

DUBIOUS FREEDOMS
OF
TROPICAL FISH

“THE HOUDINI HIJACKING”

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Possible Truth

Richmond-Upon-Thames, London

Francis Henderson's Home

“Are you serious?! What about me Francis?! You take your last ten days of holiday just to... just to go *meandering* all over the country. Where does this leave the trip to France we've been talking about forever? Honestly, you're so self-centred it's untrue!”

I'd pushed the wrong buttons with Heather this time. I'd just dived in, trying to mention it casually as if she wouldn't react and of course, she'd reacted.

“Look, I'll be gone for seven days, tops, we can do something nice when I get back.” It was scant consolation from me and now she was in her stride there was nothing stopping her.

“This is *our* life Francis, both of us, you can't just go on doing your own thing all the time. Yes, I know you work hard, I accept journalism isn't the easiest career but it has suffered because of

this... this bottomless pit of a biography of yours. You've been playing around with it for more than two years! Two years! It sucks up all your free time, all *our* time and its like you're putting it above everything else, above us. Look at it from my point of view, please! It's a stupid thing, just an object made out of paper and ink at best, that's if you can even find someone who wants to publish it. Honestly I don't think it'll ever be finished. I think you should let it go."

"Heather, will you just listen? I've got new leads, there's people out there who know things. If I can only get some truth from just a few of them it will throw light on the whole thing. I can wrap it up and be done with it. I'm so near to finding the key to it all, I'm so close to the last piece of the puzzle, all I need to do is follow up on the work I've done so far. You can see that can't you?"

"No, I don't see anything except a man chasing ghosts. It all happened more than ten years ago, come on can't you see, its old news, the books that matter have already been written, Francis. All that's left over is a bunch of tall tales from nobodies who all claim to know something different from the last person. Its history, there is no truth to be had,

just a bunch of observers who weren't even there when it all happened.”

As always Heather made her point. It frustrated me though because on the whole she had been really supportive. To hear this now, to hear how she really felt, brought me right down to the ground. With this personal project, having some faith, confidence and self belief was all I had been running on. The success of it was entirely defined by me, by continuously shifting criteria which I imagined and reimagined as often as I cared to think. Any central notion of what I was driven by was hard to pin down but I did know that I needed this more than anything as an essential way to give my life meaning. Without it I was just another journalist, one who wrote articles in a competent and concise manner, one who was reliably objective and professionally detached but one for whom the sea of stories that flowed in front of my eyes every day had little appeal so as to attract any emotional involvement.

Its fair enough to write stories about what happened yesterday, indeed sometimes some of these stories run and run giving both reader and writer a broad picture of the way they have emerged. Where they have come from, why a

reader might want to know more and how to write in order that they do so is the essence in the job. But when it comes to a story that's a decade old it becomes infuriatingly senseless to see it as news. Heather was right, there's really no way to breathe life into such a story, events of ten years ago have most definitely become history. Maybe it was this very span of time that intrigued me. How can a man who lived and died when I was barely more than a boy still have a creative appeal?

It seemed, with Heather's position now clear, I had to attempt to answer this question. Without an answer it would be hard to continue and even harder to imagine any potential reader engaging in any offering I might produce.

Sometimes I feel that Dante himself is a question that I cannot yet answer but one that allows me no rest until I do. Both his life and death asked a question and in our days of immediate knowledge such a question has pushed me to answer it, to answer him, simply because he defies me not to.

"Do what you want, I don't care. I'll probably go and stay with Mum for the week. I suppose you're going to be taking the car, that's just fine by me. I hope you'll be left on the side of the

road with the bonnet open and steam coming out, then you'll realise what a foolish idea the whole thing is."

I retreated from the kitchen rather sheepishly, knowing that this was some kind of tacit permission to leave. I went to pack my bag and thought about checking the oil in the car.

"Don't forget your metal detector. You'll have more luck finding the holy grail buried in a field than what you're looking for, whatever that is."

After two years of living here, Heather knows me well enough, and me her. She'd often ranted at me like this, I think she actually liked it but the tone in her voice was different this time, more darkly sarcastic and cold. I know I've been under the spell of this obsession with Raymond Dante and I know it's as though there are three of us in this house sometimes. I can appreciate her position, at work there are deadlines, but with this particular project it's seemed to have run and run with no real end in sight. She's someone who likes to see results, to see proof that what I've been doing can be called work and ultimately of course she wants to believe that there is some financial reward for all the time it's taken. I want that too, that's why

I've given myself this week to see if there is really any point in continuing.

The working theory which I intend to put forward in the biography, and to prove as the most rational of narratives, is that Raymond Dante took his own life. Why he did so and what might have pushed him, a man with such an apparently positive attitude towards life, are questions that drive my research. I've distilled some hypothetical reasons why he may have found himself in a position, or been put in such a position, which would explain why ending his life might have appeared as the only option left to him. However, proof enough to convince any one of truth is hard to come by.

Of course suicide can be an almost impossible thing to prove, especially when there is no body on which to perform an autopsy. However, like a murder, if there are sufficient means, motive and opportunity it may only take a small piece of vital evidence to close the loop and make my case watertight. In a very real way, I feel that if I can show this, it might put the whole story to rest and indeed give Dante himself the peace, albeit in his watery grave, that I believe he deserves.

By showing this I wish to open up for re-investigation the circumstances surrounding his life

just prior to the death. Why a man would kill himself is inextricably linked to why he would feel unable to continue to stay alive. If staying alive appears to be a worse alternative than ending it all, eventually the latter option will take over. For most of us who have never been at this very real dead end of a road it can be pointless to try to imagine what must have gone through the mind of anyone in this nightmarish situation, the imagination has its limits. To follow the trail of someone who has done this, by working backwards, it is feasible however to recreate the conditions, at least as a thought experiment, by which one can only imagine a 'no way out scenario'. It's necessarily a hideous, dark place, perhaps the darkest of places considering the poor person in question is likely to be alone. Was Dante capable of making that one last step? Who or what would manipulate him into such a horribly contorted corner?

Searching for the truth might be a philosophical endeavour but when it's the truth of a person's life, a truth that has logical implications which colour their entire life, I believe it to be worth finding, particularly if you believe in the integrity of the person, as I do with Raymond Dante. Here, however, I am not an optimist for I

doubt the truth will emerge in such a concrete form that it will be guaranteed by any proposed reality of facts.

As a journalist, I have come to see the most rewarding way of looking at any series of events as an ever developing set of narratives. These are the often convoluted stories told by any vital parties where they themselves believe or purport to hold the correct version. These give multiple perspectives on sometimes complex situations. The extent to which they correspond with each other leads to an overall, coherent narrative built from those details that haven't been discounted as mistaken beliefs, genuine errors of judgement, or outright lies. Lies are those which are ultimately false by their impossibility when compared with those facts which have been verified as incontrovertibly true at that point.

In attempting to find a truth, if not *the* truth, I've made arrangements to meet with three people, each of whom I am sure will hold various and contrasting stories concerning their own very subjective relationships with Raymond Dante. I am very lucky to have secured access to these people but perhaps the length of time that has passed since the events in question has given them the desire to

release a more considered story of the person in whom we are all interested. Needless to say the interviews I have with them might make or break my theory. The three that have agreed to meet with me are; Misha Konchalovsky - Raymond Dante's wife of just six months; Pascal Thierry Dante - Raymond's father; Gina Royce - Raymond's University girlfriend.

Misha Konchalovsky lives in North London, Pascal Dante is in Milton Keynes and Gina Royce runs a small coffee shop in Cambridge. I'll be able to get these interviews wrapped up in three days but then I'm going to drive up to Scotland. I want to see for myself where the boat was found, to travel in Raymond's footsteps and try to get a feel for what he might have been going through during that long last drive. I haven't told Heather about Scotland, she'd probably blow a fuse, but what she doesn't know can't hurt her.

Although I've given myself a week it'll be a tight schedule to get back without raising any suspicions. It's not cool to have to behave so duplicitously but the book desperately needs the information which the trip will certainly produce and if I have to obtain it with such means then so be it. Frankly, Heather doesn't really care what I do,

its just she doesn't like being left out and always has a keen on eye on alternative ways that money can be spent.

Whatever the outcome of this part of my research I'm determined that afterwards I'll be able to complete the book with everything that I'll then have. My bags are packed and it's a 7am start tomorrow morning.

I'm excited at what I might find and to be honest a week away from my proper job couldn't come at a better time. The world seems to be turning upside down lately, on a regular basis, and its quite exhausting trying to write for the paper about the shifting sands of contemporary politics before the next wave wipes away one reality only to reveal another that has claims to be of greater relevance. The major problem with narratives, stories, is that they tend to tyrannise almost every other form of communication. If an event is not neatly couched in terms of a series of other events by virtue of a plot we have trouble coming to terms with it, understanding it, or even more basically, paying attention enough to be able to commit it to memory.

Looking back some ten years ago at least you have the buffer of an appreciable span of time

to lessen the blow of the impact of new findings. You have a chance to reformulate that which has been told many times before. The established version becomes so omnipotent that other more laterally generated alternatives have to jostle for breathing space. Does everything have to be contained within a story? I've found many times in looking at Raymond T. Dante's life that it is next to impossible to think except within the confines of that which has gone before. These interviews are an attempt not just to re-examine his case but to come at it from a fresh new angle in order to find responses that may lead to untrodden paths. I'm fully aware that it's unlikely I will uncover anything so revolutionary which the passing of time hasn't already considered but I'm trying and I'm not going to give up.

I slept well knowing that I'd double checked everything and left Heather in bed at around 6.30am. She was awake and for a brief moment I considered telling her about the onward leg of my journey to Scotland. I caught myself before I did mainly because I didn't want to hear the harsh words that would no doubt follow.

I don't know if it was cowardly, or an economy with the truth in order to avoid a bare

faced lie but once I was on the road I started to think in depth about the slippery nature of lying behaviour in general; the different reasons why they are fabricated; the size and type of them; why and how they are told; their repercussions; the effects on those who use them; and what happens when they spiral out of the originator's control.

Inside Angle

The drive to Misha Konchalovsky's house was easy, except for a little confusion at the very last turn. I parked up and approached her house which wasn't a large place but which was conspicuously very modern. The building itself must have been much older than the conversion it had subsequently have gone through, leaving little of the original to consider by way of its makeover. I could understand wanting to live in a place like this but to my taste it was kind of gaudy and neither an improvement on its surroundings nor sympathetic to its neighbours. It was the large end building of a perfectly normal terrace and I couldn't quite grasp how planning permission would have been given for such a sharply contrasting alteration to the conclusion of the row of other houses. Large sums of money were clearly at work here.

Misha had mourned very briefly and very publicly for a short while following Raymond's death. Obviously she wasn't going to be left short considering her father's wealth. Rumour had it that Raymond didn't leave her so much as a penny in his

will but she was far from fazed by the whispers that went around as to the nature of their marriage towards the end.

She had reverted to her maiden name and was soon photographed with several suitors out on the town in bars and clubs, stepping out of sports cars and mixing with the super rich of London's elite. When it was announced in a gloriously glossy colour spread that she was living with the retired Real Madrid mid-fielder Rico Sanchez the news was only news to the few who hadn't already been following the story. I wondered if Sanchez would be at home, shuffling around in a silk kimono wearing a pair of leopard skin slippers.

There wasn't much out of the ordinary with the front door, unless you discount the diamond encrusted door knocker. I assumed the diamonds were fake but did a double take as I entertained the alternative. Still the knocker made the usual door knocker sound and I waited.

There was enough time until the door was opened for me to check over my appearance. I'm not scruffy by design, that look is beyond my fashion sense. I make an effort but I guess that's what I look like, a bit of an effort. Suede Brogues, chinos, Hilfiger shirt, light tan Mac and the trusty

leather messenger bag that contains my work-life. As far as investigative journalists go you could say I had some style but then such descriptions are best left to others.

I have about five days growth over my square jaw entirely due to a lazy stance on male personal hygiene. I tried maintaining some designer stubble for a few months but discovered that I left far too much to chance when it came to arriving at the appropriate length of beard on the right day, much less of a designer, more of a cowboy. I notice Heather looking at me sometimes in a kind of daze and this attention makes me feel cool, especially as I often find myself gazing over her face, her body, her clothes in a way that gives her a similar vibe. We're cool together, the physical attraction was there since day one and it hasn't left.

The door opens and in front of me is Misha. I'd seen all the photos, but mostly of how she looked when with Dante. She had a beauty then that approached classical and you could still see it, mainly as shown through her attitude. Physically quite small she had an aura surrounding her that added several inches in height. Busty without being out of proportion her hips moved to the side with

one hand on them as she invited me in. I was bang on time.

“Francis! Come in, come in! My god you look like you’re dressed for winter. It’s not raining outside is it? Let me take your coat you must be boiling? Have you come far?”

“Er... no, just from Richmond. The traffic was fine.”

“The traffic, oh my god, it’s terrible these days, I hardly use the roads anymore, it’s so tiring! They say we’re down to an average of four miles per hour in the centre of town now. Will they ever sort the transport out?”

