuroscience, they’ll justify any discrepancies between their preconception of how that person should look and the person they see before them.’

Carla nodded. She then proposed employing Mia as a second fake scientist.

‘Hmm. I like it,’ said Roy. ‘We’ll give them the ol’ one two.’

Roy agreed to pay Mia £200 for her time. So now I had to produce two giant diagrams, one for each “expert”.

On Sunday, I went looking for an internet café with a colour printer. Before long, I had everything we needed.

Chapter 11

On Monday morning, under a bright blue sky, I strolled down Columbia Road towards the office. I carried the brain diagrams in a giant art folder. I met Lesley at the Beigel Bake. He was wearing a tweed suit, thick glasses, a wig and a beard. He gave the stethoscope hanging around his neck a twirl.

‘Guten Morgen. It is a tremendous pleasure to meet you’. The slow, deep voice was that of an elderly Austrian.

‘Hmm. Do neuroscientists have stethoscopes?’

‘All Professors have stethoscopes, young man.’

‘I guess you know what you’re doing.’

We met Carla and Mia at the Italian café. Given that Mia and Lesley were supposed to be close colleagues, the least I could do was introduce them to each other.

‘Young lady, said Lesley, ‘your reputation for rigorous intellectual discipline precedes you’.

She beamed at him.

‘Hello, Lesley.’

‘Wolfgang,’ I corrected her.

‘Hello, Wolfgang.’

‘Professor Schelling,’ Leslie corrected her.

We went into the office and met Roy in the meeting room. I unpacked the diagrams. ‘Good work, Magnus, those look excellent. OK, take some time with Lesley and Mia to go through the spiel. As long as you like. When you’re ready, let me know and I’ll bring in the troops.’

Mia, Lesley and I sat down with the script and planned out the performance. I popped outside to tell Roy we were ready. Five minutes later, a horde of people flooded into the room. There was the usual rowdy uproar. Roy nodded at me. ‘Show time.’

I sat with Lesley and Mia at a table at the front of the room. A flip chart stood ready to display our props. Roy paced around, grinning like a Cheshire cat. The room was packed; people were squeezed in everywhere. Caspar was in the front row. The door was left open so others could peer in from outside. Roy clapped loudly.

‘My lords, ladies and gentlemen! Lend me your ears!’

The noise died away.

‘Welcome to the official launch of Westminster Media’s new telesales collateral. The moment we have all been waiting for has finally arrived. I will explain how the meeting will run, before handing over to the experts. First, let me introduce our VIP guests. Wolfgang Schelling is Director of Neuroscience at University College London and recent winner of the Alberghini Award. Dorothy Kersland is a cognitive scientist working under Professor Schelling. It is an honour and a privilege to welcome them both to Westminster Media. Please give them a round of applause.’

There was a round of applause.

‘Our guests will present the scientific background to the project, then Magnus will reveal the script. Copies will be available at the end.’

‘By way of context, I personally took the initiative to approach UCL six months ago to discuss a collaborative research project into the science of persuasion. Professor Schelling enthusiastically embraced the proposal, and kindly agreed to assign Dorothy to work on the project. We should all be very grateful for Professor Schelling’s far-sightedness, and Dorothy’s willingness, without which none of this would have been possible.’

There was another burst of applause. Roy raised his arm for silence.

‘Dorothy has spent the last three months working first with me, and latterly with Magnus, to develop a practical application - a sales pitch - which applies proven psychological techniques of influencing, seduction and... for want of a better word... brainwashing.’

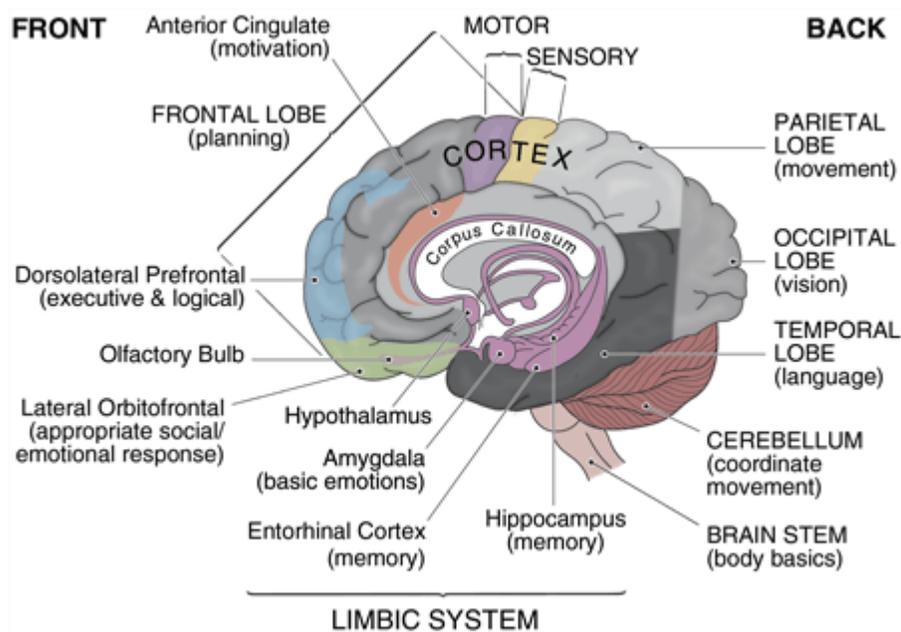
He let that sink in. Caspar nodded approvingly.

‘The results, as you will see, are astonishing. Over to you, Professor Schelling.’

Lesley slowly got up out of his seat and walked in front of the table. He fiddled with his stethoscope, looking into space. The mannerisms were spot on.

‘Thank you very much, Mr Leyden. On behalf of Miss Kersland and myself, it is a pleasure to be with you this morning. I propose to begin with a basic description of the brain’s functionality as it relates to language processing and, by extension, to decision-making.’

Lesley walked (slowly, befitting an aged, arthritic Austrian) over to the flip chart, revealing:



‘Here, we have the brain,’ he said. ‘I’d like to draw your attention here, to the temporal lobe, one of the four components of the cerebral cortex. The temporal lobe is *tremendously* important.’ He stared at Jenson, who nodded in agreement. ‘It processes sensory input into meaning, registering everything that we hear, see, feel, taste or otherwise experience. It then sends that information to

this part of the brain, the anterior cingulate cortex. It is here that emotions and motivation are generated. The information then travels here, the lateral orbitofrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that should interest you most. It is the lateral orbitofrontal cortex which takes overall responsibility for decision making and which determines, ultimately, how people respond in any particular situation.’

He paused.

‘What I would like you all to reflect on, is that rational thinking, allied to emotional processing, produces decision making. At UCL we have spent many years studying how specific linguistic patterns produce particular effects. In other words, how the right choice of language can influence people to respond and behave in a particular way. We possess that knowledge. We understand that it has tremendous value for you.’

He paused, making eye contact with people in different parts of the room.

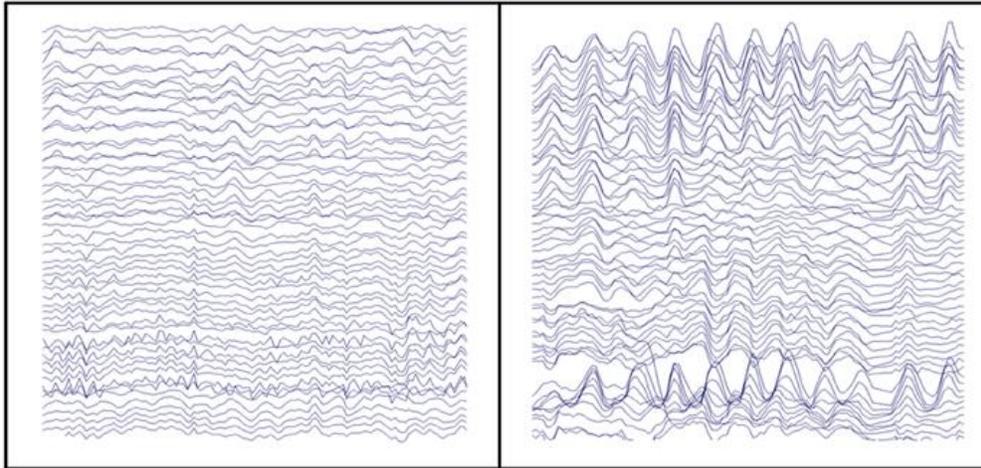
‘And now, I would like to hand over to Dorothy to discuss the specific project we have been working on with your colleagues.’

