



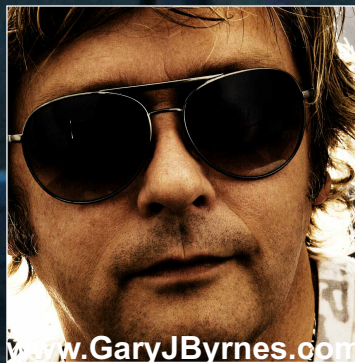
GARY J BYRNES

THE GOD VIRUS

Doctor William Bunk is bored with life at England's leading forensics lab. So his life is thrown into chaos when his wife is cruelly murdered and he's the prime suspect.

Could there be a connection with the Homo Erectus DNA, and that strange sample from NASA? But what?

THE MINDBENDING THRILLER FROM
GARY J BYRNES
AUTHOR OF PURE MAD



www.GaryJByrnes.com

THE GOD VIRUS

THE GOD VIRUS

BY

GARY J BYRNES

2010

Buy the book on www.amazon.com.

THE GOD VIRUS

PROLOGUE

Campo de' Fiori, Rome, 1600AD

Night came. She brought her lover, death. In the alleys surrounding the open field, throats were slit for a few coins or in drunken revenge, the dying dispatched under starlight.

The space - an historical site of executions, duels and murder since Roman times – was crowded now. Torches threw jumping shadows across ugly and distorted faces. Thieves circulated easily. Couples slipped towards quiet lanes for the quick, illicit embrace.

The gathering was anxious. Cursing. Simmering. Always the unspoken fear that they would be denied their entertainment. The fat Bishop sensed the mob's impatience, at last got awkwardly to his feet. Self-important in heavy robes, he carried a jewelled crosier. His purse bulged with coins for the night of whoring and gambling that lay ahead. He was a master of the uncouth, had a deep understanding of peasant ways and needs, as well as the perversions of their masters. The confessional, this was the secret of Mother Church.

The Bishop's street wisdom had levered him to the very head of the flock of Rome – God's holiest, God's chosen. He eyed the boiling crowd – perhaps a thousand souls in all – blessed himself in exaggerated motions. The crowd took the cue, mostly imitated his symbolic gesture. The coarse chattering fell to a steady hiss.

Bishop Peter cleared his throat, spat a gob of phlegm into the black. He raised his arms, staff aloft. That brought silence. Good. With the symbol of his God-given power, he indicated the sorry figure before him. The man was broken, the circulation gone from his limbs, his will taken.

‘So, Brother Bruno. What is your answer? Do you recant your heretical ideas? Do you acknowledge that there is but one oasis of life in God’s Universe? Do you accept that this planet, God’s sole Eden, is at the centre of God’s Universe?’

The Bishop stood on a raised platform beside the pyre. He was at eye level with Bruno. A file of Inquisitors - white robes, pointed hoods, slits for eyes – surrounded the pile of dry sticks that had the mad monk at its peak. They kept the crowd in check, their masks generating fear, gleaming spears held tightly.

It was intimidation that maintained the power of the few, observed Bruno. He gazed at the unknowable, then raised his eyes to the unforgivable lie.

‘Bishop Peter, my friend. In the name of all that is holy, look to the stars,’ he gasped.

The Milky Way glowed fiercely across the night sky, a river of light. A billion suns shone weakly on the depressing scene. But the crowd focused on just one light: the torch in the Bishop’s hand.

‘You recanted quickly enough in the water chair,’ hissed the Bishop.

‘See!’ continued Bruno. ‘The heavens are filled with the light of God.’

The crowd wasn’t listening. Impatience and selfishness led to calls of Burn, Devil, Go to Hell.

Bruno continued, his final action, thinking only to plant a doubt in the Bishop’s smug indifference.

‘There are hundreds of planets like our own jewel. To say that they cannot also be filled with God’s life? How can this be? The evidence will come. One day soon.’

The Bishop looked to the ground, spat again, muttered a prayer. It was time to discredit Bruno completely.

‘Copernicus before you had similar delusions and he was proven to be a heretic, a womaniser, a gambler and a drunkard. You, Bruno, are a fellow traveller of Copernicus and you will share his fate, ignored by history, turned away from the gates of Heaven. So, burn.’

He casually threw the torch on to the pile of wood below Bruno. The crowd squealed.

Joyous with relief, they had their spectacle. The Inquisitors moved nearer the Bishop. Within seconds, Bruno was engulfed, tormented. The stink of burning flesh forced the Bishop down from his platform. Thick smoke masked the stellar view, cutting the scene from the Universe beyond, keeping it secret, lessening the cosmic shame of it all. If angels had been watching.

Bruno writhed for a long minute as his nerves sparked. Then his body was consumed, his soul spent. The fire's ferocity faded fast and the crowd's anger and fervour dissipated. An odd sense of calm descended. The faithful, full of the whispers of observed death, quietened. The mob dispersed, some even saying a little prayer for the crazy monk. A few watchers lingered, taking the dregs of the heat, hoping for a morsel of sweet meat.

The Bishop blessed the black, smoking bones of his dead friend. He chatted for a few minutes with some councillors and the parish priests. Then he made his way to the brothel quarter as the surrounding galaxy once again shone defiantly.

Just ten years after the Catholic Church murdered Bruno, Galileo Galilei proved that Earth and the other known planets orbited the Sun. That other planets had moons. That there were far more suns than could be seen with the human eye. That the Roman Church's stated and immutable truths about the structure of the Universe were wrong. Utterly and incontrovertibly wrong.

IN THE BEGINNING

1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

3 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

4 And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

5 And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

6 And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

7 And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which *were* under the firmament from the waters which *were* above the firmament: and it was so.

8 And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

9 And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.

10 And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.

11 And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so.

12 And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

13 And the evening and the morning were the third day.

14 And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:

15 And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so.

16 And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also.

17 And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth,

18 And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good.

19 And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

- Bible, King James Version: Genesis: 1-19

THE HISTORY OF BUNK

Today is Tuesday. It is a sunny day. My name is William Bunk. I am forty-two years on this Earth. I am fucked.

I know certain things. I know that I add up to approximately seventy-five trillion cells and am composed mainly of water. Then there are my organic minerals: fats, proteins, carbohydrates, nucleic acids. Finally my inorganic minerals, mainly calcium, phosphorus, sodium, magnesium, iron. That's what I am. At this level, I can kind of understand myself. I'm a chemical reaction. Food comes in – typically lamb curry (hot), rare steak, salad, chocolate, rum, Coke, orange juice, vitamin supplements – is broken down to useful molecules in my gut, retained or shat out. The process driven by my inherited DNA, the chemical code that drives us all.

And that's it. No need for rocket science. No need for any Gods. But if I can understand my life on this level, why can't I make sense of it on any other – more meaningful – level?

Nobody knows what's going on, what life's about or what happens afterwards. Nobody.

Want to know what God is? God is thunder and lightning. Earthquakes. Storms. Rainbows. Eclipses. Stars. The Sun. Sex. Birth. Death. Chemical reactions. DNA. The seasons. Art. Emotions and everything that couldn't be explained in the millennia before true science. That's all.

In the Christian Bible, Genesis, God created grass, herbs and fruit trees on the third day. He created the sun on day four. The Bible was written before we had any understanding of photosynthesis. Look it up.

Want to know what the Devil is? The Devil is the animal inside every one of us, the evolved animal whose key aims in life are to fuck, procreate and survive. We can dress it up. We try. These days, the Devil is also called DNA.

I am a scientist. I like to discover answers. The truth, if possible. It is my obsession.

My life has been mixed. Moderate successes, abject failures, long tracts of mediocrity. Childhood passed without great fanfare. Medical school at Cambridge entailed boring lectures,

dissected corpses, easy sex, experimentation with a pharmacopoeia of drugs. Ask any medical student.

Early career in London's grimeiest hospitals, my reward for finishing in the bottom third. I clawed my way through, shunned the political games, found my love. Sally. Her family set me up in my own general practice. At last, I had it all. Then I blew it.

A year or more of repetitive arguments, childish blame games and the simmering disappointments of married life gone stale. I occupied my brain by studying the emerging field of DNA. Then, redemption of sorts with a position in a Government lab, forensic DNA analysis, the chance to continue my research.

Analysis, comparison, conclusion. My first love. A period of a kind of happiness followed, my emptiness filled by work, affairs, booze. Then I was cast into Hell. Punishment? Karma?

For every episode, there is a wrinkle or a grey hair or a drooping fold of skin. Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the most fucked-up of all?

A dirty cloud has gobbled up the sun. Typical.

THE MERCIFUL

Allah is He Who created the heavens and the earth and what is between them in six periods, and He mounted the throne (of authority); you have not besides Him any guardian or any intercessor, will you not then mind?

He regulates the affair from the heaven to the earth; then shall it ascend to Him in a day the measure of which is a thousand years of what you count.

This is the Knower of the unseen and the seen, the Mighty the Merciful,

Who made good everything that He has created, and He began the creation of man from dust.

Then He made his progeny of an extract, of water held in light estimation.

Then He made him complete and breathed into him of His spirit, and made for you the ears and the eyes and the hearts; little is it that you give thanks.

Qur'an: Surah 32: 4-9

THE SYSTEM

When you were born, you knew nothing. Like, what's your first memory? Mine is from when I was four. First day of school. So many faces, so many competitors. A bright room full of exciting things. Some kids cried. I was quiet, torn between the excitement, the novelty and wanting to be with my mother.

Before that, oblivion. Dribbling, pissing myself oblivion. Common to us all and sure to revisit if given time.

And in that oblivion – that primary oblivion – what did you know about anything? Zero. Clean slate, begging to be filled by experience. You had to be taught about stuff. What'll kill you, what'll just hurt. What'll make you sick, what'll make you feel good. What letters are, what numbers are. And on it goes. By the time you're making your own way in the world, you know that Tokyo is the capital of Japan, that the Nazis were bad, that the locally dominant religion is the best, that stealing is wrong, that crime is punished, that the law is the law is the law, that some are rich while most are poor, that convention dictates sexual behaviour, that globalisation is good. Spring forward, fall back. Homework. Your attitudes are formed for you. Think outside the box and become labelled. Hippy. Freak. Communist. Convict.

That almost everything you know and do is based on what happened before you were born is an appalling proposition. How much of life is about true self discovery and how much is accepting the patterns that have already been imposed?

DNA is the blueprint for ninety-nine point nine percent of what we are. The system fills in the remainder.

Genes, chromosomes, the double helix. These words and phrases are familiar to all of moderate intelligence. Yet what meaning do they hold? What is your knowledge of the most important discovery in human history?

THREAT

The call came through on a private number, delayed his departure for dinner with the Senators. On the line was a NASA operative, one whose anticipatory thought space had been abruptly shifted from his brother-in-law's secret recipe ribs at the Sunday barbeque. He was a low-level agent but, science-wise, a useful one. Active agents were described in the Foundation as angels. This was one angel among thousands: men and women who worked at all levels in the military-industrial complex, the political system, the education machine. All united by their devotion, their faith. Doctor Ryan turned away from his computer monitor.

'Ryan.'

'Doctor, Bill Reynolds here. Johnson Space Centre. Something you should know about,' said the caller.

He sighed. 'I'm already late for an important meeting.'

'Sir, we've been going through the samples. Well, a sample of the samples.'

'Which samples?'

'From Stardust. The probe.'

'Cosmic dust?'

'Yeah. But something really odd has shown up. We're doing more tests, but the findings come within my alert remit.'

'Get to the point.'

'All four proteins. Adenine, guanine, cytosine and thymine.'

'Jesus Christ.'

'Sorry, sir. It's just that some people here are pretty excited about this.'

Ryan pondered for a moment, held the earpiece to his chin.

'Are all the samples in one place?'

'Yes, for now. One is being sent to England for secondary analysis.'

‘So we must work fast. Keep me posted of any developments. Goodbye.’

When the call ended, Ryan held on to the receiver for a long minute. He stared out at Washington, muddy twilight gathering over the lazy Potomac, saw nothing.

NASA’s first dust-gathering probe – Genesis – had been sabotaged on the way home, destroyed. Stardust had proven harder to crack. Now all the Foundation’s fears were being realised.

He thought through the possible scenarios. The worst outcome would lead to the collapse of the system, an atheist in the White House. The heathen hordes – already at the gate – would succeed. The Long War would be lost. Soft liberalism was no match for the gathering enemies. All that he had worked for would perish and the gains of generations would be lost. God would die. There was just one course of action open. He dialled.

‘Link.’

‘Doctor.’

‘Yes, Doctor?’

‘You’re taking a flight. Houston. Tonight. Mission details to follow by email.’

These were the End Times, bold moves necessary.

Ryan turned back to the screen, enjoyed one long last look at the boys and their beautiful young bodies.

HYPOCRISY DEFINED

“Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.”

– Bible: Matthew: 7:1-5

THIRTY

How I got thirty yesterday. Shower in the morning. Before lunch, before, dinner, before bed. That's four. Three times after taking a shit (bad dose, curry). Five times after urinating (though I know urine doesn't contain any gems, being good enough to drink and all. Old habits, conditioning). Three times before preparing food. Once, no twice, after rubbing my beagle. Six times, before and after working with three samples at work. Once after reading a cheaply-inked newspaper. Four times after sneaky cigarettes in the back yard. Once after examining my wife's vagina.

'I'm nearly ready to leave, Bill.'

'Yeah.'

'Were you smoking again? Don't you know they'll kill you?'

'Ah, they'll have come up with the cure before then. Stem cells. No doubt about it.'

Secretly, I didn't care if I died.

'Sometimes I think you're mad, Bill.'

'Change of subject: Do you really want to go to Blackpool, Sally? For an actual hen weekend?'

'No. I just feel obliged. You understand obligation, don't you?'

'Of course. It's what made Britain great.'

'Would you mind having a look at me. I'm really sore today.'

Once a GP, always a GP. So she got on the bed, lifted her skirt, spread her legs. No underwear. I got on my knees, gently pulled her inner thighs apart and had a close look. She was red, raw from scratching herself. The telltale white lumps around her labia betray the fungal infection. I don't need to see any more. Don't really want to. Still, her inner thigh muscles are nicely defined, that adductor brevis standing out, trembling, causing a stirring from the past. Try it.

'I need to give you an internal, with my special probe,' I say.

'For fuck's sake,' she says. 'Give it a rest, will you?'

‘Sorry. Old habits. Thrush,’ I say. ‘Again.’

‘Christ, I’m sick of it.’

‘Stop wearing knickers,’ I joked. Eat less wheat, de-stress and get another of those over-the-counter antibiotics down the chemist. I’ll write you a prescription for something stronger in case it gets worse while you’re away. That okay?’

‘De-stress,’ she said. ‘Yeah, thanks.’

She fixed her skirt, got back to packing. Not the slightest chance of sex.

And once after touching my girlfriend in her sacred place.

I never used to wash my hands after sex. I enjoyed the fresh smell of woman being on me. Now I worry about germs and traces. Always germs and traces. Should I worry about all this? How normal am I? How obsessed am I?

So, how many times do you wash your hands daily?

SNOWBLIND

Though they could survive easily enough in the cold, they preferred the cover that the widespread pine forests provided. Out there, on the flood plains, they felt exposed. But they had to cut across the open space to reach the dense woods that led home.

The women were tired, but they kept moving, pulled the boy along. He wanted to stop, needed to rest, sleep even. His mother and her sister slowed, glanced at each other, thought that, yes, they could rest for a little while.

So they stopped. The youngster curled up in his mother's warm lap, took some of her milk as she rubbed his head, then dozed. His aunt picked her way down to the river, would drink her fill, use the pouch to bring water to the others.

The water was very good, clear and fresh. She smiled for the first time that day. Perhaps they would make it safely home to the others.

She froze, raised her head slowly. Yes, the cries. An evil whooping, the sound of hunters who have found the trail once more. In the open, there was no chance.

As she turned and ran to her dear sister and the boy, the heavy sky cracked open and thick snow fell. The hunters' cries – awful, bloodthirsty – seemed closer. The snow almost prevented the women from seeing each other. They were lucky, though, and clasped hands in greeting.

They moved on, knew that their only chance was to reach the hidden woods ahead. The uneven ground slowed their pace. The dense snow drove into their faces, but at least muffled the eerie sounds of the hunters. The fear in their eyes became muted.

But the snow. They were too hungry, too tired, too confused to fight it. It gathered so quickly, they could not lift their legs. A small depression, almost snowless in the lee of a boulder, appeared from the wall of white. They had to stop.

They huddled together beside the rock, happy at least that their trail would have disappeared. The followers' cries had stopped. Perhaps the snow would save them?

THANK GOD

Work was a kind of refuge for my brain. Full of imponderables and unknowables, yes. But also certainties, confirmations and useful science.

My lab was organised, clean. I was lucky to have access to the best technology, the brightest graduates, generous funding. Being part of the establishment has its privileges. Plus, you don't have to work too hard, just keep your head down, never take chances.

I busied myself in the semi-clean admin zone. The lab itself, through an airlock, visible through a wall of windows. My office, more a personal space than work place, was down the corridor. I preferred to be in this mid-space. Between things. Suited me.

Peering at C samples through my microscope, I felt a strong hand on my shoulder.

'Morning William,' said my boss.

'Hello Charles. Just re-checking the latest tests before I sign off.'

'Any results on our cause celebre?'

'He did it, the bastard. He raped the child and, by inference, killed her.'

'That's for the judge and jury to decide.'

'True enough. But he did it.'

'God, William. I love this job. We've just taken a paedophile off the streets.'

'But for how long? No, you're right. Thank God for DNA.'

Fortescue flicked through the report sheets on my work bench. He wasn't interested, he was just reminding me who was boss. He nodded, made to leave, stopped.

'Oh. Department Heads meeting at ten-thirty, okay?'

'What's up?'

'Something big. You'll love it.'

A TASTE OF HEAVEN

The probe had travelled almost five billion kilometres, made its way home thanks to technology that still owed its magic to Galileo and Newton.

Shot into space in nineteen ninety-nine, the machine met Earth again after two years, used its Mother's gravitational power to hurtle out towards the icy comet, Wild 2. It snatched fragments from the comet's immense dust trail, trapped them in aerogel. That was the exciting part. Mainly it had seen just empty space. Only the space wasn't totally empty. That's a misnomer. A second sample collection in interplanetary space was also expected to collect some good stuff.

Stardust's aerogel had been very lucky. Besides the expected – organic particles, even amino acids from Wild 2; high velocity cosmic particles, supernova leftovers, Big Bang ashes from 'empty' space – Stardust had managed to collect a small number of extraordinary chemicals. On their own, the phosphates, simple sugars and nitrogenous bases would have been remarkable enough discoveries for space. But in combination, they might shake a planet.

For they were in the form of deoxyribonucleic acid. More commonly known as DNA.

DISTRACTION

So I signed off the results and they were couriered off the grounds to the investigating detectives.

I passed the time before the meeting looking through pending casework. Nothing major, nothing really important. Millions of pounds worth of analysis equipment going through the motions: paternity tests for the nervous rich. Cold cases. Secondary comparisons. A warm hand touched my neck.

‘Doctor, I’ve got a temperature. Can you take a look?’

Tease.

I turned to face her. Jesus, she was beautiful – flushed with youth, fire in her eyes, voluptuous. My Turkish delight. And she wanted me.

‘Good morning, Karen. You know I can no longer practice. Anyway, you look perfectly fine to me.’

Damn ethics.

She took my hand and placed it on her crotch, against the cool, light fabric of her black dress.

‘Can’t you feel it?’

‘Yes. I think I’m getting it now.’

‘Can we go to your office?’

I looked at my watch.

‘Okay. But I’ve only got fifteen minutes.’

Plenty.

DEEP FROZEN

The excavators loomed over the frozen landscape. Oddly sculptural, evoking robot tombstones on another world. Some were iced rigid, would stay that way until the feeble spring. Others groaned and whistled as they churned the permafrost, smashing the delicate layers of ice that had built up over millennia.

The scientist stood on a small ice hill and watched the day dying. She saw the lights blink on in Salkhard, the regional capital twenty kilometres to the south. The Aurora Borealis flickered overhead – yellow and violet and cyan. She loved to watch it, almost her sole remaining pleasure. Turning back to the project, Anna savoured the icy sunset, smoked an imported cigarette. And another. Then she trudged back to work, depressed again at the pointlessness of her posting.

Strangely enough, this place suits my mood, she thought, smiled.

The camp generators' constant whining increased in pitch as the primary task lights powered up. The work here continued twenty-four seven. Gazprom needed to find more natural gas. Get it pumped abroad. Bring in the petrodollars while the market value kept rocketing. She had a boring, shitty job, yes. But Anna was in the top ten percent of Russian earners. And there was always the chance of some interesting science.

She entered the canteen airlock, wanted coffee, kicked the compacted ice from her boots. Duty in an hour. She had finally removed her outdoors clothes when her name was called over the whistling speakers. The camp commander sounded unusually perplexed as he requested her presence at the leading edge of the western cut. She tutted, smoked a fast cigarette, scalded the roof of her mouth with the coffee. Then she dressed again, thinking What now, a fake fucking meteorite with alien life forms inside?

A cluster of men and women stood by the gash in the ground, an excavator's toothy bucket hanging open overhead. The commander spotted Anna. He was always alert to her.

'Anna,' he called, walking towards her. 'Thank you for coming so quickly.'

‘What is it, sir?’

He seemed slightly excited, though not exactly happy.

‘Something very interesting. Your speciality.’

As camp scientist, Anna analysed gas and soil samples and also monitored all the life they encountered: bacteria, lichen, not much else. That frozen baby mammoth was the most exciting thing that had happened in Yamalo-Nenetsk. Ever. A fading memory. Still, she filled the days and nights by maintaining a perfect sample record, the raw material for a dozen frigid theses.

‘Another mammoth, perhaps?’ she ventured.

‘Better, Anna. Better.’

Her heart jumped. The commander wasn’t a joker. What on Earth could be better? A sabre-toothed tiger?

She followed him down an aluminium ladder. Into the cut, into the permanently-frozen soil. Powerful task lights had been put in place, their glaring beams reflected and refracted by ice crystals. A frozen disco. The commander indicated. She saw a shape, a dim presence in the ice.

‘There,’ said the commander. ‘Can you see it?’

‘I see something. What is it?’

‘Get closer. Lower.’

He pushed her forward until her nose touched the ice. She drew back instinctively – shocked – but she saw. A face – an almost human face – stared out at her.

PUZZLE PIECE

A sleepless twenty hours later, Anna stood alone in the primary lab. She was exhausted, yes, but giddy and breathless also. Like she was in love – a fading emotional benchmark.

Before her, on sled pallets, were three rough chunks of permafrost. Inside each chunk lay a humanoid figure. Two adult females, one young male. Everybody in camp – buzzing from the discovery – assumed they were cavemen, early humans. Anna thought differently. Even through the ice, she noted the brow ridges, the protruding jaws, the heaviness of the skulls.

‘Are you really *Homo erectus*?’ she asked, her voice echoing.

The temperature in the lab was now carefully maintained at minus four degrees C, so the ice coffins wouldn’t melt before the scientific teams from the Russian Academy of Sciences arrived from Moscow and St Petersburg. Maybe a day, maybe less. For now, Anna had her ancestors all to herself.

Using a small ice drill, she accessed the frozen flesh of one of the females. She removed fragments of flesh and carefully stored them in sample canisters. As she secreted one canister inside her jacket, the commander appeared behind her.

‘Do you have the DNA samples ready?’

‘Almost. Why the hurry?’

‘Moscow wants them sent back on the plane that brings the scientists. I don’t know why. It’s not my job to ask why. Why do you think? Do they want to clone them?’

‘Unlikely, sir. The cells will have been damaged by the freezing process. DNA we can retrieve, not cells.’

‘So what?’

‘If, as I believe, these are *Homo erectus* bodies, a complete DNA analysis would be incredibly useful.’

‘Who cares about Neanderthals?’

‘These are not Neanderthals, commander. And that’s the crucial fact. Homo erectus was the evolutionary stage immediately before Homo sapiens. Quite distinct from Neanderthals, which were a different species. Homo erectus can tell us exactly where we came from. When we look at their DNA, maybe – ’

Anna was lost in thought for a moment, the importance of the discovery finally hitting her.

‘Maybe?’

‘Maybe, by comparing their DNA with ours, maybe we can discover how and why we evolved.’

The commander nodded, not quite understanding. He did understand that his schedule was now shot to shit and, down the line, he would be yelled at because of it.

‘I just want them out of here,’ he said.

THE PLAIN TRUTH

Those who reject the Book and that with which We have sent Our Apostle; but they shall soon come to know,

When the fetters and the chains shall be on their necks; they shall be dragged

Into boiling water, then in the fire shall they be burned;

Then shall it be said to them: Where is that which you used to set up

Besides Allah? They shall say: They are gone away from us, nay, we used not to call upon anything before. Thus does Allah confound the unbelievers.

That is because you exulted in the land unjustly and because you behaved insolently.

Enter the gates of hell to abide therein, evil then is the abode of the proud.

Qur'an: Surah 40: 70-76

PROBLEM CHILD

The classroom was stifling, airless. It was late winter in Des Moines but the sun still casually displayed her power. The students were tired, their day nearly done. But the teacher wasn't finished with them yet.

'So, is there anybody here who doesn't fully understand how God created life, the Universe and everything?'

Twenty faces looked up at him, smiled. These were good kids. The future was secure. Then, one kid at the back – the problem kid – raised his hand slowly. The child lacked confidence in his half-beliefs, so the teacher wasn't worried.

'Yes, Adam,' he said coolly. 'What is it now?'

'Sir,' began the boy. 'it's the dinosaurs. I still don't get it. We've been told up to now that dinosaurs were around millions of years ago. But you say that's not true. How come?'

'It's not just my opinion, Adam.'

He was angry, thinking Go to Hell. His psoriasis began to flare, unbearable itching spreading down his arms to his fingers. He gripped the edge of the desk tightly, breathed deeply, practised his self control mantra. In command of his emotions again, the urge to scratch faded. He left the desk, walked to the middle of the classroom.

'We had been told these dinosaur stories for many years. People just accepted that the scientists were telling us the truth. But recently we've begun to question the scientists. That's a good thing. Isn't it, children?'

'Yes, sir,' they chimed in unison.

'So God gave us free will and we use that free will to question certain theories. And that's a good and positive thing. Isn't it, children?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now, it turns out that no scientist can actually prove beyond a doubt that the dinosaurs were

around that long ago. It's just as likely that dinosaurs walked the land,' he gestured to the golden woods outside the window, 'just a few thousand years ago.'

A flock of doves wheeled across the yard. He laughed, changing tack.

'See the birds, Adam? You believe they used to be T-Rex?'

All the kids laughed at this. Adam reddened. The teacher moved closer to him, made full eye contact – a calm yet subtly threatening stance. Yet still he smiled.

'Adam. The greatest scholars on Earth have studied the Bible in great detail. Now, nobody disputes that the Bible is the Word of God. You don't dispute that, do you Adam?'

'No sir,' he said.

The teacher's gaze swept the class, sensed a subtle change then. He saw the child as a danger, a potential source of contamination.

'Good. Very good. So, by taking the literal Word of God into their calculations, these learned men have deduced that the world is nowhere near old enough to have sustained life hundreds of millions of years ago. It's actually impossible. This planet of ours is no more than ten thousand years old. Ten thousand. Not five billion.'

Standing at the top of the class, the teacher put his right hand over his heart, adopted a benign expression.

'Children. All our questions lead to one place. God. And all our answers come from one place. God. And the Word of God is to be found in the Bible. We don't need anything else. No phoney science. No vested interests. No atheistic fantasies. For what else matters, but God?'

His flow was interrupted by a hesitant knock at the door. The school principal opened the door a crack, peaked in, nodded at the teacher.

'If you'll excuse me, children. Please revise chapter six of your textbook, The True Age of the Universe.'

He glared at Adam, gathered his material from the desk, locked it away in his briefcase, pocketed his phone.

In the corridor, the principal apologised for his interruption. The two men faced each other like reflections, with their immaculate grey suits, closely-cropped haircuts, shining faces.

'You wanted to see me?' said the principal.

'Two issues. One, I've been called away on urgent business. Immediately. I will complete

this module at a later time.'

'Of course, of course. We greatly appreciate your instruction of the children. We are completely flexible.'

Yes, thought the teacher, and you greatly appreciate the millions you receive from the Foundation.

'I'll call you when I can return. And two, the boy Adam. I can't get through to him, I'm afraid. What are his parents like?'

'A tad liberal. His mother's a writer and his father works in publishing. They're decent people. I feel they're exaggerating their Christian principles to further their careers. And Adam's school options.'

'Get rid of him. He doesn't buy into the school's ethos. This is clear. He may yet poison the entire class. You can deal with this?'

'I can deal with it.' No hesitation. 'I'll come up with something. Fabricate a theft, maybe. Plant something in his locker.'

'Ideal. He'll have no choice beyond State schools then. That'll halt his progress. I must go. You can deal with the class?'

'Of course. Thank you again. God be with you.'

'God be with you.'

They shook hands and the teacher marched down the gleaming corridor to the staff carpark. The boy was instantly forgotten. Operational now, he thought only of his mission in Texas.

END OF DAY

It might be morning, sitting in the kitchen conservatory, just a white bathrobe against the cold. The Guardian sprawls the table. The flatscreen web terminal jumps between news and work: evolution.

The digital radio music is loud: Handel's Seraphim, Schubert, The Doors, BBC Five Live. I jump between stations and sites, write notes, record the fragments of my life and career. The great plans, the petty delusions.

But the drink is Captain Morgan's Spice Rum, a taste acquired on a Cuban holiday. The cigarettes compulsive, the psyche entirely alert. And the room is dark as a tomb, just some diffuse city light fuzzing the view and the PC's glare. The house is mine. I make espresso, a double. A mini revolution, a good change not to hear Why are you having coffee at eleven PM?

No intentions of early bed. Besides, there's a good view of the picture window in the apartment block beyond the garden. Other than that, just the leafiness of Buckhurst Hill, the aged trees of Epping Forest. The ideal home, a true sanctuary from the madness of life. And the view? A naked woman dancing. Mostly ballet, self-aware, shameless.

The perfume of brewing Arabica – Fair-Trade – fills my space with a delicious bitterness, triggers brain events, memories of life episodes.

The Cambrian Era keeps coming back, pushes to the front. I look at the dancer, her dark hair up in a ponytail, her face oddly expressionless. Risk of fleeting obsession tingles in my innards.

But I look through her, to Planet Earth, three hundred million years before I was switched on. Full of life already, having been formed over four billion years before. But nothing more evolved than bacteria and ferns.

She catches me again, finishing a dance with a gracious bow, her breasts near enough to appreciate their fullness, too far away to make out her nipples. Or maybe that's just my eyes. Her triangle - the ultimate target – is well-defined. She takes a break, out of my sightline. I make another Cuba Libre, the fresh lime makes up my five-a-day and I'm officially drunk. The Coke adds

colour, mainly.

Then, the Cambrian Explosion. Not a meteorite or volcano, but an explosion of life. Within a few tens of millions of years – no time at all – the planet teemed with multi-cellular organisms. There is no explanation for this. No explanation. One nineteenth-Century theory I discover is called Panspermia, the idea that micro-organisms and spores travel through space, to take root and grow on planets with suitable conditions. The scientific world ridicules the notion. But it interests me.

I take notes, diving into the web for scientific papers on fossils. The dog, Charlie, barks in his sleep, somewhere in the dark. He reminds me of Darwin, so I go back to the master as I try to work out the evolutionary path of bacteria.

The faxed and copied report from the Johnson Space Centre sits on top of my papers. The initial sample analysis from the comet probe. DNA from space. The shocking finding, dryly typed up by an impersonal particle analysis device. This could shake the planet. And the B sample will be with us tomorrow for corroboration. First thing.

DNA from space. I still can't believe it.

Hungry again, I call for food. Curry for martyrdom.

'Vindaloo, please. Lamb. Pilau and naan.'

'Yes, Mr Bunk. You sure? Very hot.'

'I'm sure.'

'Twenty minutes, okay?'

'Okay,' thinking how to pass twenty minutes of the dead hour.

I hang up and the phone rings. Sally.

'Who were you calling at this hour?' she asks, no friendliness in her voice. Just a chilly edge, enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand out. Something bad is coming.

'Hello to you too, darling. The curry house, actually. How's Blackpool?'

'Absolutely horrific. I hate it here. But –'

'But what?'

'But I'm not coming home. For now. It's easier this way.'

Instant dizzy spell. Booze, empty stomach, earth-changing research, impending marital separation all spelling trouble for my nervous system. I panic.

'Pardon?' Mouth dry, I squeeze it out.

‘I know about your girlfriend at work.’

‘What?’

‘You may be the forensic scientist and all, but I’m a woman not an idiot.’

Christ, what gave me away?

Shit, did I say that or think it?

‘Darling, I don’t think it’s fair to do it like this. We’ve been married twenty-one years.’

‘Twenty-one years wasted. But not too late to start again. I’ll be down for the rest of my stuff at some stage. And don’t call me darling ever again, you prick. Goodbye.’

Click. Repeating tone.

‘Just like that,’ I say to the dancer as she stretches for her encore.

I pour a straight rum. I watch the dancer but don’t see her, gulp my drink, wait for my curry.

At last, it comes.

HUMAN ERROR

The mail room was dead, so hot outside that almost everyone had left early. All on their way to the Gulf or the aircon Wal-Mart or to lay in the garden under the trees with ice cold beers. Stan stayed behind to get the mail out. Reliable, dependable Stan. A pile of FedEx envelopes sat on the table, regular jiffies beside them, then a stack of labels and prioritised bundles of sample containers. Everything labelled, cross-referenced.

‘Jesus H,’ he said, hating this part of the job. The tedium. Monkey work was how he described it to his friends at parties. Since working in the mail room entailed monitoring all but the highest level paper and electronic communications, Stan knew there wouldn’t be a random drug test in the Johnson Centre for at least two months. So he figured Why not?

He went to the men’s room, rolled a joint, made his way to the roof. Sam from security was at the last checkpoint, near the cool, dark corridors that hosted the big bosses. Stan nodded. Sam winked, followed him after a minute or two.

The Gulf of Mexico glistened on the horizon as they shared the joint at the spot the cameras can’t see.

‘God, I love this job,’ said Sam. ‘Top benefits, no real stress, moments like this.’

‘Just watch out for al-Qaeda, yeah?’

‘For sure, but there’s still the Chinese and even the Russians.’

‘The Russians? Again? You serious?’

‘Yeah, Stan. Everything’s still to play for, world domination-wise. It’s all fucked up. Those Russians are clever bastards, really cunning. They’ve got the bread now. And they look just like us.’

Stan held his hands in front of his face, examined the backs of them with an exaggerated confused look on his face.

‘Well, you know what I mean,’ Sam said, embarrassed. ‘Anyways, it’s all fucked up.’

‘White Russians. All fucked up. That’s for sure.’

‘For damned sure.’

Then they talked about the weekend, about Sam’s eldest son’s birthday party – ten, already! – and that kind of stuff, friend stuff.

And so to work, Sam first. Stan got back to a still-empty mail room. He rubbed his eyes, played some Nirvana, resumed his work of sticking the right labels on the right envelopes with the right samples inside.

The FedEx guy arrived early, breaking his balls, saying C’mon Stan, I’ve got a deadline.

Then Stan fucked up.

MORNING

I sat in my tiny office with a coffee, squared up the documents, files and notes on the desk. Big day, fairly enormous twenty-four hours, really. Still only halfway through it, less. A dark grey shape in the door's pane of frosted glass. Two taps. The supreme being, Dr Lionel Fortescue.

'Morning, William. You look like shit.'

In a Savile Row suit and with his trademark flowing grey locks and yachtsman's perm, Fortescue was a living statement: Old money still rules.

'Thanks. I needed that.'

'What's wrong? Something's clearly wrong.'

'Sally's left me.'

'You're shitting me.'

'I'm not.'

'Does she know about Karen?'

'Yes. How do you know about Karen?'

'It's my job to know everything, William. Look, don't let it get you down. She'll be back, I'm sure. Let me take you to dinner tonight. My treat.'

I thought it through, put the shock of the easy knowledge of the affair to one side – Did everybody know? Was it that obvious? – accepted the situation.

'Excellent, Welcome to the club. See you in the conference room in fifteen. We'll have the sample this morning. Excited?'

'Like it's Christmas Eve and I'm five years old.'

'Me too. I'll call FedEx, see when Santa's due.'

And he was gone.

Next, Karen arrived. She was a bit of a mess, unshowered. Was she wearing those clothes yesterday? She was typically immaculate when it came to her personal hygiene. One of the traits

that had attracted me to her in the first place.

‘Morning, Doctor. Sorry I’m late.’

‘No problem. At all. Sleep it out?’

I felt a bit cheated. Surely I had more of a right to look like shit?

‘No. I stayed at a friends, unexpectedly. South of the river. Getting up here was a nightmare.’

South?

‘Sit down. I’ll get you a coffee. Brew’s fresh.’

Should I tell her about Sally? Not yet.

‘Thanks darling.’

Darling.

THE EVIDENCE ROOM

Link got into Johnson easily enough. He had an excellent ID, a perfect profile. Investigator, Department of Homeland Security. Legit. He could go virtually anywhere, ask any questions, no questions asked in return.

He passed nicely-lit displays of moonrock, met the angel at the door to the samples lab. The zone's high security biohazard status was marked boldly on door, walls, floor. The man – Reynolds – was nervous, had to dry his palm on his lab coat before the scanner accepted him. In the airlock, they struggled into sealed overalls. Reynolds made smalltalk, Link was quiet. They put on face masks, clipped oxygen tanks to waist hooks, checked each other. It was like going into space.

Then they entered the next chamber, had an air shower. Powerful fans in the floor sucked away the contaminating molecules from outside this super-clean world.

The lab itself was a long room, brightly-lit, spotless, shiny, its air at high pressure. Two technicians peered at electron microscope screens. Nobody else apparent. Fine.

Link was led to the large refrigerator at the far end of the room. With a code keyed, the door popped. Bill Reynolds removed a stainless steel tray and, keeping his eyes on the space samples, brought it to an examination table.

'This is what all the fuss is about?' asked Link, his voice flat, modulated and electronically relayed through the helmet.

Little plastic boxes, smaller glass cases inside. Then a tiny slice of aerogel, impregnated with DNA from some other place.

'This is it. Now what's the plan?'

Link glanced over his shoulder at the technicians.

'Open the samples. All of them.'

Reynolds did as he was told.

'Is this enough to contaminate them?' asked Link.

‘It’s very clean here. Class ten, almost as clean as it gets. Contamination would require the introduction of foreign DNA.’

‘I thought so.’

Reynolds nodded, an uncomfortable smile vaguely visible through his facemask. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. But there would be no ribs on Sunday, this he knew.

Link looked toward the two technicians again, calculated, made his decision. He darted to a nearby fire point, pulled the alarm handle. A brain-piercing shriek filled the lab. The technicians called out, left the room. Returning to Reynolds, Link swept his left hand across the sample examination table, picked up a scalpel. The technician registered all this, stood immobile, too shocked to move. Link slashed, three times across his chest, then stabbed hard.

Then he pushed him onto the extraterrestrial samples, bubbly blood gushing from his ruptured heart. He held him there until the life was gone. There was only a weak, confused resistance.

Walking calmly through the airlock to the lab exit, Link eyed a security camera. He moved clear of its view, added it to his loose ends list, before removing his helmet and clean suit. Then he blended into the hurried file of escaping staff, quickly found himself back in the dusty Texan air.

THE LORD'S WORK

The five paused together in the shadow of the heavy jeep, a moment of silent prayer. Hands clenched outside their chest-slung MP5 sub-machine guns, beads of sweat rolling into balaclava hoods, hearts beating rapidly under military-spec Kevlar waistcoats, enjoying the success that the Lord had granted. They were God's commandos and each had an angel at his shoulder today.

'Amen,' said their leader, finally. His eyes and ears hadn't stopped watching and listening since they drove into the thicket, stopped to finish the task.

There was a chorus of Amens, every man glad that nobody had been sacrificed, gladder still that the mission had been accomplished. A police helicopter buzzed past. Well to the south, no threat.

The leader held the bundle of heavy envelopes that contained Sterling bonds with a face value of well over five million pounds. These he threw into a steel drum. Then he poured in two litres of mineral water. He carefully opened a ceramic container of hydrochloric acid.

'Fire in the hole,' he called as he dropped the acid into the drum.

They stood back as the acid – the same stuff that causes gastric ulcers in humans – reacted violently with the water and consumed every molecule of the bonds, releasing clouds of toxic hydrogen chloride gas.

The job was almost concluded. The sample had to be delivered to Noah, the assault gear stashed. Then the day was done.

Praise the Lord.

B SAMPLE

As the department heads and lead scientists gathered around the gleaming walnut table in the conference room, Fortescue stared through the tall window, spotted a small herd of deer at the forest's edge. This made him smile. The wonder of nature always had that effect. He turned to the room, counted heads, smiled as every gaze turned to him.

He raised his voice over the mannered din. 'Ladies and gentlemen. I'm afraid I have some bad news.'

Silence now.

'There was an armed robbery on the M25 earlier. It targeted the FedEx van that was carrying our sample. Bonds – millions of pounds – were stolen and the vehicle was, I'm sad to say, destroyed. It seems our sample was also destroyed.'

The announcement was met with the outrage, confusion and upset that he'd expected. But he hadn't expected laughter. Bunk.

'You find this situation amusing, Bill?'

'Sorry Lionel,' said Bunk, standing, walking to Fortescue's side, now addressing the room. 'I just find it beyond coincidental that some highway robbers steal some piddly bonds and, as an aside, destroy what may have been the most important sample we've ever expected.'

'So what are you saying, Bill?'

'Yes, what are you saying?' asked the room.

'I'm saying that I think the samples were the target, not the bonds.'

'Can we get another sample from NASA?' asked a level-headed molecular scientist.

Fortescue paused.

'Perhaps not. There was an incident in the Johnson Space Centre. I don't have the specifics, but the remaining samples may have been contaminated.'