“Thank you for agreeing to see me, its very kind of you.”

“Kind! Oh Francis you’re so old fashioned. I just love talking to the press, you must know this by now.”

“Ah yes, you do understand, er, as I mentioned, that this is for a book I’m writing.”

“The book, the magazine, the movie it’s all the same. Got to keep the masses entertained. Follow me, I have somewhere nice we can go.”

By this point I was well and truly in the house, and the effect was staggering. It would be so easy to criticise the interior design and decor by an

equation of wealth and taste that are inversely proportional to each other. Making such a commentary assumes that this type of taste is only available to the super rich with more money than taste but whatever Misha has done with the inside of this house it does have the virtue of having some kind of harmony. Evidently the effect is a massive show of money but then as a style this intent has been around since the invention of money.

Here there has been success in terms of matching a dream world with the merest hint of an idea that such a world can be available to anyone who dares to dream it. It is capitalism, entrepreneurship, business and brazen upward mobility on display for anyone who wants to take it. The sofas, the chairs, the carpets the chandeliers, the wall-paper, the art, the ceilings, the fireplaces, the tables, variously assorted soft cuddly bears randomly strewn throughout every room - all are tied together by a silvery, golden strand which contains the foreign transplanted with touches of the macho and tints of the feminine into its current setting.

I follow several feet behind Misha and my mind marvels at Dante and her together. What would they have talked of? On which common

ground did they meet? Was there more to this woman than the family money and frankly what did Dante see in her? At this point I had no idea, evidently my personal inner portrait of Raymond was in immediate need of retouching, if not re-sketching, from this entirely new angle. It dawned on me that Misha may have changed greatly from her days as the wife of an MP or that the image she projected in public was somehow skewed from her private life with Raymond.

I put my little recording device down on the table. For work I use my phone like everyone else but for the book I'd bought something dedicated, just the size and thickness of a credit card it was suitably unobtrusive.

"Is it ok to record? I have a memory like a sieve."

"Of course, of course, record away."

We sat by a large bay window overlooking an uncannily perfect, manicured English garden and before I could begin with my carefully planned line of questioning, she began talking. Some people need to be prompted often but Misha was an accomplished talker.

"First, Francis let me tell you, you don't need to ask me what it is you want to know about

Raymond. Misha knows what you want to know and I will tell you everything. You want to know what he was like in private, how two seemingly different people could love each other so deeply and you want to know if there's any truth in any of these silly little conspiracy theories that will never go away. I will tell you, its all true and its all lies. Forget about everything you think you know, I will show you the man."

I was fairly dumbstruck by her opening and probably because of it I was thrown into an automatic response which was the thing that had been on my mind for so long without the opportunity to voice it.

"What I want you to tell me is whether Raymond Dante was capable of taking his own life."

It came out so matter of fact that for a moment I thought I would be ejected immediately but I held my nerve. Misha paused for a long time and lit a long thin cigarette whist staring out into the garden. When she spoke it was in a slow deep voice sharply contrasting her earlier manic buzz.

"Are you married Mr. Henderson?"

"I live with my girlfriend, we've been together just over two years."

“I don’t think anyone can imagine the extreme pressure Raymond was under. He was a piece of coal being formed into a diamond deep within the Earth but instead of it taking hundreds of thousands of years he was forced to do it in just one. It changed him, it turned him against himself. When I say he became a monster, it is without reservation. To be two men in one body, to be a tyrant and a child, to be both a destroyer and a lover, he was all these opposites. I became just a medium through which he would change. Back and forth, oscillating from extreme to extreme, no one saw the change, no one could see how one resembled the other, it was soul destroying to be the only witness. You can’t imagine, you just can’t.”

This was unreal, this was the perspective on Dante which no one else had. All I had from Misha’s perspective until now were the press releases of the time. Here was a woman, now in her 40s and faded from the public eye, who had obviously had the time for reflection she needed to express these sentiments, and I was her guest. But as she took another draw on her cigarette it flashed over me that this could be pure indulgence from someone undeniably vain looking for a last gasp of fame even if it was to be in a biography. Could I

tarnish Dante's bright life with these revelations? I had to paint the picture true, I had to know if her insight into the inner working of his mind would stand up as an integral element in the overall theory I had already created in my own.

"It must have been very difficult for you." It was a feeble way to encourage her to continue but feeling that the less I said the better, as she was reliving her memories, I left my comment hanging in the air.

"You want to know if Raymond could have taken his life, sure he could have, but it means nothing. Raymond could do practically anything he set his mind to, good or bad, he had few boundaries, few morals if you can believe me. He just had drive, drive and imagination, that's how he lived, how he survived. I don't know where he got his energy from, or his inspiration but if he had a goal and a process to get to it he was in his mind like a bull. I can even tell you how he would have gone about ending it all, he would have made meticulous preparations then taken a few days running at it. The jump at the end would have been easy for him, just a continuation of a strategy."

This was what I wanted to hear but it was clear she had come to a sort of conclusion. She put

her cigarette out and at that moment Rico Sanchez wandered in wearing a white shirt, shorts and flip flops. I'm not a dedicated football fan but as he appeared I recognised him, dark haired with a lofty arrogance that left me in no doubt as to his self image.

"Hey Misha, excuse me. Do you know where my motorcycle keys are? I left them on the kitchen table."

"They're probably in the hall by the phone. I might have put them there."

"Can you not move my stuff, it's really annoying."

He turned and flip flopped away. Keen to move the interview on I ventured onto ground that might open things further.

"The, er... little conspiracy theories, do you believe any of them yourself?"

"Ha! They're all bullshit, just for teenagers and stoned students to have something to talk about. You can't tell me you put any weight in them, a responsible man such as yourself?"

"Well, the Russian connection made a lot of noise shortly afterwards."

"Oh Russia this, Russia that. People blame Russia for everything, people who haven't even

been there. It's true Raymond knew a few Russians, both on my side of the family and through his work but then he knew Americans and French and Israelis and Africans too. We had Russian guests in the house all the time, sometimes they would talk in private, about what I have no idea. I'm sure there were all sorts of dodgy dealings but you know Politicians are generally so cautious that you wouldn't get the time of day out of one if they thought you were going to use it against them."

"And the mafia?"

"The mafia, you have to grow up Mr. Henderson. The mafia might rule the underworld, organise crime and run various drug schemes but Raymond was just a teddy bear. If he so much as saw a tattoo he'd retreat into his little world and on top of that any gangster worth his weight wouldn't risk doing any kind of business with a politician, its too out in the open, too great a chance of light falling on his activities. Politicians love the light, the mafia operates in the dark."

"You don't believe in the allegations of collusions between The Russian and British governments then?"

Misha suddenly became quite animated with a passion which I imagine came straight from her youth.

“Look, the cyber-attack of 2018, the one that Raymond personally terminated and solved, that was the foundation of our whole campaign. We built layer after layer of initiatives on that and our manifesto was brimming with his personally orchestrated strategies for British national security. It was made perfectly clear to us that the Russian intelligence bureau, The FSB was behind that whole attack. In turn they palmed it off on North Korea and they just denied it. That’s one thing, to say that Raymond was at the heart of a careful and deliberate collusion between The FSB and MI6 is just absurd. There isn’t and could never be any reason for it and it just doesn’t make sense. Why would Raymond give his input into such an arrangement? It’s just ridiculous.”

“Maybe he was forced, maybe he didn’t have a choice, maybe he got in too deep and couldn’t find a way out?”

“Maybe, maybe, maybe! Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps! If that’s your little theory, it’s going nowhere, because you could never find any proof. It’s a conspiracy theory, it’s based on paranoia and

the belief that there is some higher power, some transcendental elite that are secretly engaged in the domination of the world by covertly influencing its leaders. As I said Mr. Henderson, you need to grow up.”

She was verging on anger now and so I tried to draw this part of the conversation to a close.

“It is a widely popular story that explains some incongruous facts.” I offered the remark humbly, talking quietly.

“Next you’ll be telling me you believe the little green aliens took him!” Misha took out another cigarette and lit up.

Her quick flash of anger had subsided and she returned to her slightly cool and indifferent self, looking up at the skies. I could see this line of thinking wouldn’t take us very much further.

“I’d be very interested, could you tell me how you and Raymond first met?”

Misha smiled a sort of knowing, mischievous smile and then, wandering into a little reverie, painted a picture of their relationship.

“Well, it was love at first sight. I tell that to everyone but its true. I actually met him once before he was famous, at the architects where he worked, what was their name?”

“Prebon-Carter, they’re still doing rather well I hear.”

“Yes, that was them. My father took me there to look at a building he was having designed, he wanted to see if I had a feel for that kind of thing. Of course little models and blueprints I couldn’t find more boring. But Raymond had a presentation to do, a 3D computer model of the building’s interior. It was one of those virtual reality things and we were all wearing goggles. He was cute and that was that. Then only a month later there was the Houdini Hijacking which changed the whole game. It’s hard for young people now to get an idea of how big that was. All those networks down, all that infrastructure disabled of course real people’s lives ended.”

“The way he handled that inspired a generation. They say it was even he who named it as The Houdini Virus because at first whenever he tried to disable it the thing just disappeared.”

“He was a genius with a computer, a genius. People use that word all the time but there are only a few to whom it truly applies. He deserved all the attention he received for that, his name became a buzz word and when people found out he wasn’t just some geeky, spotty nerd, that he had charm and

charisma everyone wanted to meet him. When I saw him again I knew we were a match and he knew as much too. I have to say, when I found out he was the same guy that gave the presentation that day I was pretty quick to engineer a meeting and hey presto within a few days we were together, inseparable really.”

“There were reports at the time that your father didn’t approve of the relationship.”

“Oh reports! Sure he grilled me a few times, said Raymond had no conception of wealth or big business and therefore would never be able to understand me. He had a little vision of me with some CEO of a major player but I made it pretty clear that I knew what I was doing and basically told him to leave me alone. My father and I have a very pragmatic attitude to one another, he’s really a very nice man.”

“You mentioned Raymond as a genius, it’s a commonly accepted view that it was your genius that lead Raymond into political life and designed his campaign.”

“I’d like to take the credit but I did just what any loving girlfriend would have done. It wasn’t hard to help him optimise his potential, its true he needed some help but a ball doesn’t need much help

to keep it rolling. Raymond just took a couple of tiny nudges in the right direction and he was away. Luck as always played its part, we were always talking about a new politics but if the Reading West seat hadn't become vacant it would have all just been hot air."

"By all accounts everything happened very fast, for you and Raymond."

"Fast! It was crazy Francis, I can tell you. Can you imagine this young couple spending twenty-four hours a day together organising every single little detail of what was effectively a one-man political party. We needed our own little manifesto and then there was this huge marketing strategy. Raymond made much of it appear simple and easy but his brain was working overtime. Once we had homed in on the techno vote, once everyone knew we were appealing to people's relationship to their technologies as a means to effect change, it all took off, that's when it got fast. Raymond wrote the revised manifesto ebook in just two days. Have you read it?"

"Yes, Sat-Nav for a Techno-Centric Constitution. Not a particularly catchy title."

"But it said everything, and people were reading it on their phones on the way to work,

people were gripped by this pure idea that we could register to vote and cast our vote from a phone. And if you could do that why stop at voting just once every four years, why not vote on lots of issues all the time. A nation united not only by a government but by a digital network of the expanded electorate too. Well, as you know, the basic formulation was Raymond's, yet how many others have claimed credit since it all came to pass. It's all there in that concise ebook."

"Do you ever wonder whether it was Raymond's ideas that lead somehow to his death?"

"Oh, you're back on your tiny-minded conspiracy theory again. Raymond did have enemies, certainly, but the fortress of friends around him were far more substantial. You have to understand that almost before he won that seat, before he took up his place in Parliament he was already a player. The Prime Minister herself took a keen interest in him from day one, it was as if he were already a virtual member of the cabinet. In general people are resistant to change, they don't like new ideas, but if you have a system, an algorithm even, that utilises these new ideas to gain huge numbers of votes and more importantly increase your popularity then you're onto a winner.

Raymond had exactly that, he was a winner, he was a ticket to success and he was protected from any harm by virtue of that fact. I'm sure there were some people who wanted to use him, but not to kill him, not that."

Misha was beginning to look a little sad and run down. Her passion had seemed to ebb away and now she was just talking in a kind of monotone. I wanted to know everything she knew, but realised that this was just not possible. Sensing that she was losing interest I moved onto an area where I hoped she would have some positivity and peace.

"Did you know Raymond's parents well?"

"Oh yes! Therese was an angel, so softly spoken but when she spoke everyone would listen. She commanded great respect wherever she went, functions and the like. A beautiful woman in all respects. And Pascal, just a wonder really, he could make the most complex ideas seem so simple. Its clear where Raymond's raw intelligence came from, both of them had so much, and wisdom, and, grace. Of course Therese was broken by what happened, I feel she never fully recovered. They say dying of a broken heart is just some kind of myth but she did, she really did. I haven't seen Pascal for years, ten years probably, yes it was at a Charity event."