He shuffled back to his seat. Mia stood up and replaced him at the flip board.

‘Thank you Professor. Good morning everyone. I’d like to outline how the team at UCL has gone about applying our theoretical knowledge to a specific practical outcome, namely the production of a telemarketing script.’

‘I’d like to draw your attention to this.’

She flipped over the chart, revealing:



‘We’re very lucky at UCL to possess Europe’s most advanced electroencephalography facilities. These record electrical activity in the brain, tracking how neurons communicate with each other. Here, you see a series of brain wave patterns measuring anterior cingulate activity, which you’ll recall is the part of the cortex responsible for generating emotion and motivation. For this exercise, we used two versions of your telephone sales pitch. In the sequence on the left, the subjects were listening to the standard Westminster Media telemarketing pitch, which I believe is widely used?’

‘Universally, Dorothy,’ Roy confirmed.

‘In the chart on the right, the subjects were listening to the new, enhanced sales script which we have developed, making use of fifteen distinct scientific techniques. You will see that the subjects respond to the salesperson in a much more... engaged manner.’

There was an excited buzz. Some hands shot up. Roy stepped in front of the table.

‘We’ll take questions at the end. Let’s hear the rest of the presentation. Continue please, Dorothy.’

‘Thank you, Roy. For anyone interested in the particular language techniques we employed, more information will be available. Suffice to say, we use different mechanisms to stimulate specific behavioural responses. We’ve produced a template which can easily be adapted to your different publications and products. It can also be adapted according to cultural background. A linguistic

technique which works on a Welshman, for instance, may be wholly inappropriate for an Albanian. Similarly, men and women's brains function in different ways.'

There was a laugh from somewhere.

'We have delivered a toolkit to Roy and Magnus which details how to modify the script, calibrating it to precisely fit your requirements. As part of our agreement, UCL will provide Westminster Media with an updated template every three months, as new scientific discoveries emerge. In return, we retain the copyright. It's important to emphasise that the script is UCL's intellectual property. We are licensing you to use it in particular, prescribed circumstances. Anyone using the script, or elements contained within it, for any other purpose, will be performing a criminal offence.'

Roy stepped back to the front of the table. He wagged a finger menacingly at his audience.

'That's very good to know, Doctor. Very good indeed. Thank you. I'll now hand over to Magnus, who will perform the great unveiling.'

Lesley coughed theatrically, then tapped his watch, frowning at Roy.

'Apologies, Professor,' said Roy. 'I promised that we would let you go by 9.30 and I see that we're already five minutes over. Please feel free to leave us, I know that you have a parliamentary hearing to appear at. Thank you again.'

I walked in front of the table as Lesley and Mia got out of their seats. I waved a paper above my head. Everyone's eyes were on me as the scientists slipped out of the door. This was it, the moment of truth.

'Morning, everyone. Here it is, the first version of the new sales script for *Road Technology International*. Everyone will receive a copy. Over the next three days we'll be producing new scripts for all of our titles. Instead of just reading the script to you, I'd like to demonstrate its effects. For that, I'd like someone to play the role of the customer. As you now all know about the incredible properties of the new script, I'd like to suggest fetching someone from outside the room, who isn't aware of the project. Does anyone want to suggest a guinea pig?'

'The database wanker, whatsisname?' suggested Cruise Ship Keith.

‘Perfect,’ said Roy, ‘I’ll fetch Pete.’

He returned a minute later with Pete. I invited him to sit at the front of the room. He looked nervous but thrilled to be the centre of attention.

‘Right, Pete. I want you to imagine that you’re the managing director of Pete Industries, a firm that makes cat’s eyes.’

‘What?’

‘The rubber things in the middle of the road that reflect light. I’m going to call you up and pitch you to advertise in *Road Technology International*. Just play along, answering however you like. But remember to stay in the character of the Managing Director. You’re a busy man with a business to run. You have no time for jokers. Have you got that?’

‘Uhh. Sure!’

‘Your phone is ringing, Pete. I’ll stand behind you so you can’t see me. Whenever you’re ready, answer it.’

I stood a couple of paces behind him, both of us facing the audience.

‘Oh, OK. Ah. Hello?’

‘Hello, Pete. Charles Sterling here. Westminster Media.’

‘Err...hi..’

‘Pete, here’s why I’m calling. You probably saw yesterday’s FT piece from Goldman Sach’s Jim O’Neill, analysing the latest economic figures from China. GDP up nine percent, fixed investment up fourteen percent. Now Jim’s view, and I agree with him, is that China will absolutely boom over the next decade, representing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the UK manufacturing sector. I imagine your thoughts are pretty much aligned with mine and Jim’s.’

‘Uh.’

‘I’ll send you the article, Pete. Jim’s analysis is compelling. His main advice for those of us in the UK business community is to move fast, get in early, secure market share and maximise our long-term returns.’

‘OK.’

‘And the other thing which you probably picked up on was last week’s World Bank report on China’s massive investments into road infrastructure. The numbers are amazing, aren’t they? Six hundred billion dollars of government and private-sector investment, fifteen thousand new inter-city connections, two million miles of new highways. Think about it, Pete, that’s enough to stretch to the moon and back. And then back to the moon. And then back to the earth. And then *back* to the moon. Now the World Bank’s view, and I tend to agree with them, and I’d be interested to know if you do too, Pete, is that this is absolutely the *right time* for British exporters to take advantage of the Asian road infrastructure gold mine given that there will not be another opportunity like this in our lifetime. It would be a real *missed opportunity* if the Germans and the Japanese were to Hoover up all of these lucrative contracts. You know that better than anyone.’

‘Um. Yes.’

‘And the great thing is, that there’s so much more to this, of course, than just China. Once you have your foot in the door, the whole East Asian economic area opens up. You know as well as anyone, Pete, Indonesia’s announced a huge road-building programme, Korea is upgrading its entire highway system, Thailand is transforming its whole transport infrastructure. These are really *exciting* times for UK firms who are in a position to export cat’s eyes to these massive Asian markets.’

‘Ah.’

‘And of course the *challenge*, Pete, is that too many of us lack robust, secure business connections to the people financing and running these massive road-building projects. Obviously, it can be very *difficult* for a small-to-medium sized UK exporter to know, for instance, who to speak to about supplying cat’s eyes for the Nanchang ring road. Would you agree with me there, Pete?’

‘Uh. Yes. Absolutely.’

‘Excellent. Because that’s *exactly* why I’m calling. I want to check if you are *ready* to partner on a major business development project which connects small-to-medium sized UK exporters like Pete Industries with the people actually running these giant infrastructure projects. Westminster Media has been asked to produce a comprehensive guide to Asia’s road-building projects which

showcases qualified British suppliers, so that when a project manager in Beijing or Bangkok suddenly realizes he needs three million Grade-A cat's eyes, he knows *precisely* who to call. I'd like us to get down to business, Pete. Can we talk business for a minute?'

'Sure! Ah, yes.'

'Let's run through a few figures. Give me a rough annual production output for Pete Industries, in units.'

'Uhh...'

'Two million cat's eyes, you say? Excellent, so we can *safely* assume that you could, at the very least, *double* your annual turnover once these Asian contracts start rolling in. Now let me run a few numbers past you, Pete, you might want to grab a pen to jot these down. Westminster Media's special Asian issue of *Road Technology International* will be printed on October 15th and dispatched to ten thousand pre-qualified senior managers and purchasers. It contains details of 150 major road-building initiatives scheduled over the next five years in Asia's twelve largest economies, including of course, those massively lucrative Chinese projects. And of course, the real *value* is that the report showcases British firms who are equipped and ready to supply these projects. Everything is designed to *optimize* connections with the big Asian buyers, making it as quick, easy and efficient as possible for those huge budget holders to find you, Pete.'