Gasps. This was all too dramatic. Bunk was emboldened.

‘Back to our sample, Lionel. What are the specifics of the raid?’

‘Such as?’

‘You know, how many robbers, were they armed, did the police intercept them? Those specifics.’

‘As far as I’m aware, there were four or five robbers. They were armed. No shots fired. No injuries. No arrests thus far.’

‘And the value of the bonds?’

‘Not known.’

‘Have you spoken with the police?’

‘Not yet.’

‘But you intend to?’

‘Immediately after this meeting. I will stress to them the importance of our sample. I’ll keep you posted. Okay?’

‘Okay. Thanks.’

Bunk returned to his seat and the meeting continued. But, without the main event it fizzled into abstractions, projections, nothingness.

Bunk felt cheated. All his research and brain time was wasted. And so close to real achievement, something bigger than everything else put together. The other failures in his life had been put aside. Glory beckoned. Now only ashes. Ashes and despair. Bunk had to hide a quiet tear from the gathering as his heart pounded in his head.

THE ASCENSION

The restaurant – La Jour Verte – was about as French as it was possible to get in Essex. I sat alone at the tiny table for almost an hour before Fortescue arrived. The table setting was clean but I still wiped my silverware with the linen napkin. Habit. Then I drank. Every time a waiter passed by, my elbow and – by default – glass of Beaujolais was nudged. So I drank with my left hand, eavesdropped on the chatter all about, the air blue with smoke, bluer with words.

‘I don’t give a fuck about him, darling. I’ve had it up to here. Ah, your veal.’

‘Just let me pay the fucking bill will you? Your husband will see it on your card statement. Jesus Christ, are you stupid?’

Having been knocked back by Karen, I suddenly felt lonely.

‘I swear to you, if that waiter gives me the eye once more, I’ll smash a glass in his face. Ponce.’

‘Calm it, sweetie. You’re drunk.’

Go on. No. Don’t.

Still, I savoured the place: every slurred syllable, every delicious scent, every clatter from the kitchen, every Edith Piaf song. My stomach growled, squealing at this latest punishment, the teasing. Fortescue arrived, almost falling onto his chair with exhaustion.

‘Thank God,’ I said. ‘I’m dying of hunger here.’

‘You should’ve ordered something, old boy. I’m sorry I’m so late.’

‘What kept you?’

‘Trouble at home, I’m afraid. Nothing major, just a time-consuming diversion.’

I smiled at the unusual frankness – the second such event in the day – drained my glass. A waiter appeared to pour for Fortescue, top up my glass. He nodded at Fortescue, smiled and winked at me. Jesus, that’s all I need.

Fortescue laughed slyly at my discomfort, eased into the role of harried lab director at rest.

He clicked his fingers for service, something I could never do. He was full of work gossip and current affairs analysis. But his eyes were anywhere but on me. I sensed an unease in him.

Dinner was rushed – I had a rare rack of lamb – and it was only when the restaurant emptied a little and the cigars were lit that the talk went beyond chitchat, to talk of the late directors' meeting that had really delayed him. The motions, the dances, the votes.

'So, the bottom line is that we've got to prune.'

'Prune.'

I felt the blood drain from me. I slouched. I knew.

'Yes. It's all to do with the budgets.'

'And?'

'And I put your name forward. And it was accepted. Unanimously, I'm afraid.'

'Why me, Lionel? Why me, for fuck's sake?'

'Keep your voice down, William. Appearances.' He adjusted his tie, drank more wine.

'What in God's name happened to you today? I can't be seen to have a loose cannon about the place. Surely you understand that?'

Dizzied, I lunged for my wine glass. Empty.

'Where's that ponce?' I slurred.

Later, I wasn't aware of the hands that lifted me up the narrow staircase, put me in a cab, paid the driver.

I might have flown home.

CITY GIRL

Anna was delighted to be in St Petersburg. Her bored eyes woke up, drank in the neon signs, the western shops, the endless traffic, the stern police, the drunken beggars, the gaudy glamour. Most of all, the different people, people everywhere. See the pretty, painted women, their Gucci and Prada, smell their Chanel perfume, admire their diamonds' icy glare. Six months in the permafrost had quietly eased her to the edge of sanity. She could appreciate that only now, now that she was back in the world.

So she smiled easily as she reconnected with friends and family. The contract had paid well, well enough for her to do as she desired for a month. She felt like doing nothing at all. So she splurged on nightclubs, restaurants, clothes. She spent hours in the Zoological Museum, met an old professor, talked about her role in the whole Lyuba discovery, impressed the hell out of him. This made her happy for a few days. Then the forced idleness made her weary.

One habit that she'd brought home from the east had stayed with her, helped fill the days. The Bible, which she'd read during many of the interminable breaks between shifts, had reawakened something. Her childhood? Certainly. The memories of going to Secret Mass with her mother – all warm aprons, baking smells and You must remember to stay silent Anna – were among the best she had. The God-hating days were over. Now it was okay to be a Christian again.

Sometimes she stayed up late, smoking, re-reading her favourite passages. She began to take notes. And she regularly checked the fridge to wonder more at what her sample might reveal. Finally, on a misguided impulse, she sent it to the man who had been her teacher and her lover. Along with a note, written inside a cheap card with Van Gogh's Sunflowers on the front.

Billy

I'm so sorry I haven't been in touch for so long: I've been stuck in the gulags! I'd love to see you again, soon. Sample enclosed. VERY IMPORTANT! HOME ERECTUS TISSUE! NO JOKE!

STORE SAFELY! See what you make of it.

Love

Anna

Xx

Anna634@yahoo.com

This was her lover's gift, hopefully enough to rekindle something, rescue those feelings. She mailed it to Bunk's lab, assumed he'd be there for life.

Just a couple of days later, she received a phone call from her handler. And she cursed her love for Billy Bunk.

ONE DOOR CLOSES

It's no fun being deadmanwalking. I went through all the motions that my stiff upper lip demanded. I oversaw tests, signed off reports, attended meetings, kept my files clean, kept my office organised. But my swagger was gone and I was treated differently. So this is what it's like to be a ghost.

Days passed. Life became a blur of working on automatic and drinking alone in a darkened house. I spent some time on my Comparative Analysis of World Religions, a spreadsheet I'd started on my PC ages before. Why, I don't know.

Nothing from Sally. I wanted to call her, tell her what had happened to me. But I was afraid she'd laugh and I couldn't have taken that.

I considered killing myself and, in the darkest moments, actually rummaged through my black bag, checked for the drugs that would do the job. I found morphine in my fridge.

But no. That would not be my epitaph.

My final day in the job. I went to work with a smile on my face, said Fuck you to the evil clouds that waited over the lab, then spat torrents at me. Specifically me.

Alone in my office with a steaming coffee, I began to pack my things away carefully, wondered if I was due a pension. I remembered that we'd all been advised to start private pension plans a year before.

'It doesn't get much worse than this,' I said.

'Poor baby,' said Karen as she came in the room, an invisible cloud of perfume preceding her golden self.

I watched her, smiled, decided finally No, she wasn't worth Sally. Fool.

'Morning, for the last time.'

'Your mail,' she said, handing me some letters, a couple of circulars, a scientific periodical and a couple of padded envelopes.

'Thanks. I'll miss you.'

‘I’ll miss you too,’ she said, extending her lower lip. ‘But we’ll still see each other, won’t we?’

‘Maybe. I hope so.’

‘Well, how about one last – you know – on your desk? For old time’s sake?’

‘I should have it cleared fairly soon.’

‘Great. I’ll be back in twenty, okay?’

‘Okay. Can you close the door after you?’

I went through the mail, binned most of it, got to the padded envelopes. One was postmarked Texas. Texas? Johnson Space Centre. I flushed, my hands shaking. The customs label said that it contained a data CD. There was no CD. I ripped it open and found a sample container of a kind I hadn’t seen before. The label on the case included the word Stardust. My heart lurched sideways.

Then in came Jim, the lab’s technical director and computer wiz. Always around when I’d needed him, always lurking.

‘Bill, how are you?’ he asked, sounded like he cared.

‘This is shit, Jim.’

‘I know. Such is life. You want me to transfer your email addresses onto CD now?’

I eased the sample container into my sports jacket pocket.

‘Thanks, yeah. I can’t manage it. Sorry.’

‘He took my seat and set to work. He spotted the Texan envelope, took a long look.’

‘What’s that Johnson sample about, Bill?’

‘Envelope was empty, would you believe. I think they’re all on drugs over there.’

‘Oh.’

My squelching innards told me it was the B sample. I wanted to run, to get away quickly. Adrenaline pumped. But the other envelope.

The address was handwritten, had a familiarity to it. Russian stamps. Anna. Anna? I read her note, enjoyed its sunflowered friendliness. A little packet of desiccant fell out and a two millilitre screw-top vial. I guessed it contained ethanol to preserve the tissue by inhibiting enzyme activity. Good woman. I pocketed the note and the second unexpected sample of the day. Jim finished up, handed me a CD. We promised to call each other for a drink and he hurried off. I sent Anna a quick

email to let her know that I'd received the sample. Curious.

When Karen got back to the office I was long gone. I left with my dignity and my mysteries. I took a cab home, no car - having expected to be taken on the piss with Fortescue et al that day – and it dropped me near home. Head down against the depressing rain, I stopped at the corner to my lane when I spotted a tall, black-clad man coming out my front gate. An obscenely large jeep waited at the kerb. I ducked behind a Cherry Laurel hedge, my gut talking again, saying This isn't right. I wondered if the lab had sent someone to retrieve the samples. The jeep's door swung open, but the man paused, looked around, looked back at the house. Then he shook his head, got into the vehicle.

The jeep roared past. I pressed into the glossy leaves, yielding branches and black fruits, invisible to the unknown visitors. A simple plant had saved my life.

THE FALL

Sally's car was in the driveway, behind mine. She's come back to me. She's just packing her things, completing the break. I went into the house, emotions motley. I dripped with rain and sweat, no idea what to expect.

'Sally?'

Nothing. Could she have been driving that jeep?

'Sally darling.' She won't like that. 'I'm home.'

Not a whisper.

In the kitchen, her bags and coat lay on the counter, beside the debris of my curry supper.

'Sall-eeee!' I called.

I picked up a paper from last night's work on ancient amoeba fossils. It stole my attention for a few long seconds until I snapped myself back to the more urgent present.

I went to the stairs, maybe she was taking a nap. Long drive from Blackpool. My eye was caught by something out of place in the front living room. There was a bundle of clothes on the floor. Not like her.

No. It was her.

'Sally!'

Her face was purple, her neck bruised. I knew she was dead but checked her pulse anyway. Gone. My own pulse screamed at me. And you let the killer get clean away, you damned fool.

I opened her mouth, checked her airway was clear. I put my lips on hers, breathed into her. I went through the frantic motions of cardio pulmonary resuscitation. One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand. More stale air. Fruitless. Her windpipe must've been crushed. The brute.

'Sally, love. I'm sorry.'

I held her.

I didn't know how or why, I just accepted that her murder had been my fault. What to do? I made a rum and Coke, reflexively got some ice from the fridge dispenser, ignored the poor dog's body on the kitchen floor. I kneeled on the floor beside Sally with the phone in my hand. As I began to dial for an ambulance and the police, I heard a siren screaming on my street. A screech of tyres and the siren died. Looking through the window's net curtains, I understood at last. The police had come for me.

Bill Bunk: failure, adulterer, wife killer.

Everything fitted.

LOST

I fled out the back door as the doorbell rang and rang and rang. Jumping the fence, I heard the front door frame splintering as the police crashed through. I crouched as I ran through the dense forest, every footstep slippery. I skirted around the side of my ballet dancer's apartment block and onto her street. I tried to walk calmly then, aware that the siren would have alerted the homebound watchers.

On the main road, a lucky bus approached and I shuffled aboard with the students, the pensioners, the unemployed. More howling police cars went by as I left – so excruciatingly slowly – the crime scene. Two grannies sat in front of me, gently cursed the society that had decayed before their very eyes. They blessed themselves when the ambulance passed.

I held my phone, aware that my location would be tracked through it. I wedged it into the gap between my seat and the side of the bus, in with the old tickets and sweet wrappers. I hoped it would lead the police back and forth across Essex for the day. If somebody found and lifted it, all the better.

The bus terminus was at the tube station, so I followed the presented course, fumbled for change and aimed for the Central Line train into the city. Aware that I couldn't escape the gaze of the CCTV cameras on the platform, I tried to present a calm appearance, not at all like a murderer. Christ, I whistled. The journey gave me some time to think. By Snaresbrook, I was calmer. By Stratford, I knew I needed professional advice.

Disembarking at Holborn, I had city shock, that momentary confusion that suburb-based Londoners experience when they venture into the heart of it all. The rain had faded but the streets were still slick and noisy.

I faded into the bumping crowds and found a quiet payphone. I lifted the receiver with the cuff of my jacket, tapped the number pad with a knuckle. Some luck at last: she would see me after lunch. So I bought the Guardian, found a pub with TV news, settled myself. I worried about my samples, my dead wife, spending the rest of my poisoned life in prison.

FROM A DARK PLACE

Link sat in his office. He meditated in the Buddhist fashion, controlled his breathing, became at peace. He called his boss.

‘Do you have the samples?’

‘No sir,’ Link said. ‘He wasn’t there. I feel he may know that we’re onto him.’

‘And the importance of the samples?’

‘Possibly. Hard to tell. If he’s as smart as we’re told.’

Ryan sighed. ‘What now?’

‘I took a decision to involve the authorities. I believe they will smoke him out. My teams are watching all his key contacts. He’ll flee to one of those. Then he’s mine.’

‘You know what you’re doing?’

‘I’m confident.’

‘Okay. Listen, I’ve got his emails. I’m sending them to you right now. Have a look at one from a Russian contact. There may be a fresh scenario here. One that makes your job more urgent.’

‘Which scenario, sir?’

‘The missing link. If the target is smart, he may be able to put everything together.’

‘I see,’ said Link after an extended pause.

‘This is pretty bad for us, Link. I don’t need to impress that on you any further, do I?’

‘No sir. I have every confidence that Dr Bunk will feel deep remorse at murdering his wife, destroy the samples, then take his own life.’

‘Excellent.’

After the call, Link went out back to the warehouse. His team needed orders. The men, civilian clothing, some openly armed, stood before their jeeps. The chatter stopped as Link stood before them.

‘He’s on the run now,’ began Link. ‘Today we will have him. Team A will watch his

psychiatrist's office. It's my expectation he will go to her first. Team B to his friend's apartment in the Barbican. Questions?'

'Sir, do we kill him on sight?'

'Negative. We need to take possession of any samples he is carrying. And we also need him to commit suicide. That must be done in a controlled manner. For now, minimum force, understood?'

After a short prayer, the commandos were ready. Link combed through Bunk's emails.

He reviewed Ryan's file on Anna, smiled at the unexpected convergence.

THIS JUST IN

The TV yammered on about Iraq, then threw in the imminent collapse of the global economy thanks to atmospheric warming. Great. But I didn't care any more. Funny how murder focuses the mind. I flinched when the London News intro chimed.

Breaking news. Murder in Buckhurst Hill. Husband sought by police. Not my picture.

Please, no.

My picture. Taken from a little frame in my living room. Me smiling in Paris. A year ago. Sally was in the other half of the picture. They didn't show her.

'Anyone with any information on the whereabouts of Mr William Bunk is asked to contact the incident room at Buckhurst Hill or any police station.'

And still my picture on screen, police numbers flashing across my neck. An uncomfortable feeling? You have no idea. My skin itched, beads of sweat ran down my spine. I kept my focus on my paper, decided against feigning nonchalance. My picture disappeared - at last! – and cut back to the chirpy presenter with news of another damned whale in the Thames. Crowds were gathering along the Embankment, ooh-ing and aah-ing at the confused cetacean. Let them.

I glanced around at the other punters. Astonishingly, the whale – a mature pilot – pulled eyes to the screen where murder had not. I guess that's modern life. I was still in the clear and figured the whale would hog the media for the rest of the day. It was a gift.

I ate a salt beef sandwich and switched to coffee. At last, my appointment time drew near. I left the bar a changed man, now officially wanted for matricide.

VOICEMAIL

‘Hi. It’s me. Look, I’m sorry about all this but I need you to know that I didn’t kill Sally. The police think I did, but I’m being framed. I don’t know why. She was leaving me, that much is true. Then I got sacked and when I arrived home, she was dead on the floor. And the dog. I did what I could for her but I was too late. I know this all looks suspicious, but I give you my word. I’m innocent. It’s fucked up. Sorry. Jesus, I feel like I’m losing my mind. I’ll be in touch when I can. Love you, mum. Bye.’

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE

The receptionist was typically icy, the psychiatrist predictably warm.

‘Bill. Good to see you.’

My source of enlightenment via cognitive therapy and preferred celebrity shrink of daytime TV producers.

‘Thanks for taking me on such short notice, Mags. You’re looking well.’

‘Rogue.’

Well, she was looking well, cleavage peeking up from a silk blouse with one button too many unfastened. Her hair was pinned up and her Armani spectacles gave her the look of a hot Italian schoolmistress. I’d thought about making a pass at her many times, fantasised about her regularly. We’d flirted, yes, but never crossed the line. Professional ethics times two.

She sat behind her vast desk, gestured to the couch, rested her hands on her lap. I lay on the black leather, closed my eyes, felt a dizziness.

‘Bill?’

‘Yes?’

‘How many times have you washed your hands today?’

No hesitation, ‘So far? Twelve. Twice at home, three times at the office – ’

‘That’s okay. That’s enough. And since you got here? All those door handles?’

‘No.’

‘Good. And you accept that the world is a dirty place, a deeply flawed place?’

‘I’ve been studying bacteria quite a bit, Mags. They’re amazing, actually. I’d forgotten.’

‘Fantastic, Bill. That’s really good.’

‘And we each have as many bacteria living inside us as there are people on Earth.’

‘Fascinating.’

‘Get this, there are ten times as many bacterial cells in you as there are human cells. Ten

times as many!’

‘Charming, I’m sure,’ she said, putting on a shudder. Or maybe it was genuine.

‘So I’ve accepted that no human is divine or perfect or clean, as we’ve been taught to understand the word. If anything, we’re just vessels for bacteria, vehicles to help them get about and —’

‘And?’

‘And to help them evolve.’

This struck me as a profound thought, but it probably sounded like madness to Mags. So I filed it away.

‘Interesting,’ she said as she wrote in her pad. ‘And what about all the lethal bacterial infections – syphilis, tuberculosis, meningitis – how do they fit into this symbiotic relationship?’

‘I’m not sure yet, either an imbalance in our own bacteria or an introduction from outside our system.’

‘Any other profound insights?’

‘I’ve come round to the fact that nobody’s perfect. Yes, I’m pretty clear on that now.’

So I told her of my sense of abandonment, how the preceding days had made me want to die. While talking, I had a kind of an epiphany, became aware of my reality: an imperfect man in an imperfect world. Nothing more, nothing less.

Nothing to worry about, so!

She became quiet. I opened a sly eye. She was deep in thought, then ‘Anything you want to tell me, Bill?’

‘I suppose I feel a lot better lately. Since you diagnosed my obsessive compulsive disorder, my mild OCD, I haven’t noticed many behavioural changes, but I feel my awareness of the condition —’

‘Not that, Bill. Anything else?’

‘Such as?’

‘Such as Sally. How is she?’

I opened an eye again, saw her move the phone a little closer. I took a deep breath. It sounded like a sigh.

‘You’ve seen the news?’

‘Yes. And the police were in touch.’

‘Have you called them?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know if you have it in you to kill someone, Bill. The Hippocratic oath is very powerful. Hard to shake off.’

‘It didn’t stop Dr Harold Shipman.’

‘Whose side are you on, exactly?’

‘Sorry.’

‘Did you kill Sally?’

‘I finished work today. Did I tell you that?’

‘Go on.’

‘That Fortescue. He’s such a bastard.’

‘Tell me about Sally.’

‘She left me the other day. Went on a hen weekend. Called me to say she wasn’t coming back. Just like that. Good bye. Bitch. So I get sacked, get home early today. My life, my career officially finished and there she is in the house.’

‘What did she say?’

I rose from the couch.

‘She was fucking dead when I got there. Strangled.’

‘So you called an ambulance? The police?’

‘No. I didn’t get a chance. I did CPR on her. The cops arrived then and I scarpered. I’m being framed. Jesus!’

She picked up the phone, edged closer to the drawer that had the mail knife in it.

‘Bill, I’m calling the police now. Would you please wait until they get here? It’s for your own good. I’m sure you can clear this up. Trust me.’

I walked to her, grabbed the edge of her desk.

‘Jesus Christ, Mags. You don’t honestly think I killed her, do you?’

She remained cool, dialled the emergency number. I accept that my story may not have added up. As the call was answered, I left the office, passed wordlessly through reception, moved

quickly to the stairwell.

I was fast running out of friends, just one person remained that I could trust. Maybe.

A GATHERING

The mosque was crowded. It seemed that more people came to pray every week, every day. It was the times, and Islam resurgent. This made her feel strong, confident. She sat in the section for women, away from the gaze of the men. This was only right, for how could a man concentrate on the glory of God when the distraction of the weaker flesh was in view?

After prayers, she lingered until nearly all the worshippers had gone. Then she attended a special meeting in a tiny, windowless office. The room was swept for listening devices by the imam, using a small handheld device. Clear. The cell began its discussions.

‘How close is he to releasing his information?’ asked Imam Ali.

‘Not close. He has been fired from the lab for insubordination. Now he will find it difficult to complete the required analysis. Maybe he will find it impossible without the required machines.’

‘And the Christians?’

‘I believe that they will stop him soon. They have more to lose.’

‘And if they don’t?’

‘I will stay close.’

‘Your sacrifices have not gone unnoticed, child. Allah is watching all that we do. In His name, we will prevent the Godless atheists from threatening his ascendancy and the creation of His Caliphate. From Spain to China, we will have our belief, our law, our promised land. God is great.’

‘God is great,’ they echoed.

The meeting briefly discussed planning for ongoing operations, but she knew her priority was to stay on Bunk. Then she donned her burka and melted back into the hated world outside.

THE ESCAPE

Running down the emergency stairs, I was hysterical, crazy ideas flashing through my mind.

‘The bitch!’

My shrink, who knows my psyche, my motivations, my flaws. I’ve paid her thousands. I thought we would be lovers, some day. She knows me more than anybody else, and she thinks I killed my wife. I’d have no chance with the police, the criminal justice system.

So, did you kill her?

No.

You sure you didn’t just imagine the guy leaving your house? Could Sally have arrived home late last night? While you were drunk? Maybe you had a row, you lost it, you throttled her? And your brain fabricated the rest.

No. Emphatically no.

I refuse to consider this any further. I must escape.

I paused for breath at the bottom of the stairs. I pushed the door open a crack, scanned the lobby. Nothing unusual. Nobody who looked like a plain-clothes cop. I accepted that modern police psychology requires for plain-clothes cops to not look like plainclothes cops, but dismissed that negative thought cycle.

Into the lobby and past main reception. I nodded to the porter, smiled. Fleeing killer? Me? Got to be kidding, mate.

The street was just yards away, a welcoming maelstrom of suits, traffic, neon. Through the revolving door, blinking into the low sun, I turned left, headed deeper into the city, deeper into the anonymous crowds. A scan of the street ahead threw up nothing of note. There were no flashing blue lights, no blue uniforms, no lurking armed response units.

I hurried on, hands deep in my coat pockets. A newspaper stand caught my eye, its markeded Evening Standard poster proclaiming ESSEX WIFE KILLER HUNTED. I glanced at the paper’s

front page. The whale, thankfully. I bought a paper and stood just inside the corner of an alley to assess the bad news.

Page two. William Bunk. Disgraced doctor. Struck off. That's not true. Fired from cushy Government job. Marriage broken. Wife found strangled in leafy Essex estate. Hunted now. Jesus, that word made me feel like some kind of wild animal. The whole story did. A new photo of me, this one from my work ID. Much sharper.

Evening rush hour was just a couple of hours away. Every second person would be carrying the paper then, their shield against eye contact with fellow travellers in tube, bus or train. So every second person would see my picture. I had to get off the streets. Tomorrow would be better. The whale would be the constant, like the wars. I would be yesterday's news. Off the streets.

A wino, bottle in hand, sitting against the bags of rubbish that wouldn't fit in the wheelie bins, took an interest in me. Funny, he didn't look like a wino. Clean face. He got to his feet like a gymnast. A pistol in my ribs. Sore, might've been a knife. It pushed me against the wall.

'Hey! Take it easy, mate. I'll get my wallet.'

'Not interested in that. Mate.'

The guy was close, so close I could smell his lunch, appreciate his strength. Well-bred accent. English.

Under his dirty coat, instead of a scruffy shellsuit, tattoos and earrings, I saw a neat black suit. Then a clean shaven, bland face, a man who could've been a tax inspector.

He said 'See that jeep across the street?'

I could hear its engine growling.

'Yeah.'

'You and I are going to walk over to it. Run and I'll shoot you.'

I touched the samples. This guy was no cop. Was this to do with the samples? Before I could ask, there was an intervention.

'Armed police! Drop your weapon! Now!'

Frying pan. Fire.

A uniformed policewoman stood just twenty paces away. She pointed her Glock self-loading pistol at my assailant. Her squad car was parked back outside my psychiatrist's office – Mags, how could you? – and one of her comrades was running towards us.

The pistol left my ribs as the gunman turned to the cop. Probably an automatic reaction on his part. But he didn't lower his gun. Big mistake. She fired. Twice.

He fell, his heart and lungs fatally ruptured. The jeep lurched across the street towards us, drawing the police's attention. I turned into the alley and ran for my life, my hands raised to protect me from a bullet in my back.

SANCTUARY

Head down, I barged through the crowded footpaths of High Holborn. I bumped people, yes, but my rudeness didn't make me stand out in any way. I was just another nutcase/selfish prick/drunk. My bladder cried and I chanced upon an automatic toilet. Twenty pence for relief and time to think. Sirens passed and I sat in my stinking, plastic sanctuary. I decided that I needed to pass an hour thinking, drinking.

I took the long way, cut through Lincoln's Inn and enjoyed the irony of the wanted murderer strolling through the ancient heart of the legal system. That system, no more an abstract necessity, now solidified, threatened.

I stuck my head into a quaintly ancient pub. A black cat sat on the counter, eyed me suspiciously. The smell was good but there were too many barristers and Standards for comfort. On, on over cobbled lanes and into maybe the most well-concealed pub in town.

The Mitre, established by some ancient Catholic bishop, lurked down a Dickensian alleyway where little had changed since the sixteenth Century. Just a few suits, no music, no TV. Perfect.

I sipped a pint of Indian Pale Ale by the dying fire and appreciated my precarious liberty, the tiny things such as this simple act. I questioned how I would maintain my freedom, even mused about how difficult the adjustment to prison life could be. I'd just have to get in with the doctors' gang from the off. A brief smile as my adrenaline dissipated, a distant aching in my limbs and spine.

I checked my pockets and was gripped by a depressing duo of horror and panic. My liberty was in doubt, true. Now more so.

Anna's sample was missing. I had to go back to my house.

SCENE OF CRIME

Outside, the designated homicide car idled, the DCI in charge sitting in the front passenger seat. He talked on his phone, followed up on the CCTV camera at the end of the street. The other officers had begun their door-to-door enquiries, the footpath outside Bunk's house cordoned off, secure.

In the golden hour, it was critical that evidence be efficiently gathered. The crime scene manager – a civilian – arrived, suited up, entered Bunk's house, noted that the front door and windows were undamaged. She went through, took notes, saw the back door swinging in the breeze. She paused at the dog. He was just like her own.

The body looked like any other. No blood, blood wasn't necessary. She knelt, looked into the eyes which were still frozen in terror.

'Hello Sally.'

The bruising – though slight – on her neck, the puffy face, the blue tinge to her lips. The typical signs of asphyxia. Yes, strangulation. She stood, made more notes, studied the room, explored the rest of the house and returned to the body.

A tiny patterned impression on Sally's skin, a flash of silver under her collar. A chain with a locket. She removed it, checked for a picture inside – the dog – and bagged it. The best exhibit so far. Maybe the killer's prints would be found there.

She took wet swabs from Sally's neck and dry swabs also. DNA, fibres, chemical residues from the killer's cruel hands, all would show up. She wrapped plastic bags around Sally's hands, taped them tightly.

The Detective Chief Inspector loomed over her.

'What do you think, Jane?'

'Hi Mark. No forced entry or struggle. Seems she knew her killer.' She lifted a cold, French-manicured hand. 'Nothing visible under her fingernails, but we'll have a closer look back at base. Good chance of a print from her locket. Could be the clincher.'

‘Excellent. When will you know?’

‘Today. Do we have the chief suspect’s prints?’

‘William Bunk. Any time now.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘He works, worked in a secure establishment. I’ve a man there now.’

‘Really? Where?’

‘Essex Forensics Lab, would you believe?’

‘Shit.’ Everything changed in Jane. ‘He’ll be forensically aware then.’

‘Yes, but we’ll get him. In crimes of passion, mistakes are always made.’

Jane hoped this optimism was warranted.

‘William Bunk,’ said Jane.

‘Do you know him?’

‘Name rings a bell. He may have signed off on something or other. Can’t recall meeting him. Why did you say “worked”?’

‘He got the sack just this morning. His wife left him the other day. He comes home, his life falling apart, finds Sally here. She’s packing her things, he blames her for everything. Red mist, loses the plot, all over.’

‘It fits.’

‘Seen it a dozen times. You going to take some prints off the back door? I think he scarpered out that way when we showed up.’

‘I’ll do that now. You can get Sally out of here now. We’ll do a full post-mortem. Tell them I’ll be along shortly.’

‘Of course.’

‘Mark?’

‘Yep?’

‘One thing. The neck bruising is very slight. I’m concerned that it may have been a carotid sleeper.’

‘Arm around the victim’s neck from behind. Gently squeeze the carotid artery, starve the brain. Professional.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, Bunk is a doctor,’ said the DCI, his mind was made up.

He made a note, called the coroner as Jane examined the kitchen and back door. The evidence of heavy drinking and a life falling apart was pretty clear. She dusted the door handle, found some excellent impressions and lifted the prints. Then she photographed the door and kitchen and dog and Sally.

‘Looks like he had a drink before he left,’ she thought aloud. She smelled the glass. ‘Rum, still some ice.’ She photographed it, emptied the booze into the sink, bagged the tumbler. ‘Two more tumblers by the sink, no ice. Lipstick traces on one. Interesting.’

She took some photos, bagged the glasses separately, labelled each.

Before leaving for the lab, she poked through the detritus on the kitchen table. Food, booze, newspapers.

‘What’s this? An envelope from Russia?’

She bagged it, asked the DCI to look into Bunk’s Russian connections.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Just a hunch. It’s addressed to his job, yet he took it home. This stands out as something not normal.’

He surveyed the scene. ‘What is normal?’

LOSS

On my second pint, I thought it through. When the police arrived, I grabbed both samples. Definitely. I stuffed them into my jacket pocket. Absolutely. I would have heard the impact if one fell to the floor. So it must have fallen out when I was jumping the back fence. There was a chance the police would find it, but also a chance that they wouldn't. I had to get back and check. Tonight.

First I needed time. Time for everything and nothing. I had to take a chance that my one remaining – maybe only true – friend would let me hide out with him.

I found the payphone in a box in the yard and called him.

'Bill. How are you?'

He sounded tired.

'Seen the news, Frank?'

'Yes.'

His voice choked. Emotion?

'It wasn't me.'

'Christ's sake, Bill. I know that,' he said. He sounded more forceful now. Good.

'Thank God. That means a lot.'

'Where are you?'

'I was going to call around, if – '

'I'll put the kettle on.'

'Thanks, Frank. Really.'

This was a great relief. He was home and he offered me refuge. Unless it was a trap. I feared the circus at my psychiatrist's would have shifted to Frank's. I had no choice. I had to trust him. I would, therefore, be most at risk between the pub and Frank's apartment. My hands trembled and my throat was dry.

So I ordered a double rum.

HOT AND COLD

Bunk first met Anna on a scientific expedition to Siberia. The discovery of a perfectly-preserved woolly mammoth carcass in the permafrost had sent ripples across the scientific world. Here was DNA from the last ice age, an extinct species, a postcard from another era.

Lyuba - just a baby - perished in a blizzard.

Bunk travelled in a team of four, all DNA experts, each with their own specialisation.

During a quiet moment in a Heathrow business traveller lounge, Bunk's new boss had a word.

'This is your chance for a new career, William.'

Bunk, his mouth full of free dry roasted peanuts, swallowed. 'I understand that. And I am grateful.'

'Just don't fuck it up. Clear?'

'Loud and.'

A comfortable Airbus flight to Moscow was followed by a much longer, infinitely less comfortable Antonov flight east, towards the Yamalo-Nenetsk region. It was a place that only those who had been there could ever truly be aware of.

Bunk stared down at the unending wastes, amazed by the cleanliness of the environment, the absence of humans.

'Russia's the biggest country on the planet,' said the team leader, Fortescue.

'That's the fourth time you've said that.'

'I know. It's true though, isn't it?'

'It's so bloody vast, isn't it Frank? So much treasure hidden under the ice.'

Frank looked up from his book – short stories by Ivan Turgenev. He was proud of his vocabulary, was often called the walking thesaurus.

'Illimitable, immeasurable, boundless, voluminous,' said Frank. 'Or how about this one?'

Mammoth.'

'Apt,' groaned Bunk, who continued to stare at the emptiness.

'Lot of horror hidden there, too.'

They left the plane, aching. Stretching on the tarmac, the drop in temperature registered immediately.

'Jesus Christ,' said Bunk. 'Is it just me or is it bloody freezing? I think my balls have just retreated into my stomach.'

'Get used to it,' they laughed.

After a terrible meal – meatballs of unknown origin with Pepsi Cola – they were driven to the dig. Six bumpy hours later, Bunk was ready to give up and turn for home. But the scientist who greeted them gave him a fresh perspective on the situation. Anna was incongruously beautiful. Bunk couldn't assess her figure because of her cold wear, but analysis of the mammoth dropped to second place on his to-do list. A delicious red scar ran from the corner of her mouth and along her jawline to just below her earlobe. Bizarrely - to Bunk's eye - this added to her attraction.

'Welcome, gentlemen. I am your liaison, Anna Kozlov, senior scientist here. Would you like to see your rooms now?'

'Not yet, thanks,' said Fortescue, introducing himself and his team to Anna. 'Can we have a look at the mammoth first?'

'Lyuba? Certainly. She's not far. Please leave your cases in the jeeps and follow me.'

The dig was on an escarpment, on the periphery of a gas pumping station being carved out of the frozen soil. The British team made smalltalk with Anna on the walk, reintroduced themselves. Bunk held Anna's hand for longer than was necessary. She smiled at this. Off to the north, drilling towers lurked in the dim polar light. Engineers and oil workers drifted by, eyed the strangers.

'Does everybody smoke here?' asked Bunk.

'Of course. It helps to pass the time. Plus, the illusion of warmth. Here we are. Meet Lyuba.'

A large clear plastic tent covered the mammoth. They entered the animal's tomb. A dark brown shape, partially exposed to the air, lay crumpled against a ridge of icy pebbles.

'Good Lord, the fur –'

'It's like it's asleep.'

A section of exposed fur had been peeled away for samples. Some hardy flies had begun to

make the most of the feeding opportunity, enjoyed the fresh twenty thousand year-old meat. Six technicians dug carefully around the body.

‘She is the most perfectly-preserved specimen yet recovered,’ said Anna.

‘Remarkable,’ said Fortescue.

‘Pity she’s female,’ said Frank.

‘Yes,’ said Anna. ‘If a male, we could have harvested sperm cells and cross-bred with an Asian elephant, the descendant.’

‘We could have had mammoths walking the earth again,’ said Frank. ‘Pity.’

‘A problem, yes, but we’re working on other possibilities. Her DNA is so well-preserved, we should be able to make a pure extraction.’

‘And I hope we can help you with that,’ said Fortescue.

‘See here,’ indicated Anna. ‘The trunk is appearing.’

‘When do you think you’ll have her out.’

‘A day or two. Then we conduct final tests here before she’s taken to Moscow.’

‘What then?’

‘Who knows? Cloning experiments? I don’t care. Our analysis is almost done. That’s all I care about. Your priority?’

‘Your Ministry has given us permission to remove sufficient samples for our DNA analysers back home. We’ll be sharing our results.’

‘No need. Come.’

Anna brought the team of wondering scientists to a complex of prefabricated buildings, a Lego lab. She beamed as she opened the main entrance and brought them into a much more pleasant twenty degrees C.

‘Voila. DNA analyser. Moscow sent it as soon as we discovered the animal. We are completing comparison tests now.’

‘We are suitably impressed,’ said Fortescue as he took in the vast machine, on which two technicians worked without acknowledging the visitors.

‘I believe that was the intention,’ she said.

Anna sat at a terminal nearby, squinted at the screen, nodded her head.

‘How goes it?’ asked Bunk.

‘We should be ready to commence analysis later today and have the complete code within days.’

She stood, removed her winter coat. Bunk’s interest in mammoth DNA disappeared.

THE LORD'S WORK

Doctor Ryan and the rest of the Foundation's Board of Trustees sat around the mahogany table in their secure meeting room. Night had fallen and the formal business was concluding.

The treasurer was nervous. Ryan leaned forward, spoke slowly.

'So you're telling us that our investments in the Chinese arms industry have flattened?'

'Sir, the leadership shifts the goalposts as and when it suits them. They've diluted our stocks and there's nothing we can do about that.'

'Is this part of the geopolitical game?' asked the publicity director, a widely known and much respected evangelical pastor. 'Or are they playing to the domestic audience?'

'Probably both.'

'What's the latest analysis of the timeframe for war between the US and China?' asked Ryan.

'It's more than a decade away, possibly two,' answered the operations director. 'Our State Department contacts agree with that assessment. Unless –'

'Unless?'

'Events, of course.'

There was a murmur of concern around the table. The Chinese investments were worth tens of billions of dollars.

Ryan stood.

'Gentlemen, I propose that we shift all our arms investments into US and Anglo corporations and even consider Russia. We have had contact with traders there. But a focus on biotech and health offers greater stability, with reduced public relations downside potential. Society is sick, getting sicker. Healthcare has infinite growth potential.'

'Until they find a cure for cancer.'

Everybody laughed.

‘All agreed?’ said Ryan. ‘Raise your hands. Unanimous then. Any other business?’

There were no takers. It had been a long session and all knew that there was still one off-the-agenda item still to come.

‘Good. I propose a short break and then we can discuss the final topic.’

They rose, went to the coffee and liquor station, the bathrooms or the smoking area down the hall.

Dr Ryan went to his office for an update from London. He scrolled through images onscreen, not stupid enough to download anything. His attention was on other matters, floating, as he listened to Link. He returned to the meeting room, not happy. He poured a black coffee.

The Chief Justice went to his side.

‘You seem distracted.’

‘The situation isn’t yet resolved, I’m afraid. I had hoped it would be before our talk.’

‘Shall we consider the Jericho solution?’

‘Yes. Yes, we shall have to.’ He looked into the judge’s eyes, read approval.

‘Let’s put it to the board, shall we?’

Ryan saw that everyone was in the room, tapped a water glass with a spoon, touched the Book, called the meeting to order. He briefed them on the situation in England, invited the Reverend to speak.

‘Gentlemen,’ said the preacher from Kentucky. ‘We represent the very pinnacle of Christian achievement. And we are engaged in a generational struggle for the very soul of the world.’ He paused. ‘Our actions in the coming days and weeks may have implications for the survival of our species. Victory will ensure the continued dominance of Christianity and the ascendancy of Evangelical Protestantism. The Word of our Lord.’ There was a chorus of Amens. ‘We must halt the ascendancy of atheism. And we authorise Dr Ryan to employ every possible means at our disposal.’

‘Praise the Lord,’ they said.

FRESH MEAT

Link sat at a counter café in the elaborate cast iron shell of Smithfield Market. The business of the day was winding down around him, carcasses were loaded onto trucks or placed into cold storage. He imagined Bunk hanging from a meat hook, dangling among the pigs.

He ate a salt beef sandwich, drank strong sweet tea. Every ten seconds, he looked down the length of the cavernous arches, past the refrigerated trucks and white-coated, blood-stained labourers.

The Barbican apartment blocks waited nearby and Link knew that Bunk was headed there and that he would be unable to resist passing through this market.

Link's team of three heavily-armed men sat in their jeep behind the market. Link's phone sat before him on the counter, a text message waiting for the send command.

Bunk would come. Link was sure of that. He finished his sandwich and quietly recited a Bible passage over and over.

The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride. (Ecclesiastes 7: 8)

Somehow, the smell of meat, the sight of blood as the hoses swooshed it down the drains, the cold flesh at every turn, somehow it excited him.

THE ROOM OF THE DEAD

The autopsy was under way. Sally lay naked on a stainless steel table and her orifices were probed. With respect, yes, but only the casual respect shown to the dead.

If Bunk could see her, he would cry. Then he would become angry. Then they would all have seen, believed, that he did not kill his wife.

Jane stood by while the examiner – young, confident - did his work. He took bloods, scraped under Sally's fingernails and examined every inch of her skin for surface wounds. Nothing.

'Vaginal scratches likely self-inflicted,' he said to the recording microphone. 'Evidence of thrush infection. Fingernail scrapings to confirm this. No evidence of sexual activity.'

'We'll test anyway.'

'Certainly.'

Then he cut her throat open.

The scalpel sliced easily through the dead flesh, just a few lazy drops of congealing blood oozed.

Jane had witnessed many such scenes, but every occasion still filled her with loathing. Every time, the renewed awareness that one human being could cause another to undergo the final humiliation of being cut open. Sliced. Dissected. Bagged. Commoditised. It came as a relief to her when the cause of death was assessed as Natural. Not today.

As Sally's neck was peeled open, clots began to appear. Small clots, but telling ones.