It seemed all paths led to death and as I spoke it was with hope that I might cheer myself up.

“I’m going to see him later today at his home.”

“Oh you’ll love him, he’s just a darling. You must give him my love.”

“I’ll be sure too.”

“Ok”

And that was it. Misha suddenly stood up and offered an outstretched arm with a bejewelled hand sparkling in front of me. I stood and we shook.

“Thank you so much. I believe you’ve been a great help with my research and the story as a whole will benefit.”

“Oh you’re too kind, I thank you for jogging some fond memories that might have remained hidden Francis, best of luck with you book.”

By now we were walking through the hall to the door. With a kiss on each cheek I was quickly through it and out into the open of the clearing sky and leafy street. The meeting was over in a whirl, I had been hoping for more, but with regards to my curiosity I always hope for more.

Dante's Ghost

The drive onwards to Milton Keynes was longer than I thought it would be and empty in some ways. I played no music, I don't know why, I didn't do much thinking either. The skies which had clouded over again leant only a dull form to the thoughts I did have and these were correspondingly grey in nature.

All I could think about now was the after effects of Dante's death. To the casual observer there were few.

We treat our famous celebrities, musicians for example, with great awe at their life. The amount of energy and devotion we put into revering them when they are alive is then shown when they die. There is often a resurgence in sales of their music and the radio plays their music ever more.

Actors it seems fare a little worse. They appear, we love them, and then they exit stage and, if this is beyond a certain age, an age that has allowed them to shine sufficiently, our love for them wanes. Their image is forever captured in their

films but in a pub we might mention them only on the rare occasion.

Due to our love/hate relationship with politicians, when they pass, usually as old and well worn commentators, some of us may think of their achievements and their moves within circles of influence. Their party and colleagues will provide perfectly worded accolades and may miss them personally as we all do with people we have known, but the day after they have gone, the main part of the public life goes on without them and we are reminded of them only occasionally.

Raymond Dante was an exception, most definitely. He died young, he was very popular, he was somehow intrinsically ‘different’ from the establishment he had become part of. However, even considering the news of his disappearance, the giving up of the search and then the inquest, once these media fascinations had subsided little was said in the press. Conversely though, Raymond’s followers, a substantial number of the public, were well able to keep his memory well and truly alive. It was the person in the pub who began concocting the tempting theories of some kind of cover-up, alcohol fuelled ideas that lead deliciously away from the facts and into the realm of the bizarre.

Thus Raymond is generally remembered for his death more than his life. It's a shame, not just because his life was so short but because what there was of it he filled with so much. The more I researched the actual records of the Acts passed whilst he was in a position of influence, the more I see his hand guiding their content with a sophisticated and natural flair. The more I look at those which were passed after he died the more I see the wholesale transcription of his ideas into the public domain.

Without trying to be dramatic it was as if the philosophy he carefully crafted and grafted upon was taken without the author's consent. Of course there is no copyright on political philosophy, it ebbs and flows, sometimes from one extreme to another but what bothers me is that there was not one ounce of recognition of the source of these ideas. It was as if Dante was dead and it was all up for grabs. Looting a tomb for its treasures is a good comparison.

But Dante's ghost drifted through it all. His ideas had problems, of course, some of which he had foreseen, some of which he had solved, some that were perfected after he'd gone. But every Dante inspired Act that was passed had his spirit at

its core. In particular those who had voted him in, those in that bye-election who had become hooked on his little e-manifesto, would prove to be a base of fans who could see him at every turn when navigating the new constitutional reforms. These were the dedicated few who followed his story who hoped beyond hope that he would be found alive, but who had, like most others, let their hopes subside over time.

I had interviewed many of these people and when I mentioned the idea that some believed him to be still alive they mostly had an almost sentimental picture of him in some exotic location. “I heard he became the leader of a native tribe in Africa somewhere.” “They took him with them on that Mars mission.” They were without exception a funny bunch who had taken him to their heart, called him their own and even in death they had a special and humorous place for him.

As I approached the outskirts of Milton Keynes I knew that this angle of approach would be in bad taste when I questioned Dante, Sr. I had a different angle in mind that would respect his feelings and hopefully allow a full and open discussion of the areas I was interested in. The main point was to let him talk in his own way,

however what I didn't want was hours of nostalgia, there was a point I was trying to make in my book and focussing on the surrounding area was a priority. I would have to tread carefully.

Senior View

Pascal Dante's house was in a new, small road with ten or so other very similar new builds. It wasn't a grand house but it had a distinguished front that remained quite unassuming. It could have been the house of the local bank manager or a man with a young family who was in a comfortable position in a green energy company, a doctor's home or a self-employed owner of a prosperous business. As I parked it seemed to stand out from the others, probably just because I knew the man who lived here had been a former advisor to the Canadian Prime Minister and the father of the subject of my attentions.

He let me in, a tall man with a full head of brown hair and grey-blue eyes that were deeper than their boyish sparkle would suggest. He showed me around the entire house and then the garden, proud to reveal his home to me. It was clean and tidy.

"I don't have a cleaner, I just can't stand the idea of a stranger, however trustworthy poking around my things."

Immediately I felt like such a stranger but he pre-empted my concerns.

“I hope you’ll forgive me Mr. Henderson, I took the liberty of doing a little research by way of becoming familiar with you before I become too familiar with you, if you get my drift.”

“Not at all, in a way I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be, I’ve come to understand your journalistic style from what I’ve read but I’m afraid with respect to your stance you are mistaken in a great many of your beliefs. Shall we sit here?”

By now we were out on the patio part of a neat garden that was, from the various garden tools here and there, probably Pascal’s own work.

“Oh I’m intrigued.”

“Forgive me for being a teacher for a while, but I find myself giving this little lecture to many people. My friends who visit on occasion know my attitude but, well here it is for you, for what it’s worth.”

“Do you mind if I record, Mr. Dante?” I held up my device.

“As long as it doesn’t stop you from listening.”

Already I was the pupil here, rather than an interviewer but I felt fine with the status.

“You see, the political spectrum is often seen as a line. We place ourselves on that line somewhere, sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, always drifting either side of the middle. It’s a poor model. Just as our friend Einstein showed that with Space-Time we have four dimensions instead of the instinctive three so the political landscape is multi-dimensional. A linear model simply makes no sense. You understand don’t you?”

“Yes, completely, I couldn’t agree more.”

“Well, then you’ll kindly arrest your simplistic language by talking of the left and the right, especially in print. It’s old fashioned and counterproductive.”

“Certainly, yes.”

“Good, now about my son, what exactly is it that you want to know?”

“Ah, yes. It’s hard to know where to begin.”

“Well, you better start somewhere, there’s only so much time in the day. Why don’t you start with the end, the whole death thing.”

“Ok. Well,” I took deep breath knowing that there was only one way to approach this, “the theory I’ve been working on is that Raymond

actually took his own life, er, because he was forced into an impossibly untenable position.”

“Rubbish. Raymond would never do that, could never do that. He was a life junkie. He loved every single little aspect of life, including all emotions however difficult or uncomfortable. If there was fear, hatred, jealousy, betrayal, danger or threat, he would embrace it as fully as if it were love, friendship, kindness or beauty.”

“You don’t think anything could have tipped him over the edge?”

“No, I don’t. He went up to Scotland to get away from it all. He was always taking time out spontaneously. He’d done so since he was a teenager. I’d wake up on a Saturday and there would be a note on the kitchen table: ‘Gone camping, back tomorrow night.’ That was when he was thirteen.”

“It’s just I’ve uncovered a lot of evidence that he was under considerable pressure from all sorts of different angles and was suffering much distress in Westminster with people from all sides.”

“He would have loved that. Would have thrown himself into it head first. He was a skier too you know. Took his first black run at ten, at top speed, I watched him do it.”

“What do you believe happened that day?”

“He came to see us one night, unannounced. I was the only one here as Therese was at a seminar in Paris. He stayed the night and the next morning he left. He took my car actually, said there was something wrong with his, the air conditioning or something. Anyway he was a bit weird when he came in the morning, I can believe he was under some pressure. He had a back pack and said he needed a couple of days away to think. We’d been there before, Arran, on a family holiday when we first came over from Canada, he’d loved it, was really in his element, so it was natural that he’d want to go back. As I understand it, he’d hired a decent boat, from a local. It was a bit choppy when he went out, then the weather changed for the worse and a storm had come through. I can only imagine that he’d capsized. The only reason the man who’d hired it to him hadn’t alerted the emergency services was because he’d gone on a drinking binge with the money and had passed out in a corner of a pub until morning. It was an accident, that’s all there is to it. A stupid dumb accident took my son from me. Took him from the country.”

Having motored through this account from beginning to end, a story he’d obviously had to go

through in his mind many times he looked away from me and became quiet. I needed to prop him up somehow although he was far from being in tears.

“I believe your son did more for his adopted country than many people give him credit. He was a very special man.”

“Yes, yes he was.”

There was a long pause and then he smiled.

“He was a little shit though too, I can tell you that. He always wanted his own way and he nearly always got it.”

Then he laughed.

“You know a man’s psychology can be almost entirely analysed simply by the degree to which they want something, and then following that, the intelligence and patience that they possess in order to obtain it.”

“You’re right, over the years my search for the truth, in all its forms has lead me down some mysterious roads but just wanting it enough is often the key to finding it. Mostly it’s just persistence and usually a bit of luck.”

“Persistence, yes, but luck, no. I don’t believe in it. What we call good luck is really just opportunity and there is always opportunity in bad luck too. The storm that took Raymond, he should

have checked the weather. That was unlike him, that was lack of foresight, something that he usually had in abundance. No, Raymond was fundamentally a prepared boy, and man, he left nothing to chance. He wasn't superstitious. You're not one of these insane conspiracy theorists are you?"

"Ah well, I wouldn't use the word insane however, the more I look at the details the more I am sure there was a lot going on that we haven't been told about. I believe there were forces at work at the highest of levels that had some impact on the events that transpired. Whether these were orchestrated and point to some kind of cover up, I reserve judgement but it's possible, that's all I can say about that, it's possible."

"I've heard them all and to begin with they are quite fascinating. Let me show you something.

Pascal rose from his arm chair and pulled a small photo album from the bookshelf. He opened it and began to show me the pictures.

"Look, this is Raymond as an actor, all these are plays from the age of eight right through to University days. You see, he was an actor in life as much as anything, a naturally good one too. He loved Shakespeare, see. He loved comedy, look at

these, just look at what he and his friends are wearing, that was a hilarious show as I remember. Most of all he loved The Method. He went to just a few classes and was hooked. Method acting became a way of life for him.”

“I had no idea.”

“No one does, these are all a very family thing. Do you know what it takes to be a good actor? It’s about identity. You need to believe that you are someone else, that you actually are the character you have become. When you do that there is really very little difference between the genuine person you are and the person you can play. It becomes an integral and very real part of you, an extension of you.”

“Are you telling me that the Raymond Dante we all saw, we all knew and love was, in the public eye at least, an actor of sorts?”

“Of course and not just in public either. But what you must understand is that the characters he had created, the characters he had been all his life are not mere fictions or pretensions, they are realities that my son inhabited. He became these people, grew and developed into them.”

“This is normal for someone who’s life changes so dramatically, we adapt, we morph.”

“Yes, this is correct. But some, Raymond included are able to reserve some part of themselves, their mind, their soul if you like, that is capable of remaining constant through it all. It’s as though such people have a third eye, a detached observer which is at the same time their most reliable and unique facet.”

I knew what Pascal was talking about but I also had my own ideas on this and I ventured to air them as I felt I was talking with a man who may understand.

“I wonder sometimes if we don’t all live our lives in bubbles, sometimes of our own making but most often imposed upon us by others who would submit us to their will, to their design. What we can experience of the world is limited by the nature of these bubbles.”

Pascal was staring at me and for a moment I felt like I had uttered some nonsense which he found to be quite immature. After an awkward silence however he replied.

“This way of thinking is as dangerous as it is true. The idea that our horizons are somehow limited is not a new thought but the lengths and the costs we go to in order to change this situation sometimes outweigh the benefits of being able to

see further. In your analogy we have to ask what happens when the bubble bursts, either due to your own efforts or those of someone else.”

“The changes in such a transition could be quite strong and quite final.”

“Well, you might think so, but that’s why we have culture. In your little metaphor of living in bubbles, modern culture is like the foam they all form when together. The way we all join together, coalesce and interface. Its like a giant support mechanism. It's a good analogy Mr. Henderson, I think you should put it in your book.”

Encouraged I expanded a little.

“I’ve been working on it as a theory for a while. Where these bubbles come from, how we make them, why we make them.”

Then Pascal interrupted and I quickly remembered I was talking to an ex-advisor to the Premier of Canada.

“Well, I wouldn’t take it too far Mr. Henderson, bubbles will only get you so far. For what its worth, as you’re writing your book, I think it will become clear to you that my son was such a type of person, living life in various bubbles. He was uniquely adept at surviving both within and

outside of these worlds, whether they were made for him or whether he created them for himself.”