'Ah.'

'By the way, Pete, do you know Terry Masterson? Runs an industrial coatings business in Northampton. Keen golfer.'

'Ah. No.'

'I just had a call from him. He's signed a contract to supply the new Hanoi ring road. He's gone over the numbers, and he reckons he'll *personally* clear two and a half million on the deal. Plans to retire next year, just bought a six-bedroom villa in Montego Bay. Good man, Terry. Very similar background to yourself.'

'Uh.'

‘Now, of course, we *could* simply list Pete Industries’ details on the online directory – phone number and website, the bare *minimum*. But as we’ve been talking, I’ve been thinking about what opportunity will *maximize* your return, bringing you most money. And what I propose, and it would be good to know if you agree with this, is that we commission a full-colour, full-page advertising feature for Pete Industries to appear directly alongside an expert article on cat’s eyes that our award-winning editorial team will put together. And then, of course, what will happen is that when these Asian project managers read our independent, expert analysis about cat’s eye solutions, their eyes will *automatically* flick over to Pete Industries’ information-rich, full-page advertisement. I think both of us know who we’re talking about, here. We’re talking about people who need to buy *millions* of cat’s eyes, and who will immediately recognise that Pete Industries is the ideal firm to provide them. It really is that simple. Because fundamentally, and you probably say this to your staff all the time, Pete, success is all about three things: riches, and wisdom, and knowledge.’

‘Ah. Yes.’

‘Now, Pete, if you’re keen to *secure* this opportunity for Pete Industries, we can get things moving now through a one-time investment of £29,000. The other way we *could* do it would be to allow two cat’s eye manufacturers to share the page for £15,000 each. But in my experience, and I’m sure this is yours too, the real *value* from projects like this is generated when you don’t have to share the limelight with your competitors. And you’re probably thinking, and I have to say I agree with you, that Pete Industries deserves to profit *fully* from Asia’s massive road-building bonanza. And so for that reason, I decided to call you first, Pete, before picking up the phone to Geoff Johnson at Johnsons’ Cat’s Eyes.’

‘Uh. Thanks.’

‘Now, Pete, I can hold Geoff off for 24 hours, so if you’re keen and ready to move, I can send you the booking form now. And the great advantage of moving fast, obviously, is that we can *immediately* start promoting Pete Industries to these Chinese budget holders. So I’ll send you the form straight away and what I’d like you to do is study it carefully *before* signing it. All I need from you before I do that is an answer to one very important question. Pete...’

‘Ah. What?’

‘Pete... are you ready... to capitalise fully... from this exceptional opportunity?’

‘Yes! Fucking YES!’ Caspar jumped out of his seat. Suddenly everyone was shouting, whooping, whistling, stamping their feet. Roy beamed benevolently. Carla walked round, distributing copies of the script. People rushed outside to the photocopier. Caspar walked up to me and slapped me on the shoulder.

‘Good job, Magnus. Top work.’

He knew it was a sham, of course. Caspar knew, Roy knew, Carla knew, Lesley knew, and I had belatedly realized that ultimately, perception *is* reality. It’s all that matters.

‘I LIKE TO MOVE IT, MOVE IT! I LIKE TO MOVE IT, MOVE IT!’ Roy had switched on the ghetto blaster. I felt drained, and left them to it. As I walked out, I glanced back and saw Pete dancing, arms in the air, fists pumping.

Chapter 12

Thereafter, Carla and I produced versions of the script for *World Rail Frontiers*, *Port Infrastructure Horizons* and every other Westminster Media title, all of which were to have a special Asian focus for their next issue, allowing us to regurgitate much of the spiel. When each script was ready, I put it in a red box and hand-delivered it to the relevant sales manager (this was Roy's idea – “it's all about ceremony”). One of the first recipients was Earl, a giant Jamaican who ran the Packaging sales team. When I handed over his box, wrapped in a gold ribbon, he weighed it carefully, then with his free arm pulled me towards him, hugging me to his chest. When he let me go, there were tears in his eyes. Envious looks were cast his way by teams waiting anxiously for their own boxes.

At the end of the day, when all the boxes had been distributed, I met Roy for a beer.

‘That seemed to go well.’

‘News has spread, Magnus. I'm getting calls from headhunters, asking if I'd be interested in CEO positions at rival media companies.’

‘Cool. Would you?’

‘Yes. No. Not yet. My work here isn't done. I'm these people's benefactor, they need me. One day there will be a statue of me in reception.’

He sketched a design on his beermat.

‘Something like this, you see? A marble me, resting my foot on a globe, right arm aloft, pointing towards progress.’

‘Maybe you could have two women clutching gratefully onto your shins,’ I said. ‘A Zulu and an Eskimo?’

Roy peered at me. I knew he couldn’t be sure if I was serious.

‘Hmm. Interesting suggestion.’

‘How is the Century Project going?’

‘Bang on course. One a week until December 31st will push us over the top. I’ve moved on from SOAS, by the way. I slashed and burned my way through that forest. Now it’s the London School for Hospitality & Tourism. It’s pathetically easy. I tell them I’m the publisher of *Hotel Management International* and a minute later, kerching! Another Duvel?’

#

During the weeks that followed, our sales teams smashed through their targets, ably assisted by the magic script. Each magazine was crammed with advertising and we had to massively expand our editorial output. The “facts and funnies” page was replaced with two pages of “facts” and a page of “funnies”. We hired an artist friend of Carla’s to draw a cartoon for each issue. We introduced a letter’s page. All the letters were written by Diya. A typical one read:

“Dear Sir, I would like to compliment the team at Westminster Media for your outstanding Summer issue on Next Generation Adhesives. Its mixture of rich data, insightful analysis and insider gossip is proving invaluable in helping our firm keep up to speed with international best practice, and identify business partners. Yours faithfully, Wong Zhangfeng, Chief Executive, Wangxei Sealants & Coatings.”

My September pay cheque was £7,800. I had no idea what to do with the money. I paid an interior architect £1,500 to transform the spare room in Chris’s flat into a desert, plus £3,000 populating it with a dozen species of cacti, and another £3,000 installing a Bang & Olufsen BeoLab sound system. I covered the ceiling with glow-in-the-dark stars. At night, I lay in the sand, drinking white wine, listening to Japanese psychedelic rock, gazing upwards. I considered myself cured of my Roy/Carla angst.

#

Rostock.

Midnight. Capitaine Magnus walks briskly through the Old Town, having just left a fundraising dinner for orphans at St. Peter's Church, where his generosity of spirit and funds were remarked on admiringly by the town worthies. Rather than the direct route back to the Barracks, he takes a detour through the working-class district. What business has he here, at this time of night? He turns right on Burgwall and stands in the middle of the road, in front of a three-storey building.

While the rest of the street is sleeping, the occupants of the first-floor apartment are clearly awake. A young woman's head and upper body protrudes outwards from the window. She is gripping firmly onto the window sill. She is naked, her golden-brown locks tumbling over her attractive, shapely, not-too-big-and-not-too-small breasts. A shadowy figure is visible behind her.

(her)

(shadowy figure)

Yes! Yes! Oh! Yes! Ah!

You like that! You like that!

Yes! Woa! Ooo! Yes!

You fucking like that? You like that!

Aargh! Yes! Yes! Yes!

You like that? You fucking LIKE THAT!

Capitaine Magnus clears his throat loudly.

'Ahem! I say, Ahem!... AHEM!'

The young woman notices his presence, screams, and disappears into the apartment. The shadowy figure comes forward.

'What the fuck? Who the fuck are you?! Fuck off out of it!'

'Good evening, sir! I come bearing the message that I wish you and the young woman all the best for a happy and prosperous future.'

'Just FUCK OFF!'

The shadowy man launches a flowerpot at Capitaine Magnus, who ducks to avoid it, then touches the brim of his hat, bows gracefully and walks off along Burgwall. The man's shouts follow him.

'Go on, FUCK off! Ya fucking FREAK!'