'Strangulation, definitely,' said the examiner. 'I'll check the lungs, just to be sure and the bloods will, I imagine, rule out poisoning. You may proceed with DNA analysis, Jane. A third party was definitely involved.'

'A professional?'

'Impossible to tell from here. The low incidence of bruising could have been simply lucky. I believe that's your job to discover.'

‘Thank you. I’ll take my sample set and inform DCI Blake.’

‘After the lungs, do you want me to continue, remove every organ?’

‘No. We’ll save her from that indignity. I’m happy with your findings.’

‘As you wish.’

Glad to be away from the autopsy, the sensory overload, Jane felt bile rising in her throat, found a bathroom. After vomiting a small squirt of yellow acid, she drove to her lab and started the process of analysis. She hoped it was just a matter of time before the killer identified himself.

Where are you, Mr Bunk?

Mrs Bunk, her neck and chest hastily stitched, was in a fridge, her cold paradise.

BY A HAIR'S BREADTH

I passed through the new square behind St Paul's Cathedral, got closer to sanctuary. I paused at the back of St Bart's Hospital, joined a tour group – Chinese – at the spot where Braveheart was hung, drawn and quartered.

The tour guide chattered, the tourists took photos of the plaque. I shuddered at the idea of it, the wanton dissection of a human being. Whatever his alleged crime, did he deserve the humiliation?

I had a good view of the Barbican buildings, figured that Smithfield Market would be my best route over. No sign of anything suspicious, no police about. Fat jeeps, yes, but they were bloody everywhere.

I went through the market, the day's trade in meat coming to a close. Just a few punters at the café counters, mostly meat workers filling up before the pub. There was an odd sense of calm to the place, the ground glistened, the air clear.

I left the market, glanced behind, saw a guy in black talking on his phone. He wasn't looking at me. I made it across Aldersgate, called Frank from a payphone. I'd figured that the hallway porter would be reading the Standard, didn't want to risk direct contact. Frank came down, shook my hand, led me to the lifts.

A NEW PHASE

Link was surprised. He listened to Dr Ryan, watched as Bunk disappeared from view into the apartment building.

‘Can you please repeat my orders, sir?’

‘Do not hurt him. The Foundation has need for him.’

‘Need?’

‘You will be advised promptly. It may happen tomorrow. Now I have work to do. Do you have all your pieces in play?’

‘Yes.’

Link placed his blackened dagger back in its belt sheath.

‘Are you ready for the Jericho solution?’

Link had the feeling this was coming. His spine tingled.

‘Yes sir. Ready.’

‘Stand by. I’ll be back in touch. Maintain your observation.’

Link walked back to his team, advised them of the change in plan.

‘I was this close,’ he said, like he was describing the fish that got away. ‘That guy missed a knife in the guts by about one second.’

‘Lucky,’ said the driver.

‘I don’t think so. What happens next? He’d prefer a knife.’

‘Orders?’

‘We watch. We wait. The Doctor is putting a plan into operation as we speak. Jericho. Bunk has an important role to play.’

‘Poor guy.’

‘Allay your sympathies. This man is the most dangerous atheist in the world today. I’m not sure he appreciates the position he’s in or the level of threat he represents to the world order.’

The evening stretched ahead. The city put on its leisure face, thousands of Londoners making their hurried way to the bars and restaurants and coffee shops. The balmy air lulled them, the sense of impending doom palpable to less than a dozen people. These men and women said their prayers, asked their Gods for fortitude.

REASSURANCE, AT LAST

Frank's place was just the kind of apartment that I'd often fantasised about. Art – good art – covered the white walls. His home office nestled in an alcove beside a picture window, all flatscreens, blinking LEDs and paperwork. The smell of fresh coffee filled the space. And the view. From the twenty-seventh floor, looking south to the busy Thames, St Paul's so near you could almost touch it, the London Eye glistening in its slow rotation.

We stood, facing each other, Frank's eyes fixed on mine.

'You didn't do it, Bill. Did you?'

'Of course not, Frank. How could I kill Sally?'

'The police said that she'd left you.'

'When did you hear from them?'

'A couple of hours ago. I hadn't heard from you, so I didn't have to lie or anything. I said that I didn't believe you could do that.'

'Thanks.'

'I'm supposed to call a DCI Blake now.'

I stood, immobile, not knowing what Frank would do. Jesus, anything was possible today.

'And –'

'And would you like some coffee? You smell like a brewery.'

Relief flooded through, I sighed gratefully, my spine relaxing at last. The mention of Sally made me think of her again.

Frank put a hand on my shoulder.

'Sit, Bill. I'll get the coffee and you can tell me your story.'

I sat, gazed at St Paul's. Removed from the city below, I appreciated its living, concrete, electric beauty.

I dried my tears, swimming endorphins making me feel a little better.

‘So, Bill. Let’s hear it.’

‘I got fired the other day.’

‘Fortescue fired you?’ Surprised.

‘Unceremoniously. Cost-cutting.’

‘Shit.’

‘Tons of it. Sally told me she was leaving that same day. She’d been away on a girls’ weekend.’

‘Unexpected?’

‘Not really. No. Not at all. We’d been through for a long time, if I’m to be honest with myself. But I was taken aback by her hatred of me. That hurt. But, you know, there was an element of relief all the same.’

‘I can imagine.’

I drank my coffee, enjoyed its smell and taste and burn in my throat.

‘So I got home early today – I just had to get away from the job – and Sally was dead on the living room floor.’

‘Marks?’

‘Nothing. I figured she’d been strangled. I tried CPR. Nothing. Our dog was killed as well.’

‘Bastards.’

‘As I was coming up our street, I saw a man leaving our house.’

‘The killer?’

‘Presume so.’

‘Why didn’t you just report him to the cops?’

‘I couldn’t ID him, Frank. All I could say was “man dressed in black, black jeep”. Not much fucking good, is it?’

‘Is the killer targeting you? Could he know of our friendship?’

‘Doubt it. I didn’t spot any unusual activity below. I am being careful.’

Frank rose and went to the window. Pointless, being so high up, but he swept the street anyway to reassure himself.

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘I’m sure you are being careful, Bill, but you could be up against a professional. Which leads me to the big why. Why, Bill? Why is this happening to you?’

I fished the DNA sample from my pocket. The space dust. I handed the canister to Frank.

‘Space dust?’

‘The genuine article. You’re familiar with the mission?’

‘Yes, but I don’t get it.’

‘We’d been prepped to do a secondary analysis. Funnily enough, the delivery van bringing it was robbed. It must have come to be because of some slip-up. So this sample hasn’t been analysed yet. But NASA found something very interesting in their original analysis.’

‘Such as?’

‘DNA.’

‘Oh. My. God. In space?’

‘Unbelievable, but yes.’

‘DNA in space.’ He stood and paced. ‘Bill, the implications could be enormous. Has it been cross-referenced with any astronauts that died up there?’

‘I believe so. Barring some crazy rocket scientist having flown himself into space and getting killed and nobody ever finding out about it, I’m working on the assumption that this is of extraterrestrial origin.’

‘I wonder what the creationists will make of it.’

This was a good question.

‘I wonder. Well, by bizarre coincidence, I came into another sample today, one which may be even more fascinating. From Anna.’

Frank smiled. ‘Anna?’

‘She was working away on her gas field when they dug up a Homo erectus. Perfectly preserved, I do believe.’

‘What?’ He stopped pacing. ‘Homo erectus DNA?’

‘A world first, I think you’ll find.’

‘And the link. There must be a link, Bill.’

‘It is my thesis that human evolution was driven by DNA from space. Root source unknown, but not of this Earth. If I can illustrate how Homo erectus DNA differs from our own, then fill in the blanks with the space stuff, well, then I think I can conclusively disprove the biggest lie in human history.’

‘Yes?’

‘That God exists. That some omnipotent consciousness created humankind.’

Frank continued to walk the room, analysed the information I’d presented to him. He was a real scientist. Better than me.

‘One flaw, Bill. Two. Firstly, do you really think that people will buy the space connection? I mean, doesn’t it sound like a bad sci-fi movie or something?’

‘It’s science, Frank,’ I blurted. ‘NASA. That has to stand for something. Anyway, to accept the existence of God is far more ludicrous, don’t you think? We’ve got to get away from the Dark Ages, get over the God delusion and grow up as a race. Take responsibility for our own fucking actions.’

Rich.

‘Okay, second flaw. If you can conclusively prove the science, and maybe you can, won’t the creationists absorb it into their own mad theories?’

‘That would mean accepting that Homo sapiens evolved from a more primitive species. I don’t think they could make that leap.’

‘Perhaps you’re right. Look Bill, you’re preaching to the converted, but won’t the great unwashed masses just laugh at you?’

‘Maybe. But I have to do this. The timing is perfect. We might just be able to stop a new age of religious hysteria, global conflict.’

‘That’s on the cards all right.’ He thought deeply, balanced his career with his scientific principles. ‘I’m not sure if this is enough to reverse the tide. May be King Canute-ish. But we must do it. We must try.’

‘Thanks, Frank. It means a lot to hear that I’m not mental.’

He held out his hand.

‘Partners?’

We shook. Things had turned.

‘Partners.’

‘So where’s this Homo erectus sample?’

‘Little problem there. Your friendly DCI and his mates arrived just after I discovered Sally. I dropped the sample getting over the back garden fence.’

‘Shit. Are you sure?’

I patted my pockets.

‘Pretty certain. If it’s not there, I have no idea.’

‘Then we’re going to have to take a drive, aren’t we?’

PURGE

Anna sat alone in a vast, high-ceilinged drawing room. Her guts fluttered, her nervousness palpable.

‘This place makes me feel like a child,’ she said.

Her posture was rigid, for fear she would damage the Louis XV chair. All was ornate, Baroque or Rococo, she wasn’t sure. Mostly-stern faces, their expressions captured by the magic of oil, peered down from gilded frames. Her attention was fixed by a Botticelli painting, Mary mourning the death of her only son. Anna felt the anguish, at once understood the power of art in a religious context. This was an experience previously denied her by her scientific principles. She would leave the Vatican an improved person.

Her stupor was interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the corridor beyond.

The cardinal threw open the doors, smiled at her.

‘I’m sorry for the delay, child.’

‘Not at all, Cardinal Biscia. The art – ’ She indicated the Botticelli.

‘I understand perfectly. Let me show you our Raphael on the way out. I insist on admiring it every day.’

He laughed and sat on the chair beside hers. His eyes were icy blue, thinning hair white, complexion patchy and red. Anna could picture the man as he looked in his prime. Though time had caught him, he remained a powerful figure, one of the Pope’s closest advisors. Within the Vatican walls, he was called The Snake.

‘So what should I do with the sample, Your Eminence?’

He rose, his knees creaking.

‘Enjoy your youth, my flower. Will you at least promise me this?’

‘Yes,’ she smiled, rising also.

‘Come, we have a walk.’

They left the waiting room and stepped down a long corridor. Priceless art on the right, tall

windows on the left, diffuse northern light spilling in.

‘It is our belief,’ continued the cardinal, ‘that this information in your possession must be destroyed.’

The scientist tried to speak, ‘But – ’

He silenced her with a wave of a jewelled hand.

‘The debate about evolution has been, if you’ll pardon the expression, evolving,’ a pause, ‘since Mr Darwin proposed his theory,’ he stressed that word, ‘in eighteen fifty-nine. Now, Mr Darwin’s theory was widely accepted initially, but it has never been proven. Science is all about proof, is it not? As our Pontiff himself has said, “Show me, in a laboratory, how your evolution happens”. But in recent times, with the development of creationist theories and the strengthening of the Church in the face of her enemies, Darwin’s theories are losing ground. Consider our brothers in America, for example. Excellent progress is being made in their education system. There is real hope.’

‘That’s true.’

‘So, as we move into a new Age of Enlightenment under God,’ he blessed himself, ‘this sample of yours simply muddies the water. Science is seductive, seeking to explain the great mysteries. But it has little respect for human dignity. Protecting human dignity has been Mother Church’s historical role. Indeed, it was the guiding principle of Jesus Christ himself, so we will stop at nothing to maintain it. Do you understand this?’

‘I think so.’

‘Excellent.’

He guided her off the main corridor and down a darker, less ostentatious route. They hadn’t passed another soul since leaving the waiting room. Fear flashed through Anna, but only for a second.

‘But the complete specimens are in Moscow,’ she said.

He smiled, put his arm around her shoulder. He felt cold.

‘I’m working on that. Do not worry. We have many friends in your homeland.’

He stopped before a digital panel, entered a code, opened a heavy door. He led her into an industrial area. The light fittings were functional, the floor clanging steel, the air smelling of oil and smoke. Down a stairway and into an ancient part of the complex. There was a stronger smell of

burning oil now and a distant, rumbling roar. They entered an open area which contained huge machines, pallets of various materials, some in barrels, some in sacks. Nearby, some workers in overalls and hardhats.

‘Ah, here we are. Marco!’

A man turned, saw the cardinal, rushed up to them.

‘We don’t see you down here so much, Your Eminence,’ he said.

‘My knees, Marco. They can’t take your stairs.’

‘I could install an elevator, Your Eminence.’

‘Perhaps. Now, can you open Dante for us please?’

Marco nodded briskly and gestured them towards the huge mechanism at the far end of the space. He called another man and they took up positions at either side of a small double door set into the massive steel structure. The cardinal nodded. Marco and his colleague both pulled down on their levers and the doors slid back. A wave of heat shot from the furnace, the flames inside almost white hot in their intensity.

The cardinal looked at Anna, opened his hand and offered her the sample container. She hesitated for only a second, took the sample, threw it into the fire.

The cardinal blessed himself slowly, joined his hands in silent prayer. Anna looked at him, wondering.

‘A prayer for the remains of one of God’s creatures. An early human,’ he grinned at her and winked slyly.

She had glimpsed the truth. Understanding, that deep awareness of truth struck her at her core. She saw the game.

‘I see.’

‘Now,’ said the cardinal, ‘let me show you the Transfiguration. It is truly marvellous.’

She followed him out of the depths and into the Pinacoteca Vaticana, a space filled with magnificence, transcendence. Before Raphael, Anna was overcome by emotion and she told the cardinal about the sample she’d mailed to Bunk. She told him everything.

Again, The Snake smiled.

FALL

Night had fallen quietly. I was glad the day was done. Frank looked at his watch.

‘It’s just after ten. Should we go?’

He displayed the bravery of innocence.

‘Frank,’ I said, ‘it really could be that everything’s connected.’

‘I accept that.’

‘And that they’re out to kill me.’

‘They’ve fitted you up pretty well, haven’t they?’

‘Jesus, even if I do manage to prove my theory with the DNA, they could still do me for killing Sally.’

‘And your theory would be discredited.’

‘As the ravings of a homicidal maniac.’

‘But you must do it. Anyway, if I’m in this with you, they’d have to discredit me as well.’

‘Maybe. Or you could be risking your life.’

‘I’m in this with you, Bill. To the end.’

‘Then let’s go.’

‘Let’s. I’m gagging for a drink.’

We took the lift to the underground car park and Frank’s Jaguar was soon in motion.

We passed through the automated gates and drove north. There was no sign of anyone tailing us and we quickly melted into the still-heavy night traffic.

We chatted nervously on the way. I was worried about being caught, fearful of the killer-revisiting-scene-of-crime behaviour that the prosecution would exploit. Frank was calmly excited.

Up Old Street, along Hackney Road, Mare Street, Well Street. I love the olde-style names around here. Then the A12 through the site of the twenty twelve Olympics, all cranes, hoardings and aspirations. Through Leytonstone to Woodford, nodded to the lumpen Winston Churchill,

towards Epping. And we were there.

The area around my house was deathly still. Frank parked in a street a block away. I left him there, the engine idling, and retraced my escape route. I was afraid the police would be called over a possible burglar more than a returned wifekiller. I caught a glimpse of the ballet dancer – clothed – and found myself outside my back garden fence.

I had no flashlight, never even thought of one, so I got on my knees and groped through the twigs and grass and accumulated litter. Suburban debris. I snapped a twig. Careful. My hand touched something hard, plastic. Got it. Yes, yes.

My eyes, now more accustomed to the orange gloom, told me that I had my sample. I stood up and scanned. I picked my way back through the bushes and trees, glanced at my house – which, itself, looked dead – found myself exposed in an open space.

Suddenly, a noise, a moving blur at the edge of my vision. My heart accelerated but my legs froze. This is it.

I turned my head and saw the fox. The hunter paused, looked right at me, her eyes blazing. For a second, we connected. Then she was gone, off to the left. My pulse eased and I moved slowly, deliberately through the undergrowth and back to Frank.

‘Got it!’

‘Fucking excellent, Bill. Well done. Homo bleeding erectus. Unbelievable!’

He slapped my thigh, put the car into gear and aimed for the comforting melee of the city.

‘So, what next?’ I said, honestly not knowing the answer. The day had been too long, too much. I needed to sleep.

‘Firstly, we’re going to open a nice bottle of bubbly. What we have in our possession is nothing short of amazing. We need to toast our luck tonight. Then, as I see it, you’d be best to stay at mine. You can work away on my system, put the thesis together. I’ll be able to do the DNA analysis at work.’

‘Do you have good analysers?’

‘The best. We do lots with the biggest drug companies. Their investment is limitless, believe me.’

‘Sounds ideal.’

‘One thing, Bill. Can we co-author this?’

‘Of course, I appreciate all your help, your belief. But can you accept the risk in having your name on this?’

‘You’re the one taking the risks, Bill. I’ll be fine.’

INCIDENT ROOM

The golden hour had passed and Bunk was still at large. No other suspects. The detectives and forensic scientists held their end of day meeting, the pub foremost on their minds, Sally Bunk's body stiffening in the morgue.

Sensing the fatigue in the room, DCI Blake went to the whiteboard.

'Okay, people. Let's run through what we have, then we'll call it a day.'

He had their full attention as he described the scene at Bunk's house.

'Bunk then took a bus to the tube,' he continued. 'he left his phone on the bus as a decoy.

We figured he'd go straight to his shrink. Which he did and where he met a mugger.'

'Talk about leaving a trail of death and destruction,' said an officer.

'What do we have on the mugger?' asked the crime scene manager.

'The mugger? Nothing. No ID. Why do you ask, Jane?'

'If we backtrack to the crimescene for a sec. The CCTV at the end of the street shows Bunk entering the house just before the discovery of the body, yes?'

'Go on.'

'But we also had a man in black at the scene, just minutes before.'

'The Jehovah's Witnesses were active on the street today. I thought we'd accepted that.'

'I just find it odd that we have a mystery man at the murder location, the murder was called in by an unknown person and an unknown person held Bunk up at gunpoint later.'

'Your point?'

'Sally Bunk may have been murdered by somebody who knew what they were doing.'

'Bunk was a qualified doctor. He'd know about carotid arteries.'

'That I know. But it would rather remove the passion element from his crime, no?'

'So you think Bunk is being framed?'

'I think it's a possibility, that's all.'

‘But why, Jane? There’s no earthly reason for anybody to frame Bunk. Anyway, you didn’t pick up any forensics that would indicate another presence in the house today. Nothing.’

‘I know. I just have this niggling feeling – ’

‘Concerning?’

‘His dog. Why would he have killed his dog?’

‘A red herring. To get you thinking along those lines. Don’t forget three things. One, his boss at the lab. Fortescue. He said that Bunk had been acting irrationally at work, had become secretive about his work, was shagging his secretary.’

Jane raised an eyebrow, while heads nodded. You could know a man through his work. That had been proven many times over to the murder squad.

‘Two,’ continued Blake, ‘his psychiatrist says that Bunk has entertained fantasies of going postal at work.’

‘And three?’ asked Jane.

‘Three. Why he lost his license to practise medicine. That’s the kind of episode that never really goes away.

‘I guess.’

The DCI underlined these episodes on the board, drew another oval around the word FRIENDS, closed his briefcase.

‘We’ve had no callback from his friends or family members. They’re our best bet and we’ll follow up each and every one of them tomorrow. For now, Bunk is our only suspect and we won’t waste any time on mystery men in black until we have him.’ He shot Jane a hard glance.

‘Understood?’

‘Understood,’ she said.

‘Let’s go for a drink. I’m buying. Tomorrow we’ll get our killer.’

EQUATION

Back at Frank's, we put both sample containers on the glass coffee table. Frank stretched on a pair of examination gloves and looked at the receptacles closely. But he didn't open them.

'From now on, we play this by the book, best practise. Okay, Bill?'

'Fine.'

'They appear to be sound. I'll confirm that tomorrow.'

Frank got a sheet of A4 paper from his inkjet printer, and a pen. He placed the paper on the table, landscape format, took the cap off the pen with his teeth. At the right hand side of the page, he drew a stick person, wrote 'Homo sapiens' beneath it. Left of this, an equals sign, then a space, then a plus sign. On the left of the page, he placed the Homo erectus sample, with its rough, Cyrillic label and Anna's handwritten description. After the plus sign, the Stardust sample, NASA logo, full colour label.

'That's it, Bill. This is the equation that proves that human evolution occurred naturally. No intervention by an all-seeing, all-knowing supernatural entity.'

'I like it, Frank, but still, won't they just say that whichever bloody God sent the DNA down from space?'

'I know you must be shattered Bill, every which way, but don't get despondent on me. No religion acknowledges that humans evolved from previous species such as Homo erectus. And don't you think that some of the holy books might have mentioned the space connection? I imagine the Scientologists might be the only ones to accept this.'

'And nobody laughs at them any more.'

'Exactly. In a comparative analysis, Scientology's claims are no more ludicrous than any of the rest.'

'Where's that champagne?' I was suddenly weary, like I was dying of exhaustion and despair.

Frank found a perfectly-chilled bottle of Bollinger – nineteen ninety-six – and two flutes.

‘I’ve been saving this for something special.’

He opened the bottle with a happy pop, slowly filled the glasses.

Frank said ‘A toast, Bill. To the end of religion as we know it.’

The bubbles stung my nose. I don’t know if it was my tiredness or what, but a cold shudder rattled my spine and my guts were filled with fear and loathing. I stood by the window, drank it all in.

Frank sat by his equation, dazed by its simplicity, eager to commence analysis.

We finished the champagne, had a whisky nightcap. Frank showed me to the spare bedroom. From the window, I could see the arc of the London Eye silhouetted against the muddy sky, its red warning lights stationary, resting.

I stripped to my shorts and lay on the bed, unable to sleep. I was afraid that Sally would visit my dreams, asking, Bill, who killed me? You will find them, Billy. Won’t you?

EYE IN THE SKY

Her head was spinning from the events of the day. She had difficulty grasping the reality of the plot in the centre of which she found herself.

Would anyone really believe that the Vatican had a team of espionage specialists? The history of deceit, murder and execution was there. Everybody knew about the Inquisition and the dirty deeds of the Holy See. How many had been killed by Mother Church? Thousands? Millions? But with purpose. Divine Purpose.

And the modern-day Inquisition, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, continued the dark but necessary work. But Bunk would not be hurt, the cardinal had promised that.

Anna regretted sending the sample to her English Billy in the first place. She explained it to herself as a desire to impress him, to make him want her again. After their first encounter at the mammoth dig, she thought of him constantly. He'd kept his distance – he was married – and she'd genuinely believed that the Homo erectus sample would have made him want her again. Nothing more. Stupid. Now she was bringing all kinds of attention his way. She drank a vodka and Coke. Bad vodka.

Three rows behind her sat Antonio Pollo, a salesman who represented a furniture factory near Milan, specialising in very expensive modular systems for the high-end office. He wore a charcoal Armani suit, kept a calfskin briefcase on his lap. Through thick Gucci frames, his calm brown eyes stayed fixed on the back of Anna's head. Everything about him fitted his cover. He had no need to risk taking a weapon to London. His organisation's global reach meant that everything he needed could be sourced – and easily – anywhere on Earth.

As they flew over Bavaria, he ordered black coffee from the steward. As they approached Heathrow, Anna turned and caught his eye. He nodded imperceptibly. Bella. We meet at the hotel. You know the plan.

They passed through controls without suspicion, took separate taxis to a posh central hotel.

Their adjoining rooms were booked and ready for their arrivals, with baskets of fruit and complimentary newspapers, British, Italian, Russian.

As Anna unpacked her things – not many things – Antonio knocked on her door. She looked at him through the spy hole for a long second. He was attractive in his Italian way, strong, though short. A perfect mesomorph. And he had a coldness in his face. She let him in.

‘Antonio.’

He paced the room, helped himself to some Evian.

‘I’d like you to make contact immediately,’ he said. His tone suggested not a request, more an order.

‘I’ll try his cellphone.’

‘Use the hotel line.’

She called Bunk. She was ready to hang up when the call was answered. Background noises suggested a bar.

‘Billy?’

‘Who is this?’

‘Anna. Is that you, Billy?’

‘No. This is Detective Chief Inspector Blake of the Metropolitan Police. We’re looking for Mister Bunk. I’d like to meet with you please.’

At this, Anna hung up. She told Antonio. He wasn’t happy at the development.

‘Why do the police want him? Are they trying to protect him? This is not good.’

‘I have no clue.’

‘Very well. They will trace the call easily.’ He rubbed his chin, moved towards the door. ‘We must check out immediately. I’ll meet you at reception in five minutes.’

With a sigh, Anna put her things back in her case, took a banana, locked the door behind her.

PILLOW TALK

Jane sat up in bed, smoked cigarettes. Her lover fiddled with phones.

‘Can’t you leave it?’ she asked.

‘Sorry, love. I need to find out who called Bunk. I’ve traced the hotel. There’s someone on the way there now.’

‘It could’ve been anyone. Maybe his lover?’

‘A second lover? He doesn’t strike me as the stud type.’

‘Unlike yourself.’

He didn’t reply, kept at the phones. She stubbed out a cigarette, put a hand on his shoulder.

‘So are you going to leave your wife or not?’

Again, no reply. He was thinking only of his new Alfa Romeo Spider – red - which would be ready for collection in just two days. Sighing, she accepted that they would have no long-term future together, removed her hand from his shoulder, mused further on her favourite topic: the perfect murder.

FACE VALUE

I'd just slid into sleep when Frank knocked in at seven.

'Morning! I'm off to the office. Got to get cracking on saving humanity.'

'You're very chirpy.' I winced at the morning sunlight. 'I'm brain dead. Jesus, how much did we drink last night?'

'Have a lie-in, Bill. You need it. Painkillers in the kitchen.'

'Where are you heading?'

'Kensington by tube. We've got a private suite at Imperial College. Dead handy. Help yourself to anything, won't you? I'll be late.' He held up the samples. 'I'm going to have a chat with my best students, get cracking on this little timebomb.'

'Good, thanks.'

I managed to get up on an elbow.

'My PC's cranked up for you. Spare keys on the counter and I'll have a word with the porter downstairs, tell him you're my brother-in-law. In case you need to slip out. Okay?'

'Thanks a lot, Frank, really.'

And he was gone. I tried to get back to sleep but my mind was too active, ghosts penetrating the haze. Anyway, the sun was blazing outside and the pigeons on the balcony were too bloody noisy.

I went to take a shower, was dismayed by the stains on Frank's grout. I found rubber gloves, bathroom cleaner and sponges under the kitchen sink. I made a mental note to work on that gloomy space later, fill the day.

I scrubbed, then showered.

I made coffee and toast, sat at Frank's computer.

News first. No mention of me or Sally anywhere. More bombings in Iraq and Algeria. The whale. Fears of an al-Qaeda spectacular in London. Oh, fuck off.

My personal email inbox turned up an unexpected message. Anna was in London and wanted to know if I'd received her present. She was sorry to hear about Sally – how? – and wanted to meet up ASAP. Fine by me, I wanted to thank her for the Homo erectus sample. And I wanted to see her.

I replied to her, said I was keeping a low profile, but there shouldn't be any problem meeting up at some stage. I was cheered by this development, fantasised about her eyes, lips, body and smiled at the memories of our fornication.

To work. I trawled the web for most of the morning, printing everything about Homo erectus and the prevailing theories on human evolution, particularly the genetics. There were big holes, certainly, but these were holes that Frank and I were preparing to fill.

Lost in a fog of learning and analysis, I was alerted to lunchtime only by the growling of my innards. As I prepared a turkey and salad sandwich, Frank called.

'Everything okay, Bill?'

'Fine, just fine. I'm collating as much as I can about Homo erectus. That sound good?'

'Perfect, perfect. I'm tied up with work stuff most of the day, but I'm hoping to get some time on the main analyser later on. I'll at least make a start on our ancestor's genome.'

'Did you speak with the students?'

'I've had a chat with the two brightest PhD students and I brought in the Department Head.'

'Is that wise?'

'Don't worry, Bill. They're all avowed atheists. I haven't mentioned you. They're salivating at the prospect. We'll be able to get through it in weeks rather than months this way.'

'I trust your judgment, Frank. I just don't want them to be in any danger, you know?'

'I take your concerns on board, don't worry.'

I ate lunch and waded through Wikipedia, amazed by the thing. Sometimes it helps to read a less technical take on something complex. I decided to go back to the fundamentals, cellular DNA and its evolution. If DNA really did come down from space, how could it have become part of Homo erectus? I reviewed cells, clicked through hyperlinks, landed on a page entitled Endosymbiotic theory. Yes. Symbiosis is the coming together of different life forms, sharing, working together, becoming stronger. Mitochondria, the power plants of animal cells, and plastids, their plant counterparts, both carry independent genomes. It's believed that they arose from

endosymbiosis of bacteria.

So bacterial DNA was absorbed into cells and, get this, nuclear DNA has been taken from plastids. This is the mechanism. Our theory, it really could have happened. Even the quote: 'Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking.' This clears a lot up. Not science fiction, science fact.

Before calling Frank with this exciting development, and a request to look for possible bacterial envelopes around the space DNA, I checked my inbox. A reply from Anna. She asked to meet. Urgently. Couldn't wait to see me. My groin stirred. New mobile number.

I called her.

'Billy! Thank you for calling. Where can we meet?'

Not here. Not just yet.

'Where are you?'

'Near Trafalgar Square. Where are you?'

'Smithfield. Take a cab, I'll meet you at a pub, the Meat Hook.'

'I'll leave this second.'

'Fine. I'll see you in about fifteen minutes then.'

I needed a break from my work. That's what I told myself. The mitochondria and plastids could wait. I would risk exposure in public? For Anna, yes. For Anna.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The Vatican assassin knelt in a tiny church on the South Bank. He prayed for guidance, his thoughts aimed squarely at St Anthony. Every minute, he raised his eyes to the brilliant, dazzling stained glass window, then looked behind. Just a few elderly Catholics and one or two tourists. None met his eye.

Eventually, he turned his head and saw his contact. The man – a priest – nodded. The assassin blessed himself, stood, left the pew, genuflected, followed the man from the church. They passed through a narrow alley beside and entered the priests' residence.

In the quiet hallway, the priest offered his hand.

'Michael.'

Irish.

'Antonio. Many thanks for your assistance, Father.'

'My pleasure. Tea? Coffee?'

'Thank you, no.' His phone chirped. 'Excuse me.' He saw Anna's ID flash. 'Actually, coffee would be excellent.'

The priest hurried off and Antonio gave his attention to Anna.

'Progress?'

'Yes. I'm meeting him in fifteen minutes.'

'Where?'

'Smithfield. A bar.'

'A pity. Do what you must to find out where is the sample. Then call me.'

'Understood.'

He ended the call, blessed himself, mumbled thanks to St Anthony.

The priest returned with two cups of passable instant coffee.

They went upstairs to a bedroom, which was frozen in the fifties. The priest locked the door,

then gestured to a simple chair beside a small table. The assassin sat. The priest went to a large closet and, from under some folded blankets, took a battered brown suitcase. He placed this on the table, thumbed the combination locks to six-six-six and opened the case.

Both men smiled.

The assassin surveyed the contents of the case, decided to prepare himself for every eventuality.

‘The Beretta pistol with silencer, please.’

The items were placed on the table.

‘Ammunition?’

‘Four magazines. And I may have to destroy objects.’

‘Fragmentation grenades or high explosive? Both of the kind used here by Irish terror groups.’

‘High explosive, two if I may.’

‘With pleasure. The gun is clean, so no problem there. Even the kids have guns here now.’

‘So I’ve read.’

‘Is there anything else I can do for you?’

‘If I were to require a bomb? Say two kilos of C4 with detonator and timer?’

The priest whistled, suddenly felt sorry for whoever was on Antonio’s target list.

‘I’d have to go elsewhere for that. I would need a few hours’ notice, if you could.’

‘Then I give it to you now. I should have more information later today, but I would prefer to be prepared for any eventuality.’

‘Very good.’

‘And when I am finished my work?’

‘Standard operating procedure. If you use the weapon, dispose of it. Other items to be returned to me. Make your report in the normal manner so that the Auditor can be satisfied.’

The assassin nodded and placed the gun, ammunition clips and grenades into his briefcase, in a discretely partitioned space behind his brochures, business cards and Mont Blanc pens.

‘The Auditor will be very satisfied,’ smiled Antonio.

AFTERNOON DELIGHT

Funny how songs just come at you and stick in your head and won't go away.

As I brushed my teeth, gargled with cinnamon-flavoured mouthwash and plucked hairs from my nostrils, the song Afternoon Delight by the Starland Vocal Band came into me and just wouldn't go away.

Gonna find my baby, gonna hold her tight, gonna grab some afternoon delight. Skyrockets in flight, ching-ching, afternoon delight.

Over and over and over again.

I sang it aloud as I grabbed the spare keys, put on a baseball cap with MIT on the front, locked up and took the lift.

The entrance lobby was quiet and I nodded cheerily at the porter.

A deep breath before going outside, into a mild, bright day. I scoured the street for anything suspicious, exhaled, concluded that I hadn't been followed to Frank's. The police were, no doubt, dealing with a fresh batch of murders. I had a strong feeling that, if I didn't do anything stupid, I'd be okay.

The pub was moderately busy, just a few office drones squeezing the last drops of pleasure from their lunchbreaks. No sign of Anna, so I got a pint of India Pale Ale and sat in an alcove facing the door.

Skyrockets in flight, ching-ching, afternoon delight.

A few minutes passed and Anna appeared. She stood in the doorway for a long second, framed in light, then she spotted me. She smiled and walked to me with her arms outstretched. I stood and embraced her, hugged her tightly. She had a wonderful smell, musky. She kissed me full on my lips.

'Billy! I missed you!'

'I missed you too. What'll you have?'

‘White wine, please. Something dry.’

I got a glass of sauvignon blanc and we toasted ourselves.

‘I love your hair dark. You look fantastic.’

‘Thank you. It’s just for a change.’

‘So what brings you to London, Anna?’

‘I’m between contracts with a bonus to spend. I thought Why not visit Billy, see if the spark is still there?’

She rubbed my thigh with her strong hands.

‘Yes, it’s still there.’

‘Is there someplace we can go, you know?’ she whispered in my ear, licking it then.

‘Let’s finish these and get out of here.’

Skyrockets in flight.

The suits got back to their chores and we were almost alone.

She said ‘Did you get the sample I sent you?’

‘Anna, that could be one of the greatest finds in human history. I’m trying to compare it with DNA found in space to show how humans may have evolved without the need for divine intervention.’

‘You mean you’re trying to prove that God doesn’t exist?’

‘Exactly.’

She blessed herself.

‘Some people will not be very happy with you, Billy.’

‘Fuck them. They’ve had control of our imaginations since civilisation began and look at the mess they’ve made.’

‘Where is it now? Do you have it?’

‘Not on me, no. A friend is taking a close look at it.’

‘Who? Where is it?’

‘Steady on. Did you come to see me or the sample.’

She smiled.

‘You, of course. But I would like to see the sample too. I lost my own.’

‘Tell me about the find.’

‘It was a lot like the mammoth, really. Just in a deeper layer of permafrost. Three bodies. They were taken directly to Moscow. I was lucky to get the sample for you.’

‘Three! When was this?’

‘About a month ago.’

‘That’s curious. Why no media coverage?’

‘Moscow wanted a lid kept on it. I am sworn to secrecy. And I think that I was wrong in my initial assessment.’

‘In what way?’

‘Moscow says that they are not pre-humans at all, simply early humans, no more than two hundred thousand years old.’

I felt as though I was sinking through the seat. I gulped my drink.

‘Oh fuck. You’re not serious.’

‘Unfortunately, yes. I am sorry.’

‘For fuck’s sake. I thought I was on to something big. Fuck.’

‘I’m sorry.’

I turned to her. She was upset.

‘No, I’m sorry. You were only trying to do me a favour. I appreciate that. But fuck it anyway.’

We sat in silence for a long minute. I finished my beer, my thoughts garbled now. Skyrockets in flight.

‘Come on,’ I said. Let’s go for a proper drink.’

‘Okay, sorry,’ she smiled.

Ching-ching.

Arms linked, we walked back to the Barbican.

‘Is this your place?’ she asked. ‘It’s beautiful. And so central. I love it.’

‘No. I live, lived, out in the sticks. This is a friend’s place.’

‘So why are we here?’

The elevator doors slid open, closed behind us.

‘Anna, you know how my wife died? Well she was murdered. The police think I did it.’

Inside an elevator is probably not the ideal place to tell someone you’re wanted for murder.

Anna didn't seem fazed.

'Idiots,' she said. 'Of course you didn't do it. Who did?'

'That's something I just don't know.'

'Did she take a lover?'

A surprising question. One I hadn't considered. The idea threw me.

'I have no clue.'

I fumbled with my keys and we went into the apartment. We didn't make love right away.

Anna turned on the widescreen Sony plasma to watch the news. The first Earth-like planet had been discovered. And only twenty light years away. Only.

'Isn't it exciting, Billy? I wonder what life forms could be there? With higher gravity, would cells be smaller or have stronger cell walls? Will bacteria be dominant there also?'

'I wonder what the churches will make of it,' I said as I made two vodkas with Coke.

'Why?'

'You'd think the Bible might have mentioned the other Earths.'

'I don't think the Bible is to be taken literally. Shush.'

Her directness didn't bother me – that was her way – so I sat quietly on the couch, put her drink on the little table, stretched out my left arm for her. She sat beside me and we flicked between news channels, some even with animations of gravity-compressed alien lifeforms. The talk was about how broadcast signals emitted by Earth's media twenty years ago could now be enjoyed on 581 c.

Benny Hill. The Joshua Tree. Cheers. Whose Line is it Anyway? The Cosby Show. Margaret Thatcher. Black Monday. Andy Warhol. I Want Your Sex.

Nineteen eighty-seven.

What would they make of us?

'I want your sex.'

'George Michael. My favourite singer.'

'No. I want your sex.'

She turned to me, put her drink back on the table, then her hands on her lap. Her eyes were restless.

'Tell me about my sample now.'

She wouldn't let it go.

'Your sample? I thought you gave it to me.'

'I need it back and I need to know everybody who's touched it.'

'Jesus, Anna. What's the big deal?'

'It may be contaminated.'

'What with?'

'Some kind of ancient toxin. It may be related to bubonic plague. The bodies themselves have been incinerated. We're afraid of unleashing something bad.'

She stood and went to the window. I examined my hands, felt a strong urge to wash them. But I fought it.

'Fuck's sake, Anna. Thanks a lot. I'd better call Frank.'

'Frank?'

You remember Frank. This is his place. He's doing the analysis. Down at Imperial College.'

I found his business card on the counter.

'Yes. I remember Frank Jennings. Call him. He must secure the sample and get it back to me for verification and destruction.'

While I tried to get through to Frank, Anna examined his card, said she had to send a text to her mum. Frank was out of coverage, so I tried the switchboard. Voicemail. I left him a panicky message, prayed he'd get it.

Other options? I couldn't get the police involved, both for my sake and Frank's. But this was a potentially massive biohazard. An ancient plague pathogen could be expected to meet zero resistance in the human population. Bubonic plague had a ninety percent fatality rate upon exposure. I went to the bathroom and washed my hands with antiseptic. I knew it was too late. But I washed again anyway. I looked at myself in the mirror, looked away immediately.

I went back to Anna. She was on her phone.

'My mama,' she said as she ended the call.

'I'll try Frank again.'

Nothing.

'Don't worry, Billy. I'm doing this out of caution. There have been no infections reported back home.'

‘Thank Christ for that,’ I said, slightly relieved.

She came to me and put her arms around me from behind. She was noticeably more relaxed.

I felt a stirring, turned to face her.

‘You still look sad,’ she said.

‘I’m just gutted, that’s all. I thought I was going to be able to clear my name with this.’

‘I’m sorry, Billy. So sorry.’

‘It’s not your fault.’

‘Let me make it up to you.’

She kissed me hard, her hands pressing, moving to my buttocks. We went to my room.

Anna pushed me onto the bed and took my clothes off. I enjoyed taking the passive role.

Then she stood before me and stripped slowly, carefully folding her clothes over a chair. My penis budged, but only slightly. Fuck. She saw my worry.

‘Not a problem, she said, walking naked to the living room, grabbing her handbag, standing before the window and saying Ta-dah! To the world outside. ‘Take one of these,’ her palm open, a little Ziploc bag containing some condoms and half-a-dozen blue, diamond-shaped pills.

‘Viagra?’

‘Very cheap in Russia. I brought some just in case. Let me get you some water.’

So I swallowed the pill, washed it down. Why not?

She got on the bed, began kissing my feet. This bothered me – hygiene-wise – and I wanted to shout Stop! Her lips moved up my legs. Slowly. She took little bites of my thighs. She smiled at me, then took my penis deep inside her mouth.

I closed my eyes, willed my blood to fill it.

‘How long do they take to work?’ I asked.

‘It’s working already, Billy.’

Her hard tongue lingered there for an extended fragment of time and pleasure. It verged on agony. The sensations were powerful, my spine jangling and, as blood gushed into my penis, my heart fluttering.

She ripped open a condom and stretched it on.

Then her salty mouth was on mine and I was in her. She sat up, her hands on my chest, her pelvis crushing me with its divine rhythm. Then I was out as she turned to face my feet. I put my

hands on her hips, pulled her down. I marvelled at her arse, not an ounce of excess, just wonderfully firm curves. Her vertebrae rippled and I came in a burst of near-death joy.

The little death.