I glanced at my little recording device, affirming that it was recording. I felt that this last exchange could represent the narrative theme, the concept, even the backbone for the book, and this from the mouth of the man who most surely must have known its subject the most closely and truly.

Somehow Pascal must have sensed that little more could be said in such a way about his son. The following part of the interview was spent mostly listening to him telling stories. They were plentiful, of all colours and although Raymond was missing from many of them I was thoroughly entertained as a privileged guest. I laughed and Pascal himself was often wiping away a tear as humour overwhelmed him. This must have been an opportunity of great release for him. Story after story, at all moments in time, linked together by reference to political events and leaders of so many countries whose international words and gestures had sent ripples around the world. I was bowled over by his depth and insight and fascinated by his lightheartedness and casual manner.

The time came for me to go. It was quite a drive to Cambridge and I would be arriving there

late. After the door had closed I realised nothing had been said of Therese, Raymond's mother and Pascal's wife who had died not long after Raymond. I don't think it had occurred to me to ask, or if the opportunity had not arisen, the timing had not been right. Pascal had evidently steered all conversation around or away from his wife, being so skilled as a raconteur. He clearly had drawn an invisible line in my interview, I was of course just a stranger of a kind to him and some very personal areas had justifiably been carefully avoided.

He wished me luck with the book, he shook my hand and as I turned to go he slapped me on the back.

"Remember, books are books, people are people..."

I smiled, "Thank you Mr. Dante, thank you so much. Good bye."

He shut his front door and with that noise I was shut into a reverie that lasted all the way up the M11 to Cambridge, it was a great drive with some bluesy radio station filling the car with its view to the sunset sky. I didn't snap out of my little dreamworld until I was a couple of roads away from the Bed and Breakfast I had booked. In fact when I parked I just sat still for a good few minutes, almost

as if a great film at the cinema had just that second finished and suddenly I had the chance to reflect. It felt altogether better as I became aware that Dante, Sr. had been the director of this rich experience which amounted to something of a biopic of his much loved son.

Joyful Crazy

Having called ahead to Beatrice, the lady at the B&B, to let her know I was running late, and she was terribly nice about the whole thing, being welcomed into what was really her home. There were only two bedrooms but the other being empty I was the sole guest. She gave me a cup of tea and a slice of cake and on auto-pilot I was soon under the covers of an extra thick and soft duvet, my still buzzing head supported by more pillows than I cared to count. I went to sleep with an image of the Dante family holidaying in Scotland thinking that all great people once started out as children.

Morning came. I was awake and so warm and cozy that I lay there motionless for a while as time drifted pleasantly before I opened my eyes. There was a bedside radio which I flicked on to catch the news at 9am, it was a kaleidoscope of international affairs but foremost amongst the national news the official opening of The Severn Tidal Barrage that had been under construction for nearly four years. The Green energy that it would produce had been one of the many personal projects

propelled into motion by Raymond Dante and I had the idea he may have had a hand in some of its design.

A shower and a shave and I was downstairs to be quickly served an English breakfast. I never lose the enjoyment of life in transit, wherever it takes me. These little interludes for food or sleep are all imbued with a special sense of occasion. The tea pot, the plates and the cutlery all distinctively so similar and yet in detail so different from all such other pit-stops. The atmosphere of the place, leant its flavour by quickly glanced observations of wallpaper, chair design, light fittings, curtains and carpet. It's easy to see oneself as just passing through but I believe I take a small part of these places with me wherever I go and I'm glad of it. There's no blueprint for a generic B&B, only variations around a theme of its function and aesthetic. By the time I left for my walk into the city centre I'd added another layer to my memory and idea of these places.

Walking with a sense of achievement that my plan for this working holiday was in full swing, I soon began to encounter more people. The city centre was crowded with tourists, shoppers and of course students. I was getting a feeling for Ray T,

as he was known whilst he was studying here. I imagined him walking in the very same footsteps as myself right now. What would *he* have been looking at in these surroundings? What would *he* have been thinking? Could he possibly have had any inkling whatsoever of the adventure that lay ahead in his life?

Now, as I see a couple of gowned Don's emerge from one of the college doors, I have a wave of realisation about the great figures of history who would have walked these streets too. It was a sobering thought. Here I am, wondering over the thoughts of one man when all around are the sights and sounds that so many special others, men and women would have moved through. Those who have gone down in history as milestones in their fields of endeavour and who, like Dante, have left their mark on contemporary life.

The cafe, owned and run by Gina Royce, was all the way through on the other side of town. I arrived and looking through its front window, and then approaching the door, I noticed the number of people around me had subsided. It was the type of place that one might overlook, tucked away in a small side street which had the air of a well kept

secret, a perfect place really to read a book or write a letter.

A small brass bell rang as I opened the door. Inside it was clear this quiet getaway was no such thing. Nearly all twelve or so tables were full, mostly with students I guessed, but also a family with a very quiet baby, an elderly Japanese couple and a tall, thin African man wearing headphones and sitting at a laptop. It was a cafe bustling with noise and energy, enclosed in a space that hinted of a peaceful experience with piped music, some kind of jazz. The walls were covered almost entirely with original photography both colour and black and white.

I couldn't see any person who might be Gina, so I thought it best to order something, enquire from one of the baristas, take a seat and see what happened. A latte and a Danish pastry looked good.

"Thank you. Also, could you tell me if Gina Royce is here. I have a meeting with her."

The short, and very pretty girl, turned to attend to my coffee and talked over her shoulder.

"I think she's just out the back. I'll let her know you're here. Who shall I say it is?"

"Oh yes, my name is Francis Henderson."

“Thank you.”

The three behind the counter were fairly rushed off their feet but the service was quick and the coffee reasonably priced. I took my order and found my way to one of only two small tables that were left. I’m a fairly big kind of guy and operations such as negotiating my way around chairs and children and tables and the like is always a bit of a careful operation. It was a success until I put my coffee down and spilled a little onto the saucer, drenching the sachet of brown sugar that I had carefully place there.

I was all finished some ten minutes later and entertained my self by looking at the various photographs. Mostly travel inspired, there were some portraits too, some were framed and others liberally placed unframed in the gaps. That they were the work of many different people seemed likely but likely too that Gina Royce’s work was amongst them. She suddenly appeared, evidently looking for me, I raised a speculative hand and she came over.

“Hello, Francis?”

I stood and we shook hands.

“Hi, Gina, pleased to meet you.”

“Hi, I’m sorry, I was on the phone. Do you mind if we go someplace else?”

She leant in close and almost whispered in my ear.

“It’s a mad house in here...”

“Sure, let’s go.” I picked up my bag and as we left the premises she led the way.

“I know somewhere very special we can go.”

We walked, or rather Gina marched and I tried to keep up. Every now and then she turned to ask if I was ok but very soon we arrived at a strange kind of art gallery called Kettle’s Yard. As soon as we were in Gina flashed what I assumed to be a member’s card and suddenly we were surrounded by all manner of creative items from pottery to paintings, sculpture to etchings and glass to wood. My immediate impression was that the place had no thematic strand to hold all these objects together but over the time we were there I managed to glean little that would tell me otherwise. The atmosphere the place generated was needless to say quite random but as a backdrop it was a perfect setting for the conversation which took place.

We walked into a small courtyard and Gina perched on a bench and finally, catching up with

her, I did the same. She spoke quickly with a voice that had great range and an animated body language which matched.

“Sorry for the rush, I don’t actually have that much time, I’m sorry. Everything’s gone tits-up with our orders for the week and I’m kind of in the middle of trying to sort it all out. Can you imagine what happens in a cafe if you run out of coffee? You can’t really call yourself a cafe can you?”

“I suppose not. This is an interesting place, kind of tucked away.”

“Exactly, I wanted to bring you here because this is the place Raymond and I used to come, you know to meet, away from it all. This is about your book isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes it is.”

“Good, first off, I have to tell you, I’m not mad, not really, its just a show. Everyone thinks I’m mad but its a smoke screen to keep people at arm’s length.”

“Oh, good.”

“I mean, someone who runs a cafe couldn’t do so if they were mad could they?”

“No, certainly not, not at all.”

“But if everyone thinks you’re mad anyway then you might as well have a bit of fun pretending to be, don’t you think?”

“Yes, of course, a bit of fun.”

“Precisely. Now ask me something, anything about Raymond, it doesn’t matter what it is just dive right in.”

“Ok, here we go. I need to know a few details, about you first, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh me, I’m kind of boring. I met Ray in the first year of University. We were like many relationships really, steady but on and off due to commitments elsewhere. Not many people knew about us, it was a quiet little affair, a sort of dreamy story really. We sort of used each other for, well you know, just the physical side of things, to start with, neither of us had any problem with that but over the three years as students I think its fair to say we were in love. We graduated and then it was game over for a few years as we went our separate ways. Are you married Mr. Henderson?”

“No, I live with my girlfriend of three years in London.”

“Get married, have a baby and enjoy the life that follows, if you know what’s good for you. All

this messing around with relationships is well, well it's just messy. You know that don't you?"

"Ha, yep, it's certainly not very tidy."

"So what was I saying. Ah, ok, so then we didn't see each other again until I was like, 22, no 23. We were both 23 and I was playing the violin in an orchestra for movie soundtracks in LA. Don't ask me how I got into that, it was one of those spontaneous, serendipity, destiny things. You know the kind of thing?"

"I think so."

"So he just flies in one day to LAX and calls me up, all casual. 'I'm in California for a few days would you like to meet up?' It felt so natural. He'd been travelling for a long time and was on his way home. We picked up straight where we'd left off at Uni but the environment we were in, the country, the USA couldn't have been more different. And then he was gone."

"Do you mind if we can just fast forward a little here, just for a moment?"

"No, I don't mind."

"It's just that the first time you came to my attention was when I was looking at the news shortly after Raymond passed away. I knew you

then to be just an old friend of Raymond's but the press were pretty hard on you."

"I know, I know, it was a ridiculous time. All that happened was that I came forward to say that I felt Raymond must be alive because he sent me something in the post, dated several weeks later. No, one believed me. No, one believes me still. I was painted as this jilted lover who just wanted to get her picture in the papers, a crazy woman who was somehow leading the bandwagon of conspiracy theories and so was to be mocked accordingly."

"That must have been very hard for you?"

"Oh, no, it was great! I got my picture in all the papers! The hard thing was knowing I wouldn't see him again. They didn't know Raymond and I had been seeing each other regularly ever since he became an MP and I kept quiet about that, it was our secret and only ours. I rang him to congratulate him when he won and he invited me out almost straight away. Our affair was very real and I saw a lot of change in him over that short six months. There was a transformation of considerable proportions and by the time he went missing he was quite a different man from University days, from week to week in fact."

“This is all very interesting. Was it political life that was changing him?”

“He wasn’t growing as a person. It was like a metamorphic rock, he just developed under the pressure from one... entity into another. I believe it was to do with the insight he was gaining of the workings at the top. Most people in those situations evolve to blend in. Raymond would have had to do that too but in addition he was always able to keep his personal integrity whole, by hiding things.”

I had been quite mesmerised by the sound and speed of Gina’s voice that something just triggered late. “I’m sorry, did you just say Raymond sent you something after the date of his death?”

“Yes, it was sent almost exactly a month after the date he went missing.”

“Where was it sent from?”

“It was post-marked London, it came recorded delivery.”

“What was it?”

“It was an old Golden Virginia tobacco tin and inside was a big rusty key and a cheque, made payable to me. It was dated just a few days earlier, I kept quiet about that because it was for a rather

large amount. I can't say exactly how much but it got me started with the cafe."

"My god! Are you sure it was from him?"

"I know his handwriting, and his signature, and the cheque cleared which was amazing because I thought people's assets got frozen after they died, but then somehow in some way he wasn't dead was he..."

I was completely hooked by this point. Gina was clearly sane, lucid and rational and this piece of information was incredible.

"So when, I mean how can you explain it? What was the tobacco tin and key for?"

"I can't explain it, really I can't but I can say this. Two days before he went away he called and we met here, I mean right here where you are sitting now. The tobacco tin is easy. You see Raymond really liked to smoke, roll ups, but the funniest thing is his parents didn't know about it and he'd kept it a secret. He always smoked, with me and only me as far as I know, and he really enjoyed it. Even that Russian wife of his knew nothing about it. I had given him the tin that day with tobacco in it, in case you know he needed to smoke, I know it was the same tin he returned because it had a dent in it. Apart from it being something to put the

cheque and the key in, I think the tin was just to say that we had something special, something that only the two of us knew about.”

“So he was a smoker, I see.”

“I honestly believe it was his only vice, only bad habit even. I always told him he was basically just an old man. That night he told me he wanted to go away with me, forever, split with Misha, jack in the political career and just ‘check out’, as he put it. The problem was he couldn’t afford the consequences that it would cause. He was flustered, still focussed but it was as though he was a computer trying to process too much information. He was distracted, nervous, even a little bit afraid. The only time I’d ever seen him like that was before he went on stage to perform in his band at University. It was weird, it was definitely like stage fright.”

“This is all incredible Gina, why didn’t you tell the police?”