#

At the start of November, the first Westminster Media Diner's Club event took place at Le Gavroche. IBM paid £20,000 to sponsor the dinner, which was due to be attended by fifteen telecoms Brexits. Carla, Roy and I arrived at seven o'clock to set things up. Carla would be hosting the event, while Roy and I would hover outside the private dining room, prepared to make up the numbers if necessary. The IBM people arrived. Their telecoms partner and marketing director would both be sitting at the table, and Roy had briefed Carla about "sending them home happy." The IBM partner would be given the chance to make a short speech at the start of the dinner, and Carla was under strict instructions to laugh uproariously at anything she perceived as a joke.

The dinner guests (all male) arrived at eight. The table was full, so Roy and I left them to it and ordered our food in the main restaurant. From time to time, one of us poked our head round the door to check how things were going.

'How does it look?' asked Roy, cracking his spoon through his crème brûlée as I came back from peering into the room.

'Seems to be going well. Carla's doing great as a hostess.'

'Naturally. She's a unique talent. With exceptional tits.'

'Hmm.'

He took a drink of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, then smacked his lips together.

'Get over your hang-ups and ask her out. Stop pissing about.'

'Eh?'

'Do you know what Buddha said about fear?'

'No.'

'I don't either. But it was probably that fear serves no purpose. It's paralyzing and unproductive. You don't gain anything by not asking Carla out. You don't lose anything by getting knocked back. Am I right?'

'I suppose.'

'Do you know what it is?'

'Do I know what what is?'

'You don't love Carla.'

I said nothing.

'You're in love with an idea of who Carla is, with an abstraction you've created. You're in love with a fucking concept.'

'You're mad.'

'No, *you're* mad. Stop wasting your time with visions. I'm saying this for your own good, Magnus. As long as you're enslaved by concepts, men of action like me will take advantage of your fear.'

At that point, the door to the private dining room opened, and Trevor, the IBM marketing manager appeared. He pulled up a seat for himself at our table.

'Roy, I just wanted to say, this dinner of yours, it's fucking fantastic. I've sponsored dozens of events, can't remember a more productive one. Those guys are loving it. Chatting away, sharing business challenges, giving our partner a chance to shine. Your colleague is doing a first-class job. Cut to the chase, I want to book three more dinners. I'll send you the dates tomorrow.'

'You're on.'

'And by the way, what an inspired touch to invite the film maker. Really effective ice breaker.'

'Who?' I asked.

'Finlay, the chap from the BBC. Dicky Attenborough's grandson.'

‘Glad you think so, Trevor. We put a lot of effort into crafting the perfect networking environment. If a thing’s worth doing, etcetera... you know that better than anyone.’

‘Well, it’s paid off big time. Right, I’m going back in. Let’s catch up later about those dates.’

He clapped Roy on the shoulder and walked back towards the dining room. I looked at Roy.

‘Dicky Attenborough’s grandson?’

‘No idea.’

We opened the door and looked in. At the far side of the table, sitting between Trevor and Carla, was a young man with a goatee beard. He was wearing a blue velvet jacket and Buddy Holly glasses. He said something and the table burst into laughter. He saw us looking over at him, and raised his wine glass in our direction.

‘I don’t fucking believe it’, said Roy.

It was Lesley.

#

An hour later, the guests left. We gave everyone a bottle of vintage wine to take home, and paid for their taxis. The IBM duo emerged last, laughing and joking with Lesley.

‘All right Roy? We’re going for a late one with Finlay. He’s invited us to The Ivy.’

Roy’s face was multi-tasking, simultaneously reflecting Trevor’s grin back at him and staring daggers at Lesley.

‘Excellent, Trevor! Finlay, I’ll be in touch with you tomorrow. Expect my call.’

The three of them walked off. We went into the dining room. Carla was putting on her coat.

‘Alright guys? That was a hoot. We sent them home happy.’

‘So I gather’, said Roy. ‘Good fucking job, Carla. The goons are over the moon. They want three more dinners.’

‘Nice!’

‘Just one thing. What was Lesley doing here?’

‘Yes, I wondered that myself. He said you were counting on him to make the evening a success. That he wasn’t prepared to let you down. That you’ve been like a father to him.’

‘Ah, for fuck’s sake.’

‘He was brilliant, Roy. It was virtuoso stuff.’

‘I don’t doubt it. The cunt.’

He picked up a glass of wine from the table, and downed it.

‘Let’s get out of here.’

#

Next day, Roy came over to let me know the dates for the next three IBM dinners.

‘Trevor’s still over the fucking moon. Apparently Lesley, sorry, Finlay, introduced him to Jeremy Paxman at Groucho’s. So now he wants to know if we can have Wolfgang, sorry, Finlay, back for the next dinner. I told him it would probably depend on his filming schedule. The cunt.’

‘Ah, cool.’

‘And he’s going to talk to IBM’s European Marketing Director about commissioning... wait for it... twenty-five dinners from us next year. London, Brussels, Paris, Amsterdam.’

‘Woah.’

‘We’ve struck a fucking gold mine here. And when you find a gold mine, Magnus, what do you do?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You pillage it. Exploitation, that’s the name of the game. I want you to meet someone tomorrow.’

‘Saturday? I’m not sure if I can make it.’ I had a cactus delivery scheduled for 7pm.

‘Trust me, Magnus, it’ll be worth your time. Meet me in the Vibe bar after work, I’ll explain what it’s about.’

#

I spent the rest of the day struggling with “Cheese of the Future!”, an advertorial feature for our food processing magazine. At five, I went down to the Vibe bar. Roy was waiting for me. He handed me a Duvel.

‘What do you know about the Greek shipping industry?’

‘Not a great deal. I’ll rephrase that. Nothing.’

‘Aristotle Onassis had sex with Maria Callas *and* Jackie Kennedy, and you know nothing about his work. You disgust me.’

‘Eh?’

‘The Greeks, in business terms, are a mess, Magnus. Their economy’s fucked. They’re a bunch of lazy, disreputable, tax dodgers. Never, *whatever* you do, do business in Greece.’

‘Right.’

‘Except if you’re dealing with a shipping magnate. It’s the jewel in the national crown, the lily atop the dung heap. Sailing’s in their blood, it’s what it means to be Greek. Poseidon, Jason and the Argonauts. Need I go on?’

‘Uh. Yes.’

‘Tonight, I’ll introduce you to Kostas Samaris. The reprobate son of George Samaris, who owns a conglomerate covering shipping, hotels, supermarkets and casinos. He’s one of the three richest men in Greece. Kostas is the black sheep, the family cretin. He’s in London to do a diploma in hotel management. George has earmarked him for the tourism part of the family portfolio. It’s where he’ll inflict least damage.’

‘How do you know all this? And why are you telling me?’

‘I know this because I met Idiot Boy on a Century Project mission. I stole his girlfriend from under his nose. Understandably, he now thinks I’m some kind of superman. Keeps inviting me to join him and his millionaire friends for drinks.’

‘OK. So...’

‘Fucking hell, Magnus. Lady Luck is jiggling her tits under your nose.’

‘Eh?’

‘Tell me. What happens when brains meets cash? When intellectual capital meets actual fucking capital?’

‘An opportunity cocktail?’

He gave me that familiar look, trying to establish if I was taking the piss.

‘Hmm. Not a bad way to describe it.’

He wrote “opportunity cocktail” into his Filofax.

‘Here’s the deal. Old man Samaris is looking to diversify the family portfolio, specifically towards technology and the internet. He would fucking leap at the opportunity to be a founding partner of a progressive, digital media business. Digital media, I told Idiot Boy, that’s where tomorrow’s billions will be made. Tonight, we feed the parasite that I already planted in his mind. As it grows, it will take control of his brain. The parasite controls the host, Magnus! It will manipulate him to recommend to Pop, sometime before Christmas, that the family makes a small investment of three million pounds in a new media business run by our good selves.’

‘Wow.’

‘I call this the zombie mind control method.’

Now I looked at him quizzically, trying to establish if he was being serious. It looked like it.

‘Imagine, Magnus. As much seed capital as we need to create the perfect business. Doing the projects we want and keeping the profits for ourselves, rather than watching them go to the Guys and Caspars of this world.’