She kept to her own score, her orgasm at last causing her vagina to pulse and squeeze my cock. She shuddered and threw her head back, then raised her arms and called out something in Russian.

She lifted herself from me, then snuggled up close, an easy smile on her face. I put an arm around her, twisted her pubic hair into little ringlets with my other hand.

Life in all its fatal predictability continued outside. I gazed at Anna's skin, all of it, took in her smells, kissed her forehead. We drifted off to sleep, lovers in a world gone mad, grateful for a brief respite, an afternoon delight, a break from the craziness, somehow united in our indifference to it all.

Bliss.

But while we dozed, proud as sated lions, any remaining shreds of my reputation were cruelly blown away.

THE LAB

Fortescue led the police downstairs to a dusty corridor of dark storage rooms, disused office and, right at the end, Bill Bunk's secret lab.

'What's that musty smell?' asked a cop.

'We breed our rats and mice just back there,' said Fortescue. 'The cleaners don't like to come down here. Same goes for most of our staff. It's a good area to hide stuff.'

He put the key in the unmarked door, twisted the handle, turned to the inspector, two uniformed constables and Bunk's ex-assistant, Karen.

'I must warn you. Some of this – ' he paused, things in here are quite distressing.'

'Let's have a look, Doctor,' said DCI Blake.

Fortescue opened the door and flicked the lightswitch. Fluorescent tubes crackled to life, throwing crisp light over the gloom.

At first glance, this was a lab like any other. The police officers fanned out, scrutinised the objects on the tables, the files on the desk, the bits of Bunk such as photos from Siberia.

Then one cop said 'I'm going to throw up.'

'Sink, there,' said Fortescue urgently, pointing to a work surface at the end of the room.

The officer ran, his vomit stream hitting the porcelain with force. He pointed towards some jars with his left hand.

The others gathered round the large, heavy jars. The contents - floating in a greenish liquid – were hard to make out at first. Mainly mice and rats, most with deformities, incomplete growth, no hair. And worse.

'Good Lord,' said Inspector Blake.

Karen stepped backwards, her face pale. She looked to Fortescue. He nodded at her.

'I should have said it sooner,' she stammered. 'I'm sorry. I thought his work here was sanctioned.'

‘It’s okay, Karen. None of this is your fault. I’m afraid that Mr Bunk is a very sick man. My main concerns now are that the police catch him and that the lab doesn’t get any bad press over this.’

‘Is this – ?’ asked the inspector, his face close to a jar, all colour gone from him.

‘Yes. That one appears to be a rat with human features.’

There was little doubt. The white rat was suspended in ooze, its fur matted, its eyes wide open. The rat’s mouth was open, twisted, like it was crying. Its limbs were contorted and, at their ends not claws, human hands. The detail was astounding. There were opposable thumbs, rounded nails, bulging knuckles.

The next jar contained a more repulsive sight. A rat which had been more completely combined with human genes. It had no legs, just four stumps. But its back was flatter than a rat’s should be and the stumps were in the wrong places. Bt the head. The head was more round than pointed, the ears flattened, the whiskers gone. And the teeth. Captured in a grotesque grin, the teeth were flat-topped, like a miniature set of dentures from hell.

‘Okay,’ said the inspector. ‘Everybody out. This is a crime scene. Where can we get some fresh air please?’

‘Do you wish to look inside the refrigerators?’ asked Fortescue, pointing to two huge stainless steel fridges.

‘Not now. Let’s go.’

Fortescue led them through a fire exit and into a yard. All three policemen were pale and quiet. All three lit cigarettes. The inspector made a quick phone call.

‘Karen, would you mind fetching some water, please?’

With Karen away, Fortescue was quizzed about her role.

‘Doctor, how involved was she and how could Bunk have gotten away with all this, right under your nose?’

‘Good questions, inspector. I believe that Karen is in no way implicated. She is a research assistant, not with us very long. Her role was to support Bunk in whatever he did and not to question his authority. As far as she is concerned, Bunk was doing sanctioned research.’

‘So how did he get away with it?’

‘He is highly intelligent and, it would seem, very devious. In truth, the only reason this kind

of gene-splicing isn't going on in every scientist's garden shed is that the laws are so strict and the ethical questions so grave. To someone with Bunk's abilities, this work is quite straightforward. As far as I knew, he was using that room for overflow work when he couldn't get time in the main labs.'

'Seems Bunk lost all his ethics. This is getting very weird.'

Karen returned with bottles of water and the officers drank greedily. The man who had vomited excused himself, went around a corner, brought up his water.

Fortescue said 'I think, yes, it's proof that Bunk's ethics are somewhat warped.'

'So he could have killed his wife?'

'I wouldn't have thought so. Until now. Inspector?'

'Yep?'

'There's one other possible crime scene I'd like to show you. It may be connected or it may not. When Bunk's secret lab was brought to my attention this morning, I initiated a search of every room in the complex.'

'Is it as grotesque?'

'No, but perhaps more alarming.'

'Okay,' said the inspector. You guys hang on here for Jane. Lead the way, doctor.'

Fortescue brought the inspector back down the corridor, to a heavy steel door. He unlocked it with two keys.

'Why the radiological warning?' asked the inspector.

'You'll see. It's quite safe. Now.'

They entered the room, which was dominated by two white cast iron machines, all tubes and dead lights and bright red warning symbols.

'What am I looking at?'

'These are old x-ray machines and, if you'll look back here – '

Panels had been removed from the machines, screws tossed untidily on the floor. Wires and mysterious components spilled out like roboguts.

'I hope this isn't what it looks like.'

'Afraid so. It appears that somebody has removed the radiation sources from both systems. Almost a kilo of Caesium-137 is now at large.'

‘Fucking hell. Dirty bomb.’

MARTYRDOM

It was more than a typical ecumenical service. As well as the Christian Churches, the leaders of Britain's Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist communities were also present on the altar, their robes vying for impact, the Buddhists winning.

St Paul's was resplendent, the hallowed dome, the potent incense and the resonance of history lending a supernatural glow to proceedings. Three rows from the altar sat a middle-aged man of nondescript appearance. His padded jacket caused him to sweat.

The large congregation had gathered to call for peace in the world. In truth, the twenty-first century had quickly become the century of war. The promises of technology and communications had made people and faiths more alienated from each other. This contradiction had brought confusion, terrorism and the killing of innocents. But faith, blind faith in the assorted deities represented on the altar, gave some hope. Of course, the awkward Buddhists didn't have a God, but it would have been politically incorrect to leave them out. There were no atheists represented. Perhaps the mental concentration of prayer could change the world. Faith.

As the service entered its second hour, the Buddhists' chant – impenetrable and alien to most of the congregation anyway – drove one woman to despair. Now I really want to die, she decided.

Then the perspiring man stood and left his pew. Feeling faint, no doubt. Fresh air outside. But instead of leaving, he made his way uncertainly towards the altar, fumbled in his pocket.

'There is no God!' he screamed.

Then he erupted in a flash of pure hate and the despairing woman's wish was granted.

PANIC STATIONS

I was awoken from my idyllic stupor by an odd sensation. Was that thunder? Something wasn't right. I tried to get back to sleep. Impossible.

I got out of bed, marvelled at my still-enormous erection, went to the balcony. I realised immediately that I'd just heard my first bomb detonation.

A hole had been punched in St Paul's dome and a thick plume of dirty smoke was rising.

'What the fuck?'

The wail of distant sirens floated up and a flock of pigeons wheeled round and round the tower block. I had no idea what was going on, but in my guts, I knew it was really bad.

'Anna, wake up darling. I think al-Qaeda have just blown up St Paul's.'

'Come back to bed, Billy,' she mumbled, her eyes still closed.

I shook her shoulder gently.

'I'm serious. Come see.'

'Oh my God.'

'Don't panic. We should be fine here.'

She tutted and followed me to the balcony. As she stood and gawped, I turned the TV volume back up. Breaking news, bomb attack on ecumenical ceremony at St Paul's.

I found my clothes and dressed. Anna got dressed as I made drinks. I remembered Frank and tried his mobile again. A network message apologised for lack of coverage. That was odd.

Then, the fall into chaos. The news coverage changed suddenly, from a tone of alarm to one of panic. Reports are coming through that the explosion may have been caused by a dirty bomb. Repeat, there may have been a radiological release at St Paul's.

'Holy fuck,' I said. 'We've got to get out of here.'

'The smoke,' said Anna. 'It seems to be coming in our direction.'

I stood beside her. Yes, the breeze, though gentle, was straight in my face.

‘Okay. Panic.’

I rushed around the apartment like a lunatic, thinking What to take? The samples were safe with Frank so I figured the best thing I could do was to ensure that all the windows and doors were closed. My research was left on the desk without a thought.

As I stumbled around the apartment, Anna said ‘I’m leaving, Billy. I’ll talk to you soon.’

She kissed my cheek and was gone. Gripped by indecision – my fatal flaw - I stood before the TV, took in the evacuation alert, wondered what would be the best escape route. The tube would be too risky, cabs unlikely. I’d have to just outrun the smoke, head north. I found a clean towel and soaked it in water, figured that anything around my nose and mouth would be better than nothing. I glanced out the window again, saw that the smoke was appreciably closer now.

Finally, I left the apartment, locked the door, waited for the lift. Frantic by now. I was about to run for the stairs when the elevator pinged and the doors slid open. There was an elderly woman in there. I hesitated.

‘Get in the fucking lift will you, sonny?’ she said.

I laughed like a lunatic, jumped in.

On the way down, she told me about a still-functioning air raid shelter not far away, on Liverpool Street. That’s where she would go. In the lobby, I wished her well, said that I was going to try and outrun the smoke, get far away. We wished each other well.

On the street, the scene of panic was to be expected, but it still shocked. Police and fire units screamed towards St Paul’s. I was sobered to see the emergency workers wearing NBC suits. This was truly the doomsday scenario.

There were few vehicles leaving the area, the roads and footpaths clogged with office workers. Many were crying or screaming or pushing the weak out of their way. Animal instincts had kicked in. Show me your Gods now. I pitied the old lady from the lift but had the feeling she could look after herself.

A young woman in a business suit came towards me. A man knocked into her and she fell heavily to the ground. I stooped to help her up.

‘You’re going the wrong way, love. There’s radiation coming from St Paul’s.’

‘But I have an interview,’ she said. ‘It’s important.’

She was very pretty and I felt the urge to help her. I twisted her shoulders, aimed her

towards escape.

‘Trust me, no interview today. You need to go this way.’

‘Okay, okay.’

‘Come on, so.’

‘I –,’ she paused, turned back towards the danger zone.

So I left her there.

I ran, my lungs burning, my legs jelly. Passing Liverpool Street rail station, I saw many people descending the stairs to the trains but I decided to keep to the streets. After a few more minutes, I thought that I might make it. Walking now, I looked around me, saw the occasional smile on my fellow refugees’ faces. I glanced behind and saw that the dirty cloud was some distance back. I worked through my escape routes and figured to head for the next mainline rail station – King’s Cross? - and try for a cab along the way. But where would I go? Oh fuck.

As my overloaded brain tried to work this out, I felt a sudden sharp pain in my shoulder, then a thump. I looked around, started to fall, saw a

THE DEATH

I am dead. That is my only conclusion.

I can see nothing, though my eyes are blinking. It is not like the darkness of a cave, more the absence of anything to see.

I can hear some distant sounds, odd droning, sometimes a squeal or a bang.

My mouth is dry and tastes of decay.

I feel detached from my self, like my body is just a husk that's stuck there, unable to move. I try to twitch my fingers, feel the sensation of movement there, but only weakly.

I smell something oily, metallic. It is probably my own decay.

My mind screams for meaning, all the while pierced by regular darts of intense pain. Imagine the worst headache you've ever had, then stick hot needles in your brain. I am dead, I accept that.

Is my soul trapped in my coffin?

This couldn't be Heaven. Could it?

Or am I in Hell? Christ, the irony of that.

Is Purgatory still official? This feels like purgatory, some kind of no-man's land between life and outright death.

I sense motion. My husk lurches up then down again, my brain confused. I taste vomit in the back of my throat.

I desperately process the data available to me and the only possible reality that I can conjure is being on a rollercoaster in the dark tunnel that leads to Hell.

What are my memories before this scenario?

I remember kissing breasts. I see a beautiful woman. The sensation of running. Some kind of fear. Then the question.

Who am I?

When I cannot answer, there is the sensation of moisture on my face. Salty tears trickle into my mouth where they are welcomed. I will myself to keep crying and the tears flow.

Some time later, my body drops again and my ears begin to squeal. This is agony. I feel a scraping motion on my left arm. If I am trapped in a coffin, this could be a rat, ready to eat me alive. There is a sudden sharp pain. It's biting me. I try to scream but my throat merely coughs up bile. I struggle to keep it down. Then a wave of warmth spreads out from the biting point. Up my arm and into the rest of me. It reaches my brain and an odd feeling of calm, serenity even, floods through me. Perhaps this is the death. Finally. I welcome you. Please take me on to oblivion.

The needles are slowly withdrawn from my brain and the nausea subsides. The fog clears a little and I hear sounds more distinctly, clicks, footsteps?, still the incessant droning. I understand that I have been injected with an opiate. I can taste it.

There is more contact with me, this time behind my head. There is a click, I am pulled, another click. A sensation of something moving over me and then my eyes are seared by light.

An indistinct shape before me clarifies as my ears scream again. I move my jaws up and down like a lunatic. This helps to equalise the pressure and the screams fade. The shape becomes a human face. A black man, wearing a plastic suit and respirator, holding a piece of heavy cloth. He leans on my headrest, comes close to my ear. He pulls an earmuff from my ear.

'Feeling a little better?' he shouts, sounding like a spaceman.

I nod. He comes closer still and places goggles on me. They bite into my face and hurt the back of my head. He pulls the earmuff again.

'We'll be landing in just a couple of minutes,' he says. 'Welcome to Guantánamo Bay.'

RIGHTS

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3.

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4.

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5.

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6.

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7.

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8.

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9.

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10.

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Excerpt from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, 1949

THE GITMO SHUFFLE

The plane descended rapidly as I tried to come to terms with the horror of my situation. I had been extraordinarily rendered. I had no idea why I had been taken – How? Where? – but I knew that I was heading quickly towards Hell on Earth.

I took in my surroundings. I was in a large aircraft, a jet. There was a bulkhead a few metres in front of me, with a secure door for the crew. There were other seats around me, each spaced well away from the others. I saw the tops of some heads, my fellow prisoners.

The crewman who'd spoken to me came back through the door and used a PA mic to make a short announcement in Arabic. I assumed this was Welcome to Guantánamo, as he made no speech for my benefit. There were distant howls of protest, utterly futile.

The crewman strapped himself into a fold-down seat, then the plane lurched violently to the right, dropped like a stone and its tyres screeched on the tarmac. The reverse thrusters engaged, howling like banshees, and we slowed to a crawl. The plane taxied for a couple of minutes, then shuddered to a stop. I was back in Cuba.

The crewman undid his buckles and opened the bulkhead door. A dozen soldiers armed with submachine guns and pistols, and each with a Taser in his hand, filed into the prisoner area. There was another announcement in Arabic and the speaker came to me again.

'We're taking you out first,' he said. 'I have to advise you that you are now on US soil and under the administration of the Joint Task Force. As an enemy combatant, your legal rights have been forfeited and you are now subject to US military law. Is that clear?'

I nodded. I was no enemy combatant but felt no desire to argue the point.

'I must warn you that if you attempt to escape this facility you will be killed. Is that clear?'

'Yeah.' I could speak. Progress.

'Further applicable regulations will be explained to you during processing.'

He nodded to the soldiers and two, wearing the same yellow jumpsuits and respirators, came

down to me, pointed their Tasers at my chest.

My hand and foot restraints were unlocked and the crewman helped me to my feet. Heavy shackles on my ankles forced me to shuffle like I was in a chain gang. My wrists were also shackled. I was wearing a bright orange jumpsuit. How did it come to this? Just as things began to make sense, they jumped to next level of insanity.

So I shuffled forward, the soldiers covering me every half-step of the way. They patted me down, touched every crevice. The bulkhead door was unlocked and I passed through with my security detail. The bulkhead door was locked again and I was led through the crew area and to the plane's exit door. The crewman spoke on a walkie-talkie, received a reply, nodded to the soldiers. Then he pushed down the door release catch, twisted it around and pushed the door out and to the side.

I was unprepared for the blast of humid heat that physically slapped me back a step. The light from that merciless tropical sun punched my eyes. The brain needles were back. Rivers of sweat poured down my face, slaking my thirst some more. The intensity of it all hammered the tiny confidence that had grown in me since I realised that I wasn't dead. I wanted my mother. More than anything, I just wanted to regress and have her hold me close.

I was pushed forward and shuffled on to a hydraulic platform closely shadowed by my guards. As the platform whirled downward, I looked back at the plane. A grey Boeing 737, N313P on the tail, no other markings. I took in the airfield. There were soldiers everywhere, Alsations straining leashes, rifles not slung, but ready. More soldiers waited in Humvees, trained heavy calibre machine guns in my general direction. There were two buses waiting. A show of strength, I guessed. A helicopter hovered nearby. Beyond the apron, low buildings lurked among the palms, and then there was a watchtower and a high fence. The concrete bounced the withering sun into my face. I inhaled deeply, the rich smell of the tropics – growth and decay combined – gave me some small comfort.

The platform clicked to ground level and I had the intuitive feeling that this was my best opportunity for escape. Once inside the camp proper, there would be no chance. A Humvee pulled up before me and a guard opened the door. The vehicle had radiation markings emblazoned on it. An officer – again in yellow plastic - left the jeep and signed the plane guard's clipboard, accepted papers, took control of prisoner 7263. He patted me down. Strong hands lifted me on board and a

securing chain was looped through my leg restraints.

A door slammed, a lock clicked, a six point five-litre engine growled and my brief flirtation with the idea of escaping was over.

The officer sat across from me, scanned his papers, glanced at me.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ he asked.

‘Wish I knew,’ I said. ‘I woke up on the plane. Now I’m here. That’s all I know. I don’t even know my bloody name. That’s the truth.’

He must’ve felt sorry for me. He leant closer to me, looked into my eyes.

‘Says here your name’s William Bunk. British national. Atheist. Jeez, you’re going to love it here!’ He read on. ‘Linked to an al-Qaeda cell. Shit, you were involved in that dirty bomb attack on St Paul’s?’

He took a Geiger counter from a rack, activated it and scanned me from head to toe. He shook his head then. I was clean. He made a note on his clipboard.

Then we waited. The officer watched the other prisoners leaving the plane on a flatscreen monitor. I could see them going through the same indignities as I had suffered, pieces of meat.

Eventually, all were disembarked and handed over to Camp Delta security. The soldiers and military police entered the buses and escort vehicles and we were off.

The jeep bumped along, its functional interior was air-conditioned, some small mercy. The windows were blacked-out, the only light from the officer’s task lamp. My heart hurt, by brain screamed.

‘William Bunk,’ I said. ‘That sounds familiar. Yes. I’m William Bunk. But I am not a member of al-Qaeda and I had nothing to do with any attack.’

‘We’ll get to the truth.’

There was no further conversation between us.

DAD

“No, I don’t know that atheists should be regarded as citizens, nor should they be regarded as patriotic. This is one nation under God.”

- Vice President George H W Bush, 1987

PROCESSED

When I feared that I was in purgatory while on the plane, I was surprisingly close to the truth.

The convoy drove for a short while, then we bumped up a short slope and stopped, the engine died. After a few minutes, we were in motion again. The sensation was like being on the aircraft. We were on a ferry. My stomach complained, perhaps fearful of another flight into desperation.

The ferry docked, the engine revved and we were on the road again. The drive was punctuated by regular checkpoints. At each one, the officer left the jeep and showed his clipboard to an MP. Each time, the tropical sun torched my eyes and hurt my brain.

Finally, we passed the sign that read CAMP DELTA, JTF GUANTÁNAMO, HONOR BOUND TO DEFEND FREEDOM. It may as well have read ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE.

The convoy pulled into the maximum security area of the base. My escorting officer spoke on his radio, turned to me.

‘Let’s go.’

He unlocked my restraining chain, opened the door. Two MPs in yellow suits were waiting. They helped me down from the jeep and led me – shuffling painfully – to a long building, the officer following behind. Armed soldiers and dog teams lurked everywhere. I glanced around and saw the convoy parked in a line, maybe a dozen vehicles. The chopper buzzed nearby. There were snipers on the roof of the building and machine gun towers with huge stars and stripes painted on them.

The processing building was thankfully cool. A team of soldiers in yellow suits with respirators waited for me. The lead soldier spoke quietly with my escort officer and checked his clipboard. I was ordered to stand with my legs spread and arms outspread. Two soldiers with Geiger counters scanned me again. No clicks, no radiation.

‘Once more,’ said the lead soldier.

Again I was scanned, again I was clear. This didn’t add up. The Standard Operating Procedure was consulted at a table off to the left. It was agreed that I posed no risk of radiological contamination. Orders were given and hoods and respirators were removed.

A certain amount of tension seemed to dissipate and I was regarded with curiosity, even the occasional smile.

I was shuffled to a room that had STATION 1 stencilled on the door.

There is a full length mirror against the wall and I see myself. I gasp. Besides the bright jumpsuit and chains and stoop of defeat, my head is wrapped in heavy goggles, earmuffs and, bizarrely, a surgical facemask. What am I like? But it all works – I feel demeaned, less than human.

All my shackles are removed, causing the armed escorts to tense up. Tasers and shotguns are aimed at me. The goggles are pulled down to rest around my neck. The earmuffs are removed and tossed in a plastic bin. My facemask stays on. A small black box which I hadn’t noticed before is unclipped from my chest. My jumpsuit is pulled down and thrown in another bin.

I am taken to Station Two, where a medic checks my head for lice.

‘Clear,’ he says and points me toward a shower cubicle. I stand in there and the water soaks me. It is tepid and welcome. There is a bar of military issue soap, which I use. The water stops and I am handed a white towel.

Dry, the towel is taken from me and I walk naked to Station Three. I am examined by a medic, who looks into my eyes, mouth, ears and anus and takes a photograph of my appendix scar.

In Station Four, I am dressed in white shorts, a fresh orange jumpsuit, red plastic flipflops. I am reshackled.

In Station Five, a sample of my DNA is taken with a mouth swab. My height and weight are recorded and I am photographed.

Christ, how many stations?

In Station Six, the data collected on me is entered into a computer database. This takes a while.

In Station Seven, I am photographed again. My picture is inserted into an identity bracelet, which is sealed and secured to my right wrist.

In Station Eight are two men in civilian suits, whose ID laminates mark them as FBI. They

fingerprint me, electronically and using ink. I am given tissues to wipe my fingers but most of the ink stays on me.

In Station Nine, I am pushed onto a cot and blood is drawn from my left arm.

Station Ten and the escorting soldiers wear lead aprons while I am given a full body x-ray. Camp X-Ray, isn't that what they call the place? A distant part of me emerges from the dark recess of my shocked brain, thinks to complain that this procedure probably delivers a lethal dose of radiation. I immediately decide not to bother. I fear the repercussions. I am shocked to realise that I would prefer to have cancer and freedom than stay an extra minute in this awful place.

Station Eleven and I am given a full medical exam. There are four medics now, including two senior doctors. After all the usual checks, they get out the Geiger counter and probe every orifice and talk quietly among themselves in the corner. They want to get to the bottom of my radiation conundrum. But I am not radioactive. This they finally accept and they sign off my folder.

In Station Twelve, there is a dental examination and a mouth x-ray and there are no more Stations.

I have been successfully dehumanised, reduced to a sample, quantified, logged, all dignity shredded.

I am offered a Styrofoam cup of water.

I have been processed.

CHILL OUT

Naively, I had expected a hot meal, a cup of coffee, maybe a talk with a psychologist to make sure that I wasn't too suicidal.

But no.

I was bundled on to a golf cart – a golf cart! – cuffed to a restraining bar and driven to a grey building which sat on its own, with maybe a dozen guards in front. Two armed MPs walked behind the cart and a watchtower guard trained a heavy machinegun on me.

I could see that short of an Act of God, escape would be impossible. And I didn't believe in God.

But the whole experience had made me angry. My opiate haze was beginning to clear and a sense of injustice was forming.

'This is wrong,' I said.

'What?' called the driver over his shoulder as the cart whirled towards the interrogation centre.

'This is wrong,' I called hoarsely.

'Shut up,' he said.

'Chill out,' called a guard behind me.

Then they laughed.

We stopped and I was unshackled from the cart and passed to my interrogators, along with my folder. They signed for me and I was taken down a dimly-lit corridor and left on my own in a large cell.

The cell was about ten feet square, white tiles, no furniture, fittings or window, just a recessed fluorescent light behind a plastic screen, a little camera dome there too, and a large vent high up in the wall.

The room was cool, refreshing after being outside for just a few minutes. I sat on the ground,

my back against the wall. The buzzing sound from the vent increased in pitch and the temperature plummeted. I huddled as best I could and shimmied into a corner. But there was no escaping the cold.

I could see my breath and stood to keep my sluggish blood circulating. Colder still and my teeth began to chatter. Walking around and around my tiny prison and I realised that I was being tortured.

After an unknown period of time, the room was certainly below freezing and I was in pain. Every breath burned my lungs and my fingers, nose and ears were numb. Tiny ice crystals formed on the tiles and the floor became slippery in places.

I tried to remember the sun and how, just a short time before, it had scorched my skin and toasted my retinas. And it was out there still, through the wall and just beyond reach.

I could almost feel its heat on my face. But I knew the sensation was simply early stage exposure. Then the cell door opened.

PLUS TWENTY-FOUR

Picking their way through the splintered wreckage, the lead-suited figures held torches before them, almost protectively. Every step was a labour, every view a nightmare.

Torn bodies radiated outwards from the blast point. Up ahead, the altar was rubble, the robes of the priests and monks bloodied and dirty.

Soot and dust filled the air, the brightest light an eerie shaft of sunshine through the torn dome. The distant sound of chopper rotors caused the examiners to quicken their pace as the clicking of their suits' Geiger counters increased in urgency.

'We need to get out of here pretty soon,' crackled the leader, a young lieutenant as he scanned the scene with a digital video camera.

'I think we have our bomber,' said his sergeant, indicating a torn mess just a couple of metres ahead of the blast centre. He moved his handheld radiation detector all around the area, noted that the lump of flesh had an appreciably higher reading.

'This is him. Definitely.'

The camera's light flooded the area as the lieutenant made sure to collect as much data as possible from the blast centre.

'Then let's grab a piece of the fucker and get the hell out of here.'

DCI Blake sat with his elbows on the desk, his chin in his hands. Jane sat near him, nursed a cup of cold instant coffee. The rest of the squad filtered in and out, passed notes to Blake, paused to pick up on the latest developments. The TV in the homicide room showed the scene at St Paul's as two Chinook heavy lift helicopters gently lowered a massive lead-lined blanket over the hole in the dome.

The commentary talked about containment, minimisation, but Blake knew this was just for public consumption. The damage had been done and the radiation had spread as far as the Barbican

already. A whole swathe of the City was contaminated. It would take months, maybe years, to clean and it would cost billions.

‘Fucking Bunk. What a total bastard,’ he said, as much to himself as the room.

‘You’re still convinced it was Bunk?’ said Jane.

‘It fits, Jane. He stole the caesium from the lab. He was mad. He hated religion. We know he could kill. The description of the bomber from the survivors fits. It was him. The Counter-Terrorist Division agrees with me.’

‘So when are you going to get me some bomber DNA?’

‘I’m pushing as hard as I can and you know it. The radiation messes everything up. We can only be thankful that we started the investigation on Bunk, otherwise we wouldn’t get a look in.’

‘So when?’

‘I’ll make another call. Okay?’

‘Okay. Thanks.’

The blanket was lowered into its final position and waiting steeplejacks in radiation suits began to secure it over the horrible gash. Cheers and a round of applause betrayed the unease with which the normally jaded and cynical police officers faced this dark new reality.

DCI Blake wondered whether he could neatly tie Bunk into the crime of the century in time to make it to the Alfa dealership tomorrow.

He dialled his CTD liaison, had a brief conversation.

He turned to Jane then. ‘Success. Bomber DNA has been isolated. It’s on its way to the Army Research Lab at the Imperial College.’

‘Can we go?’

‘They’re waiting for us. Have you got Bunk’s DNA sample handy?’

She held up a vial.

‘Then let’s take a trip to South Kensington.’

CHANGE OF SCENE - UP

The cooling fan clicked off. My cell door opened and in walked an officer of about my own age, with lively eyes and smirk on his mouth.

‘It’s freezing in here,’ he said. ‘Come on out. Let’s go somewhere warmer.’

He held the door open and warm air rushed in, reviving me quickly.

Two armed MPs stood in the corridor. I shuffled along beside my rescuer and he brought me to a kind of lounge at the end of the building. An unarmed soldier stood by the door, while the MPs followed us leisurely. On the wall were two framed photographs. President George W Bush smiled at me. The Twin Towers gleamed in morning sunshine beside him. Why we were all here. There were two old-fashioned armchairs, still no windows, a coffee station in the corner.

The officer gestured to an armchair, a small electric heater beside it. I sat on the edge of the chair and warmed my stiff fingers, carefully inhaling the hot air through pursed lips.

A cup of coffee was placed on the little table beside me and the officer sat down.

‘Hungry?’ he asked.

‘Bloody starving,’ I said.

‘You like McDonald’s food?’

‘Not normally,’ I said. ‘But I would give my right arm for a Big Mac now.’

He nodded to his aide, who left the room.

‘Regulations say that you eat nothing but combat rations for two weeks on arrival. But we have a McDonald’s here for the staff and for prisoners who are helpful. You will be helpful, won’t you, William? I’m taking a risk here, okay?’

‘Okay. Thanks.’

‘Would you like a Starbucks coffee too?’

‘No thanks. Don’t like it.’

He nodded to the orderly, sat quietly then, watching me. What must I have looked like? As

my blood forced its way back through tightened veins, my whole body burned. Scratching all over like a dog with fleas, sipping the machine coffee loudly, I was an illustration of how easy it is to dehumanise a person. I felt broken already, a prisoner less than a day. I was fearful of what could possibly happen next.

The aide came back, carrying a large paper bag, a soft drink container and some napkins. He placed them on the table beside me, then stood against the wall, watching me. I could smell the food, wanted it so badly, but was afraid to show my desire in case this was part of my torture.

‘Go ahead,’ said the officer. ‘I’m Captain Miller and I’m your new best friend.’

‘Thank you.’

I tore open the bag and found a Big Mac in its cardboard container, a cheeseburger wrapped in cellophane and a portion of fries. I ate like a hound and the food was consumed in maybe a minute. I drank the Coke then, licked my fingers, even licked the paper wrappings. Dog.

‘Now. Do you need any kind of medical attention? How’s your head?’

‘No. Thank you. It was bad earlier, but I’m okay now.’

He took a packet of Marlboro from his breast pocket.

‘Smoke?’

I took one and he lit it for me. I inhaled deeply, the fragrant fumes helping to warm the deep recesses of my innards. Fragments of my recent memory began to reform. He nodded to his aide, who brought over my file. Captain Miller flicked through the papers, nodding to himself.

‘William, what are we going to do with you?’

I assumed this was a rhetorical question, made no reply. He continued to browse.

‘Tell me about this blast at St Paul’s,’ he said. ‘Who helped you?’ He clicked his pen.

‘Sorry, Captain. I had nothing to do with that.’

‘Okay. Where were you when it happened.’

‘I was in a friend’s place in the Barbican,’ I said. Shit. Gave Frank away.

‘I see,’ he said, taking notes. ‘Who is this friend and can he vouch for you?’

‘Just a friend. He was at work at the time.’

‘So nobody can corroborate your position?’

‘No,’ I said, not wanting to land Anna in any of this.

‘Who was the carrier?’

‘Carrier?’

‘Who took the bomb into the church?’

‘I have no idea.’

He stubbed out his cigarette. I smoked mine right down to the filter until it burned my lips.

‘William, you’re going to have to help me out here. I have to answer to my superiors.’

‘I’m sorry, I just don’t have anything to tell you. I was in the apartment. I heard a bang. I saw smoke. I ran. I woke up on the plane and thought I was dead.’

‘Yeah,’ he smiled. ‘We get that a lot.’

He looked at my file again.

‘Let me tell you what we have on you here,’ he said, the smile gone now. ‘You’re wanted by Essex Police for killing your wife – ’

‘But – ’

‘Hang on,’ he said, holding up a hand. ‘You’re wanted for killing your wife. You’re wanted for doing illegal cloning experiments. You’re wanted for stealing the radioactive material that was used in the St Paul’s attack. And I believe that you facilitated that attack in other ways. You’ve been a busy boy, William. Frankly, I don’t know what we’re going to do with you.’

What the fuck was he going on about? I was dizzy. Play it cool, Bill. Play it cool.

‘May I speak?’

He nodded, lit another cigarette, didn’t offer one this time.

‘Firstly, I did not kill my wife.’

‘So why did you run?’

‘I was being set-up. I panicked. I didn’t want to be locked up.’

‘You didn’t do such a good job, did you? Go on.’

‘I didn’t kill my wife. I have no clue about any illegal experiments, I just test DNA samples, that’s all. I didn’t steal any radioactive material. I didn’t have anything to do with any bomb. In short, I don’t know what’s going on or why I’m here.’

‘Your past history isn’t exactly helpful, William. Is it?’

‘I have made mistakes in my life. But not on this scale. Hang on, wait a minute!’

‘Yeah?’

‘If I was involved with a dirty bomb, how come I didn’t register on your Geiger counters?’

‘Interesting. Why don’t you tell me?’

I felt exasperated, fought hard to control my rising temper. Loss of it would be entirely futile.

‘I have no reason to blow up St Paul’s.’

He looked through my file.

‘You’re an atheist, right?’

‘Correct. I don’t believe in any God. I’m a scientist. I’ve met some good people in my life but, on the whole, I have seen plenty of proof that humans are not divine.’

‘We’re just clever animals, right?’

‘Right.’

‘Many people would take exception to that statement.’

‘And that’s their right. I don’t care if people want to believe in God or Santa Claus or aliens. I certainly wouldn’t want to kill them for it.’

He nodded, made notes, offered me a cigarette.

‘According to your police file, you lost your job, had a breakdown, killed your wife because she was having an affair.’

Shit. ‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Even your psychiatrist confirms that you had murderous tendencies. So you had access to caesium at your lab, somehow made contact with an al-Qaeda cell in London and gave them the material for the attack on organised religion. It was perfect, actually. You killed all the leading churchmen in Britain and made London’s iconic place of worship uninhabitable.’

‘For how long?’

‘It could be decades. They’re still working on containing the radiation.’

‘Shit.’

‘Yes it is. It’s shit, William and it’s my job to work out how you did it and with whom. I think the why is pretty clear.’

‘That’s bullshit. I had nothing to do with it.’

He stood then, closed my file.

‘I think that’s enough for now. I hope you’ll be in a more communicative frame of mind when next we meet. Good night.’

He nodded to the MPs and they took an arm each, led me back towards the cells.

Miller called to me.

‘Yeah?’ I responded weakly.

‘Remember those pictures from Abu Ghraib?’

How could I forget that depraved episode? How could any human being?

‘I remember.’

‘Well they used techniques which were developed here. We don’t allow cameras on base, that’s the only difference. You understand?’

‘I understand.’

‘Good. Good night, fellah.’

Bastard.

Having warmed up, I was fearful of returning to the cold place. But they took me into a different cell, one with a fitted bunk and a stainless steel toilet.

The door was locked and I lay on the bunk, covered myself with the light blanket. I tried to find sleep, but it evaded me. Morning came with a shaft of blazing sunshine through a long, narrow window high on the wall.

Then the music started.

CONTACT

As Blake and Archer and Detective King sped through the dead streets in their unmarked car, blue light flashing, no need for the siren, the enormity of the attack struck home. Everybody in a huge chunk of the city had been advised to stay put indoors, whether at home or work, until the all-clear.

It was mid-afternoon, yet there was barely a person or car to be seen.

‘Christ,’ said Blake, driving at seventy miles an hour, ‘it’s like one of those post-apocalypse films where everyone’s dead.’

‘It’s bloody scary,’ said King from the back.

‘I don’t know,’ grinned Blake. ‘I’m actually enjoying this drive.’

The men laughed as Jane scanned the buildings - many faces at windows – wondered if Bunk was looking down at them. Where are you? Did you really do all this?

As they approached the outer limit of the closed zone, police and army checkpoints let them pass, directed them away from the City.

Soon there were more people about and it was like a Sunday morning. Plenty of police still, all leave cancelled indefinitely. They met some traffic and Blake activated the siren, smiled again.

Most shops were closed but the occasional restaurant and coffee shop had opened their doors and were thronged. People had been at the brink of chaos, survived, wanted to be socially engaged now, swap stories, gossip about the almost-apocalypse. The older ones remembered the Blitz and how much worse that had been. The younger ones were stunned at how the city buzz could be so easily derailed. They pointed at the covers of the day’s newspapers, puzzled over what could have motivated Dr William Bunk to cause such calamity. Atheist had never been such a dirty word.

‘We’ll stop off for a bite to eat on the way home,’ said Blake. ‘My treat.’

‘Fission chips?’ laughed King, who’d been desperate to use the joke.

The dispatcher came through on the radio.

‘DCI Blake, the Commissioner needs a word.’

‘The Commissioner?’

‘I’ll patch him through.’

‘Thanks,’ said Blake making a surprised face at Jane.

‘Sir?’

‘Hello Blake. Where are you?’

‘Nearly at Imperial College sir. We’ve got some of Bunk’s DNA for comparative analysis with the bomber.’

‘Good. Listen, a lead I need you to follow up. I’m in receipt of information which places our suspect in a Barbican apartment immediately before the attack.’

‘Okay. What’s the source?’

‘Need-to-know. Now get on it, will you?’

‘Very good sir.’

The Commissioner signed off and Blake immediately made contact with the office, ordered an immediate computer cross-referencing of all Barbican residents with Bunk, asked to be kept updated.

‘We may have found Bunk’s bomb factory,’ he said.

‘Maybe his cell?’ said King.

This was a good break.

South Kensington’s wide streets had some black cabs and a lot of military traffic. Nearing the sprawling Imperial College, they were stopped by a military checkpoint which was still being organised. Unusually, the officer commanding asked for Blake’s ID and an explanation.

Safely through, the military presence at the main entrance was overwhelming, with soldiers in radiation suits, many jeeps and a bomb squad armoured truck.

‘They used that for Bunk’s pound of flesh,’ said Blake.

He found a space across the street, reversed in quickly.

‘Okay people. We’re to find a Colonel Parks in the Army Research Lab, hand over our DNA, hang around for a result.’

‘Will I be able to observe?’ asked Jane.

‘Doubt it. We don’t have any clearances. I can ask if you like. There is a radiation risk.’

‘Please.’

As they crossed the street, Jane looked at her watch, hesitated.

There was a flash and the third floor left its moorings, came down to them in a hail of glass, brick and bone. A yellow fireball flooded the street, roasted pigeons on the roof opposite. Jane and her lover and her colleague were thrown violently to the road as the blast and thunder engulfed the sky. Blake crept to her then, put his body over hers as the Imperial College rained down on them.

Jane could hear nothing, just a ringing, wondered if this was the end of the world. Then her mind cleared a little and she wondered what could have caused this devastation. Would the Army be researching new weapons in the heart of London? Hardly. Was there research into nuclear fusion going on the College? Maybe. Was this blast radioactive too? Possibly, if only fractionally, from the St Paul’s bomber’s remains.

Blake hugged her.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked tenderly.

She could read his lips, couldn’t hear his voice. She pointed to her ear, said, tried to say ‘I think my eardrums are gone.’

He understood, nodded. He looked for Detective King.

‘Clive. You okay?’

‘I think so,’ said King feebly. ‘That was a bomb, wasn’t it?’

‘It certainly wasn’t a gas explosion,’ said Blake. ‘Come on, if it wasn’t a suicide job, the bomber may still be in the building.’

They picked themselves up. Blake checked Jane, rubbed away a stream of blood from her nostril. They looked at the building, saw that some of the soldiers at the entrance were burning and that the entire entrance area had collapsed. Other troops had leapt into action with fire extinguishers and distant sirens could be heard already.

Jane suddenly registered a dozen alarms going off, heard the sirens too.

‘I can hear,’ she said.

‘Good, good,’ said Blake as he unholstered his Glock pistol and hung his ID around his neck.

King did likewise.

‘Jane, stay close, okay?’

‘Where to?’

‘Around that corner, there’s a goods entrance. Might be our best chance.’

Thick black smoke poured into the grey sky and the screaming started.

Anna’s phone chirped as she lay in the bath in an upmarket West End hotel.

‘Yes?’

‘This is Antonio,’ said the caller. He sounded frantic.

‘Is everything fine?’

‘No. I have destroyed the evidence but the building is full of soldiers.’

She sat up, bubbly water sloshing onto the floor.

‘What can I do?’

‘If I can’t get out, you must report for me. The lab is gone, I believe the evidence was there.

The man who was working with our friend is dead. It is up to you now to make contact again with our friend and ensure that all is neatly clean. Do you understand?’

‘Yes. I understand.’

‘Arrivederci.’

‘Good – ’ she said, but he was gone. ‘Luck.’

She dropped her phone on a dry towel, inhaled deeply, slid under the water.

Blake, King and Archer turned the corner and were met by a soldier and his SA 80 rifle.

‘Halt!’

Blake raised his hands as the soldier eyed the pistols and flicked off his safety catch.

‘Police,’ shouted Blake, gesturing with his chin towards the ID flapping on his chest.

The soldier lowered his weapon and continued to the front of the College.

‘Let’s be very careful,’ said Blake.

They reached the goods entrance, which was unoccupied, all staff and guards gone to the scene of the blast.

The loading bay was dark and quiet, a small delivery truck backed in against a loading platform full of pallets, boxes, drums. On the wall beyond, a large clock ticked away.

Blake and King moved into the loading area cautiously, pistols ready, covering each other

like you'd see on TV. Jane used her senses.