“I did, I gave a statement but they never got back to me. I called several times and then I went to the papers and they blew it all up - the crazy jilted ex-girlfriend angle. It took me a couple of years to get over the whole thing.”

“What about the key? What was it for?”

“I have no idea, its just an old fashioned key, no markings. The only thing I can think of is that it was something to do with luck. That day he kept mentioning luck, that luck was the only thing that was real, very real, and he needed some, lots of it and very soon. He kept asking me if I had any luck I could give him. In the end I gave him the bracelet I was wearing, a funny kind of charm bracelet with twelve little semi-precious geological rocks on it. It wasn't worth much, I got it in a thrift store but he took it, and he even put it on. It was strange because it had always been one of his things that luck wasn't important, he always used to say that it was only the ability to see opportunities. The next morning was the last day I saw him. He said he'd call, he never did.”

“Gina, do you believe Raymond ended his own life?”

“He certainly ended something. The theories, I've gone over all of them in my head and you know the only conclusion that I've come to that makes any sense is that... he's a missing person.”

“You really believe that he's out there somewhere?”

“All I’m saying is that even if I met him again, even if you met him now, even if he just walked in that door, he would still be missing.”

“Surely someone would have found him by now.”

“No, you don’t understand. Before he disappeared, when I saw him last, and just the way he was those last few weeks, something was missing. He had lost something, or something had been taken from him, his spark, his magic, I don’t know, some might call it his soul. If he died by his own hand or if some bizarre government agency bumped him off or whatever he was already a missing person before he died. That’s what I tried to tell them all but they didn’t understand.”

Gina was now visibly distressed and started to cry, not sobbing but just weighty tears making their way under gravity down an otherwise still face that looked at me for some kind of reassurance. I noticed how beautiful she was. Although approaching forty, with some years of worry showing in the contours of her skin, the beauty she so obviously owned, shone through. I put my hand out to comfort her.

“Are you ok?”

“Not really... I’ve been living with a ghost all these years. Out of everyone, I’m the one who should know for sure what happened to him. I don’t, no one does and that’s the way it will stay, forever.”

I could see that she didn’t want to go on with the interview, she had suddenly become very drained, as if at the end of a long absence from home. It was at this moment that I realised I had not used my recording device. Annoyed for a few seconds, then accepting that it would have benefitted me little from the interview.

“We can stop here if you like Gina, you’ve been so helpful, you can’t imagine.”

“No, thank you Mr. Henderson, its a blessing to be able to talk about this again after so long with words being unspoken. Thank you.”

“I’m going up to Scotland next, to look at the places where he was last seen. I wonder before we go if you can give me any clues as to what to look for.”

“I’m afraid not, all I have I have given you.”

She hesitated,

“Actually, that’s not completely true.”

Rummaging deep within her bag her hand emerged holding a small object, a tobacco tin. She stretched out her arm and offered it to me.

“I always carry this, I forget sometimes, I want you to have it, for good luck.”

“Oh, I’m not sure I can take that from you.”

She rattled it and smiled,

“Its got the key in it. I want you to have it, please. It will be good for me not to be lugging it around everywhere I go anymore. It really has no meaning for me now but I can see for you it just might.”

“Well, thank you.”

I accepted the gift and we stood up and left. As we walked back to the cafe, Gina’s mood lifted. It was windy and clouds were racing across the sky but the sun was breaking through every moment. Gina laughed.

“Have you been to Cambridge before Mr. Henderson?”

“No, this is the first time.”

“It’s a lovely place, really, so old and mysterious but it keeps you feeling so young.”

Her hair was blowing in the wind and she walked with a carefree stride. Stopping outside the cafe she faced me with ruddy cheeks.

“A pleasure to meet your Mr. Henderson, good luck with your book. I shall look forward to finding it in the bookshops, there’s quite a few here. Reading it will be illuminating I’m sure.”

“Thank you too, I’ll send you a copy if and when it’s published.”

“Not if, just when!”

We shook hands.

“Well, I must get back inside the mad house. There’s a sack of coffee with my name on it heading this way from Costa Rica or some such place!”

Then she leant in close as she had done before, whispering,

“I’m not mad really, just got a bad press...”

I smiled, “Good bye Gina, thank you once more.”

She went inside to the sound of the brass bell over the door and I turned and walked along the pavement.

Holding the tobacco tin in my hand in my pocket, it was rough and rusty to feel and as I shook it the key inside rattled. Holding something so personal that had once been in the hands of Dante conferred upon the object something of the magical. I felt energised, the claim that this somehow showed the existence of him after he was officially

declared missing, dead even, made it all the more vital. The temptation to stop and open it was growing and after only a minute of delaying gratification I stopped on a small bridge and prised open the lid. The key was about three inches long, once black but now rusty and very rudimentary, there was nothing remarkable about it, just as Gina had said. I put the lid back on and safely slid the tin back into my coat pocket. This done my attentions turned immediately to the long drive up to Scotland where I felt I would be even closer to the essence of Dante and his story.

6

Real Perspective

My driving was a little twitchy. Despite having driven for several hours I felt it was only every few minutes that some event occurred to unsettle me.

A low-loader lorry moving painfully slowly pulled out in front of me. Two motorbikes hurtled past racing each other at over 100mph, I didn't see them in my mirror and the first I knew was the high pitched wail of their high revving engines as they flew by in the third lane just as I was indicating right to pass a coach. A broken down vehicle on the hard shoulder opened a door for a loose plastic bag to blow out of it and onto my bumper. Intermittent rain that required continuous attention with wipers left a smear across my field of view through the windscreen.

These moments of low quality driving experience were a challenge and kept me uncomfortably alert, and I prefer to drive easy, efficiently and without distraction. I put a CD on, a chill out album and strangely the rest of the journey passed without any noticeable annoyance.

It was a six and a half hour drive from Cambridge. I'd left at 12pm and planned two stops at service stations along the way breaking the journey into three stints. The service stations were exactly as expected, reassuringly impersonal and anonymous. I refuelled the car twice, I stretched my legs by walking around the car parks, I had some food, I had coffee, I visited the loos, I spoke only to those serving me and by the time I'd arrived at Kilwinning on the West Coast of Scotland there were only purely forgettable memories of those stops, almost as though they had happened to someone else.

Pulling up to the coast was quite literally a breath of fresh air. As I parked to overlook the waterway between myself and Arran I could see the effects of the wind on the waves and felt the buffeting in the car, the low sound of the bursts of air as it came in forcefully off the sea. When I opened the drivers door an inch a gust took it from my grip and blew it wide open.

It was enough to walk about for only a few minutes before I returned to the still comfort inside the car. Could this have been how it was when Dante was here? What was on his mind to go out in such weather?

It was now 8pm. The ferry left in the morning and I had booked ahead to stay in a room above a public house. My initial impression of this place was that it was barren and desolate and I had as yet to cross over to the island itself. I couldn't imagine, I tried, but just couldn't see this as a place for contemplation or reflection. For whatever reason Dante had made this very same trip it was still as unclear to me as the thunderous skies that lurked above.

The pub, just near the ferry terminal, was called The Wheel Inn. I went in to what was a large and nearly empty lounge area decorated on the walls with the wheels of many boats. Directly in front of me was the largest of these, standing some four feet tall and mounted on the floor so that it could be spun around. Entirely made from wood, its twelve handles were well worn, inviting me to place a hand on one and imagine for a moment steering some large old vessel. I turned it through just a few degrees and then looked up to the large man who came into view behind the bar.

"Hi! I booked a room a couple of days ago, my name's Francis Henderson."

"Ah, hello Mr. Henderson, glad to have you here. Have you come far?"

“Well, from Cambridge today but I was in London yesterday.”

“That’s a fair way. That your car just outside?”

“Yes, I’m just glad it made it all this way. I think its on its last legs. I don’t know how many warning lights have been on for months.”

“How are they, those Beetles?”

“Well, this one is about twenty something years old, its done over 130,000 miles so I’ve got to say they’re reliable.”

“Mmm... Now then, your room. It’s all ready for you. If you’d like to just sign yourself in here and we’d appreciate it if you’d pay up front, if its all the same with you. Had a few people take off without paying recently.”

“Certainly, that’s no problem.”

I signed, paid and ordered a much needed drink; a pint of some random, dark, real ale which was very pleasant indeed, a sort of charred hops taste with a honey flavour. Within minutes I was telling of my book and had completely forgotten the weather outside which had been turning rather ugly. The barman was all ears, he cleaned a few glasses, changed a few optics and restocked various bar snacks whilst making reassuring noises. During

another pint I realised he hadn't said a great deal other than muttering some words about the whole Raymond Dante affair being a long time ago now and that most folks had forgotten all about it.

"It did put the place on the map for a while though. I was a very young man back then when they brought all the cameras and reporters up here. It was all over very quickly."

Suddenly I didn't want to know much more. My research of all the media coverage was one thing and everything said that I should find out as much as I could from the local people, that's why I was here after all. But something in me didn't want to hear ancient accounts from people who didn't know Raymond. In the last two days I had spoken to his father, his wife and his University sweetheart and mistress, and their accounts were fresh and ringing in my ears. I didn't want to somehow dilute them with hearsay and speculation, I'd had enough of that over the last two years and I'd discovered there wasn't much in it to further the story.

On top of that, tomorrow I was about to see where Raymond's journey had come to an end. Possibly I would cross over somewhere near his final resting place as I took the ferry in the morning. To see where his boat was found, smashed up

against the rocks would be to see with my own eyes how he had met his end. I didn't want some dumb yokels to spoil my pilgrimage, with their tall tales or dismissive talk. This was my untainted perception and I wanted it to have some respect if not some intimacy. With the realisation that it was the drinks adding to my annoyance and with a decisive motion I finished the second and asked to be shown to my room.

I don't much recall what happened next. I must have lain down on the double bed and fallen asleep with my clothes on. Drained by the long drive and the constant alert state it required I was obviously more tired than I had realised. I woke at 3am only to close the curtains to the night. The wind was still whipping in, now accompanied by heavy drops of swirly rain beating hard against the windows. I managed to get out of my clothes and into the bed and was soon dozing off as I just remembered to set my alarm. That done I was out like a light.

When I woke to the annoying 'bleep bleep' it took only moments to realise where I was and what lay ahead. I had new vision and new energy. So much so that I was fully changed, packed up,

breakfasted, out of the pub and waiting for the first ferry by 9am.

It was not a large boat, with room for about twelve cars, including mine, and no more than thirty or so foot passengers. Having embarked we chugged away. The weather had changed and was now calm but a cold and damp humidity hung in the salty air, enough for me to take the process of waking up to another level. By the time we arrived at the shores of Arran I was fresh and keen.

I knew where I was going, I'd studied the map for this part of the journey many times. I like the old paper maps, not just for the tactility, or the romance but the vast colour coding key that lets you know you are straying from a main road, a well trodden path onto a lesser more exciting way. The contours showing that you will be driving around a steep peak, the symbols that say you will be passing a post office, the scale that allows you to approximate your distance to your destination.

It was three miles along the coast to my rendezvous with the goal of my journey. As I rounded one corner it came into view, a few small buildings, and a kind of rock outcrop that jutted some fifteen metres into the surrounding sea. This was just as I remembered it from the television

footage. I pulled up and parked, eyes eager with anticipation not yet knowing what they searched for, or what they hoped to learn.

Greeted with a stoney silence I walked to the rocks. There was nothing here, in abundance. There were no clues, no marks that history might have left for my benefit, no sign that Raymond Dante had been here or indication of *why* he was here in the first place. If he had drowned off this shore, it would have been the most bleak and lonely scene for a death. Perhaps he was just off the coast, perhaps he could see the lights from the small cluster of houses and shops, maybe he had struggled against a storm the nature of which had blown in last night. Nobody had been found, no body.

Would a life jacket have made any difference? Certainly the boat had been hired with two, surely he would have been wearing one. Just a life jacket then, against the likes of last night. I wouldn't rate my chances and I'm a strong swimmer as Dante had been. Fully clothed, the weight of the world of Westminster dragging him down. Deeper and then deeper. How could one choose to end it this way? Exactly what facts and details could have put their claws into this brilliant man to drive him to this?

This was just an accident. A stressed MP takes a few days time out to visit a childhood holiday destination. On a whim he hires a boat from a local and makes a foolish trip into the channel, not checking the weather, not thinking for once. He throws caution to the wind most literally, a few hours of fun to put between himself and the suffering of his work. A storm brews, a freak gust and wave coincide, he's capsized and thrown overboard, he is out of reach of the downed boat, he floats away. He knows he has only little chance, he fights, he swims, he sinks, he swallows water, he recovers, he goes under. Does he go down fighting, does he just give in, give up? He dies, he is lost, no one sees him again, ever.

I didn't really know what it was I was looking for but here I have found it. It's a feeling really, a feeling of my finding some peace with the questions that have driven me. In many ways this feels like the end; the end of Dante's life, the end of my search for the truth, the end of my ambition to find a truth and Dante's living of it, the end of the book.