He took a sip from his Duvel and looked around him.

‘Look at them, Magnus.’

‘Who?’

‘Them.’ He gestured to some people standing by the bar. I recognized Gary and Ray from *Mining Technology Solutions*.

‘Apologies for the human condition. Carcasses. Fucking skeletons, rattling their way to the grave.’

‘Eh?’

‘Go and get us a couple of Duvels. And as you’re waiting at the bar, ask yourself this: what will I do with my multi-million pound cash payout? Because that, my friend, is why we’re heading to Hampstead to meet London’s richest simpleton.’

As I stood at the bar, my thoughts were not of cash, but of Carla. Roy was right, I had to grab the mettle. But how? I had no clue.

Our second Duvel consumed, Roy commandeered a taxi to north London. We got out in Hampstead Village. Roy led the way to an Italian wine bar, from where he phoned Kostas.

‘He’ll be here in 5 minutes. He lives with his mum in a mansion by the Heath. Old George divorced her years ago, he’s onto his third wife now. Some kind of Aphrodite. Golden breasts, snakes for hair, that kind of thing.’

‘Uh huh. What’s my role in the conversation?’

‘The bait. London’s most talented young writer and editor. Say as little as possible at the start, but jump in once you’ve figured him out. It won’t take long. He’s a wonderfully shallow individual.’

‘Right.’

‘Remember, Magnus. It’s the family money that interests us, because when all’s said and done, it’s all about liquidity. What I’ll propose, or rather what the parasite inside Kostas’s brain will instruct him to propose to his father, is that the three of us become joint founders of the new firm. We’ll set it up with share capital of £1,500 – we each chip in £500.’

‘That doesn’t sound like it would go very far.’

‘Fucking hell, Magnus. We don’t need Samaris for share capital, we need him for working capital – the family credit line. We’re not launching a shoestring outfit here. We’ll have eighteen employees on Day One, a cool office in Shoreditch. We’ll burn through a million in the first three months.’

‘Ah.’

‘We’ll lose £1.75 million in Year One. We’ll break even in Year Two. We’ll make £3.5 million in Year Three and £8 million in Year Four. At which point, you can sell your shares to me or anyone else, and get the hell out with your multi-million pound payout. Head up to Scotland. Build a giant wicker effigy of Carla. Whatever it is you people do.’

‘OK. And what’s Kostas’s role in the business supposed to be?’

‘Kostas will spend his time sniffing coke off air hostesses’ tits in hotel rooms. Forget all about Kostas.’

‘Right.’

‘Here’s Kostas!’

A grinning, chubby young guy wearing a leather jacket, white shirt, blue jeans and designer sunglasses was coming towards us, arms outstretched.

‘There he is! Roy! The old maestro!’

He bumped fists with Roy and sat down.

‘Kostas. Good to see you, amigo. You’re looking well. How’s life?’

Kostas shook out a Marlboro and lighted up. He inhaled, exhaled.

‘Life? I am enjoying it.’

‘Good to hear. How are the studies going?’

‘I’ve no idea. Absolutely no idea.’ He laughed heartily, clicking his fingers to draw the waiter’s attention. ‘Bottle of Chablis.’

‘We only have Italian wine, sir.’

‘You’re fucking joking, right? Jesus.’ He laughed. ‘Roy! I think this guy’s serious.’

‘Bottle of Gavi’, said Roy. ‘Kostas, I want you to meet Magnus Myles, Westminster Media’s Editor in chief. You might recognize the name, he was Young Editor of the Year at this year’s

British Press Awards. He's also, in many people's opinion, the country's most innovative young novelist, due to his daring use of Anglo Saxon. I've known Magnus for years.'

'Man, that's a big build up. Good to meet you, Marcus.'

He extended a chubby fist, which I bumped.

'You're a good friend, Kostas, so I don't mind letting you in on this. Magnus and I are putting the final touches to a business plan for a groundbreaking new media company to launch next summer. You know as well as anyone, with revenue channels shifting towards digital, the real money's going to be made by firms whose technology lets them marry distribution to content. Mobile streaming video, Kostas, that's where the billion-pound advertising opportunity lies. It's something Bill Gates said to me in Aspen last Christmas. Personally, I think he's right. Bill's onto something here.'

The waiter poured our wine. Kostas downed most of his glass in a gulp.

'Agile innovation, Kostas, that's what I'm talking about. Magnus and I have spent the last six months assembling a team of world-leading technologists, journalists and revenue generators. We're almost ready to press the green button. Then the rocket takes off. Destination, Profit.'

'Shit, man, that sounds amazing. Why didn't you tell me earlier?'

'This is top secret, Kostas.'

'Sure. It's just that, you know, I'm supposed to be identifying portfolio opportunities for Dad.'

'You'd better hope he doesn't notice when Magnus and I sell the business for a hundred million pounds in five years.'

'Woah.'

He poured the remainder of the bottle into his glass, then drank it.

'Is this something that I can share with Dad, just in case there's an opportunity for us?'

'I don't know, Kostas. If we dilute the share capital three ways, rather than two, we'll only make £33 million each at exit. Magnus?'

'Hmm. I think I'd want to see what Kostas and his family are able to bring to the table.'

‘Let me in, Roy. I’m going to Athens on Friday, I’ll be able to get a quick Yes.’

Roy looked pensively into the distance.

‘Kostas, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll let you have the business plan. You’ve got eight days. Now I’m doing this as a personal favour to you. I probably owe you one for stealing your girlfriend.’

‘You do, you fucker! When are we going out drinking again?’

‘As soon as you’re back.’

MC Hammer’s *U Can’t Touch This* blared out of Kostas’s phone. He answered it, holding a brief conversation in Greek.

‘Sorry guys. Late for dinner. Roy, please email me this thing, I’m counting on you.’

‘OK, Kostas. Eight days, that’s your window of opportunity.’

‘Thanks man! Good meeting you, Marcus.’

We bumped fists. He wobbled off in the direction of the Heath. We watched him go.

‘Nice job, Marcus.’

‘I didn’t do anything.’

‘Ah, but you did. The right phrase, the right tone, the right time. It’s all about stepping up and delivering. You did that. Fat Boy has taken the bait. Let’s see what we get back.’

Chapter 13

What we got back, two weeks later, was a letter from George Samaris. Roy brought it to my desk.

‘Here we are, Magnus. The fruits of our labours. Have a read.’

The letter was handwritten on crested notepaper.

Dear Roy, Marcus,

Many thanks for the business plan – well received. Hope you’re both available to join our family in Rhodes over Christmas, to discuss practicalities. Kostas will arrange flights, etc.

Best,

George.

‘He wants us to spend Christmas with him?’

‘Makes sense. Wants to get the measure of us, see who’s he dealing with. This is the best outcome we could have hoped for. Fuck me, Magnus, we are going to pull this off. I’ll dazzle George with digital bullshit, you’ll make enigmatic and brilliant remarks, I’ll shrug off the advances of snake woman with the golden tits. All perfectly straightforward.’

‘Jesus. So what do we do?’

‘I’ll let Kostas know it’s a Yes from our side, he’ll do the rest. We’ll head out on the 23rd, the day after the Christmas party. We’ll stay over Christmas, and come back on the 26th.’

‘Okay.’

‘This is it, Magnus. Every project we’ve worked on, every experience we’ve lived through, every technique we’ve mastered, the whole fucking value proposition which we’ve developed. It culminates here. It’s time to get paid.’

‘Wow. Sounds great.’

‘Old Man Samaris will beg to be let in on the action. Mark my words.’

He walked off to the sales floor.

#

At this point, Westminster Media’s editorial department was in rapid expansion mode. Four new, “function focused” magazines were set to launch in the new year: *Future CEO*, *Future Finance*, *Future IT* and *Future HR*. Caspar had told me to recruit six new commissioning editors and sub editors. The WM Connect business was booming: twenty-six breakfasts, lunches and dinners had already been scheduled for January-June, and Diya (who had been promoted again, to Vice President, Events) had a staff of three. The noise level on the sales floor, where twenty extra desks and phones had been crammed in, was deafening.