'There's somebody coming,' she said.

Footsteps clattered down a metal staircase somewhere behind the goods inward office. The clock ticked. More sirens screamed outside. Blake indicated the doorway to King, who moved to the wall beside it. Blake walked to the doorway, his Glock ready.

There was a metallic clatter and a small object tumbled towards them. A shocking noise rang around the loading bay. Then a loud crack and a figure, dressed in dark overalls, ran forward from the doorway, shot Blake again. He caught sight of King from the corner of his eye, but too late. King fired twice. Two bullets into the killer's head.

'Mark!' screamed Jane.

He was hit in the chest, blood gurgling from his lungs, his breastbone shattered. Blood streamed from his mouth and nose. She felt his neck for a pulse. Something faint, yes.

'Hold on, Mark,' she shouted as King kicked the killer in the ribs, his gun trained on the shattered skull. Nothing. He pocketed the shooter's Beretta, called for an ambulance automatically, realised there were plenty around the corner, continued the call anyway.

Jane pulled off her jacket, pressed it against Blake's chest. Bloody splinters of bone and chunks of lung erupted as Blake shuddered violently. Then he died.

Jane put her mouth on his, blew hard. She pressed his ruined chest, again, again, again. More air.

'Clive, I'm losing him.'

'Fuck. I'll go get an ambulance. Keep trying Jane.'

He ran out of the loading bay and around to the extreme carnage at the front of the college.

He was back in two minutes with a paramedic and found Jane sitting astride Blake, punching his chest. Her mouth was bloodied, hot tears dropping into the dead man's eyes.

STOP

If you wake up and don't want to smile,
If it takes just a little while,
Open your eyes and look at the day,
You'll see things in a different way.

I wake up and I don't want to smile. Music seeps into my cell, gently at first, building to an almost unbearable volume. Fleetwood Mac, a band I used to enjoy. But no longer. The song ends. There is silence for maybe three seconds. My ears ring. Then the same song starts again.

Don't stop, thinking about tomorrow,
Don't stop, it'll soon be here,
It'll be, better than before,
Yesterday's gone, yesterday's gone.

Over and over again, the song, the song, the song. I had read that American interrogation techniques had included the repetitive playing of music to prisoners. I can only be thankful that I am not being subjected to Barney the dinosaur's I Love You, You Love Me. I am truly grateful for this small mercy.

Why not think about times to come,
And not about the things that you've done,
If your life was bad to you,
Just think what tomorrow will do.

I am worried about tomorrow will bring. Deeply worried. I yearn for Barney, for anything else.
Surely this is cruel and inhuman punishment?

Don't stop, thinking about tomorrow,
Don't stop, it'll soon be here,
It'll be, better than before,
Yesterday's gone, yesterday's gone.

My sanity, precarious at the best of times, is in danger of slipping. I try to cover my ears with my hands. It deadens the noise temporarily, but I can't hold my hands up for too long. I am weak. I am getting weaker.

All I want is to see you smile,
If it takes just a little while,
I know you don't believe that it's true,
I never meant any harm to you.

I know they are watching me and laughing. I hate them now. Even Miller. I vow to track Fleetwood Mac down if ever I escape from this hellhole. Do you know what you have done? I will ask them. Are you complicit in this torture? Are you receiving royalties from the US Army? Shame on you, I will say. Shame on you.

Don't stop, thinking about tomorrow,
Don't stop, it'll soon be here,
It'll be, better than before,
Yesterday's gone, yesterday's gone.

Night falls outside. My daily rations are beside the door, untouched. I feel nauseous and throw up – bile and spit – into my stainless steel Godphone. I beg for the music to stop and it does. A little while later, my brain registers that the music has indeed stopped and I have been hearing only the

echo. The echo fades but it never leaves me completely. I worry that if they play the same song to me for another day, I will surely crack up.

Don't you look back,

Don't you look back.

THE SHOCK

As the medic – who was suffering from shock himself – worked on Blake, King went through the killer's pockets.

‘Ah, here we go, his wallet.’

He pulled out some business cards, some Euros, some sterling, a small wrap of cocaine which he discreetly pocketed.

‘Says here this guy's a furniture salesman from Italy.’

‘That doesn't sound right,’ said Jane, who stood with her arms folded, smoked one of King's cigarettes. She coughed, stared at Blake's corpse.

‘Sorry,’ smiled the medic. ‘He's gone. I have to get back outside, okay?’

‘Thanks,’ said King to the medic's back.

‘We should cover him, don't you think?’

‘Take my jacket,’ said King. ‘No, wait.’

He went into the little office and found a towel, which he tossed to Jane. She put the towel over Blake's face.

‘What an end,’ she said. ‘Covered in a dirty towel.’

‘He doesn't care. Look, Jane. I need you now. We need to work out who this fucking guy is and why he blew up the college.’

‘And killed our friend.’

‘And killed our friend,’ he said, walking to Jane and putting an arm around her. ‘Come on.’

‘Okay. Let's see this business card.’

Jane took a card and called the murder room. She passed on the bad news – the worst news – and the name. Antonio Pollo. The detective cursed, said that Pollo was Italian for chicken, got to work on tracing his movements.

‘Could this be his van?’ asked King.

‘Yes,’ agreed Jane. ‘He’s wearing delivery man’s overalls. It would fit.’

She put on a pair of latex gloves, looked into the van before carefully opening the door, half-expecting a booby trap. She sat in the driver’s seat and looked for any potential evidence.

Two soldiers ran in then.

‘Jesus Christ,’ said the sergeant, his face black, his Browning automatic pistol drawn. ‘What the fuck is going on here?’

‘DCI Blake was killed by this man,’ said King, indicating Pollo. ‘We believe he’s the bomber.’

‘Sorry about your friend. Good work with this prick. We’ll enter the building here, check for any accomplices.’

‘Good,’ said King. He hadn’t even considered this possibility. Sloppy. He just wanted to get away from the place, do a line. The soldiers walked over Pollo’s body.

‘Careful there,’ said Jane. ‘This is a crime scene.’

‘The whole bloody city’s a crime scene,’ said the soldier.

Jane rooted in the glove compartment, found duplicate papers.

‘Van’s a rental,’ she called. ‘In name of Antonio Pollo.’

King went to her.

‘Well he’s not carrying a license or credit card. Let’s see the rental company name.’

He called it in, keenly aware that this latest attack, on top of the St Paul’s Outrage – that’s what it was being called – would slow down the investigation. He went back to the body.

‘Who the fuck are you?’

King’s mobile rang, news from base. He listened intently, finally said Fuck. Thanks.

‘You won’t believe this, Jane.’

‘Try me.’

‘We’ve got contact on Bunk’s associate in the Barbican.’

‘Oh?’

‘Frank Jennings. Top medical researcher. Long-time friend of Bunk. Guess where he works?’

‘Try me.’

King indicated the building they were in with his thumb.

‘Imperial College, South Kensington.’

‘Fuck me.’

Love to, thought King as he went to Blake’s body and rummaged through his jacket pockets.

‘What the hell are you doing?’

‘Getting his phone. I need to call the Commissioner with this.’

‘Oh. Yeah. What does it mean?’

‘Maybe our Mister Pollo is working with Bunk? I don’t know. What do you think?’

‘Why would Bunk want to kill his friend?’

‘The guy’s fucking nuts, I think that’s obvious by now. Isn’t it?’

‘Mmm. We’re still missing one vital clue here.’

‘What?’

She held up the vial of Bunk’s blood.

‘We still don’t know if Bunk’s alive or dead.’

PROOF OF LIFE

The convoy sped out of the city, police motorcyclists in front stopping what traffic there was, blue lights, sirens.

Jane and King followed in their battered car, the front windscreen a network of cracks. Behind them was the Army bomb disposal van and two military jeeps. The van carried the piece of flesh from the St Paul's bomber, which had been brought into the Imperial College Army Laboratory before the blast.

Local officers had taken over the management of the crime scene where Blake and Pollo lay. Jane tried to block the scene from her mind, instead focus on the task ahead.

'You were in this place yesterday, yeah?' asked King as he steered a path through the bewildered streets, saluting the motorcycle cops at each junction.

'This is all too coincidental. Yeah. Bunk's former place of work, the Essex Forensics. We were shown Bunk's secret lab and then the x-ray machines. Everything pinned on Bunk so easily.'

'Are they kitted out for dealing with radioactive samples?'

'Bunk's old boss, Fortescue, insists that they are. We don't have any other options.'

The car radio crackled, casualty numbers at Imperial College. Thirty dead, many more injured.

'That makes over a hundred dead from the two attacks,' said King. 'Is it just al-Qaeda or what?'

'I'm worried about the link to Bunk's friend. There may be something more sinister going on.'

'Such as what?'

'I don't know what. I really don't. We need to figure out whether Bunk's still alive first. Take it from there.'

'I'm with you.'

‘One more thing. Keep an eye on this Fortescue guy and Bunk’s ex-assistant. Karen I think is her name.’

‘What’s with them?’

‘I’m not sure they’re telling the whole story.’

They drove on in silence, listened to the radio reports. Finally they were in Essex. The security barrier was raised and they braked hard at the main entrance where Fortescue and Karen were waiting for them.

MEAL, READY TO EAT

Breakfast was dropped through a hatch in the door. A bottle of water and a shrink-wrapped packet of food. Really hungry and with the Fleetwood Mac song just starting to fade, I ripped it open to find a green-tinged cheese omelette. It was rubbery, but tasted okay. As I was licking my fingers and wondering how they could make a cheese omelette that would stay edible for months, my cell door opened.

‘Good morning,’ said Captain Miller. ‘Enjoy your omelette?’

He seemed in good form, carried my file.

‘Wasn’t bad.’

‘You want to stretch your legs now?’

‘Please.’

I followed him into the corridor. As we passed along the row of cells, I heard a scream. Miller smiled at me and I shivered. We didn’t stop at the interrogation lounge. Instead, he nodded to an MP, who unlocked the main door. Outside!

The tropical day was an assault on my deprived senses. Though the sun was hidden by low cloud, the rush of heat and light made my pulse quicken. The smell of sea was a powerful stimulant and I noticed that there was an odd sense of urgency about the camp, soldiers moving, golf carts trundling, helicopters drifting by.

We walked along the perimeter fence, a high effort with razor wire on top, with a higher electric fence beyond and a third – just like the nearest – beyond that. Two MPs walked behind us, just out of earshot. Miller walked slowly and I shuffled along in my legirons, to which I had adapted, sadly.

Miller offered me a cigarette.

‘News from London,’ he said as he cupped the lighter’s flame against the strengthening wind.

‘Did they catch the bomber yet?’

‘No,’ he laughed. ‘But there was another attack.’

‘Jesus. Where?’

‘Imperial College.’

‘Shit.’

‘I know about your buddy.’ He leafed through my file. ‘Frank Jennings.’

‘Is he okay?’

‘He’s dead. His entire lab was destroyed.’

I stopped. My head dropped. The samples were gone. My one friend was gone. My fault. I accepted that I was at the heart of a conspiracy and all who came into contact with me were in danger. I feared for Anna. It was time to talk.

‘Christ. He was the only friend I had left.’

‘Tell me about your contact with him.’

‘Do you think he was the target?’

‘That I don’t know. A sample of the St Paul’s suicide bomber was being tested at the Army lab there when the bomb went off. It could have been an attempt to hide the bomber’s identity.’

‘When I found my wife’s body I went to Frank’s apartment in the Barbican Centre. He believed I was innocent and let me stay there for the night. He went off to work next morning and I stayed in the apartment.’

‘Was anybody with you.’

‘Yes. Anna. A friend from Russia who I’d met on a scientific trip a few months ago.’

‘Tell me about her.’

‘She’s a scientist. Works on the gas fields. Lovely woman, beautiful. We were in bed when the St Paul’s bomb went off.’

‘Can she verify this?’

‘I’m sure she can. Look, it’s like anyone who comes into contact with me gets killed. Can you maybe get on to the cops in London, have them watch out for her?’

‘Absolutely. I’m sure they’d love to have a talk with her. And I know they’d keep her safe until all this blows over.’

More helicopters passed low over our heads.

‘What’s happening?’ I asked. ‘Are the Cubans invading?’

‘No,’ he laughed. There’s a storm brewing in the mid-Atlantic. We’re just taking precautions. Standard operating procedure. Shouldn’t be anything to worry about. Now tell me more about Jennings. What was he working on? Anything, I don’t know, anything military-related?’

‘I doubt it. Frank was a purely commercial proposition. He built up his CV in the public sector then took the best offer. He told me that he was doing DNA research for a drug company. I have no reason to suspect he was lying.’

‘Well, unless the British find out something from his computer at home, it looks like he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’m sorry.’

‘Me too.’

‘Come on. Let me buy you a burger and a coffee. Then I’ve got a surprise for you.’

SPIDER

Fortescue led the way to the high contamination unit. King engaged him in smalltalk while Jane watched Karen. A soldier carried the box with the bomber's sample.

Fortescue used his swipe card to open a fortified door and brought them into a vestibule where two protective-suited technicians waited.

'This is as far as we go,' said Fortescue. 'Samples, please.'

Jane gave Bunk's blood sample to one technician while the other took possession of the heavy box. They entered an airlock, sealed the warning-plastered door behind them and waited for the air to filter out. A flashing yellow light rotated in the ceiling. Then the inner door opened and they went into the examination room, a small, bright space with a stainless steel table and an analyser. A Geiger counter was used to examine the box and both men checked their suit monitors.

'First they'll isolate a tiny fragment from the contaminated sample,' explained Fortescue. 'This will minimise contamination of our equipment. The radiation itself will make no difference to our results though it will, of course, break down DNA if the exposure has been high enough.'

'Shit,' said King.

'Don't worry, Detective. Caesium isn't active enough to do this. We should be okay. If it had been plutonium or uranium, well, different kettle of fish entirely.'

Likeable guy, thought Jane. A bit too nice. Karen seemed to hang on his every word. Do I detect a little bit of attraction? Is this how I looked when I was around Blake?

'How long will it take?' asked King.

'A couple of hours, I should think. The machine's fast. Finding a match is more difficult than discounting one. We'll know if it wasn't Bunk very quickly. I still can't get over this, I'm afraid.'

'Okay. Listen, Jane. Can you stay here and observe? Call me if there's any developments.'

He looked at Fortescue and Karen. 'I'd like to talk to both of you in the meantime, flesh out the

whole Bunk backstory.’

‘Together?’

‘That should be fine. Where can we go?’

‘My office?’

‘Perfect. See you later, Jane,’ said King as they left the analysis area, winking as he passed her.

Jane sat on a folding plastic chair, wondered if the news had been broken to Blake’s wife yet, how she’d have taken it. She felt she should call the Alfa Romeo dealership, let them know there would be no Spider collection. Then she dismissed the idea as crazy, decided to let Blake go, let her memory of him fade, find a man without a wife and kids for a change. She turned her attention to the technicians at work, knew in her gut that only one of the samples contained Bunk’s DNA.

COMPANY

In the interrogation lounge, I savoured a quarter-pounder with cheese, fries and a good Americano.

Miller explained how there was less pressure from above for a confession from me and that an al-Qaeda cell was being hunted in London. But I was still being sought by the police as the prime suspect.

‘Don’t they know I’m here?’

‘No, not yet. The whole atheist-goes-nuts theory fitted, you know? But this latest attack doesn’t follow on logically. Is there anything else you’re not telling me?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Well, you’ve been reclassified as a low-risk prisoner. This means that we’re just going to hold onto you for a while, until the dust settles in London and the investigators there reach some conclusions. So you’ll be leaving solitary and joining other low-risk prisoners. Sound good?’

‘No more Fleetwood Mac or MREs?’

‘For now, no,’ he smiled.

‘Thank fuck for that.’

‘I thought you’d be happy.’

‘I’m delighted.’

‘Well, wait until you meet your new friends before you get too excited, okay?’

‘Okay. When can I go?’

‘Let’s do it now.’

Miller signed the block detention records and led me to the low security section at Gitmo, MPs in tow. We passed through four checkpoints. At each one I was patted down and my file scrutinised. Miller signed documents at every turn. Eventually, we reached a gated compound which had a line of billets along the perimeter and a double row of cages down the centre, six and six. All the cages were occupied, but for one.

The prisoners regarded me with suspicion. From what I could see, all were of Middle Eastern appearance. Most were on their knees praying to Allah in Arabic. One or two were just slumped in the corners of their cages. It was like some kind of crazy religion zoo. Here we have the Muslims. Notice how they like to Face Mecca while they pray. That one there's an atheist, see the confusion on his face.

'I told you not to get too excited,' said Miller. 'I'm afraid this is the only low-security cell we have at present.'

'It'll do,' I said. 'At least it's got fresh air and sunshine.'

'That it does. Sit here, please,' he said, indicating a wooden bench.

I sat and the MPs unlocked my legirons and handcuffs. This was an unexpected bonus. I rubbed my wrists as they itched from the free blood flow.

'Thank you.'

The compound guards patted me down, unlocked the vacant cell, handed me a towel, a toothbrush, a bottle of water and a copy of the Qur'an.

'What's this?' I asked.

'That's the only book we're authorised to give you,' said Miller.

I rolled my eyes upwards at the surreal nature of the place and entered my cell. The gate was locked behind me and Miller signed my final transfer paper, handing over my file. He had a quiet word with the guard, then came over to me.

'You'll get hot meals now,' he said. 'Just don't fuck with the guards and you should be okay. If you have anything you want to talk to me about, say it to a guard and they'll get me. Understood?'

'Yeah. Thanks a lot.'

'You're welcome. Have a nice day now.'

And he was gone and I was in my new home for God knows how long.

The cage was made from reinforced chainlink, a cube measuring ten feet to a side. There were two buckets in my cage. One had water in it. There was a prisoner in each adjoining cell and, as prayers came to an end, they began to chat in Arabic, wondered who the hell I was, concluded, I felt, that I was a plant. I stood and stretched and walked around, a tiger in a zoo.

The prisoner in the cell to my left must've been nominated to make contact.

‘The water is for drinking, the empty bucket for urine,’ he said. ‘If you need to use the toilet, tell a guard and he will take you. But they leave the door open and humiliate you.’

I said ‘Thanks.’

‘Why are you here?’ he asked.

‘I wish I knew.’

He tutted.

‘There must have been a cause.’

His English was perfect, actually he had an English accent. He had a dark, wispy beard and a young face.

‘There was a bomb attack in London,’ I said. ‘They think I did it?’

There was a murmur from the cells around.

‘What kind of bomb? On the tube?’

‘No. St Paul’s Cathedral. A dirty bomb.’

‘A dirty bomb,’ he said, raising his eyebrows. The murmur increased in pitch as the news was passed along. A Hispanic guard with a shotgun paused at my cell, listened in.

The prisoner introduced himself as Danny from Bradford. We touched fingers through the fence. We shared our tales and the guard – having heard it all before – grew bored and walked on. Danny’d been visiting family in Pakistan, celebrating a wedding, woke up on a plane.

‘Are these cages bugged?’ I asked.

‘They don’t need to bug them. We’ve all been through the water torture, told everything. What about you?’

‘I just got the cold and the music.’

‘What song?’

‘Don’t Stop.’

‘I had that too,’ he laughed.

‘This is nice, out here. I like the heat, the birdsong.’

‘Quite pleasant, but the mosquitoes come at night.’

‘Damn. I hate mosquitoes. They love me.’

‘Could be worse, William.’

‘Could be.’

I warmed to him. He didn't strike me as a fundamentalist lunatic, whereas the guards and their Commander-in-Chief were right up there.

Then one of the prisoners called out something. They all used some of their bottled water to wash their faces, hands and feet, kneeled on towels, faced Mecca. This would happen five times a day and a couple of guys would remain in prayer position, poring over their Qur'ans from dawn 'til dusk.

Lunchtime came and so did a metal tray of rice, flat bread and a vegetable curry. A dead scorpion nestled in my rice. I threw it into my waste bucket, said nothing. I licked the tray clean. Danny didn't eat.

'Don't like this lovely grub?' I asked.

'I have begun a hunger strike,' he said. 'This is my third meal protest. After nine, they will take me away.'

'Why are you doing this? It's got to be pointless.'

'My body is the only weapon I have left. I must do something to protest this injustice. Can you understand?'

'Yes.'

Afterwards, the cages were unlocked one by one. We were patted down and allowed to walk around the perimeter for an hour.

Danny walked with me and we chatted about the increased activity in the camp, the coming storm. A convoy of Humvees passed on the road outside, headed towards the high detention compound.

'They move the high value guys to a secure underground facility at the slightest hint of trouble,' explained Danny. 'It happens regularly.'

'What about us?'

'If the storm turns out to be heading our way, we'll be taken to the MP compound. It's only happened to me once.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Since two thousand and two. Is that a long time?'

'Yes,' I said, worried now that I could spend the rest of my life in Guantánamo.

INTEL REPORT – JTF/G – MILLER – P7263

Subject has been cooperative and has complied with all requests.

Key findings:

1. Denial of involvement with incident 4223. This is supported by absence of radiation contamination on subject.
2. Admission of presence at home of FRANK JENNINGS at time of incident 4223. Claims to have been in company of Russian national, ANNA KAZLOV, at time of incident 4223.
3. Expressed shock at death of JENNINGS and incident 4337.
4. Subject's atheism does not appear to be fundamentalist in nature.
5. Subject appears to have no knowledge of Cell 339 or its activities.

Recommendations:

1. ANNA KAZLOV to be located and questioned regarding incidents 4223 and 4337. FSB?
2. Subject should be considered for immediate release and placed in care of UK police authorities.

END

SOME BACKGROUND

Karen uncrossed her legs, recrossed them. What's she playing at? wondered King.

'So,' he repeated, 'you knew that Bunk was doing illegal genetic experiments and you didn't think to tell anyone?'

'As I said, Detective, I didn't know they were illegal and I didn't see much of them any way.'

'And what made you bring them to Doctor Fortescue's attention?'

'It was only after Bunk was fired and killed his wife. I thought he must be crazy.'

'But you never thought that before, am I right?'

'No.'

'Detective,' interrupted Fortescue, 'I don't think that Karen can be blamed for Bunk's actions. She was just doing her job.'

'See no evil, speak no evil, eh?'

'Loyalty is something I value.'

'Loyalty.'

Reviewing his notes, King decided that Fortescue was too cool to reveal anything he didn't want to, but was hiding something. Karen, however, was breakable.

'Karen, just a little bit about your background. What are your qualifications, please?'

'Would you like me to get you a copy of my CV?'

'That won't be necessary for now, just tell me where you studied.'

'I have a diploma in laboratory technology.'

'Where from?'

'Riyadh University.'

King's heart jumped.

'You're Saudi Arabian?'

‘Correct, but I have lived in England for many years.’

‘How many?’

‘Seven.’

‘Okay. I didn’t think women were allowed to go to college in Saudi Arabia.’

‘A common misconception. There are many courses which are approved for females.’

King’s phone rang. Jane. Brief chat.

King stood and closed his notepad.

‘What is it, Detective?’ asked Fortescue.

‘We’ve got to get back to the office. Thank you for your time. I may need to speak with you both again.’ He smiled at them. ‘It turns out that Bunk wasn’t the bomber.’

ISLAM 101

Danny became my teacher, eager to convince me that I, as a westerner, had no fundamental understanding of Islam. It was somehow comfortable to sit there in the tropical shade, the air stirring more with every hour, and listen to his well-intentioned passion.

Our talks were punctuated by the business of camp, the low-flying choppers, the guards, the dogs, the prayers.

During prayer, one of the men in our cage cluster would lead the others and they would recite verses from the Qur'an which they knew by heart, though they still turned the pages back. Their voices merged into a melodic stream of thought, echoed in the chanting from the other prayer groups scattered through the groves. My eyes focussed on a grove of coconut palms, the music lulled me into a reverie and I was disappointed when the prayers would end.

Danny spoke at length about Muhammad and the origins of the religion. Cast your mind back to the seventh Century. Imagine the Middle-Eastern mindset. Rome was a memory, the Jews and the Byzantine Christians were in place, the Persians nearby, all competing powers. Tribal conflict in the Arabian Peninsula gave Muhammad a leadership role. It appears that he used his high social position to bring about social change. He created a new religion to counterbalance the established ones. He invented Islam, starting with a vision in a cave in six ten AD. Muhammad was forty years old.

He was told that his vision had come from God, the status of prophethood was conferred upon him, Islam was born. Muhammad's smart military tactics lead his tribe to victory, eventually conquering Mecca in six thirty, destroying the idols there. A jihad conquers all of Arabia's tribes, forcing them to bow to Islam and Muhammad. He dies in six thirty-two, aged sixty-two. His successors sow the seeds of the Sunni/Shia schism, while launching their campaign to take over the world, reaching France to the west and Indonesia to the east.

'Why this campaign?' I asked.

‘For the same reason Christians travel the world with ideas of salvation,’ he answered.

‘Muslims believe that they have found the ultimate truth and that it is their duty to awaken others.’

‘Infidels.’

‘Ah. That is an English word. It means “one who is without faith or who denies the central tenets of a faith”.’

‘Then I’m an infidel.’

‘If you insist,’ he laughed. ‘The word a Muslim would use is kafir. It refers to a person who denies God or Muhammad. That is all. It is not allowed for a Muslim to describe a Christian or a Jew as kafir.’

‘I can see why. It’s incredible how all three religions are so similar. Look at their belief in a single God, their geographical origins, even Abraham.’

‘Correct, Abraham is the father of us all.’

‘So why the hatred? Why can’t these religions just get along. You have more in common with an American evangelist than you have with me, God-wise of course.’

‘Of course. This I shall have to consider.’

He meditated for a time and I read my Qur’an. What a picture. There was the commotion of a convoy passing, out of sight. Fresh meat for the torturers.

Danny’s eyes opened and he smiled at me.

‘The reason for our conflict is simple. Lack of respect.’

‘On all sides?’

‘On all sides,’ he whispered.

‘Makes sense. I’d also add in a culture clash, accelerated by digital media, big business ethics, diminishing oil and the odd old men who’ve always controlled everything. That’s a rich brew for conflict.’

‘And here we are.’

We laughed.

He told me about what makes a Muslim – submission to Allah - and the Five Pillars of Faith. One, the Confession and Testimony. There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet. Two, Salat. Prayer five times a day, facing towards Mecca. Three, Zakat. Almsgiving to those less fortunate. Four, Fasting during the month of Ramadan, from sunrise to sundown. Five, Hajj.

Pilgrimage to Mecca once a lifetime.

All fair enough. I said I wanted to get to jihad and hijab.

‘In good time, my student.’

A nice touch. But what could I teach Danny in return? Disbelief, emptiness, cynicism, denial, obsession. I would remain the student.

‘And how does one become a Muslim?’

‘Quite simply. Testify. Simply state that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger.’

‘Just state it?’

‘Yes. It’s better?’

‘Seems straightforward.’

‘Upon submission to Allah, you then have his handbook. There,’ he said, indicating my Qur’an. ‘That book contains every answer to every question.’

‘I think I get it.’

‘So.’

‘So?’

‘Are you ready to testify?’

I was surprised by the question, though I should not have been. A door had been opened for me, yes, but that was solely because of my circumstances. I would not fall through.

‘No, Danny. I don’t know if I will ever be ready.’

‘That is an honest answer. I will keep trying to educate you.’

‘Thank you. I enjoy our conversation.’

‘A point worth noting,’ he said. ‘Do you know the flag of Saudi Arabia?’

‘Green with white squiggles?’

‘Correct. Those squiggles are Arabic. They read – ’

‘There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger?’

‘You are an excellent student, William.’

Dinner was rice and vegetables and curry sauce. I was offered chicken and accepted it with the graciousness of a Mumbai holy man. I was changing.

Danny drank some water, turned to his Qur’an.

I learned about the beliefs of Islam, the five Articles of Faith, more contentious than the Pillars, with which nobody could really argue.

‘The Articles are as follows. One. God, there is but one true God and his name is Allah. He is so far above us that we cannot ask him for favours or mercy. He is our judge and does not involve himself in the petty affairs of man.’

‘Fair enough. Did you know that Catholics have a patron saint for upset stomachs?’

‘Two. Angels, Allah’s messengers. Each person has two angels. One to record his good deeds, one to record his bad deeds. Angels are spiritual beings, whereas the Jinn are between angels and men and can be good or bad.’

‘Jinn. Interesting. How were they created?’

‘They were made out of the fire.’ Deadpan.

‘Okay.’

‘Three, Scripture. The Qur’an, The Gospel of Jesus, The Books of Moses, The Psalms of David. These books are holy to us.’

‘The New Testament? Are you kidding me?’

‘Not at all. Most Christians find this shocking.’

‘I’ll say.’

‘Many Muslims believe that these other books have been corrupted, which is why Allah gave us the Qur’an.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘Four. The Prophets. God has spoken through many prophets. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus among them.’

‘Jesus?’

‘Yes, but Muhammad is the greatest of the prophets. He is the Seal.’

‘Five. The Last Days. This will be a time of resurrection and judgment. Jesus will be resurrected first. He will kill all Jews and Christians and pigs. He will shatter all crosses, get married and die. He will be buried beside Muhammad in Medina. Forty years later, the Resurrection. All who have lived will return to life for judgment by Allah. Those who believe in Allah and Muhammad - and are pure - will go to heaven. All others will go to hell, even Muslims who have sinned. These will be allowed into heaven after a time. For non-believers, there is no

escape from the fire.'

He sat back then, allowed his gaze to wander around the compound.

'I can see how Christians and Jews would have a problem with the whole Last Days thing.'

And pigs.

'That is as it is written.'

'What about the whole virgins in paradise for martyrs scenario? Is that true?'

'A man who dies in Jihad or Holy War goes directly to heaven where seventy-two virgins will be awaiting him. This is written.'

I let this sink in. I felt that insulting my teacher with my logical response to his assertions would be pointless, so I smiled, thanked him, lay down and wondered about it all.

After a time, he washed and came nearer.

'Do you wonder how I can follow my religion, Billy?'

'I guess it's down to exposure really, isn't it?'

'When one is exposed to the truth after a lifetime of emptiness, there is no resistance.'

'I can see that, yeah.'

'Any other questions for today?'

'Are you Sunni?'

'All of us in this compound, yes.'

'So what's the difference between Sunni and Shia?'

'Easy. Sunni believe in Allah and see Muhammad as his prophet. Shia believe this too, but also consider Ali, Muhammad's cousin to be his successor. This is the crux of our difference. We see Shia as idolaters. See how the Iranians – Shia – like to have gigantic images of Khomeini and other teachers all around?'

'Very Big Brother.'

'We consider this idolatry. We cannot even conceive of an image of Allah or Muhammad. Cannot even conceive of it.'

'Or a Danish cartoon of them.'

'Just so.'

Evening prayers then, the most special. As the soaring chants gave thanks to Allah for the day, fireflies appeared in the palms and the stars poked through the azure canopy. I was almost

contented, malaise dispelled. I was nearing an understanding of Islam.

The simplicity and purity of the moment, both disturbed by the arrival of a dozen MPs in the compound. They reviewed clipboards with the commander of the compound, a lieutenant, looked towards us. A move. Please not me.

Ten seconds after prayers concluded, the soldiers swarmed at the gate to Danny's cage.

'It's only been four meals,' he protested.

He was pulled out and searched by a big man. The cage was locked behind him. He was cuffed and shackled in legirons. He smiled at me as he was led away, said something in Arabic to his brothers.

'I hope he's not getting into trouble for talking to me,' I said to the MP with the gloves who'd searched Danny. He was taking everything from the cage – buckets, clothes, Qur'an, towel – and into a black refuse sack. He ignored me and entered the cage to check along every edge and in every corner for contraband. Happy that the cage was empty, he sealed the bag, completed a label, locked the cage and consulted with the compound commander.

I prayed – yes, prayed – that Danny wouldn't be tortured. Surely they could send him home?

Night fell then, a worrying impact. My imagination had deviated from its path to calm and was feverish with speculation and dread. I was startled by the relentless change in my routine. I called the guard, a friendly chap from Iowa. I asked if I could see my father figure, Captain Miller. He said he'd see what he could do.

The guard returned after a few minutes, his smile frozen.

'Sorry, bud. Captain Miller's been transferred. He's outta here. Wish I was with him.'

'Where is he?' I said, my voice cracking, my mouth dry and pulsing.

'Iraq. Your new Case Supervisor is the Base Commander,' he said, shaking his head.

'Is that bad?'

'He likes to use the water, if you know what I mean. Good night, buddy.'

I stood in my cage, my shoulders stooped. I stared after the guard, saw distant lights arching into the oily night. I almost drowned as a child, in a swimming pool in Crete. Waterboarding, the very idea of simulated drowning, disgusted me. I knew I would not be able to endure it, that I would blab my life story. Everything.

I was woken from a dream of a deserted island by the clanging of gates and the familiar

military gang bustle. They love their routines and operating procedures and I can see how the military life is attractive to obsessive-compulsives. But not for me. Ah. Buckets. A new prisoner. A new companion.

THE COMET'S TALE

Anna quickly grew bored of lounging in the hotel suite, eating strawberries and scanning the news for mention of Bunk.

A memory of her visit to Tunguska flashed and she ordered a fresh bottle of Moët, closed her bathrobe tightly and tapped at the terminal, chasing childhood dreams of comets.

Comets had impacted Earth many times. Of course. Every child with six years knows this. And comets are remnants from the all times, from the forging of the Universe to the star cycles of billions of years of growth and death and growth again. But carriers of living organisms that can interact with human DNA?

The Great Plague of sixteen sixty-five. Bacterium. Halley's Comet. If the comet could be so readily associated with world events, such as the birth of Jesus Christ and the battle of Hastings, look for an obvious correlation with the comet. No. Halley's was seen in O eight and eighty-four. What about the Black Death in the mid-thirteenth Century? No again.

Maybe Halley isn't the carrier.

Tunguska Event now. Massive explosion in Siberia. Nineteen O Eight. Accepted as a comet air-bursting with the power of a thousand Hiroshimas. Middle of nowhere, thank God.

But what's this? The stunned indigenous, those that survived, were covered in boils after the event. Boils? Whole families died. Medical examiners recorded an epidemic of smallpox, the first in the region. A virus. Transmission by inhalation of airborne variola virus.

This was fascinating and something she'd not known. So she displayed some thigh at the young man from Gdansk who brought the champagne, made his day, took notes in her pad.

Smallpox was a fascinating disease. Literally was. The first successful eradication of a horrible disease. Vaccination with the cowpox virus was safe and usually effective. Only two smallpox samples remain in existence, under armed guard in the United States and Russia. Vector, the State Research Centre of Virology and Biotechnology. Smallpox had been used as a weapon

many times through history and the Cold War saw its laboratory evolution into new, more virulent forms.

Anna shuddered at the idea of a smallpox weapon being loosed on a planet with no immunity, just a vague memory of the Black Death.

She accepted that a comet had led to the dominance of mammals by conveniently wiping out dinosaurs sixty-five million years before, she just didn't get the more subtle influence.

Wait. Scientists at the University of Wales and papers about flu epidemics from space. Sars. Interesting theory that the organic debris from comets can take decades to float down to the surface of Earth after capture by its gravitational field. Sunspots force them down. Curious, but perhaps a measurable mechanism. More notes and more ideas for Billy.

Where are you Billy?

Then news broke about the blast at Imperial College. Anna was stunned by the scale of the attack. Grainy images and breathless commentary and bodies, bodies everywhere. She put her glass beside the LCD screen, lit a cigarette and leaned towards the flow of misery.

Police report that the suspected bomber was shot dead and accomplices are being hunted.

'Jesus Christ!'

She pondered her connection to Antonio. Phone call. Shared hotel room the night before. The police already had her number. Shit. They would connect her.

She decided that a Eurostar train to Paris would be the quickest way to leave the country, looked it up. Is it running? Yes. One hour. Don't book online, just go.

She threw her clothes and toiletries into a red case, called reception to arrange her bill. She powered off her cellphone, tossed that into the case with her notes.

As she left the room, the house phone rang.

'Anna?' said a strange woman's voice.

'Yes.'

'Please don't hang up. I'm Jane Archer. I'm a civilian crime scene manager with Essex Police. I just want to talk to you about Bill Bunk.'

'Where is he?'

'I don't know.'

'Well neither do I. Goodbye.'

‘Wait. I think he’s been framed for murder. But I don’t know why. Could I see you for a coffee, maybe fill in some blanks?’

She didn’t appear to be concerned about Antonio.

‘How did you know I was here?’

‘Easy to find you once I had your name. Bunk’s email account.’

‘Very good. Let me tell you that I have done nothing wrong. I only came to London to see Billy, that’s all.’

‘I accept that, I really do. I really need to know more about his work and colleagues.’

‘Very well. I can see you in forty minutes at St Pancras station. I’ll be sitting in Starbucks with The Guardian newspaper.’

‘It’ll be hard for me to make it in forty minutes.’

‘So turn on your blue lights.’

INTO THE CAGE

Dawn broke the darkness into fading fragments, the boiling sun and rainclouds. Wind blew dust into my eyes. And into the cage came an actual American. I told him about the buckets. Then the inevitable.

‘Why are you here?’

‘I wish I knew.’

The inevitable.

‘Join the club. I’m Bill Bunk, from England.’

‘Tom Ford. I’m American. Got in last night.’

‘They think I killed my wife and blew up St Paul’s.’

‘Oh, that was you, was it?’ he laughed, then held his water bucket to his lips, drank carefully. ‘They think I’ve been planning to assassinate abortion doctors.’

A Christian militant? Here? Are they mad?

The other prisoners on cage row had woken and were washing quietly before morning prayer. When the praying started, I put my finger to my lips. Ford shrugged and slumped in a corner. The drugs were still in his system.

We spoke over breakfast.

‘There are cockroaches in my rice,’ said Ford.

‘Quiet,’ I said. ‘They’ll all want one.’

We laughed out loud and Danny was forgotten.

‘Listen Bill,’ he said in a low voice, ‘I’m a Christian and I’ll never deny that. But I don’t believe in murdering someone for Jesus. They have no evidence of anything. It’s why I’m here.’

‘I didn’t know they were sending US citizens over.’

‘Neither did I.’

‘Is it legal?’

‘Nobody cares about that any more, Bill. This war against Islam has taken over. We’re just two little pawns in a big game.’

‘Were you drugged and abducted?’

‘Nah. I’ve been in jail in North Carolina for a coupla weeks now. They couldn’t make me talk so they figured to shake me up a little over here. That’s all.’

‘Scare tactics.’

‘Exactly. That’s all this place is.’

‘I hope you’re right, Tom. I didn’t get any really bad stuff yet, but I’ve heard stories of truly nasty behaviour.’

‘What do you do, Bill? Before here.’

‘I’m a doctor. I was working in a forensics lab.’

‘CSI stuff?’

‘Yes.’

‘Cool, that’s cool. I’m a teacher myself. Can you believe that? A doctor and a teacher in Gitmo and we’re with the good guys.’

It was a bizarre situation for sure. In a disturbing way, I was glad of Tom, glad that I wasn’t the only white prisoner. I told him about my work and he showed interest. He got to talking about creationism and I spoke about my belief in evolution. We argued over this for the afternoon, including on our perimeter walk.

‘Will they leave us in the cages if the storm comes?’ he asked.

‘I doubt it. That would be crazy.’ I looked around, wide-eyed. ‘Although – ’

He laughed.

‘I don’t see how something as complex as humour can simply evolve. Do apes have a sense of humour? I don’t think so.’

‘It’s not that simple, Tom. The human brain has evolved so rapidly, we still don’t understand it.’

‘You got that right. For all your science and knowledge, you can’t even cure a cold.’

‘Yes, but at least we know it’s a virus. That’s a start. Viruses are just terrible buggars to deal with. At least we’re not running around in the dark blaming God.’

He stopped walking. I went back to him and apologised, but his smile was gone. The whistle

told us to get back in our cages. Tom asked to use the Portaloo and was taken away. I sat in my cage and covered my Qur'an with a shirt before I leafed through it, hoped that Tom would come back to me.

After using the toilet, the prisoner was escorted away from the compound to a guard hut near the main offices. Inside, he enjoyed the aircon, lit a cigarette and savoured a can of cold Coke. Afterwards, he kneeled before the crucifix hanging on the wall. Then he made a call.

'Yes?' asked the flat voice.

'Link, sir. I've made contact with Bunk and he's talking.'

'Anything?'

'No specifics yet.'

'We need to move on. It appears that all the samples are destroyed. The London actions have succeeded. Atheism is discredited, the press hysterical. We will get God into the Constitution yet.'

'Excellent. That's really good.'

'Yes. The world has moved on. Bunk is now an embarrassment. Get what you can, then kill him.'

COFFEE

King drove Jane back into the city in a marked car, lights on. The debriefing at work was over but the taste of death wouldn't go away. They'd made their statements and the case was out of their hands. At least the bomber was dead, initial tests showed explosive residue all over him. Guilty of the whole mess. No leads on accomplices, business card address was a church, dead end. Case closed, Interpol had it now. The Inspector went to see Blake's wife. The test results from the Bunk case – Bunk! – fired Jane up and he needed the break.

'So you're convinced it wasn't Bunk?' said King as they neared St Pancras, the streets still empty from the malaise of fear.

'He drank the fresh drink, yes. But the other two drinks were had by Bunk's wife and some other person. Are you working on a trace?'

'Yeah. DNA and prints. It's in the pipeline but the system's been so fucked I don't know if we'll get a match any time soon.'

'Odds are he won't be on the database anyway.'

'This is true. What are you hoping to learn from this woman?'

'She wouldn't know Sally's lover, she wouldn't know about the bombs. But she might know who'd like to frame Bunk.'

King knocked off the siren a block from St Pancras international rail station. He stopped the car, lights down, at the main entrance, just a few bemused people there. The idea of another bomb came and many hurried away.

'I'll hang on here,' said King. 'Call if you need me.'

'I'll be fine. Thanks for getting me here in time.'

'No worries.'

He turned on music radio, clapped upon hearing the Sex Pistols and lit a cigarette before she'd even closed the car door.