I'm standing at the furthest point of the outcrop. There is nothing but a vast expanse of sea between here and the mainland. I feel I have

reached the most distant extremity of my journey, there is nothing further for me here now, nothing for me to add to my book anymore. I've seen enough, its time to go home, to Heather, to my job. The book feels closed, unfinished to my satisfaction, but closed. Best to give up on these things when all the signs tell you to do so. Time to give up the ghost. I tried. I walked slowly back to the car.

The tiny pub I'm parked by is called The Albion. I don't know what the name means but I go in, to get a coffee.

As old and run down on the inside as it was on the outside I get talking to Frank and his wife Mary, the landlord and landlady. I was the only person in the place and so was the captive market. After they'd squeezed from me the purpose of my visit and a brief life-history I just wanted to have one of those conversations where little information is exchanged where voices are heard and listened to, where smiles and pleasantries meet for a thankfully short while. However, by the time I had ordered my coffee and had it in front of me we were in a full depth discussion about Dante.

"We were here when it happened." Mary had obviously told her version of the tale many

times but she and Frank were a double act, he took over from her.

“Yep, only had the place a few months. First we knew anything of it was when old Bob showed up and said he'd found a boat crashed on the rocks.”

“I thought it was just a boat that had come loose in the night, that storm was terrible fierce.” Mary had the tiniest voice but was quite animated as she went on,

“Then Jack woke up, he'd been sleeping on the couch, that one right there, terrible drunk he'd got the night before.”

Frank took over the narrative,

“It'd been Jack had hired him the boat the day before. He didn't know who the person was, he just wanted a boat for the afternoon so Jack leant him his for fifty pounds. Then he'd gotten sodden drunk on the money. Weather was fine then, just fine but no one to report him missing in that foul storm that blew in.”

Mary was welling up and Frank put his hand around her, she managed to explain between the sobs.

“Once Bob had found the boat, he knew it was Jack's, we knew something was wrong and

when Jack came round enough from his hangover he told us of the young man he'd leant it to. That man was Mr. Raymond Dante MP. He lost his life somewhere out there, just off our bit of the shore."

Frank comforted his wife further but still managed to complete the tale.

"It's been hard remembering it so often, we don't mind of course but it was actually all the media coverage that was the hardest. Those TV camera people and producers and journalists, so pushy and unemotional. For several weeks it was all questions and no answers. We did great business, we could charge a small fortune for our few guest rooms, I didn't complain about that, but they wouldn't let go of it, the story that is."

I sigh and locked eyes with Frank,

"I understand you so well, you get obsessed and fascinated with the question, it drives you and its hard to let it go. In the end you have to accept that its just a job, just a story."

Mary had pulled herself together,

"Its just tragic, any young man to lose his life so early, but one so full of promise, such a man of the people, it was so sad."

Having continued the conversation with this perfectly pleasant couple for some time it felt only

natural to order some food. It was an early lunch but I had a long drive back so it made a lot of sense. A lasagne and chips was perfect to warm and fill me up. As I finished an old, bearded man walked in wearing muddy dungarees and large black boots. It was about 1pm.

Frank greeted him,

“Hi Bob.”

“You all right there Frank?”

“This here’s Mr. Henderson, come from London and writing a book on The Mr. Raymond Dante MP.”

Already I was feeling tired, tired from the two years of writing and searching, tired from the journey and emotionally tired from sucking up the last of Dante’s life. I really just wanted to be left alone and get ready for the road back. The last thing I wanted was more backstory anecdotes. However it occurred to me that this could be the Bob who found the boat and I was still naturally curious to dig a little.

“Hello Mr. Henderson.” Bob wallowed over with a heavy gait and put his hand in my vicinity, we shook.

“You’re not the same Bob who found Dante’s crashed boat are you?”

“One and the same Bob, yes. Jack’s boat, not a very pretty boat, not even before it met its sticky end. Member for Reading West met *his* sticky end in it, that’s for sure. I suppose you’ll be wanting to see it, like all the other crazies.”

Not sure whether to throw my hat in as just another ‘crazy’ I nodded obligingly. For there to be the remains of the actual boat had not been in my mind but within seconds I was on my way to see it.

“Come on then, it’s only round the corner a minute.”

I was led to a grubby old shack, more of lean-to in truth. There was a large green tarpaulin thrown over an area not much larger than a big car, fifteen, twenty feet in length no more. Bob grabbed the covering in his big shovel hands and hauled it towards him slowly at first and then with a flurry at the end. The smashed object that was revealed had little resemblance to a boat, were it not for the white paint, the name “Lucy” on its bow and a mast in several pieces one might think it to be a loose collection of flotsam and jetsam. The years had been further unkind to it and it was mostly rotten through and covered in blotchy green algae.

“Fifty quid and no bother checking the weather, leads to one joy ride for one dead MP. If

you ask me he was as foolish as he was young and rich.”

Seeing this jagged wreck, a mess of split wood and splintered fibreglass, was much like looking at a car that had driven at seventy miles per hour straight into a strong oak tree. You can’t imagine that anyone could have walked, or in this case swam, away from it.

“Can I take a picture?”

“Take as many as like.”

Just with my phone I took about ten photos. As I did so I felt myself to be some kind of forensic detective documenting the scene, only I was a decade too late to be doing anything serious with the results. When I was done I wanted no more to do with it, there was a great surge of letting the whole thing, and the man, rest in peace. We walked the short distance back to the pub. Bob cleared his throat.

“There’s no charge for the viewing but it’s become a sort of custom over the years if you could see your way to buying me a pint, or two.”

“Certainly Bob, thank you, it would be a pleasure.”

Once in the pub I ordered.

“What will you have?”

“A pint of Stones if its all the same.”

“Just the pint of Stones then please Frank.”

Bob seemed a bit indignant.

“You not having one?”

“Oh, I’ve got to drive I’m afraid.”

“Surely one for the road then.”

I looked up to Mary who smiled.

“Ok then, I’ll try a pint of Stones too.”

So we sat in a corner, our warm pints in front of us. Bob soon downed his and I was obliged to order another for his services. Then there came that moment. Probably due to the effects of just one pint I was in much greater spirits than only half an hour previously and most definitely because Jack suddenly rolled in through the doors. I had the decision to make as to whether to stay the night. Frank and Mary were able to persuade me and I took my bags from the car to a lovely little room with a view over the sea before settling down to another pint and the company of Bob, and now Jack too.

Jack was in his 50s and basically a simple soul who became deeper and more complex with every drop that passed his lips. I felt his entire life had been coloured, defined even, by the events of the night of Dante’s death. Certainly with every

pint I bought him he offered a little more, details and insights, opinions and theories. He was undoubtedly the expert on the subject who repeatedly revealed my ignorance.

“What you’ve got to appreciate young Mr. Henderson is that although Raymond T. Dante may have been a master at navigating the psychological mine-field of Westminster, and I do say *may* have been, when it came to sailing the treacherous currents of these waters he was no more than any average idiot. Now I hired him Lucy that day, he left his driving licence by way of a deposit, authorities wanted that or I would have shown it you, and he paid me fifty quid, but he didn’t check the weather, did he? I didn’t check it, but then I wasn’t going out in it was I? So I was more than happy to spend his money, right here in this pub and no I didn’t noticed no storm coming in. So how can you say it was my fault I never did report him gone ’til Lucy got washed up the next morning? You can’t say that can you?”

Jack must have spent the substantial intervening part of his life explaining himself and I felt a little sad for him. Bob on the other hand, who was well into further pints, mostly supplied by myself, took a different angle on the matter.

“I’m surprised at you Mr. Henderson, what with you being an intelligent man and everything, writing a book. You *do* want this thing to be commercially successful don’t you, make some money? Because all the money is in the conspiracy theories, what do you make of them?”

“I’ve been looking for the truth, I want to tell it as it is, or at least as it was.”

“The truth you say. Either you don’t know the difference between fact and fiction or you’re beginning to see that there’s more truth in some fictions than there are in the so called facts. Very slippery thing the truth.”

“If you want to know what I really think its that Raymond Dante deliberately and with foresight ended his own life.”

Bob seemed to light up a little. “Now we’re talking, it's an idea isn’t it? You know what you think and you’ve got some ideas of what other people think but if you’re going to sell a book you have to start thinking about what your readers want to think as much as what you want them to. Put the so called truth on ice for a little while and think about that.”

Jack had been quiet for a while, unhappily contemplating another empty glass but he suddenly piped up.

“Aliens took him, pure and simple. It’s the only theory that makes any sense. They took him and he’s still alive in some mother-ship somewhere and they’re using his mind to control the governments of the so called free world. Soon they’ll make their move, it’ll be decisive and human-kind will be brought to its knees. You mark my words.”

Bob let out a deep and low laugh.

“That’s more like it! That’s what people want to read. There’s money in Jack’s way of looking at the world.”

By this time I was fairly hammered too and for once, for the first time, I saw the humour in all this myself. I’d been too close to the whole thing for so long that I’d not allowed myself room to breathe, let alone laugh but then I did and my truth started to come out.

“Ah, he was just a man! And it was just an accident. If he’d been some guy from, from Basingstoke or somewhere and he came here to get away from it all then it would have made the local paper that week and that would be that. We’re just

fascinated as a nation with the death of important people and I'm no different. Sure there may have been some weird goings on in government, there were those who surely did benefit from his not being around anymore, but that's all I've been doing, trying to benefit from the death of someone else. I'm a parasite like all the others. And the conspiracy theories, they're just another way of spinning out a story for want of more facts."

Jack, who now had another drink jumped in.

"But they never found the body, don't you think that's bizarre? You think I'm joking about the aliens, whoever they are, but they took him. There's even a barn about thirty miles north of here where they beamed him up, no one knows about that except for Jack here. You think I'm soft in the head don't you?"

"Jack talks a lot of bull Mr. Henderson, but if you want a bestseller on your hands you should listen to him. He's figured it all out over the years I can tell you."

Bob talked through a big smile and it was obvious he didn't believe a word of Jack's musings. It was all a big joke to him and I was just another punter providing them with free drinks. I was the fool here, they were just entertaining me for a while

as I'm sure they had done many times to other innocent passers-by in the last two decades. I was a tab at the bar and suddenly I'd had enough of it. I stood straight up and wobbled under my own considerable intake, I wasn't used to this strong ale, so much of it and a continuous conversation that must have lasted several hours. It was still early but I decided in that moment to get an early night and forget about the whole thing.

"I'm off to bed, thank you gentlemen for your company but I have to sleep now. Thank you."

As I walked slowly and deliberately towards my sleep I just heard Bob talking in a hushed voice to Jack.

"Another one bites the dust."

I didn't care, soon I would be with the oblivion of drunken sleep and a short while later when I fell into that sleep I was thinking only of which CD I would play on the way back in the car. I was neither happy or sad, just at the end of a long journey that was at the beginning of the way home.

Luck Key

I was hungover as I stirred, for a while I kept my eyes tightly shut, afraid of how they would feel when I opened them. When I did it was clear that I'd overslept, having forgotten to set my alarm the ferry had already left some half an hour ago. I got up, showered in the tiny bathroom and put on some clean clothes rather slowly and with care not to fall over.

Not sure as to a plan, my only directive was to leave the place without much fuss and drive, somewhere, anywhere. Frank interrupted me just as I was heading for the door.

"Goodbye then Mr. Henderson, no breakfast then?"

"Er, no, I have to be somewhere."

"Well, then it was good to meet you, good luck with your book and do come back, always welcome."

"Thank you. Goodbye."

I had no intention of coming back but as I approached the car I looked over my shoulder and in the clearing blue skies I saw the island behind me

rising up. It was quite beautiful with the rugged aspect that Scotland offers to all those who visit. With the next ferry not leaving until the early afternoon I got into the car and decided to drive through some of this beauty if only as a way to push to the back of my mind the feelings of last night and the hangover which still had a grip on all my senses.

The road was spectacular, a winding black ribbon with a smooth surface encouraging me to put my foot down and gracefully speed through the long curves. There wasn't another car in sight. At each bend a new part of the scenery scrolled around to reveal itself and as I concentrated on driving my fuzzy head became clear. It was as though I was in a television car commercial where the bullet line at the end comes up with the logo of the manufacturer, promising a kind of lifestyle that few enjoy but to which many aspire.

'Bang!' There came a very loud, almost explosive sound, immediately followed by an unbearable clanking sound, a grinding metal on metal vibration and without using my brakes the wheels locked up. Swerving violently it was a challenge to keep my nerve and to keep the car on the road. After a long screech I brought it to a standstill at a mad angle on the verge. My first and

only thought was to get out. I opened the door and removed myself from the source of the chaos.

The car itself was not steaming and there was no sign of it being in flames or broken in any superficial way. However as I looked back down the road I could see the rubber laid down in a skid that must have been one hundred feet in length. The trail of my tyres showed a sinusoidal swerving where the tracks of each tyre criss-crossed each other. The nature and size of the last minute of my life suddenly sank in and I sat down on the wet grass. I felt in shock but lucky to be in one piece.