Despite my resolve to “do something” about my feelings for Carla, I had done nothing at all. Carla and I had a great rapport (I thought), she was relaxed and happy in my company (I felt), and she liked me for who I was (I hoped). The fact is, I was cowardly. I lacked the courage to ask her out. With (I argued to myself) good reason. Rejection would have crushed me, leaving me whimpering in the sand, clinging onto a cactus, to remain there for months. Nobody wanted that.

One day, Caspar asked me to appoint a Deputy Editor, to take over the responsibility of managing the sub editors and freelancers. Maybe, I thought, by promoting Carla, I could earn her gratitude. Perhaps she’d have to go out with me afterwards, on human decency grounds.

‘Ah, Carla.’

‘Yep?’

‘There’s a good film on at the Curzon. *Closely Watched Trains*.’

‘Closely what?’

‘It’s a Czech film from the sixties. About a guy working at a village train station in the Second World War, during Nazi occupation.’

‘Sounds like a laugh riot.’

‘I think you’d like it. Do you want to come and see it on Sunday?’

‘I tell you what. If I receive no better offers between now and then, there’s a chance.’

‘Ah. OK.’

‘No, I’m kidding you. Of course I’ll come, it sounds cool.’

#

Luckily, Carla liked the film. She laughed a lot, and agreed to go for a coffee afterwards. When I came back from the counter with our drinks, I handed her a donut.

‘Here you go.’

‘Cheers. Hey, what’s this?’

She removed a USB stick from the hole of the donut.

‘That, Carla, is *Rostock*. It’s not finished, but I thought you might like to read it. I think... well, I don’t know if you’ll like it or not. But like I said... well, there it is.’

‘Hmm. Is there much sex?’

‘Uh. No.’

‘Put some in, would be my advice.’ She smiled at me. ‘Everyone likes sex, Magnus.’ She bit into her donut.

‘I... yes.’

‘I’ll read it at work. Have you shown it to Diya?’

‘Uh, no.’

‘Don’t you think she’d like to see it? I know she’d like that.’

She flashed a suitably knowing look.

‘Ah. By the way, I wanted to talk to you about work. Would you like to be promoted to Deputy Editor?’

‘Hmm. What are the perks?’

‘You get to be in charge of the sub editors and the freelancers.’

‘Hmm. What are the perks?’

‘You get a pay rise, more responsibility, more recognition... we need to appoint a Deputy Editor, and it would make sense if it was you.’

‘Would it? I reckon there are better options out there.’

‘What do you mean? You’re brilliant. You’re talented, clever, you know the business.’

‘I don’t mean better options than me, Magnus. I’ll take your word for it that there are none. I mean better options *for* me.’

‘Oh’.

‘Everything that surrounds us becomes part of us. Each experience seeps into us.’

‘What?’

‘Westminster Media is a carnival, Magnus, an amusement. Don’t get me wrong, I like a freak show as much as the next woman. But that’s what it is. It’s not serious. I don’t want this place to define me, either professionally or personally. My ambitions are completely different. You understand, don’t you?’

‘I thought you were enjoying it.’

‘I’ve had a great time! It’s been just what I needed. But it’s a joke, Magnus. Creatively, it’s a farce. Can we agree?’

‘Well...’

‘Ask yourself two questions. One - why would I want to stay working there? Two - why do you want me to stay working there?’

She took another bite of her donut.

‘Take your time,’ she said. ‘Put your argument together. Who knows, maybe you’ll convince me.’

I didn’t fancy my chances. My argument, “because I’m in love with you”, remained locked behind mental bars. I lacked the balls to lean over the table and kiss her. I had nothing. We finished our donuts. I went home and spent £750 on cacti.

#

Rostock.

Early evening. Capitaine Magnus strides purposefully through the town. He has just returned from the Polish border, where he skirmished successfully with brigands. Now, he has business in Rostock to resolve, something he should have taken care of long ago. He turns down Burgwall, stopping in front of the three-storey house. He hammers on the door.

A beautiful, demure, sophisticated young woman opens the door.

‘Why, Capitaine Magnus. This is a great honour. Why don’t you come in?’

She shows him upstairs to her modest, tasteful, one-room apartment. He removes his greatcoat and hat, and sits on the sofa.

‘Can I offer you coffee and donuts?’

‘Very kind of you. With great pleasure.’

While the host busies herself, Capitaine Magnus admires her approvingly. What a wonderful creature! And from this moment hence, he thinks, she will be mine.

The young woman brings back a tray and sits down beside Capitaine Magnus on the sofa. Her pleasing, symmetrical thighs press against his. His gaze descends approvingly on her scented, heaving bosom. He forces his eyes upwards, towards her face. He clears his throat to speak.

‘Achoo!’

‘Bless you!’ says Capitaine Magnus.

But wait. He reflects that the young woman’s face had remained perfectly fixed during the sneeze. The sound had not emerged from her mouth. What in God’s name?

'Is... is there someone else here with you?'

'What can you mean? Certainly not. I live alone.'

Capitaine Magnus hears a dull thump, and what sounds like someone cursing. He looks around the room, confused.

'There's someone here!'

The young woman looks alarmed.

'Of course there isn't!'

Capitaine Magnus looks under the bed. He gets up from the sofa and looks behind the curtain. Nobody. The only possible place someone could be hiding... is the wardrobe. He starts towards it.

'What are you doing? Oh, please sit down!'

Capitaine Magnus pauses, mid-room.

'Sit down... why?'

'There's nobody. There's nothing. Really, there's nobody here at all.'

Capitaine Magnus looks at her, then at the wardrobe, then back to her, then back to the wardrobe, then down at the floor. What to do?

'I must know what's inside that wardrobe!' Magnus grabs the knob and throws open the door.

'Surprise!' Crouched inside the wardrobe is a man, naked save for a green necktie. He leaps out and dances about on his toes, in front of Magnus.

'You like that? Ya fuckin' clown!'

Magnus whirls to face the young woman.

'Who is this? Explain yourself!'

'Who is who?' asks the young woman. The naked man dances a taunting jig. A donut is impaled on his loathsome, malodorous, erect penis.

'Want a donut, ya eejit?' the naked man shouts in Magnus's face.

'I demand answers! Who is this?!'

The young woman is shocked.

'Who is who? What's wrong? What is it?'

The naked man leaps up and punches Magnus in the nose.

'Ow!' Magnus recoils in pain, then swings a punch. The naked man ducks nimbly and dances around the room, hopping about the young woman. He puts a foul, grubby hand on her behind and squeezes it appreciatively, winking at Magnus.

'Are you alright?' the woman asks Magnus. 'Come and sit down. I'll fetch a doctor.'

'Over my dead body! What a fool I've been! Good bye, forever!'

He snatches his hat from the table and strides out of the apartment. Halfway down the stairs he curses. His regimental coat! He runs back to the room. The young woman is slumped on the sofa, weeping. There is no sign of the naked man. He grabs his coat and leaves for a second time.

#

The Christmas party was scheduled for Friday, December 22nd, a day before our departure to Rhodes. Caspar had booked the Faerie Queene, a two-deck Thames riverboat, for a "70's disco cruise". We would leave from Tower Bridge and sail upriver to Putney, then go back downstream to Canary Wharf. Fancy dress was mandatory.

The office was expectant. Hysteria levels rose daily. A week before the cruise, glam costume appendages started appearing. Cruise Ship Keith sported a giant gold medallion; Jenson, who was now sleeping in Guy's abandoned office, had grown a Freddy Mercury moustache for the occasion. When Dirty John returned from his Thursday-lunchtime session of violent tugging, the day before the party, he was wearing a feather boa.

On party day, we held a combined editorial/events/database Christmas lunch. There were twenty of us, and I booked the basement of Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese. I'd been given a company credit card a week previously, Roy advising me to "make hay while the sun fucking shines." We had a boozy, fun afternoon.

At four o'clock we headed back to Brick Lane to change into our costumes. I'd rummaged together a gold shirt, leather trousers, black afro, aviator sunglasses and a peace pendant. Diya painted glitter hearts on my cheeks. At five o'clock, two hundred and fifty costumed party-goers spilled out of the office and strolled through the brewery courtyard onto Commercial Street, then down past Aldgate to St Katharine Docks. It being the last Friday before Christmas, and London being London, we passed completely incognito.