The station was strikingly beautiful without so many annoying people about. She could stand for a moment and look. Then she saw the coffee shop and hurried towards it. Anna would have been hard to miss, a blonde supermodel, immaculately dressed, casually reading edgy journalism while sipping an extravagant beverage. You are beautiful and you know it. Curious scar, even concealer can't hide it. A red case on the floor. So you're getting a train.

'Anna?' said Jane, her hand outstretched, her eyes smiling.

'Hello Jane,' she said, shaking her hand delicately. 'Please sit. I got you a coffee. You know what service is like here.'

'Thanks.' Shit, should I drink this?

Jane sipped the coffee, a kind of cappuccino. It tasted fine, still hot.

'Do you have any ID please?'

Fair enough, she thought as she offered her official laminate.

'So what did you want to know?'

'About William Bunk. Anything about him. I think he's being framed for killing his wife.'

'Thank goodness for that. I didn't believe it when he told me.'

'When did you see him?'

'Just for one afternoon. The day of the bomb.'

'You were with him when it went off?'

'Yes. He had nothing to do with it. He panicked when we saw the news. So I left. I've been in my hotel since and I'm getting the train now. This has all been a horrible experience. Except for the time we had, of course.'

'Where were you?'

'In his friend's place. The Barbican. Bill was hiding from you at Frank's. We drank and made love. I was happy to see him and felt sorry for him. Then bang. What happened to him then?'

'He disappeared. When did you last meet Bunk?'

'Two years ago in Russia. The project I was with dug up a frozen mammoth. Billy and his friends from the lab came over to see her.'

'A scientific expedition?'

'And a boys' weekend away. They were crazy for their vodka and women. I fell for Bunk and he had a good time.'

‘Who was with him?’

‘His friend Frank. They got on well together. His boss, I don’t know his name.’

‘Fortescue.’

‘Yes. I didn’t like him. He was jealous of Billy being with me. Billy told me.’

‘Anyone else?’

‘Just a technical guy. Jim, I think. He was quiet. Spoke in whispers with Fortescue.’

Jane jotted some notes. ‘What month?’

‘July.’

‘And your contact with Bunk since then?’

‘Just the occasional email.’

‘There was an envelope from Russia at Bunk’s house.’

Anna took a long drink, decided to tell the truth. Her train would depart in ten minutes. She stood and fixed her long coat, checked her lipstick in a tiny mirror.

‘I sent him that. It was a sample from a frozen early human we found in Russia. I thought he might enjoy analysing it. Was the sample in the envelope?’

‘No, there was nothing in it. Was that all?’

‘That’s all. He was excited by it. He thought he could use it to disprove the existence of God.’ Anna smiled. ‘I found his crazy notions endearing. I must go.’

Jane stood.

‘What if I need to ask you something?’

‘You have my email,’ smiled Anna.

She extended the suitcase handle, shook Jane’s hand, turned to walk away. She stopped.

‘By the way, Billy was having an affair with one of his work colleagues. Au revoir.’

‘Au revoir,’ said Jane, who sat back down, finished her coffee. She ordered two more, went out to King with a taste of clarity, the idea that the answers to the Bunk mystery could be found in the forensic science labs and the new wild card: disproving God? Maybe Bunk was just a crazyman after all.

But tomorrow for all that. Today, she would go home and drink and choose her clothes for the funeral.

ACT OF GOD

When Tom got back from the toilet, the mood in the compound changed. The winds were gusting loudly and a light rain had begun to swirl. An officer came and gave orders to the MPs. 'Now!' he shouted.

Each prisoner was released from his cage, patted down, cuffed and shackled. In a few minutes, we were lined up at the compound gate. The storm had grown wilder in that time, like a hurricane had switched direction nearby, was bearing down on the place.

A sergeant shouted 'You will be taken by bus to a secure location. You must obey all orders. You must not panic. Let's roll.'

The gate was opened and we were taken onto the bus, one at a time. There was plenty of debris in the air, mainly palm leaves and dirt. The MPs wore goggles and held their weapons tightly.

The base around us was quiet, seemingly locked down. I glanced at the helicopter pad and saw a fat transport helicopter on its side. Tom saw it too.

'This could be our best chance to escape,' he whispered into my ear.

'No talking!' shouted an MP.

Jesus. But he had a point. The cool control of the base had slipped. The storm had exposed the limits of military power.

The bus had no seats. I sat on the floor, watched as the long floorchain snaked through my legirons. Tom was beside me, apparently calm. The bus was shaken by the wind. I looked up through the window and saw the sunrise glowing a rich red. The black clouds unloaded their water on us and raindrops the size of grapes lashed the bus, making the music of an asylum orchestra.

All prisoners on board, the door was locked from outside and two MPs travelled with us. The bus engine howled as the driver missed her gear. Then, with a judder, we were on our way. We drove slowly along the road beside the main perimeter fence. It was all I could see, the base passing by unseen on the right. The fence was being rattled and I even saw broken links.

At times, the bus was lifted by the storm. It gave me a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. The driver fought for control and the guards looked nervous, chatting between themselves, peering out at the damage.

We reached the far side of the helicopter field, where the road rose a little. A depression on the right must have given a gust an extra power, because the bus was picked up and thrown against the fence. The roof of the bus easily sundered the chainlink and the driver's compartment shattered the electric wall beyond. There was a flash of blue and the drivers screamed. The bus came to rest on its roof, the front raised to forty-five degrees. There was mayhem and carnage in the back. The restraining floorchain had saved some of us, hanging upside down from the floor like the slabs of meat in Smithfield. I could taste blood and my head felt wet. But the chain had failed others, at least two men frozen in grotesque entanglements. The guards, unchained, lay in a heap, apparently dead. There was a sickening smell of burning.

With the windows broken, the hurricane roared though the vehicle and shook us some more. I had to fight the motion, my stomach muscles aching, fearful that my head would be battered. Tom had raised his torso up and was pulling at the floorchain. I felt a tiny give.

'Get ready!' he shouted and tugged again with all his strength.

There was nothing I could actually do. The chain gave and we tumbled to the ceiling in a mess of death and pain. My left shoulder took most of the impact and it screamed at me.

Tom emerged from under a body and lifted me to a sitting position. He found the end of the chain and pulled it through our legirons. Then he made his way to the MPs and searched their waistbands for keys.

'Got them,' he said, fumbling with his legirons. They clicked open and he threw them out a window. Then he had his cuffs off and came to me, still in a daze. Then I was free and following Tom through a window. The other survivors were calling to us.

'What about the other guys?' I said.

'Fucking terrorists. I'm not helping them,' he said calmly, threw the keys into the storm.

We crouched beside the fence, saw that the bus had ruptured all three fences. We would just have to climb over. A large sheet of wood spun over our heads and I turned to see that the base was beginning to come apart. Debris was everywhere, lethal fragments of trees, doors, fences and machines. The damaged helicopter was shredded, the main fence showing damage along its length.

‘Ready?’ he asked.

‘I’ll follow you.’

At the back of the bus, we used the wheelarch for a foothold and made our way onto the chassis. The wind whipped us and I was hit by pieces of Cuba. I clung on desperately to the oily pipes and struts. Flipflops gone, I roasted my foot on the exhaust pipe. The bus became a mountain, every inch of upward progress a battle. The vehicle continued to shake but thankfully no more lightning bolts from the electric wall. It had shorted. A good break. We neared the top of our mountain and passed by the fences.

Reaching the front bumper, Tom hesitated, scanned the ground below. He turned to me and said Just jump, just jump.

I nodded and he was away.

I pulled myself up the last few feet and looked over the inch. The bus lurched with my heart. A high, high drop and nothing to break the fall. Tom was sitting on the dirt, looking up. I swung my body over the abyss and, holding the bumper, lowered myself as far as I could. I looked into the bus and saw the driver flattened against the front window, her face singed in death, her hair still smouldering. In fright, I let go.

I managed to bend my knees when I hit the ground, remembering the paratroop training footage, and the impact hurt but I broke nothing.

Tom wasn’t so lucky.

‘I think I twisted my ankle,’ he said.

I saw the telltale black bulge. Broken metatarsal. I got up and offered my hand. He took it and grunted his way to his feet. He winced.

‘Lean on my shoulder,’ I said. ‘Where we headed?’

‘North,’ he said. ‘Down towards the coast then to the right. Reaching Cuba is our best bet. They’ll take us in.’

‘Sounds like a good plan,’ I said. ‘We wouldn’t make it by sea.’

So we crossed the patrol track and an open grass area and felt better when we reached the undergrowth. Tom struggled, putting more of his weight onto my aching shoulder. But my adrenaline gave me strength. Soon I could hear the sea, vicious waves crashing like an artillery barrage.

‘I need to rest,’ said Tom and we leaned our backs against a boulder, the storm unable to

shift it. He was panting heavily. His foot was broken.

‘I can take a look at your foot. I’m a doctor.’

‘I know,’ he laughed. ‘No good, it’s broken. My best bet is to get medical help back at the base once the storm dies down.’

What? ‘What about me?’ Could I do this alone?

‘You’re fucked,’ he said.

Then he was against me, his right forearm pushing hard – too hard – against my throat. Couldn’t breath, my vision clouded.

‘I fucked your wife, did you know that?’ he said to me.

I couldn’t say anything, just grunted, my throat burning, ears ringing. Sally’s killer was killing me.

‘And then I killed her, to set you up.’

The pressure on my throat eased. I snatched a breath.

‘If you want to live, you better tell me about those DNA samples you got.’

So he’s not going to kill me?

‘My friend took them to Imperial College. To run tests. That’s the last I saw of them.’

He applied the pressure again. Released it again.

‘Is that the truth?’

‘Yes. I swear on my mother’s life.’

‘You know, you shouldn’t be meddling with God,’ he said, his eyes glassily calm.

‘I’m just a scientist. I didn’t mean any harm.’

‘Harm? We’re in the middle of the greatest war ever fought here. And you just can’t see it. And you would question the Creation?’

The man was a lunatic of the worst order. A religious lunatic.

‘I believe in evolution.’

He pressed hard again and I gagged.

‘Can’t you see it, fool? Question Genesis and you question the fall of man. Without the fall, there is no need for the saviour. No need for Jesus Christ. You get that?’ I nodded. ‘No need for Jesus Christ!’ he screamed, his spittle showering my eyes.

He’d lost it now. I knew that he would kill me. So I would have to kill him. The thought

came unexpectedly, with a surprising power. Kill him! There was no internal argument, no But you're a doctor, Bill. Reason it out.

This zealot, like all zealots, was beyond reason. Kill him!

'Doctor Ryan was right,' he said. 'From little seeds of evil, great demons grow. The Foundation requires your death and I must do the Lord's work.'

As the pressure on my throat increased, I raised my foot a few inches, then stamped on his broken foot with all the strength I could channel. He screamed in pain and I pushed him back. He stumbled and fell, the wind catching him, flinging him a few paces away. I gathered my breath and stooped, found a rock with enough weight to crush a human skull. He turned to look at me – pale and frightened - grunted to get up again. And I pounded his forehead until it shattered, brain and blood and bone gushing into the storm.

I stood over his body for a long minute, my hand still trembling, my throat aching, tears flying to the sea.

Then an urgent, high-pitched wailing from the camp, louder even than the hurricane. It could only mean one thing: Escape in progress.

THE ESCAPE

I made my way to a narrow beach, held onto a swaying tree and watched the sea. Mountains of black water flung themselves onto land, the spray clouding visibility. The emergency siren ebbed and flowed with the wind, but its urgency drove me on. There was a dense mangrove forest to my left, so I went right, sticking to the clear path.

I looked around the sky and then, through a crack in the clouds I spotted the sun's weak disc. It was behind me, so I was heading north. Good. I trudged along the beach, the wet sand sucking every footstep. Heavy going. The waves battered me, threatened to suck me into the Caribbean Sea. I was acutely aware that my orange outfit would draw any eyes in the vicinity, kept moving.

As I reached the end of the beach and clambered over a jumbled mound of rocks, the winds lessened slightly and the rain became a drizzle. A narrow lagoon lay ahead. I rested and watched the water. A weak swimmer, I knew I had no choice. Working inland would bring me into contact with the first patrols sent to capture me. In truth, they would have orders to kill me. Trees, logs and debris from the base rushed towards the sea. A large branch came near and I lunged into the water, grabbed it, began to kick my way across the lagoon's churning, brackish water.

The waves weren't as high as in the sea, but they still swamped my head. I swallowed water, vomited it up. The current was driving me to the open sea, so I kicked and kicked and kicked and made some progress towards the far bank.

A heavy log struck my legs, but the pain wouldn't be felt until later. As I approached the bank, a chunk of tree, low in the water, bore down on me. It seemed to drift away, then turned towards me again. Unusual behaviour for a log. I kicked harder, kept an eye on it. It came closer, seemed oddly symmetrical and spotty, opened its jaws, its tail thrashing.

'You're fucking joking,' I said to the crocodile.

It didn't reply, just eased closer, displayed its rows of shiny white teeth.

I kept kicking, struggling against the current, the shoreline very near now, just ten feet away. But still the crocodile came. Then its body tensed, it prepared to strike. I froze, allowing the current to suck me towards the sea, pulled my legs up to my body, foetally.

Was this it? Would the first man to escape the hell of Guantánamo die in the jaws of a hungry beast? At least I got your killer, Sally. At least.

Then shots rang out, bullets whistling over my head, pounding the reptile. The water reddened and the crocodile was carried away to feed the sharks. The current threw me against a rock and I made landfall. I looked up and saw several men in combat fatigues with rifles. They clambered over the rocks and strong hands lifted me to shore.

My heart beat a lament and fresh salty tears flowed down my disappointed face. Back to hell.

INTO THE GROUND

Blake's funeral, with all the tears, uniforms and stiff upper lips, was mercifully brief. Jane and Clive paid their respects to Blake's wife, who planned to remarry as quickly as convention would allow. She played the widow, yes, but she could think only of Blake's ultimatum the month before. I'm having a midlife crisis, he said, so if I don't get a sports car, I'll have an affair. Jane caught this anger, couldn't look her in the eye.

The reception took place at Blake's favourite pub in the forest, where three East End gangsters lay decaying in shallow graves on the grounds. Jane drank coffee, Clive had just the one vodka. Then one more.

They left then, drove in silence to the crime scenes at the forensic science lab. In the car park, King discussed strategy.

'I'm going to grill Fortescue, Karen too, while you take a look at Bunk's secret experiments, yeah?'

'I don't believe he had anything to do with them.'

'Yeah? Well prove it then. If Fortescue doesn't talk, I'm going to take him in to rattle him.'

'On what grounds?'

'I'll make something up.'

'Make sure you check out their level of interest in organised religion.'

'Oh, don't worry. That's top of my list. I put Karen's Saudi link into the terror system.'

'Oh?'

'Red flags galore. They'll be all over her now and we won't even see them, but we're free to continue with our investigation. See if you can tie her to the radiological theft, will you?'

'Of course. You seem to have warmed to Bunk?'

'I have something in common with him now.'

'You're an alcoholic?'

‘Okay, two things. I’m also an atheist.’

‘So what are you thinking?’

‘Is it just coincidence that Bunk’s pal was blown up the day after he got this mystery sample from Anna?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And that Blake’s killer’s address is a church in Italy? Come on. There’s something here.’

His name.

‘I really hope so.’

Then ‘How are you,’ he asked, gently. He’d always been jealous of Blake and his perfect life, career and mistress. Hid it well.

Blake was gone.

Jane let out a deep breath. ‘I’m okay. Thanks for asking.’

‘Drink later?’

‘Okay’

‘Good. Let’s get something.’

Security was noticeably tighter on the way in and, while Clive went to the office suites, Jane found herself in the dank, deserted corridors in the bowels of the sprawling establishment.

The fetid stink around the rodent breeding room was offensive, more so when you knew its origin. She hurried to the room that housed the old x-ray machine, was greeted by a uniformed officer who noted her arrival on his clipboard. Jane opened her camera and sample bag, put on her examination gloves.

Inside, task lights ringed the machine and a team of investigators were at work on its guts. This wasn’t expected.

‘Hello,’ said Jane hesitantly.

A technician nodded and walked to her, pulling down her respirator.

‘You are?’ she said.

‘Jane Archer, Crime Scene Manager, Epping.’

She showed her ID.

The woman grunted, said ‘Scotland Yard. What’s your involvement?’

‘Working on the murder of Bunk’s wife. I’d hoped to eliminate him from the radiological theft.’

‘Fine. You’re welcome to observe, but we won’t have anything for a few hours. We’ve got some low-copy DNA from inside. We’re trying to build on it and see if there are any fibres or whatnot.’

‘Very good. I’ll leave you to it and have a look at the other scene.’

‘Other scene?’

‘The lab where Bunk was allegedly working on illegal cloning.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Are your people there too?’

‘No. That’s not relevant to the investigation. It’ll all be legal in a couple of years, anyway. Work away but advise me of any developments. Understood?’

‘Yes. Thanks,’ said Jane weakly, her confidence having sagged in the face of this no-nonsense operator from a higher level. Is that what I need to become to advance my career? she wondered as she made her way to the secret lab.

Again, a uniformed officer wrote down her details and let her in to the frightening place.

Jane stood in the middle of the room for a long minute. The quiet horror of the experiments challenged her. Are you strong enough for this? On your own?

‘Where to begin?’ she said to the room.

Then she checked her digital SLR camera, assessed the light, began taking photographs. It was a useful way to examine the place, the camera acting as a filter, a protective screen. Perhaps by committing the reflected light to digital memory protected her from their immediacy? Anyway, she managed to ease in to the task, detach herself from the reality of the subject matter.

With the scene mapped, she paused again. A quick dusting of a couple of specimen jars revealed no prints, just the smears that latex gloves leave behind. As she’d expected. There was a flash outside, followed by a rumble in the distance. The forecast had been for heavy rain and every resident in the south east had prayed for it. The rain would rinse the streets of radiation, leaving just St Paul’s to be cleaned from the inside. Heavy droplets pounded the small, high windows and the daylight was lost.

‘Thank God,’ said Jane.

She paused. There were two competing propositions here, that Bunk was responsible for all this madness or that somebody was setting him up. The framework of circumstances pointed to Bunk, but too easily. She needed to prove that somebody else was in the lab, then apply Bayes' Theorem of statistical probability.

She went into the small office off the lab, photographed the papers on the desk, spotted the little kettle in the corner, the jar of instant coffee, the mug which hadn't been washed.

There were dregs in the bottom of the mug, a film of mould thriving on the milky carbohydrates. Bingo. She used a swab to sample the mould. This would allow her to approximate how long ago the mug had been used. Then she swabbed the rim, smiling at the knowledge that dried saliva and cells from the drinker's mouth could be easily isolated.

After dusting the mug handle and finding an excellent thumb print, she labelled her samples and brought them to the Met specialist to ask for a quick analysis.

OF THE NATURE OF THINGS

BY TITUS LUCRETIUS CARUS, 50 BC

EXCERPT FROM BOOK I

Whilst human kind

Throughout the lands lay miserably crushed
Before all eyes beneath Religion- who
Would show her head along the region skies,
Glowing on mortals with her hideous face-
A Greek it was who first opposing dared
Raise mortal eyes that terror to withstand,
Whom nor the fame of Gods nor lightning's stroke
Nor threatening thunder of the ominous sky
Abashed; but rather chafed to angry zest
His dauntless heart to be the first to rend
The crossbars at the gates of Nature old.
And thus his will and hardy wisdom won;
And forward thus he fared afar, beyond
The flaming ramparts of the world, until
He wandered the unmeasurable All.
Whence he to us, a conqueror, reports
What things can rise to being, what cannot,
And by what law to each its scope prescribed,
Its boundary stone that clings so deep in Time.
Wherefore Religion now is under foot,

And us his victory now exalts to heaven.

PRISONER

The cold muzzle of an assault rifle pressed against the back of my skull.

‘Easy,’ I said, raising my hands, expecting a beating.

‘Arriba! Levantaté!’

Spanish? Could it be? My heart sang. Up.

I pushed myself up and turned to face my captors.

Five soldiers, one a woman, crouched at the edge of the trees. Their Kalashnikovs were aimed at me and, though I was the focus of their attention, they kept glancing skywards. The storm had moved quickly west into the Gulf of Mexico and the winds had died dramatically, though the rain was still heavy.

Their officer beckoned me towards him and I obeyed. They gathered around me and brought me deeper into the cover. After a few minutes’ walk up a slippery path, we came to a temporary camp, a camouflaged hut in the lee of a small cliff face giving some shelter. The officer pointed to a tarpaulin on the ground and I gladly collapsed in a heap.

He looked at me in some confusion.

‘Musulmán? Ah, Muslim?’

‘No. I’m atheist. From England. William Bunk,’ I answered. Then ‘Thanks for saving me from that crocodile.’

He nodded, thought about what I’d said. ‘Ateo? Atheist? This is no good. Stay.’

He went to the soldiers outside, gave some orders and they melted into the trees, just the woman staying at the doorway, her gun trained on me. I assumed they would just hand me over to the Americans but, you never know, Cuba was an atheistic society. And they hated the American abomination on their soil.

The officer took a field radio from a satchel which hung from the roof. He spoke quickly to an operator, so quickly that I could only make out a few words. Anyway, I assumed his language was coded, as the Americans would surely be listening in to every communication in the environs of

their tropical hell. He ended the conversation and turned to me.

‘Coffee?’

‘Please.’

He took a large flask from the bag and filled the top cup with strong black coffee. He gave this to me, then filled the smaller inner cup for himself.

‘Cigarette?’

‘Thank you.’

Sitting on the ground in that hut, the rain pounding off the corrugated iron roof, the sky brightening outside, I felt positive for the first time in, I don’t know, how long was in Guantánamo? Even the rifle pointing at my head didn’t take from the feeling of warmth that was spreading through my guts.

I assumed that the officer had contacted HQ for orders. What would you do if you captured the first escapee from Guantánamo? I would shit myself, fearful of the American military onslaught that must be due.

A soldier ran to the hut.

‘Capitán! Zumbido!’

‘Shit,’ said the captain to me. ‘They’ve sent up a drone to find you. It will be armed.’

He seemed more tense now, his ears concentrating on the sounds from above. There, cutting through the fading wind was the unmistakable whine of a low jet engine. It grew louder and I held my breath until it faded.

‘It will follow an automatic search pattern,’ he said. ‘We need to move soon, get away from the coast.’

‘Aren’t they flying in Cuban airspace?’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘The pigs care nothing for us. They would invade Cuba in a moment. But we can make it difficult for them,’ he smiled. ‘Like in Iraq, you know? Guerrillas.’

I finished my coffee, which was the best cup I’d had in my life. He poured the dregs from the flask into my cup and I said ‘Gracias’.

‘Come on, idiots,’ he said to the radio as the drone came near again.

Another soldier came to the hut, gave his report and was gone again.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘Not very good. There are gunboats in the bay and helicopters in the sky. They want you back.’

‘I suppose their pride is hurt.’

‘Why were you in Guantánamo?’

‘I was framed for that bomb attack in London. I had nothing to do with it.’

‘St Paul’s?’ he said, his eyes widened.

‘Yeah. Trust me, that’s the last thing I’d do. I don’t know why they have it in for me.’

‘You are a curious man, William Bunk.’

His radio beeped and he grabbed the receiver. He listened intently, nodding. Having received his orders, he turned to me.

‘Take off your suit. I’m taking you to Havana. Radio silence now.’

He barked a command at the wide-eyed sentry and she ran off to gather the squad. Then he helped me to get out of my prison uniform and introduced himself as Captain Guerrero. He packed my jumpsuit into his satchel with the flask and radio. His squad assembled outside the hut, crouching low under any available cover. He ordered one of the men to give me his camouflage jacket. It was warm and dry and I didn’t care about my bare legs, I was just happy to no longer be a prisoner. I felt good about how events had turned. The captain unfolded a map, instructed the squad about the route we would take.

The drone approached again and everybody froze. We caught a glimpse of it through the trees, a grey, ugly shape, twin Hellfire missiles clinging to its fuselage.

After it disappeared, the captain looked into my eyes, said ‘No funny business, okay?’

‘Don’t worry. I’d love to see Havana again.’

‘Good, let’s go.’

He sent two scouts on ahead and we followed slowly, maximising our use of cover.

‘Does that thing have infra-red,’ I asked, nodding to the sky.

‘The Predator? Yes, but it’s not so good in the jungle. But we need to reach safety by nightfall.’

The trail through the dense undergrowth had been worn away by Cuban patrols since Guantánamo Bay was taken by America in eighteen ninety-eight. They had been keeping an eye on events in the illegal US naval base ever since and particularly since things had gone out of control

since nine-eleven. A cheque for rent is sent to Havana every year – worth about four thousand dollars – but Castro just curses and stuffs it in an office drawer, so the story goes.

‘Havana’s a long way north,’ I said. What’s your plan?’

He paused a moment before answering with a shrug of his shoulders.

‘We pick up a truck and travel west, to our base at Santiago de Cuba. From there, we will be transported by helicopter to the capital. Okay?’

‘Sounds good to me.’

We trudged through muddy pools and I picked up a couple of leeches on my legs. The old cigarette trick did the business and only hurt a little. The going got tougher then, as we slowly ascended a ridge. Near the top, we met our scouts who were lying in a dense growth of sunflowers.

Lying on our stomachs beside them, the panorama below us was spectacular. The natural bay was chiselled out of the high surrounding hills. I was handed a pair of binoculars. There was the airfield, there the naval ships at anchor, there was the camp itself. I could see that damage had been done to many of the lighter buildings and there was a lot of activity at the fence. There was the bus, still hanging over the twisted wreckage. Helicopters were flying low over the area – I counted four – and small naval vessels were concentrating their search in the sea immediately beyond, inspecting debris, looking for my body. The Predator whined up and down the coast but there was no evidence that ground troops had yet been deployed.

The hurricane was a dirty black smudge on the western horizon and the sun’s disc could now be seen through the high cloud, just a few degrees above the storm.

The captain nudged my shoulder, pointed to an imposing mountain range to our north.

‘The Sierra Maestra Mountains,’ he said. ‘That is where Fidel and his rebels issued their manifesto. Where the Revolution was born.’

Then he ordered us onwards, quickened the pace. The going was easier as we descended the far side of the ridge, though I slipped and bumped my arse a few times. Still, I didn’t moan about the bruises, reminding myself that this was far preferable to a waterboarding session with the Gitmo commander.

After an hour or so, we came to a potholed road. There was nobody around, just a few battered shacks and a lean dog, who watched us curiously as we lay under some low palms.

The captain checked his watch.

‘What are we waiting for?’ I asked.

‘The truck that dropped us off this morning should be here by now. Possibly the storm has blocked the road. Shit. We give it thirty minutes.’

The sun broke through then, happy to roast the island for at least an hour before it went to bed. The punishing heat caused the puddles to evaporate rapidly and clouds of steam engulfed us. I was almost asleep when a burning sensation on my bare calf startled me and forced me to change position so that the sun had no direct access to my skin.

Time passed and there was still no sign of our collection. Wait, a distant coughing groaning, the sound of an old engine, a big one. But a military truck didn’t come round the bend, more of a hallucination.

The fifty-seven Chevrolet, all fins and shimmering chrome, bright pink with rust spots all over, chugged towards us. Captain Guerrere stepped out of hiding and held his hand out, palm up. The driver creaked to a halt beside us and the captain spoke with him.

The car idled while the captain ordered two of the squad to wait for the truck while the other four of us would take a lift to Santiago.

‘He doesn’t know if the car can make it,’ smiled Guerrere, ‘but we must try. I don’t like sitting here.’

‘Agreed,’ I said.

Because the rear doors were too rusty to use, we stood exposed on the road for a long minute while the front passenger seat creaked forward and we clambered in. I sat in the middle, crushed between the female soldier and her corporal, their guns and gear filling the roomy car beyond capacity. The captain sat in front, the driver staring at me with surprise and amusement, a mouth full of shining white teeth, a wide smile and VIVA FIDEL embroidered on his ragged hat. He enquired as to my identity and the captain told him to shut up and drive.

We shuddered forward, the car picking up speed with difficulty. Once we got towards forty miles an hour, the engine seemed happier with the heavy load and sang. A faded Che Guevara pennant fluttered from the rear view mirror. I stared at the road through a rust hole in the floor and every mile away from Guantánamo made me feel better and stronger. I became hypnotised by the motion blur and the driver turned on the AM radio, picking up a local station’s guitar strums and clicking rhythms. Every spring in the car gave accompaniment. For a time, I felt that I had been

delivered from hell into paradise and my brain began to analyse and cope with my bizarre experiences.

Then a sensation on the back of my head, a tingle that made me turn with difficulty and look down the road behind us. Nothing but steam and plant matter. I turned back to the blurred road, but the tingle remained. I looked back again, looked to the sky. There, high up, a small aircraft bearing down on us.

‘The drone!’ I shouted as a silent flash underneath the Predator signified that a twenty pound laser-guided high explosive warhead was hurtling towards us at over nine hundred miles an hour.

HEAT

Karen had tried to take on some of Bunk's workload since he was sacked. Fortescue was very understanding, made her working days easy. She had taken Bunk's office and understood that she would be promoted soon enough. She had two assistants and was technically capable of the job. But she found it difficult to focus, her concern at the increasing police interest always at the front of her mind.

Her phone beeped.

'Detective King here to see you,' said reception.

'Thank you, please send him down,' she said, then 'Shit, shit, shit,' when she'd hung up.

A quick prayer and some deep breaths and she was kind of ready for him. She called Fortescue but he wasn't at his desk. She opened her desk drawer and used a little mirror to fix her face, check her best weapon. Then the double rap on her door.

'Come in.'

'Hi again,' said King. 'I just have a couple of things to follow up, if that's okay.'

His police manner, feigning embarrassment like some sort of Columbo, grated on her.

'Of course, Detective. Please sit down. Would you like a coffee?'

'No thanks,' said King, wanting another vodka.

'So how can I help you?'

'We're just trying to tie up the Bunk case.'

'Have you found him yet?'

'No, not yet. He's gone to ground somewhere. In the city, I imagine. Have you heard from him? Email or anything?'

'Not a word. I don't think I'll be hearing from him again.'

'Why not?'

'We were having an affair. I finished it the day he got sacked.'

‘How did he take that?’

‘Not very well. He was angry. He said that he was leaving his wife to be with me and now everything was messed up.’

‘How long were you two together?’

‘I’d worked with him for six months and our affair started about two months ago.’

‘Did his wife know about this?’

‘He said that she had her suspicions, that was all.’

King made notes, changed tack to religion.

‘Okay, about your religion – ’

She shifted in her seat, leaned forward, her elbows on the worn desk.

‘I’m not a practising Muslim,’ she interrupted. ‘I don’t like the misogyny, you know? I only became aware of it after arrived in England. Back home, you can’t see the wood for the trees kind of thing. You know?’

‘Yes, I can see that. So you don’t go to the mosque or anything like that?’

‘Into the female section? Please. Some of the habits, the Pillars of the Faith are hard to break. So I do sometimes look at my Qur’an and I might pray sometimes. But that’s all.’

‘How do you feel about Islamic fundamentalism?’

‘Al-Qaeda? They are insane, of course.’

King stayed quiet, eased back in his chair as she spread her palms on her desk. Karen took a breath, composed herself expertly.

‘I don’t agree with terrorism,’ she continued, ‘even if there are justifiable reasons for it.’

‘Such as?’

‘Such as American foreign policy.’ She paused again, remembered her experience growing up in Saudi Arabia, the hated regime kept in place only by its premier oil customer. ‘The Saud family claims to be the defender of Islam in the land of the two Holy Places. In reality it is a dictatorship, bloated with dollars, fat from perversion.’

Christ, thought King, we’ve got a live one here.

‘Most neutral observers would agree with that viewpoint,’ he said. ‘I mean we’ve sold them, I don’t know, fifty billion’s worth of weapons in the last two decades. And that’s hypocrisy of the highest order. But would you agree with an armed insurrection if it overthrew the Saud regime?’

Karen thought about her answer for only a second.

‘As a woman, yes. Yes I would.’

King’s pulse quickened as he spotted the huge contradiction in her response. You’re al-Qaeda, he said to himself as he thanked her, shook her soft hand, quickly left the office.

LOOSE ENDS

The evangelical commando unit had been waiting for news from their commander. The days passed slowly, each member melting back into boring, Christian, white society, meeting nightly for target practice in the isolated warehouse. Plus prayer sessions and monitoring the media.

They had been caught off guard by the bomb attack in the city and were concerned about any possible overlap with their own mission.

Paul Patterson, the acting commander, an impatient Jehovah's Witness from Utah on his required service – ostensibly spreading The Word overseas – grew concerned when Link hadn't made contact after three days. He was preparing to activate the contingency plan, which entailed hiding their weapons and dispersing the unit, when a call came through from Washington.

'Bad news,' said Dr Ryan. 'I'm afraid Commander Link was killed in an accident.'

'Sir?'

'You're in command now, Patterson. Clear?'

'Clear, sir.'

'You've got a few loose ends to tidy up, and quickly. Details have been sent to your encrypted email address. Work with Noah for the first part of the mission. When you're done, disperse. Don't contact me again. Understood?'

'Understood,' said Patterson as the phone clicked. He'd been expecting this. He retrieved the email, the contents of which made his eyes widen momentarily.

Then Patterson returned to his task, finished assembling the suicide bomb belt, fused up the six kilos of C4 explosive and the extra quarter kilo on an extension lead so as to destroy the bomber's head.

'Okay,' he said, addressing the rest of the team, 'who's ready to go to heaven?'

PLANTATION BLUES

We had a handful of seconds before the missile struck.

‘There!’ screamed the captain, pointing to a dirt track just ahead and veering off to our right. The driver accelerated, struggled with the heavy steering, forced the complaining car onto the track in a cloud of stones. The rear end of the Chevrolet skidded around the turn and dense palms slammed against the side as the driver dropped screaming gears to regain control.

Then, the blast. A wall of orange erupted in front of us, the concussion shattering the windows, my face sprayed with water. The noise was so powerful, it didn’t register, my ears just ringing. The car juddered into the palms, stopped dead.

I was stunned. But I was alive. That manoeuvre had saved my life. I looked to my right. The woman was dead. To my left, the other soldier had his face in his hands and was crying. In front, the driver’s head was missing, his torso slumped forward. The captain turned around to me. His face showed fear.

‘Are you okay?’ he said. I couldn’t hear him, but understood what he was saying anyway.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Let’s move. It will come around for a second strike.’

My ears couldn’t hear the Predator, but I knew he was right. He tried his door, but it was jammed. So he climbed out and onto the roasted bonnet, cried as his hands burnt.

He fumbled for his pistol and used the butt to shatter the rear window, which had survived the Hellfire onslaught.

He shouted at me to get out. I rolled off the trunk of the car and fell into the welcoming cool of the muddy undergrowth. The other soldier was in shock, so the captain screamed at him, pointing to the sky and the malevolent shape that was coming towards us from the darkening eastern sky.

Eventually, the captain climbed up and grabbed the soldier’s hands. They came away from his face and exposed his cheekbones and an empty eye socket, flesh and skin hanging in ribbons.

The man's pain must have been incredible, his chest rising and falling with every laboured breath. His head rolled to the side, showing the blue-grey of brain where a chunk of skull had been taken by hot shrapnel. The captain visibly recoiled, whispering something as he withdrew his pistol and shot the soldier between the eyes.

Then he was beside me, in the muck and debris and the fallen banana trees, their blue bags fluttering in the last gasps of the storm.

The noise of the unmanned aircraft's jet engine was louder, but I didn't want to see it.

'Shouldn't we be moving?' I said.

'Mierda! The radio!' he cried as he pushed me and ran back to the smoking car. He glanced into the sky just as the missile was released. In three seconds, he'd grabbed his satchel and jumped back under cover.

He grabbed my shoulder and led me deeper into the plantation, stumbling forward, doubled over, the mud sucking at my bare feet.

Then the blast behind us, a direct hit on the car blew its atoms back to nineteen fifty-seven. The concussion wave threw us face first into the mud and I felt small fragments slice into my back.

The Predator zoomed by, its cameras scanning for me, shattered banana leaves defeating billion dollar technology.

'Are we alive?' I asked.

The captain looked at my muddy, bloody face and laughed. 'Yes, we are alive and that thing has no more missiles, only cameras, and they cannot hurt us.'

He scanned the sky with his binoculars, watched the Predator as it began to bank and come back for another look.

'It can carry up to six missiles,' he said, 'but it seems they didn't have time to load this one fully.'

'Thank fuck for that. How the hell did they find us?'

'Satellites,' he replied, spitting for effect, then 'Let's go. Stay under cover.'

As we stumbled from tree to tree, the captain told me that Predator units had four vehicles each, so we could expect some more company.

'They're evil fuckers,' I said.

'Don't move,' he whispered as it roared low over the attack site and began a search pattern

that had us at its centre.

‘A CIA man can sit in his air-conditioned room in Virginia, sipping his Coke, and drop a missile on someone who looks like Bin Laden in the Afghan mountains. This is modern warfare.’

Remembering the soldiers and the driver in the car - all shattered beyond identification - I said ‘But it still boils down to blowing human brains out.’

He nodded, beckoned me onward.

The density of the banana palms increased, the blue bags giving a surreal air to our desperate escape. The Predator’s whining engine grew more distant, but we both understood that it would only be minutes before another appeared. Then another.

‘I’m calling for help,’ he said. ‘Stay down.’

He found the radio, switched it to transmit, tried to make contact with somebody who could deliver us.

I tried a banana. Though it was a tad unripe, it tasted fantastic, fresh off the tree. I stuck a few more into my combat jacket’s outside pockets. Ramming a couple home, my fingers brushed against something. Cigarettes, a Cuban brand with a picture of a plantation on the pack. Of all things. The captain was talking away to a perspiring general, consulting the map on his lap, all the while watching the sky through the gaps in our cover. I tapped his arm and held up the smokes. Instead of giving me a yes or no, he dipped into his pocket and took out his Zippo lighter, which he tossed over.

I figured – correctly - that the smoke from a cigarette wouldn’t stand out to the eye in the sky, what with the hulk of our ride still blazing nearby. And it wasn’t dark yet, so the tropical sun rendered the heat from the cigarette irrelevant. It was a pleasant smoke, though on the bitter side and strong enough to bring on a coughing fit. Welcome nonetheless.

He finished the conversation, took a last look at the map before putting it back in his pocket.

‘They may send us some help,’ he said, making the universal cigarette gesture, two fingers in a V to his mouth. I gave him the pack and his lighter and he lit one too.

‘What can help us against that fucking thing?’ I asked, thumb in the air.

‘The Cuban Air Force has some good aircraft, Russian. But we are low on parts and fuel. If one of our decent planes can fly, they will send it. They have promised this.’

‘Do you believe them? Do you really think they’re going to risk all-out war for us?’

‘I don’t think that is what the Americans want. But they have deliberately crossed the line and killed our soldiers. Therefore it is our right to respond.’

‘Couldn’t agree more, mate.’

‘We must continue through the plantation to the warehouses. They are just over a kilometre north. There is open space there. A helicopter will pick us up in one hour.’

‘If they can get the gas?’

‘If they can get the gas. Vamos, let’s go.’

We made slow progress through the acres of bananas. The ground was a steady incline. This slope, combined with the stickiness of the ground, made my thighs burn. I was almost thankful when the Predator came round, as it gave a chance to fling myself into the muck and catch my breath.

I almost fell on top of a couple of men lying in the dirt, their eyes filled with fear.

‘Jesus!’

The captain pointed his gun at them, quizzed them in rapid Spanish.

Then ‘Vamos!’ he cried.

The Predator whistled into the distance.

‘Who were they?’

‘Plantation workers, checking for damage. The good news is that the rest of the area is deserted, all gone home before the storm hit.’

‘Just us, so.’

We continued on, eventually a huge rusting structure appearing through the palms. At the edge of the leaning rows of banana palms, we rested, saw that there was an open space - maybe a hundred yards across - before the ramshackle warehouse buildings could offer any shelter from the angry eye in the sky.

‘This is where the helicopter will pick us up,’ said the captain.

‘Should we hang on here?’ I asked, just wanting to sleep, maybe wake up back in my own bed, Sally beside me, warm and comfortable.

He looked west, saw that the sun was about to set. With no twilight at that latitude, it would be dark in minutes.

‘No. The heat detectors will pick us up. We must get into the building there. It will retain

heat for much longer. Also, the tarantulas and scorpions in here prefer to feed at night.'

No argument.

We listened intently for the Predator, found that the sky was quiet. It would be harder to spot in the fading light, so we decided to move.

'Wait until I get across and signal you,' he said.

'Roger.'

Hunched low, he crossed the open space quickly and reached an open doorway. At his signal, I followed. The ground was still slippery from the rain, dense clay with scrubby grass on top. I slipped and fell, just as a distant whining roar bounced into my consciousness. The captain was training his binoculars on the sky behind me, back over the banana palms. He saw six missiles hanging beneath the slow-moving machine.

'Hurry,' he called, 'this one's armed!'

'Oh fucking hell,' I groaned. 'I can't take much more of this.'

I pushed myself up, every muscle burning. But the fear of the drone kicked in and I lurched towards the building. The captain's face was blank as he watched the Predator. I would make it. Then his expression changed and the world exploded.

VIRUS

Anna spent a couple of days in Paris, unsure about continuing east. Part of her wanted to return to London, to find Billy. There were many other Londoners in Paris, having fled the attacks, fearing a nuclear bomb. They would hang around the cafes and galleries and walk in the parks until their money ran out. Some would never return home.

She monitored the news media and concluded that Billy was in deep cover. She emailed him more than once, but there was no reply. So she travelled home to Russia, to her tiny flat, to blinding sunshine, frigid air and hot, sweet tea.

She worked through the events since the Homo erectus finds, attempted to process the craziness into some kind of logical progression. The business side of her brain she occupied with viruses, reminded herself about their great mystery.

Virus, Latin for poison.

Viruses cannot reproduce outside host cells.

When a virus infects a cell, it uses the cell's own biomechanical assets to reproduce, often leading to the death of the cell.