After a few minutes, having gathered my wits and lessened the magnitude of my shaking hands, I thought of walking back to the pub. However a quick look at my watch showed that I had been driving for well over half an hour, at some considerable speed and the pub would be some thirty miles back. I had my phone and optimistically called the AA. Having given my membership number and location to the nice lady with a soft Scottish lilt she explained in a reassuringly calm tone.

“Yes, Mr. Henderson, we do have a recovery vehicle on Arran but it will take at least two hours to get to you. You have the Silver Relay service

which means if we can't get you up and running we'll be able to take you and your car to the nearest garage and arrange for a way for you to continue your journey."

I was elated. "Thank you, thank you so much."

"That's fine Mr. Henderson. We recommend you stay with your car until we arrive."

"Certainly, I'll read a book or something."

"Ok. Is there anything else we can help you with?"

"No, I'll be fine right here."

"Thank you then, good bye."

As soon as I hung up I looked at the phone and thought of phoning Heather. The only problem was that the battery was so low, having used it as a sat-nav and having forgotten to put it on charge last night. I felt I might need it again, for new emergencies in the near future. I put it in my coat and it made a clunk. The tobacco tin was still in that pocket and as I withdrew it the key rattled inside.

Up ahead in the distance was a brown house, I estimated it to be only five minutes walk. It sat on a slightly raised piece of ground, framed by a group of thin trees. I needed to move, I simply couldn't

sit still waiting for two hours and as the sky was so clear now, the sun shining brilliantly the invitation was very appealing. I locked the car doors from habit and started walking, wet underfoot as it was.

It was normal for me to satiate my natural curiosity to explore my immediate surroundings. My life had always been like this, wandering from disaster to disaster through patches of discovered beauty. My only regrets in life were that some of these disasters had been relationships. For long periods in my life it would seem that I'd created a little zone, a little bubble that would last so long but when it burst I would have to move on to another. The whole project of writing this biography was yet another such bubble, it had surely burst now and I found myself once again stumbling through a no-man's land in search of the next.

The more I thought of this as I walked the more Heather came into sharp focus at the front of my mind. She knew me well and was completely aware of my abilities to jump from one world to another, the difficult journey between microcosms being one that was now usual. She had seen it and had come with me now on several such explorations.

She would be happy I was dropping the biography and would encourage me in my job and help me to look for other ways I might further myself. She knew I was a journalist, naturally moving from one story to another and she had always been with me to make those transitions easier and more productive.

The small house on the grassy mound grew in size as I approached. The motivating excuse to myself, if I needed one, was just to find a convenient and sheltered space in the otherwise open country to use as a convenience, and indeed on reaching the cover of this place I was able to relieve myself, with great relief. It wasn't a house but a large out-building. It was the kind of barn that a dedicated photographer might be able to work wonders with in black and white. Split planks, gnarled and twisted roofing, rusty corrugated panels, patch-worked repairs. It was evidently disused but as I grew closer the boyish explorer in me came alive and of course I wondered as to what lay within.

Right next to it now I thought that only time itself can create such a place. Overgrown with grass all around I felt I may have been its only visitor in many years. A farmer may have stored

things here, there were no other buildings as far as I could see looking around. It was kind of an anomaly. It must have belonged to someone but due to its remoteness I felt no guilt to be trespassing. I ran my hand along the exterior, feeling the rough weathered grain and knurled knotty surface. All along there were gaps in the planks, I peered through but it was too dark inside to make anything out. My car and predicament were a fair distance away and out of mind as I was thoroughly absorbed in this building, this place. I came to a door.

The door handle was a large brass mass, about the size of a tennis ball. Coloured and tarnished by time, the weather and by however many hands, I placed my own on it and turned. It was locked and I was disappointed. I took a step back with the realisation of an impossible idea. Suddenly and at once remembering Jack, from last night, talk of such a barn, I wondered if this was it, and further, was it possible, had I held the key for it in the tin in my pocket all the way from Cambridge?

Looking at the tin its age and patina was in keeping with door nob, and then the key too. Its fair to say I was in some kind of trance in this moment, born of the location, the circumstances and

indeed my search for Dante's story reigniting in my heart which began to pound. All my research and wanderings had come down to this and unsurprisingly it was overwhelming and hard to take in. I laughed to myself in an attempt to stir a sense of normality and render this situation as a joke, but it had no effect. I placed the key in the lock and with some force it turned with a reassuring thud as the mechanism fell into place. The handle turned, the door eased open and gingerly I put one foot in front of the other to enter. I stopped after just one step in order to remove the key, my hands wanted to be holding it still but after I had stared at it for some moments and it was firmly in my grasp once more I took another step, and then another.

A damp musky smell greeted me. Loose straw lay on the ground wet from the water which must have come through the gaps in the roof last night. Now, through those same gaps, shards of sunlight, slashes of sunshine, illuminated partial areas of the interior. There was no sound save for my footsteps and the occasional creaking of wood brought about by the gentle breeze outside. The beams, high above, looked solid, this structure was perfectly stable and had evidently been built well but it was by and large completely empty. In size,

the plan was only half a tennis court, so that its spaciousness was leant by its height rather than its area. With one partition to look behind I ventured further, somehow fearful that I might disturb what was simply not there. Around this partition there was more of the same, wet straw piled up smelling all the more dank as the strong sunlight warmed it through further gaps in the exterior walls.

Had Dante been here? A quick calculation said it was a seven hour walk here, at least, from where his boat had been found, not impossible. I leant no credence to Jack's talk of aliens but time and time again I had been forced to rethink and reimagine such stories due to the hidden substance that they usually contained. Why would Dante come here?

Sitting down, my back against a wall, it was to acclimatised myself to this new finding. It was an immediate experience, no mental space available to process the influx of imagination, senses and ideas. On the wall facing me was some kind of drawing, a rectangle of four feet by six feet it looked to be in chalk. I couldn't make it out clearly as it was quite faint, so I stood and approached in order to understand what I was looking at.

The picture was not chalk but had been carved with a knife. In the top left hand corner in letters an inch or so high was the inscription BBCHD. As I cleared away the straw in the centre at the bottom in slightly larger letters was written the word SONY. This was a drawing of a television and on its 'screen', drawn carefully and with some artistic merit in the same knife-carved lines was a picture of a tropical island. It was well depicted; the waves, the beach, the palm trees, a person lying in a hammock and the island itself with a little wooden jetty projecting out into a lagoon in which sat a small boat. It must have taken considerable time and was the work not of a small child but a considered and careful representation of a paradise and perhaps somewhere very real. Its atmosphere drew me in.

I imagined a person having completed the picture sitting down to admire their work, to gaze at the image and its associated ideas. I sat with my back against the opposite wall, as though it was late at night and I was channel surfing to arrive at this channel. As I sat, my coat moved aside some of the relatively dry straw that was piled up by the wall, revealing many marks, marks that counted days and struck of week by week. I counted 31 days exactly,

one whole month. Someone had been here all those hours and days, that much was clear, and then with the words written under the marks I had no doubt that the person in question must have been Raymond Dante. The words read “Tobacco Key”.

I removed the Golden Virginia Tobacco Tin from my pocket, opened it and whilst holding the key in one hand, the tin in the other, moved my eyes from objects to words to convince my dumbstruck mind that they were from one and the same source.

He had been here, he had been here a month, he had sent the tin and its contents to his ex-girlfriend, but he had sent it from London. At that time, he was alive and if he was alive then he could be alive now.

Snapping out of the mesmerised state that had overcome me I looked at my watch. It meant nothing because I hadn’t checked it when I’d called the AA but I could easily have been here far longer than I might have thought and knew I should get back to the car. I left, almost as though leaving the scene of a crime, carefully taking one last look at the place before shutting the door, locking it tight and retaining the key.

Walking, with the car ahead of me in sight, I kept glancing over my shoulder trying to reinforce

in my consciousness that the place was real, that what I had just seen was fact, and then to realise that the thoughts I had discounted about Dante could be real too. It was not feasible to take it all in at once and so it was fortunate that I had the immediate business of the car to attend to. Soon I came up to it, with a weird expectation that I could just get in and drive away. One glance at the rubber skid tracks on the road and the trough carved in the verge where it had come to a rest brought my stark reality into focus. I was a long way from anywhere, physically, emotionally and mentally and all I could do was sit in the drivers seat, stare at the inanimate gauges and wait.

My brain must have shut down, for how long I don't know. A kind of open-eyed sleep ensued where images and memories, words and pictures, speech and stories all played through the theatre of my mind in a random mixed-up rough edit of a movie that was my incomplete research. Not having the necessary thread with which to create any story that made any sense, it was with some kind of relief from this chaotic shuffling of data that the AA man knocked on my window. I was startled, then ecstatic to be finally receiving

outside help in any form, from myself and from my unbridled imagination.

“Am I glad to see you!” As I got out of the car I shook him vigorously by the hand with the raw experience of holding on to someone real. He obviously understood my reaction.

“It’s a perk of the job, always being welcomed with open arms. I’m Tom.”

He was a thin man with a mild Scottish accent and scruffy beard but he had a great smile full of crooked teeth and in my eyes was nothing less than a super hero. He’d pulled up his recovery vehicle in front of my car and lost no time doing his job. We turned to view the skids leading up to the final resting place.

“Looks like you had a battle on your hands coming to a stop.”

“You can say that again, it was like wrestling an elephant.”

“I’m impressed you didn’t turn her over, must having been doing a fair speed.”

“Fifty, more like sixty plus. I wasn’t really looking at the speedo. I didn’t touch the brakes, the wheels locked up and I just tried to keep it on the road until it came to a stop.”

“Ah, I’ve got a feeling I know what’s happened here. Can you open the bonnet for me then?”

“Yes, no problem.”

The bonnet popped open and Tom busied himself under it. He removed the oil dip-stick and showed it to me.

“There you see.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Oil!”

“I can’t see any.”

“That’s because there isn’t any. You must have had a leak, or dumped it a ways back. No oil, no lubrication, no cooling. What you have here is a seized engine.”

“That sounds expensive.”

“I’m afraid it worse than that, its game over. Your pistons and cylinders have got so hot that they’ve fairly welded themselves together in the block. Short of an entire new engine, you’re going nowhere.”

“Oh.”

“Yes sir, Oh.”

“Well, what are my options?”

“Honestly sir. This is a very old car, unless you have some deep seated sentimental reason for

holding on to the old lady I think its time you let her go. It'll cost you far more to repair than its total value. It's a write-off sir."

"Oh, man."

"I can load her up on the truck, and dispose of it for you. Get you on your way home. Where is home sir?"

"London."

"Well, you're in luck. Get the ferry back to Kilwinning and the train will take you all the way into Euston. I believe you have to change just the once."

"That's my best bet you reckon?"

"I reckon a stress free ride on the train is just the ticket for you sir."

So that was the plan. With the help of a winch Tom pulled the Beetle onto his recovery vehicle and it wasn't long before I was deposited at the ferry terminal. With all my belongings around me, including the contents of the glove box and boot, I stood and waved Tom and my car goodbye. I was alone with a head full of fantasy that desperately continued trying to integrate itself with the stark reality of the surroundings and the train trip home.

I don't know the definition of insanity, but I'm familiar with a delusional state of mind and its safe to say that the next few hours saw me in such a way that I remember none of it. Surely I went through the motions of buying the ferry and train tickets but it was as the walking dead. Only after some hours had passed, staring out the window did a memory come to light that put me on another train, a train of thought. Whether it was rational or lucid would be for others to judge.

I recalled Gina Royce trying to explain to me in her own assembled logic that should Raymond Dante be alive he would still be so but as a 'missing' man. I too was now missing, no-one knew my current whereabouts and I might as well be lost at sea. Were it not for the straight steel tracks and the wheels that rolled along them ever closer to Heather and to home I would be on a road to nowhere.

I had the tin and the key. What can one tell from mere objects? They were evidence of life, certainly evidence of a faked death but what kind of clues were they and where did they lead? The words that they corresponded to had been carved quite clearly and deliberately in wood on the wall and equipped with the words which suddenly had

more use than their objects I took out my phone, which still had 5% battery left, and into Google typed “Tobacco Key”.

After just a few seconds, the reception was good, up came the results. Tobacco Key or ‘Caye’ was a tiny tropical island, off the coast of Belize in Central America, and when I tapped on ‘Images’ up came several beautiful photographs. The likeness of one to the picture carved on the TV image in the barn was not far off exact, it could have been copied from one to the other. I sat back.

Ten minutes passed. Countryside went hurtling by, I noticed none of it as I was in another bubble. I looked up flights to Belize City on my phone and booked a one way ticket leaving from London next week on United via Houston, using my credit card, zen acceptance of the impossible and some amount of nerve. As I went to call Heather the battery finally died and, my imagination crashing too, I slept for the last three hours until disembarking at Euston.

Silent Treatment

Heather wasn't happy, not one little bit. She wasn't happy because I hadn't called her, she wasn't happy because I'd taken 'a little joy ride' to Scotland, and she certainly wasn't thrilled that I'd 'run the car into the ground'. I hadn't told her about Belize yet, I thought it best to leave that little gem until tomorrow. Turning the tin over in my pocket I felt sure she wouldn't appreciate its significance either, so it stayed in my pocket.