At the dock, staff wearing high-visibility jackets stood holding flipboards, checking names before allowing people up the gangplank. A man with wild black hair, drooping moustache and beard was gesticulating angrily. He was dressed in a nun's costume.

'Zappa! Frank fucking Zappa! Look harder!'

I caught his eye.

'Hi Guy.'

'Oh, hi Magnus.'

The lad with the clipboard scratched his chin.

'Fuck it. On you go.'

Once everyone was on board, we set sail. It was a beautiful, chill evening, the stars visible through London's light pollution. A buffet service had been laid out with sandwiches, hot dogs, curry and soup. Two bars distributed free drinks. On the upper deck, a sound system was pumping out disco; the lower deck had glam rock. Ten minutes into the cruise, the boat was already a heaving, drunken mess.

I took a bottle of beer to the front of the upper deck. I found a spot by the rail, and watched London drift by: St Paul's Cathedral, Shakespeare's Globe, Somerset House. Chewbacca was standing beside me, talking into a mobile phone.

'We're finally fucking getting somewhere, Giles. Rory's their big swinging dick, the king locust. If he greenlights it, it's a fucking goer. Keep the pressure on!'

'Hi Caspar.'

He took off the Chewbacca head.

‘Magnus. Good to see you, chap. All well?’

‘Yeah, thanks. You?’

‘Tip top. Jenson tells me you’re making great progress with the book. Good fucking effort. I’m thinking of writing a book myself. Contrarian investing. Turning points. Know what I mean?’

‘Ah.’

‘Let’s talk about it in the new year. My brains plus your pen. Bingo.’

He put the Chewbacca head back on, and walked off towards the bar.

As I was looking out at the Houses of Parliament, Carla appeared with two shots of vodka. She gave me one.

‘May you die in bed at the age of ninety,’ she said. ‘Murdered by a jealous spouse.’

We downed the shots.

‘Cheers.’

It was the first time I’d seen Carla since she’d changed into her party costume. She was wearing a white shirt and a black waistcoat. A dark spotted tie poked out from the top and bottom. She had billowy beige slacks and a wide-brimmed hat.

‘La di da.’

‘I knew you’d get it, Magnus. No other fucker does.’

‘Enjoying the party?’

‘Yep. I’ve been downstairs. Jenson smuggled some absinthe on board. Him, Roy and Diya are smashing it.’

‘Oh. Sounds messy.’

‘Roy’s ranting about assets and liabilities.’

‘What’s that?’

‘His new method. For every event, or circumstance, or person, he calculates whether they work towards his objectives, or against them. It’s all about recognizing determining factors. Jenson, it appears, is an asset. Diya, a liability.’

‘She must have been gutted to hear that.’

‘Inconsolable. She’s weeping over the rails.’

‘Hey, did you read *Rostock*?’

‘I did. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.’

‘Oh. Well?’

‘I need more to drink.’

‘Ah.’

She spun around, disappearing into the crowd. I went to get myself another beer. Intrigued by the concept of Roy on absinthe, I took a look below decks. I found him in a large, low-ceilinged cabin. He was sitting among a group of revelers, watching Jenson balancing precariously on a wooden chair, delivering an animated harangue. Roy winked at me, beckoning me to sit down. Diya made room for me to squeeze in beside her.

Jenson was dressed like Huggy Bear, the Starsky & Hutch pimp: purple suit, flowery shirt with giant lapels, platform boots. He was waving, and occasionally drinking from, a bottle of absinthe.

It took me a while to tune into what Jenson was saying. Partly it was because we’d all been drinking since lunch, partly it was because he was reciting iambic pentameter, but mainly it was because he was speaking French.

‘Amis, le monde entier est un cactus.
Il est impossible de s’asseoir.
Le crocodile prospère dans l’éphémère,
Désirs ne s’expriment pas sans la passion.
Vivons en acceptant le libre arbitre,
A bas les monstres, à bas les traditions!’

He bowed, then staggered down from the chair, handing the absinthe to Roy. There was a round of applause. Roy climbed onto the chair. He was wearing an American football helmet and a green New York Jets jersey with “Namath 12” on the back. He took a swig from the bottle.

‘Ladies, gentlemen. Show your appreciation for Jenson, one of the great iconoclasts of our time. Jenson, you clearly stated what needed to be said. I salute you.’

He raised the bottle. We all gave a cheer.

‘And now, a toast,’ he said. ‘To man and his habitat. To life as an experiential journey. To the crucial difference between formal modes and modal forms. You all know what I’m talking about.’

Database Pete, who was dressed as Wonderwoman, nodded, inhaled from a fat joint and passed it to Diya.

‘Is this (Roy gestured expansively) reality, or is it truth? Does an idea have more value than an impulse? Do I contradict myself? No, I fucking don’t. Jenson articulated it better than I could; it’s not about having the potential for success, it’s about *actual* fucking success. Don’t think ideas, live them! Push things forward. Your acts will set you free.’

He took a swig from the bottle, then hopped off the chair.

We clapped. Diya passed me the joint. After I passed it on, I realized Diya was holding my hand. My head was spinning. I wanted to get out of there and find Carla. I extracted myself and left them just as Database Pete, who had climbed onto the chair, began his speech with “I believe that children are the future”. I went up to the top deck, squeezing through the crowds until I spotted Carla standing by the front rail. She was with a man dressed as a ship’s captain. I approached them.

‘Magnus! Where did you disappear to? Let me introduce you to Stig Björnsson. He’s the captain.’

The captain gave me a firm handshake. He had a bristly moustache and mirror sunglasses. He was puffing on a pipe.

‘Nice to meet you,’ I said. ‘Shouldn’t you be steering the ship?’

‘Don’t worry about that, young fellow,’ he said in a reassuring Scandinavian baritone. ‘The chief engineer is manning the helm. But the young lady was wrong about one thing. My name is not Stig Björnsson. Far from it! Nothing, indeed, could be further from the truth. For I, you see, am Björn Stigsson. An easy mistake to make.’

He laughed generously and slapped Carla on the ass.

‘Wait a fucking minute.’ I reached out and pulled off his sunglasses. It was Lesley.

‘And on that bombshell, I must leave you.’

He sauntered off, puffing his pipe.

I squeezed into the space which Lesley had vacated at the rail.

‘How you doing?’ Carla slurred.

‘Good, thanks. You?’

‘Fucking sensational. Drunk. Best office Christmas party ever. And you’re the best colleague ever. Although Lesley runs you close.’

She leaned her head on my shoulder. We sailed under Chelsea Bridge. Battersea power station appeared on our right.

‘If you didn’t care what happened to me, we would zig zag our way through the boredom and pain.’

‘Eh?’

‘I’m leaving London, Magnus. I’m getting out.’

‘What?’

‘It’s a question of momentum, of being a moving fucking object. I don’t like to stay too long in one place. I’m going to New York to study photography. My ex is working as a chef in Manhattan, I can stay in his flat as long as I like. Give me your blessing, Magnus. Let me go.’

‘Ah.’

‘You mean a lot to me.’

‘You mean a lot to me, too.’

‘Yes. I figured that.’

She took my hand, lacing her fingers between mine.

‘So, you want my feedback on *Rostock*?’

‘Sure, why not?’

‘Well, let’s see. How shall I put this?’

She looked me in the eye.

‘I thought it was a monumental waste of effort.’

‘What?’

My fingers rejected hers.

‘It’s an exercise in utter fucking futility. I felt ashamed reading it.’

‘Jesus...’

‘Next time, Magnus, write something meaningful. Write about life, about the human fucking condition. Stop wanking behind the curtain. Get to grips with things.’

I looked at her, my mind blank.

‘You think too much, Magnus. That’s bad news for momentum. Figure out whatever it is you want to do, or who you want to be, and apply yourself.’

‘Right...’

This was too much to process. I concentrated on simply not blurting out anything pathetic.