The origin of viruses is – scientifically – unclear. They may have evolved from spare genetic material. They may have evolved from bacteria. Origin unknown.

Some scientists believe that viruses are neither alive nor dead. They are ghosts.

Biological cells contain DNA and RNA, the messenger. Viruses contain DNA or RNA.

Human DNA has twenty-five thousand genes. Influenza has eight.

Hepatitis, influenza, Ebola, HIV are viruses. And smallpox.

A virus is simply a piece of genetic material wrapped in a protein envelope. That's all.

In the same way that humans could not survive without symbiotic bacteria, are there any beneficial viruses? Nobody knows.

For all that science knows today, viruses may as well be from another planet.

Is it possible that viruses are the dominant lifeform on Earth?

DOGFIGHT

A missile flared and leapt from the drone. In the same instant, a MiG-29 Fulcrum fighter jet belonging to the Cuban Air Force swooped down behind the Predator. The pilot, a forty-seven year-old with a hatred of all things American, had been cleared to fire on drones, but not manned aircraft. Unless in self-defence.

With relish, he calmly waited for his helmet-mounted weapons sight to lock on. The whine confirmed that an R-73 Archer dogfight missile was ready and he released it with a flash of yellow smoke.

The MiG turned away in a gut-churning banking manoeuvre and the Predator exploded in a maelstrom of fire. As burning fragments rained down on the plantation, the MiG went hunting. The pilot prayed that the Americans would send up a jet to confront him, used his eyes and radar systems to seek out any airborne objects.

But the Hellfire missile was on its way to Bunk and Guerrere. Guidance was interrupted, in that the Predator was the platform for the distant controllers, but the original bearing was good enough. The missile slammed into a warehouse building, the rusting panels offering no resistance. Then the warhead struck a pallet of bananas which had been destined for St Petersburg.

FURNACE

As I reached the warehouse, the captain ran towards me. He screamed something, but the thunder of the missile drowned it out. He pushed me back on to the ground, covered me with his own body as the warhead exploded with the sights and sounds of Vulcan's furnace. The blast was, to an extent, muffled by the density of the bananas inside the warehouse. Their role was characterised by a wave of an intensely sweet smell that washed over us. The warehouse structure was flung into the air, corrugated iron clattering out of the sky like some giant robot's confetti.

The captain got off me, helped me to my feet. The heat. My bare legs were scorched, I could see blisters and blood.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

He turned around and showed me that his back was shredded.

'I'll be okay. I just hope the helicopter reaches us soon.'

But we were in the open, beside the smoking ruins of the warehouse, the blazing drone crackling and popping down in the plantation, close enough to smell its acrid cargo.

Off to the left of the warehouse was a low brickbuilt building which may have been an office or a canteen. We headed there, the captain waving to the unseen fighter pilot who continued to circle over us. I waved as well.

Then the sound of rotors, thumping the dark air, forcing the cicadas on the fringes of the plantation to sing louder, to the edge of my pain threshold. Fireflies hovered there too, lending a surreal air to the scene of jungle battle. The rich smell of night accentuated the scorched bananas, so much going on, my senses overloaded.

The helicopter appeared as we reached the building. Coming from the west, it flew at treetop height and dropped straight in to land. The young pilot spotted us and beckoned us forward. He looked scared, aware that he was a sitting duck for any Predators that evaded the fighter cover.

We ran to the helicopter - an ancient Russian job - and two crewmen lifted us on board. One

shout later, we lifted off and, skimming the trees, headed north.

As a crewman helped us to buckle our belts, he spoke to the captain, then joined his comrade at a window, scanned the sky.

The captain turned to me, shouted over the turbines.

‘They have received a report of American troop helicopters taking off from Guantánamo. I think we’ll be okay,’ he added, patting my trembling arm.

The MiG flew low, straight across our path, flicked on afterburners and streaked high into the sky. The pilot made radar contact with two helicopters which had just entered Cuban airspace. He requested permission to engage them. While awaiting a response, they turned around. He cursed.

That I would discover later. So I cowered in the corner, my shoulders rattling off the throbbing, rusty bulkhead. Outside, a silky moon rose in a sky which was as black as my mood. My skin crawled as I waited for a missile to slam into us, bring the whole sorry saga to a flaming conclusion. I waited, but it never came.

NIGHTFLIGHT

We flew for about an hour, my fear subsiding, the moon calming. The helicopter suddenly lurched down, its engine complaining as it fell into a small clearing in the jungle. I thought we were crashing, but, as the trees filled the view from the window, our rate of descent slowed and we eased in to a gentle landing.

‘Refuelling stop,’ said the captain. ‘let’s stretch our legs.’

I unbuckled my belt and tried to stand, but couldn’t. My knees had locked in foetal position. A crewman took my hands and helped me up. I shuffled forward and climbed down the fold-out steps with extreme difficulty. I felt like a man of ninety-one, like my grandfather in that stinking nursing home the day before he died.

The crewmen went a small hut that nestled under the trees and brought out a hand-operated pump on wheels. We walked to the far side of the clearing and smoked cigarettes.

‘How is your heart doing?’ asked the captain.

‘Better now, I think. Will they come after us?’

‘No. We’re safe now. They won’t invade Cuba just to get you back. Will they?’

He studied me. I asked myself the same question.

‘I doubt it,’ I said. ‘I’m not guilty of anything. All I can do is tell what a shithole Guantánamo Bay is. But that’s yesterday’s news.’

He smoked quietly, then held out his hand.

‘I forgot to say. Welcome to the Republic of Cuba.’

I shook his hand.

The pilot came and joined us for a smoke. After introducing himself to me, he entered an animated discussion with the captain, all hand gestures, swoops and explosions. The pilot kept glancing at me, mystified at my value.

I paced slowly about the clearing, staying well away from the refuelling operation, petrol

from a drum spurting into the helicopter. The hurricane was long gone, just a gentle wind then, thin clouds occasionally masking the moon.

Then it struck me that I was in the hands of a communist dictatorship and the Cubans, for all their easy Caribbean charms, banned political activity, murdered democracy activists, maintained prison camps every bit as odious as Guantánamo. I told myself that my position could not be worse than it had been when I woke up that morning. There was little chance that I would be killed. I figured my immediate future would consist of either being returned to the Americans or being toasted as an anti-imperialist hero. I felt that I couldn't deal with the unknown horror of anything in between.

The crewmen called and we were back on our way. I collapsed into an uneasy sleep, my burnt legs unbearably itchy.

I dreamt of fire and spiders and woke with a start when we touched down hard at a military base on the outskirts of Havana.

TAIL

Karen left the forensics lab early on Friday. King, waiting near the entrance in an unmarked car, saw her take a lift from a female colleague. He followed at a safe distance. When Karen was dropped at a tube station, the detective barely managed to park, toss his Official Business card on the dashboard and reach the platform as the train arrived.

He took a position at the far end of the carriage, read his Evening Standard as the train got more and more crammed with each stop. Liverpool Street was different, with access from above still closed off as the radiological scrubbing continued. King swore he saw a wry smile on Karen's face as she left the train and walked to the Circle Line platform. A tube screeched in after only a few minutes. When they disembarked at King's Cross and Karen hurried towards the Piccadilly Line northbound platform, King's stomach dropped as he glanced at the overhead network map.

Four stops would take them to Finsbury Park, home of the most radical mosque in Europe. He would be easily visible in the Muslim-dominated streets, would attract cruel glances, would feel anger.

As he expected she left the train at Finsbury Park Station, put on a long coat as she climbed the clattery steps, buttoned it up to her neck. Combined with the slacks she was wearing, she looked every inch the compliant female Muslim. A headscarf was quickly knotted around her as she reached the exit, completing the transformation.

King kept his distance, tried to look nonchalant as she went down the street towards the mosque. Already he was hearing indecipherable curses, already he was overwhelmed by the profusion of Arabic shop signage, already he was sickened by the stench from the halal meat shops.

'This isn't right,' he murmured.

Then a tug at his sleeve.

He turned, found a Muslim-looking man, long beard, shabby suit. King froze, lifted his right hand towards his shoulder holster.

‘I’m police,’ he said.

‘I know,’ said the man, raising his hand, which concealed an identification card. It read Scotland Yard and had his picture on it. ‘We’ll take it from here.’

‘Okay,’ said King, turning back to the tube station and the rush hour madness.

From across the busy street, the scene was watched by the occupants of a black jeep. Their plan was then activated.

THE PLEASURE OF SIMPLE THINGS

The captain thanked the helicopter pilot, then led me to the officer's quarters.

There was a lot of activity around the base, plenty of armed soldiers lounging about, many enquiring glances at the gringo who had triggered a hot war with America. Thankfully, the war had been mercifully brief, but who knew what morning would bring?

The base commander was waiting for us in a lounge area and he shook both our hands firmly, offered us comfortable chairs, ordered coffee and sandwiches. He chatted with the captain for a few minutes, taking notes, asking questions.

Then he turned to me and smiled. He had the look of the bad guy in a spaghetti western.

'Mr Bunk, is what you told Captain Guerrere truthful?'

'Yes.'

The coffee and sandwiches arrived. I sipped the strong hot drink and swallowed the salami and crusty bread without chewing. The commander picked up his phone and had a long conversation with his superior. You could tell by his manner in any language, all soft-spoken and deferential.

He hung up then and addressed me.

'You will both shower and rest now. We will speak in the morning. Okay?'

'Thanks.'

The captain was excused and brought me down a corridor of scuffed red linoleum to a room that had an armed guard standing outside. The guard stood to attention and the captain opened the door and brought me in to a plain room with a bunk and a shower unit with a transparent curtain in the corner. There was a bowl of fruit and a jug of water on a table.

'You will be comfortable here,' he said, gesturing to a pile of ironed garments on the bed. 'Take a shower, here are some fresh clothes.' He looked at my legs. 'If you need some medical attention, let the guard know.'

‘You might want to see someone yourself.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Thanks, Captain.’

‘It’s okay.’

He left and I ate a red apple, its complex, juicy sweetness sending a shiver down my spine. Then I took off my ruined clothes and sat down in the shower unit, let hot water roll over me for a good half hour. The simple pleasure of it was as intense as any experience in my existence. As the dirt and blood and sweat and smoke was rinsed away I felt purified, almost reborn, almost thanked God. The stress and tension of that terrible day dissipated. I washed my hair three times with a shampoo that smelled richly of coconut, then stayed under the water for another ten minutes.

My thigh muscles were a lot looser then, but I still found it difficult to stand. I dried myself with a thin towel and put on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. I savoured another apple. I lay on the bunk and, though I could feel the mattress springs and the pillow was no fatter than a paperback book, I enjoyed the most comfortable and refreshing sleep of my life.

But as I dozed off, gazing at the pregnant moon outside, the fear of Guantánamo returned. For there were bars on my window.

THE MORNING AFTER

Day came with heat, light and an insistent rapping at the door. Every muscle ached as I got out of bed and found the camp commander standing outside with a fresh guard, stiff and tough.

‘Good morning, Mr Bunk. You slept well?’

‘It was really lovely. Thank you.’

‘You are so welcome. Now. Can you get dressed and this man will take you for some attention before we speak?’

‘Okay.’

‘Good. See you at ten.’

He nodded to the guard, who saluted. I got dressed, baggy fatigue trousers and a loose white shirt. And more flipflops.

Then the soldier took me to a small medical room, where I was given a good examination by a pleasant, competent doctor. He put some burn ointment and dressing on my legs, said I’d be fine. Then he asked me stand against a wall and took my picture. Then he asked for my fingers and printed me with some sticky blue ink.

‘For our records, you understand?’

What could I say?

Then I was brought to the officers’ mess and given a plate of scrambled eggs, with toast, juice and coffee. It was tremendous.

Along the corridor again and into a large room with three men sitting behind a long wooden table. Ceiling fans rotated lazily above and a woman sat at a computer terminal.

The commander introduced himself and the other officers, all high-ranking from the swathes of multi-coloured ribbon and self-important fronts. The soldier stood to attention behind me as I took a wooden chair before my inquisitors.

‘Now tell us your story, Mr Bunk. From the beginning, please.’

I told it all, from the shudder of the blast in St Paul's to my arrival at the base just hours before. The woman typed everything. The officers took notes. They hung on my every word. When I was done, they asked some questions.

Who was the man who helped you to escape from the illegal American base?

Was Captain Guerrere ever hesitant in his actions?

Why would anybody want to frame you for a terrorist attack?

When the American drone first attacked, what was your situation?

What are your feelings towards the American military?

What are your feelings towards the Islamic faith?

I answered all these and more as truthfully as I could. They asked me to go and take a coffee while they discussed my case.

The soldier brought me back to the mess. When I asked for a cigarette, he got me a pack from the orderly and joined me for a smoke.

The guy's English wasn't great, but I learned that I was before a Military Tribunal of Inquiry. He was eager to learn more of my experiences escaping from Guantánamo and the contact between the MiG and the drone. I told him as much as I knew and he smiled at the idea that he wouldn't have to pay for any drinks that night, maybe all week.

After an hour in the lounge with water and coffee and Cuban cigarettes and more curious officers coming by to shake my hand, I was called for by the Tribunal.

Seated again, I was told that my case was unique, that the Americans were going crazy (loco!) to have me returned – loss of face – but that they had not made my escape public. This was to my advantage. So I would be kept under house arrest until the Cuban authorities made a decision on my future. I would be protected by Colonel Silvez of Military Intelligence and that was all.

The typist stood up, a small pistol tucked in a belt holster at her side, and put on her light suit jacket. She introduced herself to me as Colonel Silvez, said 'Let's Go, Senor Bunk.'

HEAVEN

Colonel Silvez was, naturally, beautiful. Though her face had a stern edge, that couldn't hide her almond eyes, her ripe lips, her sleek profile. Physically, I could just imagine what was under that formless linen suit. And I could imagine.

She led me across the square, which was alive with soldiers counting out rocket-propelled grenades, loading trucks, readying anti-aircraft batteries for travel.

'What's up?' I asked, squinting against the glare.

'I will get you some sunglasses. Reinforcements going south. If the Americans want to try anything more then we will make it difficult for them.'

'Shit.'

'Yes it is,' she smiled. 'But some day this situation must come to a head, no?'

'You're right, but wouldn't the regime crumble under an invasion?'

She didn't answer this, just pointed to a Spanish colonial style house, at the end of a row, at the far side of the square.

We passed through a checkpoint, the sergeant there watching me as he made a note in his logbook.

Up a slight hill to a small area of scrubby grass and wooden steps to a shaded veranda that ran along the fronts of the houses. Nice.

'This will be your home for now.'

The place was crumbling, but it had that faded elegance, that character of balconies, ornate grilles, exquisite detailing. She unlocked the front door, opened it for me onto a dusty hall that was filled with light.

'This is great. Compared to my last place, paradise.'

'Spanish officers lived here when they controlled Cuba during their imperialism. Then the American imperialists that controlled the Batista regime, they and their mafia partners stayed in

these houses. Now they are for officers, visiting dignitaries and – ’

‘And odd visitors like me.’

She laughed at this, led me upstairs to the living area. I stayed beside her on the stairs, though I was tempted to fall back. A wide room with ornate plasterwork around the ceiling and intricate tiled patterns on the floor, a dining table and a fat nineteen-fifties refrigerator. An open window, drapes fluttering in a fresh breeze. The view, a little of the base, some of the activity, but mainly the city of Havana with all its noises and smells stretching off, down to a sparkling turquoise sea.

‘Beautiful,’ I said.

‘Yes. There is rum and fruit and water in the fridge. The water from the taps is for washing only. You will eat with me in the officer’s mess. I will get you some sunglasses now. Is there anything else that you need?’

She’d caused me to consider sex, so then I thought of Anna.

‘Is there any way I could send an email, do you think?’

She looked surprised, then I realised why.

‘Internet access is strictly controlled here, like all media. If I request permission it will be denied.’

‘I didn’t realise.’

‘Realise that Cuba is very different to England.’ She turned to leave, paused. ‘Maybe not so different to the place you escaped from.’

Shit.

I sat on the balcony with a long rum, dopey in the shade. A layer of smoggy dust covered the cracked marble table. Absentmindedly, I ran a finger through it, rubbed the gritty dirt between thumb and forefinger, calmly watched a cockroach exploring the shadows on the floor. I realised then that my OCD had been cured by Guantánamo. Something, at least, to be grateful for. So I dozed with dirty fingers, oblivious to the bugs.

Waking hungry I ate some fruit and explored the bookshelves. Most of the work was in Spanish and by Castro, Guevara, Marx. Many books dated back to the fifties, proclaiming Cuba’s bright new future, free from the shackles of tyranny. That’s what I could glean, anyway. Some books in English, translations of Castro’s and the odd novel, mostly classics and, bizarrely, some

vintage science fiction. Then there was a stack of Time magazines from the nineteen sixties, so I grabbed a bundle of these and Philip K Dick's Ubik, topped up my drink and resumed my position.

My minder came in the afternoon, woke me with a hand on my shoulder.

'I thought you'd be resting,' she said.

'Any news?'

'Nothing. You are being discussed at the highest levels. We haven't admitted to holding you, so the Americans are simply bluffing and bullying. We say they murdered a peasant family, supplied photographs of the bodies. They have not yet supplied satellite images of you on Cuban soil. So – '

'So I'm stuck in the middle.'

'Purgatory?'

'I'm not into that stuff.'

'Ah yes, you are the militant atheist?'

'Jesus, you don't believe – '

She laughed then. 'I'm having a joke, William. Are you hungry?'

'I dreamt of steak. I really did.'

'Let's see what's on the menu.'

After a meal of ham and eggs and sweet potatoes in a quiet mess, I was offered a cigar and a rum by an officer who was desperate to hear my story.

Colonel Silvez was agreeable, so the man joined us, calling his friends over.

It was dark when we got back to the house, the sentry waiting outside.

'Would you like to come in for a drink?'

'Okay,' she said, no hesitation.

Sitting on the balcony, the city twinkling, the sea reflecting the moon, I felt her mood softening further.

'What's your first name, Colonel?'

'Helena.'

'Sounds European?'

'My ancestors came to Cuba from Denmark.'

'Ah, that explains it.'

‘Explains what?’

‘Your unique beauty.’

‘Stop it.’

‘No, I’m serious. You have this voluptuous Caribbean thing going on, that’s a given. But also some extra definition in your face. Have you ever seen your cheekbones?’

She drank her rum, smiled, sat back in the chair, put her feet up on the balcony railings.

‘Will you help me with something tomorrow?’ she asked.

‘Gladly. What is it?’

‘I’d like to get some more detail on the American base. You know, layout, defences, procedures?’

‘I’d been trying to erase all that from my memory. Yeah, I’ll help you any way I can.’

‘Good,’ she said, rising. ‘I’ll see you here around nine for breakfast.’

‘Do you have to go?’

She put her glass down on the table and I followed her through the living room.

‘I have work to do. Important work. You’ll find out soon what I’m talking about.’

FINSBURY

Karen made her way through the milling crowds of worshippers making their way to the mosque. Friday prayers always drew the largest crowds and police and demonstrations.

Today, the main discussion was about Danish media republishing cartoons of the Prophet. An angry speaker stood on an amplifier and screamed into a microphone. He talked about insult, corrupt Western values, the decline of so-called Western civilisation, the ascension of Islam. Karen loitered for a few minutes, enjoyed the sense of anger building in the crowd. Though Karen slotted easily into her role as secular independent woman, she couldn't see the irony of militants being allowed free speech to criticise the very system that protected that right.

'It will all come crumbling down,' she muttered, glancing around the crowd, waiting for her cell contact.

The police agent stood nearby, applauded the speaker, chanted in Arabic exactly when required.

Through the crowd approached a Christian man with a powerful bomb around his waist - plastic explosive enveloped in neat packs of four-inch steel nails for maximum shrapnel - a trigger in his sweaty hand. He wore a fake beard and the baggy ethnic clothing that helped him to blend right in.

Karen was unaware of her exposure. As the sole contact between the Christian and Islamic groups that had attacked St Paul's, she must have known that she could be seen as a loose end. But now, here, she was among her own.

Her contact came and stood beside her, greeted her with his eyes. The policeman spoke quietly into his cuff and armed officers waiting in nearby streets cocked their weapons, ready to move. Riot squads who were lounging near the mosque – fixtures by now – also heard the command, straightened up, ready to protect the snatch squad.

An ear-splitting call to prayer suddenly filled the air, a melodic screeching, carried for miles

by high-powered speakers. The demonstrators were instantly silenced by this and the distinct knots of angry men and women dissipated. Karen moved towards the mosque entrance with her contact. They would go to a meeting room while the prayers were conducted, as this was when the police would be least likely to search the building, with their false respect, procedures, unease.

The bomber pushed his way through the throng and got close to his target. Karen looked to the sky, admired the crescent gleaming over the minaret. Then her view of the crescent became suddenly skewed. For a fraction of a second her brain tried to recalculate her visual input, checking her inner ear balance system, reviewing past experience. That was when Karen's life flashed before her eyes. And she was dead.

When the bomb detonated, its position had been chosen to kill the designated target. That dozens of Muslims would also die was secondary, but welcome nonetheless. The Foundation was secure.

Detective King waited impatiently for a southbound Piccadilly tube, everything still messed up because of signalling works, bombs, suicides, all the usual.

Then he heard a muffled thud from outside, knew that another bad thing had happened. He dropped his paper and ran towards the steps and out into the black air. From the tube station entrance, he saw smoke rising from the mosque location, noticed that the minaret was missing. People were dazed, some lightly wounded, clutching their bleeding heads, wailing.

What to do? He wondered.

It was like Baghdad. Had the Sunni/Shia clash come to London?

A woman fell at his feet, her cheek badly gashed. King knelt down to help her, fumbled in his pocket for a handkerchief, used it to press down on her wound.

'It's okay,' he said. 'You'll be okay.'

She mumbled something to him, but his attention was elsewhere. The roar of an engine gunning, over-revving as it forced its way through the dazed crowd.

'What's this?' he said, expecting a police van.

No, the vehicle was leaving the scene of the blast, a black jeep. King managed to push through, caught a glimpse of it as it turned a corner. Gone.

But he caught the license plate.

VISITOR

I was in a sleep of the dead, having finished the rum when Helena left. My bed was comfortable, much better than the little cot down in the barracks. In the middle of a fractured dream, peasants offering burning bananas and bats in the night sky, I was shaken roughly.

I blinked into a pounding headache and saw Helena standing over me. In my confused stupor, I thought she'd come back to sleep with me.

'Helena. Hi.'

'Get up. Quickly.'

'What's up?'

'We must go. Now.'

I sat up, rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

'Can you tell me what's up?'

'They're handing you back to the Americans in the morning. It is as I feared.'

'What the fuck?'

I was fully awake now.

'The regime is so fragile, they can't risk any conflict. You're not important enough to give them leverage with America.'

'And they don't want to arouse the sleeping giant.'

'Exactly. Now get dressed. Size eleven?' she asked, handing me a pair of shoes.

As I struggled into my clothes and washed my face in a basin of tepid water, she explained that she'd gotten duplicates of my photos and had a passport made up, travel documents, everything.

'How?'

'I'm Military Intelligence. In a military dictatorship, I can do anything. A couple of innocent people have been released from custody. That's all it took.'

'Are the documents good?'

‘They’re the real thing. From the source,’ she said, handing me an envelope.

I looked at my new passport. Jesus Crista, citizen of the Republic of Cuba. Travel papers, allowing international travel, signed by the Minister of the Interior.

‘Jesus?’

‘I thought you’d like that. Pronounce it hey-zoos.’

‘Hey-zoos. Okay. So why are you helping me? What’s in it for you?’

She smiled, ‘I’m going with you.’

THE HYPOCRITE'S MANIFESTO

'We propose to all opposition political parties, all civic institutions, and all revolutionary sectors the following:

1. To create a civic-revolutionary front with a common strategy of struggle.
2. To designate as of now a person to preside over the provisional government, whose election will be left to the civic institutions to show the disinterest and impartiality of opposition leaders.
3. To declare to the country that due to the gravity of events there is no possible solution other than the resignation of the dictator and the transference of power to the person who has the confidence and the support of the majority of the nation, expressed through its representative organizations.
4. To declare that the civic-revolutionary front does not invoke or accept mediation or intervention of any kind from another nation in the internal affairs of Cuba. In contrast, it supports the denunciations of the violation of human rights made by Cuban emigrants before international organizations and asks the government of the United States that as long as the present regime of terror and dictatorship persists to suspend all arms shipments to Cuba.
5. To declare that the civic-revolutionary front, by republican and independent tradition, will not allow any type of provisional military junta to rule the Republic.
6. To declare that the civic-revolutionary front plans to separate the army from politics and to guarantee the apolitical nature of the armed forces. Military men have nothing to fear from the Cuban people, but it is the corrupt clique that sends them to their death in a fratricidal struggle.

7. To declare under formal promise that the provisional government will hold general elections for all offices of the state, the provinces, and the municipalities at the end of a year following the norms of the 1940 Constitution and the Electoral Code of 1943, and that power will be given immediately to the elected candidates.

8. To declare that the provisional government must adjust its mission to the following program:

- a. Immediate freedom for all political, civil, and military prisoners.
- b. Absolute guarantee of freedom of information, of the spoken and written press, and of all the individual and political rights guaranteed by the Constitution.'

- Excerpt from the Sierra Maestra Manifesto, Fidel Castro, 1957.

NIGHT FLIGHT

After Helena found some aspirin for me, we left the house. The sentry was away and she winked at me. We walked to the transport pool and she led me to an unmarked car, an old Russian model that I didn't recognise.

She drove us to the camp's main entrance, where there were four armed soldiers and a barrier. A corporal came to her side, saluted her. She chatted with him and then asked for my papers. I handed them across and he had a look with a flashlight.

As we left the base and drove down the hill to Havana proper, Helena explained that I was an agent of Military Intelligence and my identification would strike fear into ninety-nine percent of the Cuban population.

The city was quiet, the occasional military vehicle trundling by, small clusters of poor-looking locals standing around fires in oil drums. What I could see of the place wasn't impressive. Shanties would be a good description of the housing, everywhere with the jaded air of a banana republic with few friends in the world. On my holiday to Havana – a lifetime before – Sally and I had been free to explore the coastline, the beachfront bars, plenty of the old town. But when we left the beaten track, there would always – always – be somebody with police identification ready to politely ask us to turn back.

There was an air of gloom in the parts of town that we drove through, perhaps one in four streetlights functioning, rubbish piles at each corner. Two men stumbled from an alley, tried to flag us down. Helena pressed on the accelerator, almost struck them.

'Thieves,' she said. 'Many Cubans can only survive the blockade by extortion and corruption.'

'You would've been okay, surely?'

'I lived very well. My father was in Castro's brigade and he survived the purges that followed the revolution. So my life was relatively easy. But that was not enough, not any more.'

‘What changed?’

‘The Cold War ended. Without Soviet cash and machinery, the regime turned inwards. Yes, Chavez is our friend now, but that’s not enough. The regime has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, the revolution is over. Soon it must die.’ She looked at me, bit her lower lip, shook her head. ‘I thought you would be our saviour, force the Americans to take decisive action.’

‘When did you hear they planned to hand me back?’

‘I’m surprised it took so long. I ordered your papers after your tribunal yesterday – ’

‘Nice work.’

‘And when I left you last night, I checked with my contacts in administration. The orders to seize you were being typed up. I acted. They’re probably at the house by now.’

‘What’s our plan?’

‘We need to get on a flight. Immediately. There’s a plane to Moscow at three-thirty.’ She glanced at her watch. ‘We can make it.’

‘What about tickets?’

‘I have US dollars, the real Cuban currency.’

We skirted the city, heading southwest along a decent highway. We passed more traffic then, including the occasional fifties classic like the one the drone had obliterated. There were open back trucks with peasants or fruit harvests, tourist coaches, military vehicles.

José Martí International Airport – named, she told me, after the national hero of Cuba, a writer and poet who led the late nineteenth Century independence movement against Spanish rule – suddenly broke through the night gloom. Red lights flashed atop the control tower and, as we drove parallel to a runway, a large jet howled in to land, Air Canada.

We drove to a multi-storey car park near terminal three. As she pocketed the parking ticket and locked the car, I worried about our cover.

No need. She opened the truck and took out two midsized bags.

‘This is yours. Underwear, clean shirts, a book of Castro ramblings.’

‘I can’t speak Spanish, you know?’

‘Just keep your mouth shut. Let’s go, we’re running out of time.’

Security at the entrance was scared by our papers and, after getting our tickets – Aeroflot to Moscow, one refuelling stop at Shannon - without hassle, I felt we were clear.

We made our way through the quiet terminal building to final security and boarding zone. I love airports at night, that otherworldly feeling, the knowledge that the new day will come in a different place.

Helena did all the talking, the guards stiffened, my passport barely checked. In a military dictatorship, you don't question the dictators.

The flight was boarding, but we had a couple of minutes for a coffee and a cigarette.

'This is all going very smoothly,' I said.

'As long as none of the guards bother to call in our presence, we'll be fine.'

'Would that be standard?'

'You still don't get Cuba, do you? Cubans are brainwashed into reporting anyone doing anything out of the ordinary. That's how the state functions. It's just like East Germany in the bad old days.'

'Is that why you're leaving?'

'Part of me has wanted to leave for many years. Inertia held me. You rocked the boat, gave me the push I needed.'

'Oh?'

'You escaped from Guantánamo. Don't you realise how amazing that is? You deserve to get off this shitty island.'

There was a final call announcement, in Russian, Spanish, English.

'That's us,' I said, draining the chipped cup, pressing the butt into the ashtray.

'So how will you use your notoriety?' she said, stubbing out her cigarette, our knuckles brushing. 'Write a book? Go on TV?'

'I think I'll keep a low profile for a while.'

A couple of armed guards loitered by the boarding gate, paid us no attention. Twenty minutes later we hurtled into the sky, Cuba a fading nightmare, the black Atlantic below.

WHERE TO GO?

The brandisht Sword of God before them blaz'd
Fierce as a Comet; which with torrid heat,
And vapour as the Libyan Air adust,
Began to parch that temperate Clime; whereat
In either hand the hastning Angel caught
Our lingring Parents, and to th' Eastern Gate
Led them direct, and down the Cliff as fast
To the subjected Plaine; then disappeer'd.
They looking back, all th' Eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late thir happie seat,
Wav'd over by that flaming Brand, the Gate
With dreadful Faces throng'd and fierie Armes:
Som natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon;
The World was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
Through Eden took thir solitarie way.

- Paradise Lost, John Milton, 1674 (Excerpt)

COLD AIR

There was no warm Irish welcome at Shannon, just a sunless afternoon, cold drizzle filling the air. We left the plane as the refuelling tankers pulled up. The change in climate was a shock at first, but I gulped in the air, enjoyed the sensations as my spine shivered and my body hair stood on end. Nearly home.

‘It’s freezing,’ said Helena, laughing, taking my arm as we walked across the runway apron and towards a cordoned restaurant area, no passport control. ‘I’ve never felt actual cold.’

‘Welcome to the free world,’ I said, delighted at this contact with her, my mind trying to work out if I’d be better off slipping away here, then taking a ferry across to Wales, no passport controls between Ireland and Britain. Bizarrely. ‘Is this your first time in Europe?’

‘My first time outside Cuba,’ she answered, inhaling loudly through her nostrils. ‘It smells different, very different.’

A bored security guard stood by the entrance to the terminal building, a couple of cameras panned the crowd. Illegal immigrants would be the big concern and, as we queued for Irish coffees, I dismissed the idea of making a break for it. The system would see me as an illegal Cuban immigrant. I wouldn’t make it home.

‘Shit,’ I said as Helena paid for our drinks and a couple of prepacked ham sandwiches.

‘What is it?’

We took a seat by a long window, a little bit warmer there than outside.

‘I’m wanted for murder. I’d bloody forgotten that. And St Paul’s. I’d been half-thinking about making a run for it here.’

She inhaled the steam from her drink, said Aaah!

I drank from mine, scalding the roof of my mouth, that damned cream layer always deceiving.

‘I don’t know what kind of reception we’ll get in Russia. You could be better off here.’

‘Shit. I don’t know what to do.’

‘Do you have any friends in Russia? Anyone who could help?’

‘Anna. She might be there.’

‘Girlfriend?’

‘Sometimes. She’s a scientist, interested in DNA and stuff like that.’

‘You have something in common.’

‘Yeah,’ I smiled, just thinking about her again. Was I in love?

There was an internet terminal nearby and I begged a Euro coin from Helena, promised to pay her back for everything, made her memorise my email address, made her swear to stay in touch so I could pay her back. At some point in the unknowable future.

I logged into my email account and, seeing the messages from Anna, my decision was made. I replied to her, told her I would be in Moscow in a few hours, would contact her by email, my heart giddy. I signed off with I want your sex, so she’d know it was really me. I figured the police back home would probably see this traffic, didn’t care.

The one minute warning flashed on screen. I was out of time and out of cash.

Another message, almost lost in the spam. Frank. A voice from the grave, sent after the fog, so long ago, to a different me. I opened it, saw that it contained a couple of oddly-titled and lengthy attachments. He wrote This is important, Bill.

FINDING NOAH

After the Finsbury blast, when the emergency services had things under control, King got away. He couldn't face the tube, took a cab back to base. On the way, he called in the license number from the jeep, actually crossed his fingers.

'Fucking Muslims,' sneered the cab driver. 'Bringing their shit over here.'

'A lot of dead women and kids back there,' said King, his adrenalin only now dissipating, the shock hitting. 'You mind if I smoke?'

'Not allowed, mate.'

'I'm a cop. You won't get into trouble.'

The driver took a good look at him in the mirror, said Go on then.

King smoked and the driver turned up the radio, live reports on the latest bombing. The sense of panic in the reporters' voices was palpable. London was on its knees, no end in sight.

'Who do you think did it?' asked the driver. 'Them bloody Iranians?'

'Could be. Finsbury's a Sunni mosque. The attack could be connected to Iraq or the whole nuclear processing thing.'

'Well, if you can prove it was them Iranians, I say bomb the bastards back to the Stone Age.'

King said 'It's out of my hands.'

They drove on, the naked racist anger - calls for revenge and declaration of war - from the radio matching the driver's. Society is being changed by all this, thought King. Is that the bombers' objective?

In the station, the team was gathered around the TV again.

'Fuck,' they said when they saw the state of King. 'You okay, Clive?'

'I'm not hurt, just a bit shook up.'

'You want to wash that dirty Muslim blood off you,' said a young detective.

The others agreed. The change had happened. Jane came in then, took his arm and brought him to the locker room.

‘Get out of those clothes, Clive. You’ll feel better. Any open cuts on your hands?’

King looked at his hands, saw the dried blood, remembered the cigarette, cursed himself for risking hepatitis or HIV for the sake of an injured woman. A Muslim woman. Now it’s happening to me, he accepted with a distinct malaise.

He washed and changed into fresh clothes from his locker. Then he checked his gun, a Glock automatic, felt he’d be using it again soon.

Back in the office, the license plate search had turned up something.

‘Looks like it’s registered to a business in Linkway Business Park. They import aquarium equipment, mainly from the States,’ said the detective hunched over the PC.

‘Where’s Linkway?’

‘Off the M25. And here’s the good news. It’s in our jurisdiction.’

‘Let’s get organised,’ said King. ‘I want an anti-terrorist weapons unit to back us up.’

‘They’re on the way already, Clive. I had to flag the search as terror-related to get into the system. The Yard are all over it, but they’ll let us lead.’

‘Fine,’ said King, suddenly weary. He gave orders to his team, asked Jane to come along, expecting to find something important, some missing link at Linkway.

As the room buzzed with weapons and bravado, King brewed a fresh pot of coffee, touched Jane’s nervous hand.

‘You’ll be fine,’ he said.

‘I don’t know, Clive. I don’t know any more.’

The armed unit was on-site, just inside the entrance to Linkway, in two unmarked vans when King’s team arrived in three cars.

King met the commander, who wore blue fatigues, body armour and helmet, carried a Heckler & Koch submachine gun. They sat in the leading van’s cab and looked at a satellite shot of the target building, a standard warehouse unit at the far end of the estate. Yes, a black jeep parked round the back.

‘There’s a good fence all around, so the only escape is right here,’ said the Yard man. ‘Your

guys will set up a block while we neutralise the location. Okay?’

‘Fine,’ said King. No point arguing.

‘One of my teams will enter by the rear, through this loading bay. The other will go straight in the front door.’

‘What are you expecting?’

‘Best case, some scared secretaries and a lot of fish tanks. Worst would be an al-Qaeda cell preparing their next attack. My men will operate according to the new procedures, shooting first, questions later. Everything clear?’

‘Crystal. Good luck.’

‘See you inside.’

The vans drove slowly into the office park while King ordered two of his cars into blocking position across the entrance. With Jane, he waited in his idling car outside, chainsmoking. In case anyone connected turned up, spotted the activity, drove off.

The anti-terrorist units took up position at the drab building, a standard steel cladding job. The commander noting a sign at the front door, NO PUBLIC ACCESS. He looked inside the frame of the aluminium and glass doorway, tried the handle. Locked. The ram wasn’t suited to such a door, so he nodded to the lock expert, who slung his weapon and opened a little leather tool holder. Within seconds, the door was open and contact made with the team around the back.

Go.

Paul Patterson, idling before the PC monitor, had no time to react when the armed police officers entered the rear space. Alone in the warehouse, considering the move on Noah, he realised that he had been foolish, lazy.

All he could do was to reach for the detonation switch which would vaporise the unit, destroy all evidence. It was tentatively close, just there on the edge of his desk. Freeze? No, I’ll do this.

Four bullets smashed into the right side of his skull, tore his amazed brain to pieces, pulled some pulsing bloody fragments out the exit holes. His fingers twitched, just short of the trigger. Another officer fired two bullets into the man’s forehead. Just to be sure.

Patterson’s body was kicked off his swivel chair and onto the floor while the rest of the building was carefully searched and found to be secure.

King had heard the gunshots, just muffled thuds and was relieved when the radio crackled, received an all-clear call.

He waved at the roadblock cars to move aside and drove with Jane to the scene.

Some members of the armed unit were outside with their helmets off, smoking. A few scared office workers were clustered at the entrances of the nearby office units. There would be no more electrical generators reconditioned, no more life insurance calls made, no more letterheads printed, no more busywork that afternoon.

King drew his pistol, reholstered it at a shake of a sergeant's head. The sergeant held up one finger. One casualty, most certainly dead.

The entrance was typical, with its industrial carpet, yellowing calendar, dead plants. Inside was a hallway with a couple of small offices leading off. Glances inside of vertical blinds, cardboard boxes, quiet desk fans.

An officer stood at the end of the hall, held open the door to the warehouse space proper. The unit commander stood over a body on the floor. A man whose head had been shattered, his blood pooling on the painted concrete ground, little islands of brain matter glistening under the fluorescent tubes. A small TV set nearby scrolled casualty figures.

'He went for a trigger,' said the commander, pointing to the electrical wire taped to the desk. 'There. Connected to a big fucking lump of C4. Bomb squad's on the way. Looks like you found our bombers, King. Well done.' He slapped King hard on the bicep, smiled. 'Now let's get the fuck out of here.'

King was interested in the man's features. He was short-haired, well-dressed, Caucasian. Either a very smart Muslim. Or – ?

Jane avoided seeing the man, instead was interested in the message on the bloody computer screen. The last line. Kill Noah, it said.

Who's Noah?

'Fucking now!' shouted the commander.

DUTY-FREE

I had a minor shitfit when about a hundred US soldiers came through the door of the airport lounge. For a confused second, I didn't know where I was and understood only that I was going back to my hated cage, with a bucket for drinking and another for pissing.

They didn't see me, though, just went straight for the duty-free counter and bought as much Irish whiskey as they could safely carry. Poor saps, bound for Iraq, Shannon their midway break. A bit like my own position, each of us heading for an uncertain future to the east. I felt an odd connection with them, the sensation of being a pawn in a larger struggle, one with rules and motivations I could only guess at.

'We can't talk on the plane,' I said to Helena. 'So what's our plan when we reach Moscow?'

'We must assume that Cuba has put out an alert. I'm travelling under my own name. They may not have yours yet, Jesus,' she smiled.

'Should we just wing it?'

'Impossible. We don't have visas. I'm wondering about political asylum. The relationship between Moscow and Havana is not so strong today.'

'How would we be treated?'

'Unknowable. Maybe fifty-fifty. You might have an advantage, your escape from Guantánamo. The Russians might love that, the chance to humiliate America.'

'Christ, I don't know if I could handle being a Russian PR pawn.'

'I say we try to cut a deal. Tell the truth. Say that you are in fear for your life from the Americans. That we both fear the Cubans. Tell them everything in return for new passports. See where that takes us?'

'Agreed.'

Our flight was called. Back in the air, we filled out our immigration forms. Then Helena slept, her head against my shoulder. I was too scared to rest, worried about living out my life in a

frigid gulag.

CLEAR

As night fell, they evacuated the whole office park while the bomb squad screamed along the hard shoulder of the commuter-clogged M25.

The workers were happy to get out of their hellish jobs a few minutes early, delighted with the story they would tell. Bloody terrorists, right there in Linkway, I swear I nearly had a heart attack when the cops shot them all. Yes, I'll take a brandy, thank you. Bloody hell.

Jane sat in the car at the gate, checked her crime scene kit, eager to get in and find some DNA, read that email.

King returned to her, satisfied that the place was clear.

'What are you thinking?' he asked.

'I'm thinking about Noah, yeah?'

'Go on,' said King, lighting a cigarette, maybe his thirtieth of the day.

'There's a chance that this,' pointing to the warehouse, 'is the base of our bombers, maybe the ones responsible for everything, all the shit.'

'A good chance, I reckon.'

'Yeah. Now, could Karen have been a contact, their source for the radioactive material?'

'They'd need somebody from the lab, yeah.'

'So she was killed to tidy up the situation, blown up at the mosque to cover the motivation.'

'I'd go along with that, Jane.'

"'Kill Noah.'" That's what the message said. Could Noah be the local commander of the cell. Wouldn't killing him tidy everything? Could Noah be Fortescue and wouldn't he be the perfect man to frame Bunk?'