#

During this conversation, other events were taking place around the boat. Some of them I was aware of, others I learnt of afterwards. One thing I took note of was when the boat’s engines stopped suddenly. Then the music stopped, prompting boos of complaint and a barrage of beer

bottles to be launched at the bridge. We turned round, and started chugging slowly back up the Thames. At this point, I heard people saying “some cunt’s jumped in”, “man overboard”, “fish the fucker out”. The boat stopped near Chelsea Bridge. We drifted there for a few minutes. Then I saw an RNLi inflatable rescue craft roaring towards us from downriver. It disappeared around the bow.

‘Some idiot’s fallen in,’ I muttered to Carla.

Then, from all around, I heard many variations on the same grim theme.

‘It’s Roy’. ‘Roy’s missing’. ‘Roy’s lost’. ‘It’s fucking Roy’.

‘What?!’

I barged people out of my way, fighting through to the bow. Two inflatable boats were circling around. People were shining torches into the water. In one boat, someone was wrapped in a blanket. I saw Diya in tears on the lower deck. I pushed my way down to her.

‘What’s happened?’

She shook her head, sobbing.

#

The inflatables circled around. Our boat drifted in the middle of the river. Then the engines started up and we chugged down to Vauxhall pier. Everyone was ushered onshore. The partygoers dispersed into the night. Diya, Carla and I hurried back along the Thames path, towards Battersea Bridge. It was freezing. We went as fast as we could. When we arrived, we found Pete in an ambulance, nursing a hot drink. In the river, rescue boats of various sizes were going here and there. Two police divers were getting changed into their wet suits.

We slumped down on a wall and watched. Diya explained what had happened. Urged on by the crowd, Pete, who’d been “out of it”, had scrambled onto the back rail, where he’d clung onto the flagpole with the intention of taking a flamboyant, public piss into the river. A beer in one hand, fumbling with his costume with the other, clutching the pole with the crook of his elbow, hindered by his Wonderwoman outfit’s high heels... The effort proved beyond him and he had careered over the rail with a ‘Fuck!’ and a splash.

Roy, standing nearby, had taken command of the situation. He found a lifebelt and lobbed it in Pete's direction. With the boat steaming downstream, he dispatched Jenson to tell the Captain to stop and turn round. By now Pete was out of sight, and not responding to calls.

'Well, there appears to be nothing for it,' Roy had told Diya.

And with that, he'd climbed onto the rail and dived in.

And that was the last anyone saw of him.

#

I didn't sleep that night. When I got home, I went to the desert room, switched on the TV, and gazed blankly at a cricket match taking place in Australia. I remember looking at my watch and seeing it was eight in the morning. I was supposed to be boarding a flight to Rhodes just then with Roy. I stayed in my desert, watching TV, phone switched off, until mid-afternoon. It was Christmas Eve. Starving, I went out to Broadway Market and bought six packets of crisps and six cans of beer. I returned to the sand and watched "100 Great Bridges".

At some point, I got up from the sand. I went to my bedroom, dug out my rucksack and filled it with clothes. I took my passport and my bank card. I didn't bother with the phone. I put on my coat and left the house, walking down Cambridge Heath Road to Bethnal Green tube. An hour later I was at Heathrow Airport.

Chapter 14

“I am losing precious days. I am degenerating into a machine for making money. I am learning nothing in this trivial world of men. I must break away and get out into the mountains to learn the news.” – John Muir

Christmas Day. I got a bus from Los Angeles airport into the city. I wanted to locate the hotel where John Fante wrote *Ask the Dust*. When I got to Bunker Hill, it bore no resemblance to the neighbourhood Fante described. I couldn't find any hotels, cheap or otherwise. Rucksack on my back, I wandered into Union Station and sat down on a bench. I gazed at the departures board for a while. Then I went to the ticket window and bought a seat on the Southwest Chief, leaving at six.

I got off the train in Needles at midnight. I checked into a hotel opposite the station and crashed out. In the morning, I went to an outdoors supplies store and equipped myself with a tent, hiking boots, water bottle, sleeping bag, airbed, matches, mirror, maps, compass, penknife, sunglasses, stove, fuel, plate, mug, cutlery, dried fruit and nuts, chocolate, granola and protein bars, insect repellent, sun hat, torch, notepads and pens, sun cream, lip salve, first aid kit, whistle, candles, binoculars and a small saw. I tried heaving my rucksack onto my back. It weighed a fucking ton. I staggered around the shop, crashing into a display of fishing rods, sending them flying. The store assistant considered me from behind the counter.

‘Need some help there, son?’

‘I'm fine. Thanks.’

I wobbled out to the street. I found a taxi, explaining to the driver where I wanted to go. He drove me twelve miles out of town, into the desert, leaving me by the side of Highway 95

then driving off in a cloud of dust. I heaved up my pack and headed east, away from the road, across flat scrubland. Towards the Dead Mountains.

I reached the base of the mountain range an hour later. There was no sign of a trail, so I scrambled over the rocks. After another hour, I slumped down and ate lunch. A spider ran over my boot, settling on a lace. I looked at him. A soft wind blew.

I continued uphill, heading for Mount Manchester, the Dead Mountains' highest point. I wanted to get there by nightfall. I made it just as the sun was setting, as the sky caught fire with reds and yellows. I flopped down to watch it. I opened a bottle of mescal which I'd bought in Needles, and had a drink. I raised the bottle to the setting sun, then performed the same ritual with the rising moon. Ten minutes later, I was asleep.

Next day, I explored the western side of the range. Mid-afternoon, I found what I was looking for. A flat patch of ground just big enough for my tent, between some prickly pear cacti and a Joshua tree. A small spring bubbled out of the rock. This place fit the bill. It would be my home for as long as it took.

I took another ceremonial drink of mescal, toasting the recently departed. I fished out my notepad and considered its empty pages. I took out my pen. It was time to get to grips with the story of Roy Leyden.

Appendix:

Rostock

(original stage version)

Cast of characters

POLICE CHIEF: MAGNUS MYLES

MILITARY POLICEMAN: AENGHUS QUINN

DRUMMER BOY: DERMOT BYRNE

EXECUTIONER: PAVEL SHUM

YOUTH: RYAN HALLIDAY

YOUTH'S MOTHER: SORCHA O'CONNELL

BUGLER: NICK THORPE

LA LIBERTÉ: LOTTE MADSEN

CROWD: CIARAN POWER, SINEAD MACALEESE, FIONA DEVLIN

ACT 1

SETTING: Rostock, 1810. A raised platform stands in the middle of the town square. A black-hooded, bare-chested executioner stands beside the chopping block, running a finger over his axe blade. A drummer boy beats out a snare roll. A policeman holds a shackled youth. The police chief unveils a scroll.

POLICE CHIEF: Hear ye, hear ye! The accused, Johannes Reinders, has been found guilty of sedition, disobedience and bearing arms. The sentence is death by decapitation, followed by dismemberment of the corpse, followed by disfigurement of the head. Ainsi périssent les ennemis de Napoléon!

[The policeman forces the youth to his knees, holding his head over the block.]

YOUTH'S MOTHER: No! He's innocent! Stop!

[The drummer boy increases the cadence of the drum roll. The executioner raises his axe. Just as he readies to strike, a bugle sounds. The crowd turns to see a young woman, wearing a red, silk robe, marching towards them. She is naked under the open robe, which billows behind her.]

BUGLER: Ta ra ta ra ta ra! Ta ra ta ra ta ra!

[The crowd parts in front of the robed/naked woman. She ascends the platform and walks towards the executioner, whose axe remains hovering above the youth's neck. She raises her hand and places it on the axe.]

LA LIBERTÉ: I am freedom! I am Rostock!

[She kisses the executioner on the mouth. He lowers the axe.]

EXECUTIONER: I am freedom! I am Rostock!

[The robed woman kisses the police chief, then the policeman, then the youth.]

POLICE CHIEF/POLICEMAN/YOUTH: I am freedom! I am Rostock!

[The woman throws off her robe and descends the platform. She walks among the crowd, kissing everyone. On the platform, the executioner carries the youth on his shoulders.]

CROWD: We are freedom! We are Rostock!

(END)