'Fuck me. My gut says yes.'

As the possible scenarios worked through their brains and the past confusions faded into clarity, a call came through on the radio. Activity on Bunk's email account. He accessed it. Sent a

message to Anna. He's heading to Moscow.

'Moscow?' said King. 'What the fuck is he doing going to Moscow? Where was he?'

'Get this,' said the technician back at base. 'The email was sent from Ireland. Shannon Airport.'

'Follow up, will you. See what flights have been active there,' said King, signing off then.

As King and Jane tried to make sense of this development, Bunk passed over their heads at nine thousand metres, his aircraft still climbing for the long haul to Sheremetyevo Airport.

The bomb squad was still some way off and it would take time to make the place safe, so King made a decision.

'I'm heading to Fortescue,' he told Jane. 'Just in case his killer's on the way already.'

'Call him,' said Jane. 'Tell him to stay put, lock his door.'

King made the call, asked for Fortescue, was relieved to finally hear his cultured, confident voice.

'Yes, detective?'

'Thank God. Listen. I think somebody may be on his way to kill you.'

Silence for a couple of moments, a throat cleared, a forced laugh.

'That's preposterous, detective. Who would want to kill me? Bunk?'

'Not Bunk. And I'm serious. We've located the base of some kind of assassination squad. Your name's come up. Well, maybe.'

'What do you mean,' said Fortescue, more serious now.

'Are you Noah?'

A long five seconds of just breathing. Then the call died.

THE BIG ASK

King avoided the motorway, used the back roads, blue lights sundering the amber suburban gloom.

He clipped an old style VW Beetle, tore the rear bumper off, drove on, oblivious.

‘Get off the fucking road,’ he shouted.

The police radio was filled with reports of Muslim stores being burned in East Ham, some kind of riot in Southall.

Fortescue trembled after he put his phone down, then composed himself. Why would Dr Ryan want to kill me? I’ve served The Foundation well. Karen, yes, she had to go. But me? This doesn’t make any kind of sense.

A large cognac – Napoleon – slowed his pulse, allowed him to accept the logic. The operation was being closed down, all evidence being, well, erased. The Bunk escapade had been a genius idea, tied everything together. And it had worked perfectly, until. Until that blast at Imperial College. Who? Why? Ryan had been jumpy since.

Fortescue made an internal call, left a frantic voicemail.

Are you Noah?

Footsteps in the corridor outside, a shadow at the door.

A knock.

‘Yes?’ his voice cracking.

The door opened. Security. Overweight, unarmed, so only vaguely comforting.

‘Just checking around, sir. Nearly everybody else is gone.’

‘Friday. Yes,’ said Fortescue. ‘I won’t be long.’

‘Take your time sir. Let me know if you need anything.’

Can you stop a military-trained assassin with God in his heart?

‘Thank you. Oh, I’m looking for Jim, the techie. Have you seen him?’

‘No sir, but I’ll keep an eye out for him.’

Another cognac and a look around the office, the accumulation of many years, the symbols of a life’s cunning. He knew that it was over. To stay would accept death, Ryan’s orders wouldn’t be rescinded. To escape now would require disappearance. It might take a week or a year, but an assassin would come in that door.

This isn’t fair, he thought.

So?

Heaven? Appealing to walk with Jesus, certainly. But not yet.

Tuscany. There’s the place to have a few stolen years. They’d get me eventually. But look at the quality of life. Get the broker to shift some money quietly to Switzerland, take a lease on a vineyard, be the lord of the manor with a private cellar a furlong across. There’s the life, there’s the chance.

His mind made up, Fortescue made a note on lab letterhead, in his beautiful, flowing handwriting. I’m depressed by man’s inhumanity to man, he wrote. I am upset at the break-up of my marriage. I am going to end it all, drown myself in the Channel. I apologise for this, all of it. May God have mercy on me.

Smiling at the fluidity of his thoughts now, now that the shock of the call had dissipated, Fortescue quickly scanned the office, taking his most treasured possessions, but nothing that would be obviously missed. His sleek pen. Leave the mobile phone. Take the Tolkien first edition.

Ready to leave, the escape route – car, Dover, ferry, drive through France, smell those rolling lavender hills – solidified in his mind. Then the knock.

Dear God, not the knock.

THE BEAR'S EMBRACE

Moscow was dark, bitterly cold, even in the connecting tunnel. At passport control, we raised eyebrows and were directed to a security office, accompanied by an armed policewoman.

We sat together in a bright white room, on a bench that went all the way around the wall. A plain, slatted table stood in the centre. The cop stood nearby, a camera winked, a mirror the length of one wall allowed unknown agents to watch our body language, listen to our conversation.

‘So, tell me again. How are Russo-Cuban relations these days?’

‘We send bananas. They send engineering components and machinery. Some weapons systems. Bananas and sugar don’t buy too much these days.’

‘More hard-nosed.’

‘Yes. I’m still amazed we got that Fulcrum to save you.’

‘Fulcrum?’

‘The fighter jet. We have a few, but they’re normally grounded.’

‘Well thanks to Russian technology I’m here now. It made mincemeat out of that bastard drone.’

‘Some adventure you’ve had.’

‘I may write a book some day.’

‘But not quite yet.’

‘Not quite yet.’

Then a low-grade official came into the room, put our bags on the table. He went through Helena’s first, placed her t-shirts, spare trousers, bra and knickers in neat piles. I tried to make light, made a happy groan at the sight of her underwear. He frowned, she smiled.

Then he emptied my bag, looked quizzically at my book of Castro rant, then at me. I shrugged.

He expertly checked the lining of both bags, then asked me to spread my arms and legs

while he patted me down. Then he told the policewoman to search Helena.

Then he put our stuff back in the bags and asked us to follow him, in good, unaccented English. Jesus, the whole rest of the world is multilingual.

Down a shiny corridor, the cop behind, and into a less austere interview area. There was a row of booths at one end, all empty, but four chairs around a low round table were pointed out to us, coffee offered.

This was good, coffee and soft chairs, not holding cells in the basement, with open toilets and various lunatics wondering, wondering.

We gratefully accepted the coffee. It was instant shit, but hot and somehow comforting. After a time, in came a tall guy, full head of short grey hair, maybe forty, decent grey suit, some kind of grin on his face.

‘Hello Helena and – Jesus?’ he offered.

We nodded, said our hellos. He took a seat opposite us, flipped a notebook open, clicked a pen.

‘I’m Major Constantin of the Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti. You know of us?’

‘FSB,’ said Helena. ‘Of course. Like the KGB, only more powerful.’

‘Have we had contact?’ asked the major. ‘I’m sure I would have remembered you, colonel.’

‘Maybe by phone,’ she said. ‘I don’t know. I’ve never been to Russia before.’

‘Okay,’ he said, still grinning. ‘There is no problem. Now,’ he said, turning to me, ‘you’re the curious one, Jesus. Or may I call you William?’

‘You can call me William.’

‘Good. Very good. This is going well, don’t you think?’

‘So far, so good.’

‘Now, why are you in Moscow under a false passport, William?’

‘That’s a genuine passport,’ said Helena.

He silenced her with a raised hand. ‘Perhaps, but the name is false. This is a serious crime in Russia. Tell me why, William. Tell me now or we can travel to the Lubyanka. Would you prefer that?’

Patronising prick. Why would I prefer KGB HQ, a grand torture chamber where the walls could weep, what they’ve witnessed.

‘This is fine,’ I smiled.

‘Ashtray,’ he said to the policewoman.

She got one – pressed tin - and he offered his Marlboro reds around.

So I told him the whole story. From St Paul’s to my nightflight from Havana. He didn’t seem phased, took notes, nodded occasionally.

This all took about an hour. By the end, he had put his pack of cigarettes in front of me, made the open-palm help yourself gesture, was glancing regularly at the camera, like saying Are you getting all this?

At the end, I said ‘And here we are.’

‘That’s the whole story?’

‘It’s all I know. It doesn’t make much sense but – ’

‘It makes perfect sense,’ he said, standing then, stretching his shoulders. ‘I knew most of your story before. It just didn’t make too much sense. Now I hear it from you, it kind of adds up. Do you know?’

‘What are you saying?’

‘As you know, we have many agents in London, many in America, even some in Cuba,’ he winked at Helena. ‘Their reports, plus requests from various governments and, well, we know you Mr Bunk.’ He paced the room, stopped in front of me. ‘What do you know of The Foundation?’

BOOK

Jane was nervous, waiting to hear from Detective King, eager to get into the warehouse, take a good look. As the all-clear was announced and the bomb squad's armoured van roared out of the office park, the Yard crime scene team arrived. Jane recognised the woman from Bunk's lab, was spotted in turn. Jane moved towards her as she neared the front door and an armed officer moved to block her.

'She's with me,' said the woman from the Yard.

Jane followed her through to the open area at the rear. The dead man was there on the floor, no ID on him, no longer relevant. The Yard woman got a couple of shots of his ruined face, connected her camera to a laptop from her bag, sent them back to HQ. Jane went straight to the computer terminal. Afraid that the data would disappear, Jane took some photos, no flash. Noah.

She scrolled back up the page, cut through the jargon, understood that this was Foundation business, that Karen was to be killed, that Noah was to be killed, that the base was to be dismantled and the unit dispersed. Oh, and if Bunk shows up, kill him too. Plain speaking. She captured the whole message, spotted what could be the sender's address, a bit messy but also what looked like an IP, and what looked like an encryption algorithm. Government. But not Her Majesty's. She called base, passed on the codes, the identifiers, put an urgent request on the sender identification.

A good look around the place. A case of H&K submachine guns. Another of Glock pistols. Grenades. Daggers. Plenty of ammunition. The plastic explosives removed for analysis.

'You could start a little war with this lot,' observed a cop as the Yard woman set her team to dusting the phones, weapons and soft drink cans for prints.

On a rack on a wall, dark blue fatigues, like what the police were wearing. On a desk, a heavy book. But not the Qur'an, the Bible.

CLOSURE

Fortescue gripped the edge of his desk, said 'Come in.'

The door opened, revealed Jim the technician.

'Thank God,' said Fortescue.

'What's wrong Lionel? You look ghastly.'

'The unit is shutting down, tidying up,' said Fortescue, pouring another cognac. 'You want a drink.'

'Jesus Christ. Yes. Yes, please.'

As Jim sipped the drink and the gravity of the scenario sank in, Fortescue explained that a gunman was likely on his way to kill him. Possibly Jim too.

'Fuck. What can we do?'

'I'm getting away from here. It's every man for himself now. But first I need you to erase my computer.'

'Everything?'

'Total. Can you do that?'

Jim set to work, drink in his left hand. He emptied the desktop wastebasket, then shut down the PC, disconnected all leads, plucked a slim screwdriver from his breast pocket tool and pen organiser.

He removed the rear panel easily, then began to unscrew the hard drive itself. He put that on the table, then disassembled it until he was down to the disc itself, just a piece of plastic, pitted with a billion laser impacts.

'You sure, Lionel?'

Fortescue nodded, so the technician took the disc out of the housing, held it by the spindle, used a little pair of snips to cut it into little fragments. These he placed in an ashtray. Then he set fire to them. They caught easily, sending up a little cloud of horrible smoke.

As Jim was putting the panel back on the computer, the door opened, a young man in a leather jacket, wearing gloves, an expressionless face.

‘Yes?’ said Fortescue, his voice feeble, surrendering.

‘A message from Dr Ryan,’ said the man, reaching into his jacket pocket.

LUBYANKA

I told Constantin about the plant at Guantánamo, how he'd tried to kill me during the escape, how he'd mentioned The Foundation. But that was the sum of my knowledge.

Constantin explained that The Foundation was a component of the US military-industrial complex, an evangelical movement which operated both inside and outside the law to further the aims of evangelical Protestantism. And how I was their fallguy for the attacks in London.

'Is this all about the DNA evolution thing?'

'I don't know about DNA or evolution,' said the FSB man. 'But this mission has little to do with that. If anything.'

'Jesus,' I said, stunned. 'I thought I had it worked out.'

'Clearly not. I will explain it to you further later. Now we're leaving. There is somebody waiting to meet you.'

'What is our situation, sir?' asked Helena, rising.

'You, colonel, will be offered asylum in return for telling us all about the present situation in Cuba and Cuban intelligence activity in Russia and America. Mr Bunk here is our enemy's enemy, so he will also be offered asylum.'

'Seriously? Thanks a lot,' I said.

'You are welcome. Now come, we're going to Lubyanka.'

I paused, worried that I was being duped yet again.

'Don't worry,' said Constantin. 'You'll be above ground.'

He led us down endless corridors, a separate thoroughfare running parallel with the public areas at Sheremetyevo. He made smalltalk, was animated when quizzing me for more details about the drone attack, claimed the MiG-29 was the best fighter plane in the world.

I told him all I could remember, warmed to him when he congratulated me on my survival.

We reached an exit door, manned by two armed officers, who saluted Constantin, opened the doors for us. He took us into a small yard where two Mercedes SUVs waited.

I sat in the back of one with Helena, Constantin in the front passenger seat. The other jeep led the way, out a sliding gate and into the general airport traffic. Red and blue lights flashed on both vehicles and the taxis and BMWs and occasional Trabants quickly made way for us. We sped along the Leningradskoe Highway, passed endless ranks of brutalist apartment blocks and screaming neon advertisements.

Twenty minutes later, we were in the centre of Moscow, both Helena and I staring out at the mad, grand excitement of it all. Even from inside the vehicle, the buzz outside was palpable. Compared to the grim melancholy of the nineties, I could appreciate now why Putin was a hero to Russians. City was a lot like London, only with faster traffic and more open spaces, giving the eye a better chance to be impressed by the brightly-lit signature buildings.

I recognised Petrovski Boulevard, then Neglinniya, where I enjoyed the clubs with Frank and Fortescue after our expedition to the mammoth. Jim preferred his hotel room. Christ, Fortescue was mad for his strippers and whores. I wondered where he was, how he was doing.

Then into Lubyanskaya Square and our destination. The Lubyanka's façade, yellow brick, classical detailing, belied its truth.

'In the old days, it was said that Lubyanka had the best view in Russia,' joked Constantin. 'You could see Siberia from the basement.'

I forced a laugh, being genuinely scared. This place had a bad reputation, worse even than Guantánamo. The Russians didn't give a shit what anybody thought of their methods. Six thousand nukes resting in Russian silos. Tsar Bomba among them. At one hundred megatons, the ironically-named warhead is the most powerful explosive created by humanity. And though they've never used the ultimate weapon, you only argue so far with Russia.

We drove through an entrance gate to the left of the building and entered a high-walled courtyard which allowed access to a whole series of security buildings, not just Lubyanka. Armed guards in varying uniforms hung around idly, smoking or blowing into their hands. They snapped to attention when they saw Constantin.

After we parked, Constantin led us through a grand entrance hall and into Lubyanka proper. We were processed in a pleasant room with parquet flooring and pale green walls.

Photographed, blood taken, fingerprinted efficiently, laminated guest IDs on lanyards were handed to us in just a few minutes.

‘Wear these at all times while in the building,’ said Constantin.

‘How long will we be here?’ asked Helena.

‘Not so long. We just need all your information. How fast can you talk?’

‘Pretty fast,’ I said.

‘Start now?’

I glanced at Helena. She nodded.

‘Okay.’

‘Excellent,’ he said. ‘I will take you to your rooms and we can begin there.’

Into an area like a hotel reception and Constantin spoke with a guy who produced two keys and wrote some notes in a ledger. A porter appeared and said This way, please.

We took an ornate lift to the fifth floor, walked down a deeply-carpeted corridor and were brought into a vestibule, richly decorated, well-furnished, a door at either side.

‘Miss, this is your room,’ said the porter, unlocking the door on the left.

Helena followed him into the room, followed him back out with a smile on her face.

‘Sir,’ said the porter to me, leading me into a grand and opulent space, dazzling crystal chandelier above, massive deep bed below.

With a barely perceptible nod of his head, I went after him, back to the vestibule.

‘Everything okay?’ asked Constantin, a rhetorical question. ‘Nice. Now, you will be interviewed in this area, individually. My men will set up some equipment and knock when they need you. When you have had enough, just say this. Feel free to use the facilities as provided. We will try and get through this quickly and, I hope, without any unpleasantness.’

I didn’t detect any irony in his last phrase. I didn’t allow this to worry me, just accepted it as Russian bluntness.

‘Drink?’ suggested Helena, opening the door to her room.

‘Lovely,’ I said.

Her room was just like mine, just as perfect.

‘This is the nicest room I have ever seen,’ she said. ‘Yet it’s in a building with one of the worst reputations in the world. Why is this?’

‘I guess it’s another example of how appearances can be deceptive, how legend can mislead. Also how those at the highest level in societies genuinely do inhabit a different dimension. I have no doubt that there are poor souls being tortured in this complex, right now, right as we speak. But -
,

Helena looked around with exaggerated eye movements, saying We’re being watched and listened to. She held up a vodka bottle. Stoli. I nodded.

‘But?’ she asked, eyebrows raised.

‘I’ve changed, I can appreciate that now. Since it’s not me on the receiving end, I’m quite happy to be here, with you, sipping my vodka. This now is all that matters. This and getting out of here.’

I wondered if I’d changed from being a mere selfish bastard into a genuinely evil swine.

FALL OF THE THRONE

King arrived at the lab, saw just a couple of cars still parked outside, most of the lights dead, figured most of the staff were down in the Dragon's Arse getting shitfaced. He wished that he was there too. Yes, it was exciting, all this running around after assassins and all that. But he would still rather be out getting shitfaced.

'Does this mean I'm a bad cop?' he said aloud as he snorted a line of cocaine off the back of a CD case. The White Stripes, you've got to laugh.

He checked his pistol, cocked it, held onto it in his jacket pocket.

'Evening sir,' said the fat security guy. 'How can I help?'

'Evening,' flashing the badge, but the guy knew him anyway. 'I'm looking for Fortescue.'

'In his office. You know the way?'

'Yeah,' said King, moving past him and into the reception area.

'He's in demand tonight, I'll tell you.'

King froze. 'Oh?'

'Yeah, another officer came to see him just a few minutes ago.'

'Thanks,' said King, taking his gun from his pocket. The guard blanched, took a step back.

'Listen. Lock that door and don't let anybody leave the building until I get back, yeah?'

As the guard fumbled at his waist for the bunch of keys, King moved silently past reception and up the stairs to the management offices. Nobody around, light dim.

His heart pumping, King reached Fortescue's office, saw that the door was ajar. Back to the wall, he edged close to the door, just like on TV. Using his ears, not sensing any movement, he turned the corner, like a surfer catching a wave. The bloody cocktail of adrenalin and cocaine was pumped faster, banging through his veins, hammering at his eardrums.

Two bodies.

A guy on the floor, unknown. The shooter?

Face down on his desk, Fortescue.

A smell of burning in the air, something nasty.

Into the room, gun raised. Scanning, scanning. Clear. Door to annexe closed. To the guy on the floor.

Face up, mouth open, bullet wound, no two, on his chest. Heart shattered, lungs blitzed, no pulse. Good night. No sign of a weapon, patted him down, confirmed this. And an unlikely target area for a suicide.

Now Fortescue. No sign of a gun. Pool of dark stickiness under his face, seeping across the blotting paper, the Financial Times, the open briefcase with bits and pieces in there, like he'd maybe been packing or something.

Habit put King's fingers on the dead man's neck, searching for the throb of a jugular.

'Jesus Christ!' shouted King, scared at his reaction.

He gently lifted Fortescue's head, saw that a bullet had ripped away much of his lower jaw. There was light in his eyes, the hint of a broken smile.

'Detective,' he said with difficulty, blood spraying towards a flinching King. 'You've come for the truth.'

DO YOU WANT TO HEAR A STORY?

After a couple of drinks, the interrogators came. One wore a military uniform, full of unknowable symbols and decorations. He asked all the questions in Oxford English. The other was younger, hid in a plain grey suit, took notes, monitored the recording equipment. I felt he was the boss.

I was given a comfortable chair, two packs of Marlboro, a military issue lighter which smelt of petrol.

I started from the beginning, the space DNA sample from Johnson. The Homo erectus sample. The murder, the bomb, Cuba.

They spent some time probing deeper into the torture methods used at Guantánamo, then spent a great deal of time on my past. College, early married life, that kind of odd stuff.

Two hours of this and it was the middle of the night. I asked to be excused and the soldier smiled Fine.

‘Will you be wanting to speak to Helena?’

‘No. Tomorrow will be fine. Good night.’

‘I’ll let her know, so. Night.’

So I went in to her, expecting to find her asleep. But no, she was sitting in a chair by the window, watching the Moscow night. The vodka bottle contained more vapour than booze, the ashtray was full. She wore a dark green bathrobe. Hearing the door, she turned, rose, smiled.

‘Drink,’ she exclaimed. ‘When in Moscow!’

‘Sure,’ I said, suddenly shattered, the long flight from Cuba – thirteen blasted hours – finally catching me by the throat.

‘I’m too drunk to talk to them now,’ she said, giggling like an aunt who’s had too much sherry at a funeral, spilling a little vodka as she poured my glass. ‘Ooops!’

‘It’s okay. They’re gone for now. Off to type up my tale, work out their next step.’

‘I’m sure it was typed in real time.’

We were quiet for a minute, while the straight vodka scorched my throat, poisoned my stomach. Then she finished her drink, went and sat on the edge of her bed.

‘Will you stay with me tonight, Bill? Please?’

‘Just look at you, you hard-shelled Caribbean beauty, and me just out of the toughest prison on earth. Forgive all the cliches, but what a stupid question.’

I downed my drink and went to sit beside her. In a moment, she had pushed me onto my back – some power in those arms – and was on me like a hungry lioness. Clawing at my clothes, she straddled me and, pulling her knickers to the side, she engulfed me.

Then she rode me, her hands pushing against my chest, her wet centre washing away any hint of reticence. Then I knew her. I felt my orgasm boiling to the surface and gasped Now. She cried Wait, grinding harder against me, her nails tearing at my nipples. I couldn’t hold back – what man can? – and came in an ecstatic, religious way. Thank God! I grabbed for her breasts and squeezed them hard until she gasped, and again, and fell forward onto me, her lips on my cheeks and chin and mouth.

She slid off me, lay on the bed with her hands behind her head, a grin on her face. As she muttered something in Spanish, I saw neat rows of dark scars on the inside of her forearms.

I passed out then, woke to a brilliant blue sky, a painful hangover and Anna standing at the foot of the bed.

PRISONER

King called nine-nine-nine, requested an urgent ambulance, requested an armed police unit, cursed when the operator said That may take some time. Then he tried to make Fortescue at ease, lifted him back into his armchair. Probably the wrong thing to do. The bleeding wasn't so bad, but he was pale as death.

'It's okay, Lionel. There's an ambulance on the way. You'll be fine. Any other wounds?'

'No,' said Fortescue, his breath laboured, 'just this bullet in my head.'

'That's it, Lionel. Keep your humour. Now tell me about Bunk. What's his involvement in all this?'

'Bunk?,' he laughed. 'He's just the stooge. He's an idiot, a gullible idiot. Nothing more.'

Poor fucking guy, thought King. He's not going to make it.

'What about that crazy lab downstairs? Was that Bunk's?'

'That was mine,' said Fortescue. 'I was trying to prove that cloning was wrong, against God's will.'

'You picked a fucked-up way to go about it. And it was just convenient to pin it on Bunk?'

Fortescue smiled, nodded.

King checked his watch, worried that the ambulance wouldn't make it in time.

'Listen, do you have a clean towel or something we can use to put a bit of pressure on?'

'The bathroom, there,' said Fortescue, indicating the door set into the oak-panelled walls. The lab used to be a boarding school, this part anyway. This room was the headmaster's office.

As King moved to the door, he noticed that it was open, just slightly. Then it opened fully and a man appeared. He'd been listening, raised his arm, the Glock pistol with silencer pointing at Fortescue. Two puffs of smoke, two subdued cracks. Joop-joop. The top of Fortescue's head smashed against his bookcase, The History of Blood brought vividly to life.

As Fortescue was quietly killed, King reached for his holstered gun, pulled it free, fired at

the assassin as his arm swung round. The report, without silencing, made an ear-splitting crash in the well-insulated room. The assassin took the round in his right shoulder, fell back against the washbasin inside the bathroom.

King should have gone for the head, didn't want to risk losing maybe the last, maybe the best, witness.

He moved forward with care, glancing at Fortescue, glancing behind to the main office entrance, making sure not to be caught out again. Seeing the gunman slumped over the toilet bowl, pistol on white-tiled floor, alive, King just wanted the day to be over, to get so drunk as to risk death.

There was an urge, a strong force, to just kill the fucker. He restrained his twitching forefinger, kicked the gun away from the man, kicked him in the ribs. The shoulder wound was good, major bones shattered and the man was crying, wanting his mother, like they always do. American accent? wondered King.

The sound of a siren in the dark distance.

'We're going to save you, you prick. And you're going to tell me everything. Understand?'

The man nodded, pointed towards Fortescue.

King followed his direction, took his eyes off for a second, just long enough for the assassin to use his good hand to pull the pin from the grenade, the black one that hung from his belt.

He threw the pin at King, who saw the smoke, heard the fizz, thought Holy fuck, what next?

NASO-GASTRIC HELL

Danny was held in secure detention until the hurricane passed. Then everything erupted. The sirens, some deliberately placed inside the cell block, wailed for hours. As the air-conditioner rattled and the temperature plummeted, Danny felt hungry and nauseous and disorientated. Hours later, he was dragged from the cell and taken to the water chair.

Here, he was brought to the verge of drowning six times. Fearing for his life, he told every detail of his time beside Bunk.

Why this concern about Bunk? he wondered.

Still, he told all.

In the middle of the night, his interrogators were satisfied. They beat him in his stomach and thighs with lengths of weighted rubber hose. Then he was taken to the medical block.

Outside, there was much activity, many helicopters in the air, squads of armed marines marching, standing, checking weapons. The whine of a Predator in the near distance. The air still turbulent.

In the medical block, Danny was secured to a feeding chair, a tubular metal monstrosity, like an oversized wheelchair. Two marines, dressed in riot gear, held his head. Then a feeding tube was inserted through his left nostril, forced down his throat to his stomach.

A pureed concoction of rice and stewed vegetables was pumped slowly into him. He wanted to vomit, but the feeding tube had neutralised his gag reflex.

When the medic decided that enough food had been forced into him, a stupefied Danny was wheeled into the observation room.

Just over an hour later, Danny began to vomit blood and food, the feeding tube having been forced just a little too far into his shrunken stomach. Then he died.

CLARITY, OF SORTS

I rubbed my crusty eyes.

‘Anna?’

‘Yes. Nice to see you, Billy.’

‘Where’s Helena?’

‘You don’t waste any time, do you?’

‘I – ’

‘No excuses, Billy. I’m not criticising, you know that. She’s being interviewed. She has some history. I think she will be offered a position with the FSB. The Cuban G-2 is not so different.’

‘What history?’

‘Let’s just say that she is familiar with torture. In Villa Marista prison, she is known as the Queen of Pain.’

‘Fuck,’ I said, feeling sick.

Anna came to me, sat down on the edge of the bed. She was wearing a sober blue suit, a white blouse with enough buttons open to allow a tantalising glimpse of cleavage. There, clipped on the breast pocket, an FSB ID laminate. Only it didn’t say Guest.

‘You look like you’ve been through so much,’ she said, her lower lip extended, like she was talking to a child.

‘I’m sure you know all about it,’ I guessed.

‘I have read your interview transcripts. Fascinating, certainly. Your time in Cuba must have been awful. Poor Billy.’

‘Anna, be honest with me. Were you involved?’

She stood, walked to the window, her hands on her hips.

‘With Guantánamo? Certainly not. When you disappeared, I was very concerned for you. I even assisted the English police.’

‘Oh?’

‘I told them of our time together. They said that you were being framed for the killing of your wife.’

‘They think that?’ I asked, my heart swelling. ‘Thank God.’

‘Yes, that is what they believe.’

She looked over at me, smiled.

‘Anna?’

‘Yes, Billy?’

‘Are you with the FSB?’

She sighed an inevitable sigh, lit a cigarette, offered her pack. I accepted.

‘Yes, in the way that all senior Gazprom employees are. You know that the Federal Security Service controls the Russian energy industry?’

‘No, I didn’t know that.’

Where the hell was this going?

‘I am truly a biologist, Billy. But in order to secure my job, I must become an FSB agent. For example, when you and your associates came to see the mammoth, was it not obvious that I was watching your every move?’

‘No. No it wasn’t.’

‘I am good at my job.’

‘So what’s your involvement with my misery memoir?’

‘I caused much of it, but unwittingly. When I sent the sample to you, the *Homo erectus*, that was a big mistake.’

‘You said that wasn’t really *Homo erectus*.’

‘That was a lie. I was desperate to get it back before things got out of control.’

My head felt heavy as I lit another cigarette.

‘Were you involved in the bombings in London?’

‘No. We used our influence with other agencies to make them destroy the sample. We had no control over their tactics.’

I was angry only for a second. Then I believed that it wasn’t her fault that Sally was dead, that Frank was dead, that London had suffered a new blitz. Shit, I had no choice but to believe her.

‘Why the big deal, Anna? Why was the sample so important?’

‘All will become light, Billy. I can get you some coffee while you take a shower. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘Then we will go and see our Homo erectus friends, the cause of all your troubles.’

ALMOST

‘I almost fucking had him,’ Detective King said to Jane.

‘What happened? After you shot him?’

‘I don’t know. It’s like I froze, temporary insanity. I thought That’s it.’

The medics had pronounced the three dead. Now the office was a grim scene of destruction, Fortescue and the technician frozen in death, the assassin’s body sprayed around the bathroom and into the office. His torso, head and lower legs were mostly intact, shredded at the point of detonation.

Jane took a lot of photographs, knew that she had an excellent blood splatter case study on her hands. Brilliant pictures, plus testimony to back up appearances with facts.

King moved around behind her, a couple of junior officers from the station taking notes, wowed by it all.

‘Anything from the warehouse?’

‘They’re rushing the DNA, see if there are any more of these guys on the loose. Oh, that reminds me. Thanks.’

She fished a syringe from her pocket and rammed the needle into the gunman’s remaining intact thigh. She drew some blood, bagged the syringe, labelled it.

‘I need to get this to the Yard forensics lab right away. Can you ask one of the boys?’

‘Sure,’ said King, nodding to one of the junior detectives. ‘Take this to the Yard. Pronto, yeah?’

‘One less trace to worry about,’ said Jane.

Later, outside, Jane asked him for a cigarette. They stood beside an ambulance. The lab security guard was receiving treatment for shock, his face red, tie undone.

‘Poor guy looks like he’s having a heart attack,’ Jane said.

‘Rough day all round,’ said King.

‘Really bad. I’m at my limit now, I think.’

Two unmarked vans from the morgue drew up.

‘I think everybody is. Any news on the riots?’

‘Just garbled bits and pieces on the way over.’ She paused, inhaled deeply. ‘You want to come back to my place? Watch the news, have a drink?’

Inevitable.

‘Things are looking up.’

Finally.

‘Then tomorrow we’ve got a nice little DNA jigsaw to piece together.’

GOOD FRIDAY

Anna led me to Constantin's office. He gave me a laminated document, with my photo and his signature at the bottom.

'I am discharging you into Agent Kazlov's care. You may not leave Russia and you must sign this document, which obliges you to not divulge any scientific, security or mineralogical information you learn while in Russia, before and after today. The penalty is up to thirty years in a labour camp. We will find you. Is this clear, Mr Bunk?'

'Yes.' I signed the document. 'Will I ever be able to leave Russia?'

'Perhaps. But you won't get very far on a fake Cuban passport.'

'I was worried about that.'

'Well, we shall hold on to it, just in case of a moment of madness. You will not face any charges for entering Russia without a visa or valid passport. You understand our terms?'

'I understand.'

He stood, held out his hand.

'Thank you for your cooperation, Mr Bunk. I will be in touch with Anna if I need to see you.'

And we left Lubyanka, into a brilliantly sunny morning, my papers passing the first test at the exit guardpost.

Anna drove a silver Mercedes saloon, drove it fast. We stopped for lunch – big bowls of steaming borshch – with dollops of sour cream on top and black bread on the side. Who knew turnip soup could be so fantastic? I had vodka with mine, Anna Coca-Cola.

We encountered heavy traffic, got stuck behind a religious procession. A large cross was carried at the head of it, the crowd wailing tears for a crucified Christ.

'Jesus Christ,' I said.

'Exactly,' Anna said.

‘Isn’t there another way?’

‘Yes, but why bother? We will reach our destination soon enough. You must learn to calm yourself, Billy.’

Soon enough, we reached the Palaeontological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, at Profsoyuznaya Ulitsa.

Our IDs got us access to the staff car park and we parked near a modern, curvy redbricked building.

‘I must say, I’m grateful to Constantin. You know, for making me stay with you.’ She smiled. I stopped, took in a good, cold lungful. ‘This is my first day of freedom, since – ’ Hang on.

‘Since we were last together?’

Yes, now that you mention it. I found this physically unsettling. Or maybe it was just the borshch.

‘Lot of people about,’ I said.

‘This is the largest palaeontological centre in the world. Also, the Orlov Museum, there, has the greatest collections of therapsids from Perm and a stunning display of Precambrian fossils from Siberia.’

Therapsids, the precursors of mammals, were fascinating enough, but the Precambrian fossils got me thinking back to where this whole story began.

‘I’d love to see those,’ I said.

‘You haven’t been here before?’ she said, faking surprise.

‘You know I haven’t.’

‘Yes, your boss prefers the ladies to the fossils.’

‘Exactly.’

Anna fixed her laminate to her breast pocket again.

We passed the museum and entered the research area, traversed a charming internal courtyard with lifesize models of dinosaurs lurking in the lush planted areas. More security later and we were in the advanced research section. The corridors were dark and shiny with very little human activity.

Some office doors were open and I caught glimpses of flatscreens, graphs, piles of printouts, the occasional researcher. My respect for Russian scientific research had exploded in magnitude.

These are very clever people, I accepted.

Finally we reached yet another security point, where both our papers received maximum scrutiny. The armed guard made a call, gave me a funny look, before he let us through.

‘This will blow your mind,’ said Anna, leading the way to a narrow room with a wall of glass on one side.

I joined her at the glass, looked into a bright examination lab with two stainless steel tables, electron microscope screens and four people in full coldwear with oxygen tanks.

On the tables were the bodies of a woman and a child. But the hair and the musculature and the facial features were wrong. Not Homo sapiens, Homo erectus.

FLUSH

Two flushed lovers stood by the desk, fractionally closer together than usual, shuffled through all the DNA analysis reports. The rest of the office wasn't in yet.

'Has the Yard given you everything?' asked Clive.

'I think so. They're pretty grateful to you for getting the lead to the warehouse.'

'Pretty damned good police work, that was.'

'Yes it was. Okay. Here's what we have. One pile of DNA profiles from Bunk's house. One pile from the lab, including the x-ray machine. One pile from the warehouse. Then we have the mosque bomber and Fortescue's killer.'

'So let's match them up.'

With a gritty lump of Blu-tak, Jane stuck the profiles to a whiteboard, used a red marker to join the dots.

'The mystery DNA from Bunk's house, remember the two glasses in the kitchen?' she said. 'Well, Sally drank from one glass. Whoever drank from the other was also in the warehouse.' She drew a line.

'So it's fairly safe to assume that one of the assassins killed Bunk's wife.'

'I agree. Any decent defence lawyer would get Bunk off on that connection alone. But my gut tells me that Bunk is innocent.'

'Fair enough. What else have we got?'

'Fortescue's DNA was on the mug in the illegal cloning lab. So we can put him there.'

'And he admitted to it.'

'Which is fine. But was he telling the truth?'

Jane said 'I don't know. I wasn't there,' without irony.

'Okay. A trace of Karen was found on the x-ray machine. And she studied radiology. So she's behind St Paul's.'

‘Any joy with the rest of her cell?’ asked Jane.

‘There’s a good chance they were near her when the bomb went off. Everyone’s being analysed.’

King finished his paper cup coffee.

‘The warehouse,’ said Jane, sticking the strong traces in a row. ‘Sally’s killer we can place there. Also the mosque bomber, Fortescue’s killer, the guy who was killed there, obviously and one more.’

‘I don’t like that,’ said King scratching his stubble. ‘Sally’s killer and this other guy still at large. None of these characters have shown up on any criminal database. Yet.’

‘Are the Americans being cooperative?’

‘Theoretically, yes. But we wouldn’t know if they were holding anything back. The profiles are with Interpol, but they’re as stretched as we are. I wouldn’t hold my breath. What about the St Paul’s bomber? Yeah? Possible match. Arms dump in Acton. Christmas. Two guys picked up were Yemeni.’

Jane drew some lines, saw that Fortescue – with his erstwhile nutbag hitsquad - did seem to cover a lot of missing links. Two still out there.

She said ‘So Fortescue, the bleeding heart of the English establishment, did a deal with al-Qaeda why? Bunk? Or this cloning thing. Or was there really something groundshaking in this NASA sample?’

‘Fuck knows,’ said King.

Then the Commissioner came by, with a Scotland Yard DCI and two suits from the Crown Prosecution Service, asked for a briefing.

King did a competent enough talk and it was concluded that Bunk was innocent and everything else was clear. The Yard would find the two assassins still out there. King and Jane and the whole unit was off the case.

‘Finito,’ said the Commissioner, beaming. ‘So well done, both of you.’

‘Okay,’ said King.

The visitors left and Jane said ‘Why did you take that? It’s not over.’

‘The fuck it’s not,’ said King.

‘Not until we find out who killed Sally. She deserves that at least.’

‘Well you heard the man, didn’t you?’

THE PROTON VIEW

I was entranced, had to sit on one of the dozen or so folding plastic chairs in the gallery. As the technicians peered and poked at the still-frozen bodies, clouds of foggy breath filled the lab. Like it was on another planet or something. The Homo erectus might have been aliens.

Anna explained that the microscopes did not use the tiny wavelength of electrons to magnify atoms, rather the even tinier wavelengths of protons. This allowed a view of God. The twisted helix of ancestral DNA was there on the screens.

‘Good God. I haven’t seen that before.’

‘Impressive? Of course, we’ve been viewing human DNA – there, the screen on the left - for the past year, so this is a wonderful research opportunity. It looks like the Homo erectus have an immunity to viruses.’

I was in awe of the science. On about every level, Anna was a long mile ahead of me.

To see DNA on a screen, live, the character of it, the elegant beauty of its structure. The simple importance of it.

The human being, like all living creatures, carries DNA in most of its cells. Right in the core.

We don’t have DNA in our white blood cells, which is odd.

So the DNA tells every cell, thus our body and mind, what to do. The two DNA sources, the tiny clumps that come together from an egg and a sperm, form a new pattern. A self-replicating pattern that makes a person. Or a whale. Or a duck-billed platypus.

Coiled backbones of simple sugars, joined by bases, a chemical machine designed for the long-term storage and transmission of information.

There, on the screen. God.

‘So are you going to find a cure for viruses? By implication, most cancers?’

‘Eventually, yes,’ Anna said. ‘For now, embryology research and cloning. They are so

similar to us, maybe zero point two percent of a difference only, we can use his sperm cells and her eggs to make clones of them. Adjust the DNA as we want to and we can have an infinite supply of stem cells. No messy ethics.'

'Or slaves.'

'Well, that's the direction in which the research is being directed.'

'If they were so advanced, why were they wiped out?' I said.

I couldn't take my eyes off them, their frigid beauty. It was like they'd died last night. What a find. And I had them in my hand. Frank's email.

'Anna, would it be possible to check my email, do you think?'

'Of course, here,' she said, taking a small laptop from her briefcase.

She flipped it on and launched the browser.

I found the inbox, but no message from Frank. Had he found the cure as well? Was that his death call? Who deleted the mail?

'Nothing new,' I said. 'I was delighted when I saw your message.'

'That's nice.'

'Who killed Frank? Do you know?'

'I'm sorry about your friend, Billy. I really am. I don't know who killed him. If only you had kept the sample.'

'If only.'

Shit, she was making me feel guilty again.

'Now listen to me, Billy Bunk. I have done some research into your viruses. Coffee? Or therapsids.'

'Both.'

So we had a quick look at the museum, a surreal trip through countless bizarre lifeforms and neo-classical art exhibits depicting the evolution of life. No Gods here! The history of evolution was shocking. Still being written, back there in the frozen lab.

In the museum café, a few customers, mostly Russian, some Europeans. A couple of American scientists, a good sign. I savoured a double espresso, an almond pastry and Anna's DNA findings.

'Tunguska looks promising.'

‘I know. I love the whole smallpox virus outbreak thing. Problem is, Siberia’s in the middle of fucking nowhere. And in Russia, that’s a lot of nowhere.’

‘The Trans-Siberian Express would get us within range,’ I ventured. The journey appealed.

‘It would, but why bother when all the samples collected over the years are right here?’

She cocked her head, a smile.

‘Fantastic. Wow. And the Homo erectus?’

‘Full access. But what do you want to do, Billy?’

‘I’ve been thinking about that. Going east does interest me. I’d like to find out about Zen Buddhism, that kind of stuff. Then again, I’ve been on the receiving end of religion my whole bloody life. Catholic boarding school. Sally’s superior Protestant family. More recently, Christ, join the queue. I’m sick and tired of the whole damned lot of them. I want to strike back, play them at their own bloody game, piss them right off. I’ve been thinking about this a lot. Imagine a web-based religion, promoting meditation and unity. Backed up by a pantheon of Gods, relevant Gods for the now. A sympathetic religion, self-aware of its limitations. Honest.’

‘The God of sex. The God of money. The God of war. So many possibilities.’

‘You’ve got it exactly. We could sell amulets to fund it. Get a celebrity or two on board. What I want to do, Anna, I want to start a religion. Are you with me?’

THE END

THE GOD VIRUS

BY

GARY J BYRNES

2010

Buy the book on www.amazon.com.

to be continued in

THE GOD FACTORY

BY

GARY J BYRNES