I was self-conscious that there may be a slightly crazed and knowing look in my eyes. Becoming aware of it was largely brought about by Heather's varied ability to look at me straight on for more than a few seconds as her ramping interrogation morphed into a full-on rant.

"I simply DO NOT understand you Francis, you're not normal. I know what normal is, I'm a lawyer I see all kinds of deviations from the norm but I've built up a good picture of what's expected from people, on just a human level, appropriate behaviour. Is any of this sinking in?"

“I’m sorry Heather, I am, but this thing has suddenly gotten a lot bigger, bigger than me, bigger than us, bigger than this country and I’m deep into it, that’s all there is to it.”

“What are you talking about? Bigger!”

“I can’t really talk about it, I think its kind of become a secret.”

“A secret! Oh well, that’s just marvellous! Secretive behaviour is the start of a very slippery slope, downwards.”

She was right of course. The trouble was there were several conflicting ideas within me and I was having to hold onto them all at the same time. Without really being able to stop myself I made a first attempt to resolve some of them.

“I’m going to Belize next week.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Belize, it’s a country in Central America.”

“I know where it is but people don’t just ‘go there next week.’”

Heather’s voice pattern had become even more elevated, verging on the hysterical. I began a slow process of trying to calm her but it didn’t really have much effect.

“It’s for my book, I’m following up on some leads from my trip. Don’t worry I’ll only be gone a week.”

“A week, what about me! What am I supposed to do? Why can’t I go with you? What about your job? Have you even stopped to think about any of this?”

“No, not really. I’m just going with the flow at the moment.”

My girlfriend of two years was now in complete and fixed disbelief.

“I understand that this might be a little hard to process but when I get back we can do the Paris thing together. I’ve a feeling my book will kind of write itself from here on in. As for work, I’ll give them a bell in the morning to get another week off, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“How are you paying for all this? You know money’s tight, come on tell me.”

“Well, it’s all on the credit card at the moment, we should be able to clear it. When the book is finished it will sell, I’m sure of that. Hey, we’ll save loads on the car, no insurance, tax, mot, petrol - that’s kind of a bonus.”

The stare from Heather was now of such intensity and incredulity as to confound even her, she broke.

“I don’t think I even need to talk to you anymore. You go off, do whatever secret thing you have to do, think about what you may or may not be coming back to, but I’m not going to say another word to you for as long as I see fit, that’s starting now.”

She stormed off into the kitchen and left me standing. All the time my hand had been in my pocket, turning over the tin. My fingers used as they were to typing had acquired a mind of their own and since they booked the flight they were taking the lead in terms of my new found search initiative, towards Dante but obviously now, and without desire or intention, away from Heather. My brain was as seized as the car engine had been and currently I was equally as immobile.

True to her word Heather didn’t say anything, for days, nothing. My efforts to coax her into conversation fell on stoney ground. We became two souls occupying the same space but whereas I became glum and down, Heather had a smug smile all to herself. I was being punished and whilst I moped around in a kind of solemn

preparation for my trip she cleaned a lot, sang to herself and went about her jobs which she did mainly from home recently. To say I was in the dog house was an understatement, I was relegated to the position of some miserable being already sorry for myself. There was no humour to be found, there was no fun in the bedroom, there was no food for me either and I was demoted to buying my own ready-cooked meals. On the odd occasion when Heather needed to communicate with me she wrote a note, with which I silently complied. Sometimes I wrote notes for her, but they seemed to be largely ignored.

All in all it was an impressive display from her and I came to respect her more fully in those days than I had previously realised was necessary. However, come the morning of my departure I wanted her blessing more than ever and she gave it to me.

“You’re ready.”

Those were her first words in nearly a week. I smiled at the door, laden with my carefully packed back-pack.

“I’m ready?”

“Yep, good bye, good luck and enjoy yourself. Enjoy your little secret mission and get enough to finish what you’ve started. Now go.”

“Well, bye then.”

“Go on, go.” She gave me a kiss. “Call me when you get there.”

So, I turned, got into the taxi and made my way to Belize.

In Motion

‘The journey is more important than the destination’ is of course very apt for all travellers, as when we move, we experience, and it is this experience that is the purpose of travel. In the bare meaning of this though when we look at the majority of international journeys that begin with an aeroplane flight we just want to get there!

Further to this, for those of us who use air travel regularly, its appeal and novelty soon wear off and, in contrast to the first few times we fly, the experience can be one where it is simply a means to an end. Such is the case with this flight. When we eventually arrive at our ‘destination’ another mode of interest comes into effect - even the shortest of taxi rides, boat trips and walks takes on far greater meaning than any multiple of thousands of miles travelled in the air.

If you travel to another town, another city, another country to see a friend you know that you are going to be greeted, hopefully at the airport, by a friendly face, a person for whom the journey has its reason. Without this human greeting, this

interaction, you are well aware that it is simply the place itself that will appear before you, the people of this place and the strange sights and sounds of a foreign country, where you have become the foreigner.

Beyond sight-seeing and holiday-making the deep and hardened traveller may have any number of coping mechanisms and methods for immersing themselves to different degrees in their new found environment. Over analysing these spoils a lot of the fun as they are emerging but knowing that they exist enables anyone entering a new domain to grow into the scene, to become easy and at one with their surroundings.

For this trip my purpose is one that, although obvious, is still not one I have allowed myself to define. My goal is still unclear to me as to be almost intangible. Why am I here? The lure of Dante's trail is foremost in my mind but I can't think of it for too long as its nature is so ethereal and unknowable. Despite the time that has elapsed since I discovered proof of his post-death life, that's the only way I can think of it, the search for life after death. I cannot conjure up a rational series of cause and effect that took him, or me here. There

are moments of madness, psychological and intentional states that have no roots in reality.

It's an exploration in the truest sense, you don't know what you're going to find on an exploration but that very fact heightens the senses and causes a great sense of adventure. I have my exact destination, which has become a kind of holy grail of places, Tobacco Caye, but in order to get there I am travelling through uncharted waters. Whatever I find, when I get there, and whatever stories litter the way I step out of the airport knowing that I am alone and there is no one to greet me here, no face to smile and to say "Welcome."

There is of course the ancient Chinese phrase 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.' I try to think of the first steps I took when embarking upon the project to write this book. These steps were taken in England and they walked towards memories of a deceased Member of Parliament. Now I am in Central America with the notion that this man has lived beyond his death and that the island I am heading for was, in his conception, his destination too. The Chinese saying is in fact more accurately translated as 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with the ground under your feet.' I look at my feet, they are a long way from

home and still within the small bustling airport, surely my journey has begun once more.

To break into the warm dry air outside was the first step I'd been looking forward to the whole flight, only then would I feel I'd arrived in a real sense. I waited to collect my back-pack from the carousel which included the greatest variety of luggage I have ever seen. There were other back-packs of all states of ageing, there were occasional Samsonite suitcases of all colours but the largest category of luggage were well worn leather suitcases, mostly wrapped in strapping to ensure that poorly made locks did not give way to an explosion of clothes and belongings. I had not as yet started noticing the actual people collecting their bags, concentrating as I was on finding and retrieving my own. When it came into view it was as the smallest piece of England, last seen at Heathrow and packed in the flat in Richmond.

Through arrivals and with a surprising shock I took that step into the outside. I stood there, finally able to begin some process of acclimatisation. Wearing sunglasses was essential because the mid-afternoon sun was a searing and immediate presence. I had some Ray Bans to hand and as I placed them over my eyes a short and

smiley taxi driver was onto me and my vague look of directionless immobility. A quick exchange of hotel information and I was in motion, able to be a passenger in my own adventure.

Belize City, as I entered its outskirts, has low buildings that tend to sprawl from the main road. It has been hit by several large hurricanes over the decades, and fires too, so building and rebuilding is always in effect. I see the people of this place, some walking, some sitting, some cycling and not so many in cars or on motorbikes. It's not such a big place, 60,000 or so inhabitants I read in my travel guide, but I get the feeling that most of them are out and about, on the streets working, or moving from here to there.

Their faces intrigue me hugely. I know the people here are made up from all manner of ancestors, many Africans, historically brought over in the slave trade but also those of more local origins. The mix is one that lends the faces a happy attitude but a noble one too. Belize was once the 'second most violent city in the world', but the people here don't look angry or violent at all. It could easily be my naivety of romanticising the place, I have yet to see or will not see the areas of the city where poverty and aggression meet, where

the brutal economics of a developing state meet the raw necessities to further life. One thing I note is the diversity of clothing; from rags to suits, from shoes to trainers and baseball caps to fedoras.

We pull up outside my hotel, "The Majestic". I pay the taxi driver and tip him well as he has been polite and informative the whole way from the airport. The hotel is old, colonial and run-down. I'll only be here one night but I already wish it could be longer. A few gentleman sit in a courtyard smoking and drinking but I carefully negotiate away from talking to them and continue straight to a long reception desk in order to check in.

My bag taken by a porter to my room, I tip him too as he tells me about the bar, I lie down on the bed and watch the ceiling fan rotate reliably. The light is still bright and streaming through the open windows with the light drapes drifting in and then outside. After only a few minutes coming to terms with a fizzing mind, my ears still in a drone of the long flight, I get up to look at the view.

I am somewhere central, the city laid out before me in a hectic but hazy mash up of mainly old buildings not more than a few storeys high. The overriding colour as I defocus my eyes is a light tan,

with whitewash here and there that beams out from the reflected sun. There are a few new buildings too, glass and steel structures that I imagine are part of investment in this expanding hub of the country as a whole.

I'm used to culture shock but that doesn't mean it just disappears. The road directly beneath my window and the sounds and smells that come from it draw comparisons with other places I have visited. There is something of the back streets of Hong Kong here, something of remote Thailand, but on a minuscule scale and of a totally Caribbean flavour. As with other places I have been lucky to spend time observing, I conclude that this is somewhere altogether different and demands a fresh perspective.

The closer I look into details I can make out in both foreground and background the more I begin to imagine the clear straight horizon and clean singular vista of the sea I hope to encounter tomorrow. I have been in a rush of sorts for a long while now, a rush to delve into the real substance of my story, to dive into the ocean of intrigue, conspiracy and lies with eyes firmly on the all illusive truth. I'm close, getting closer but the idea there will be an empty void in the place where I

have targeted all my hopes haunts me as Dante does so himself.

I take out my laptop but there is nothing to write. I carry all clues, I am immersed in the thread of my narrative so profoundly that I feel I am no longer writing but in fact living my book. Excited and keen to keep moving I pace the room and eventually find entertainment from the radio by my bedside. I listen to the weather, it's going to be hot, again. I listen to the news, the scope and scale of which is refreshing for an English journalist. The importance placed on stories that might appear trivial to many is relief that this city, this country works so differently. In these moments my immediate culture shock comes to a pleasant end as I'm just another foreigner in a relatively expensive hotel listening to the news of the day.

The foremost priority within me is not to give away to anyone my purpose here. It wasn't hard to construct an alternative story to hide the actualities of my mission. I can quite easily exist as a journalist writing a piece for the UK media. After a couple of hours scanning the net back in London I discovered a developing debate occurring between the Belizean government and the British who are helping with infrastructure building roads in the

South. Disagreements over the source of funding, the deforestation that will occur and the proposed routes of these roads are causing some fairly strong uprising within the local peoples and the whole project seems to have fallen into a bureaucratic mess.

From a journalistic point of view the story became more and more interesting as I explored its consequences. I had to keep reminding myself that it was to be used simply as a cover but it was a great cover and I was really comfortable with it, indeed looking forward to trying it out, in the field so to speak. I was to get my chance fairly soon.

The music on the radio was now so beautifully crazy, so much so that I made some mental notes, and then some real notes on paper of the names of the bands and the artists. The style I learned was 'Bruk-Down', apparently a staple fare of Belizean people and a national sound that made no apologies for its raw and funky beat. I loved it and wondered if I could find this music on my return to England.

Having snoozed for a while to the hum of the road noise I felt suddenly alive with a hankering for a drink. The hotel bar the porter had recommended seemed like a fine choice. I wasn't

ready to simply stroll onto the street and pop into any random place I might find so my mind was made up. Taking a few vital belongings and hiding my laptop, not yet being sure about the security of this hotel, I headed down to the bar, hoping to find some food on the way. It was 7.30pm.

Cover Story

The paint on the walls of the corridor were a cracked and peeling off-white, the immediate thought was that the whole place could do with some serious renovation but there soon followed the overriding feeling that in doing so its character would be lost. To describe a building as something like possessing ‘the character of a bygone era’ would in most cases be a way of trying to hide the fact that it is just plain old, but here it truly applied and I was pleasantly satisfied about my choice as I headed down the stairwell. I ran my hand along those walls touching the decades as I did so, the wooden handrail receiving a similar caress.

Back in the foyer now, the receptionist nodded and I went through a large doorway to a sparsely populated bar. As well as the barman there were just three people here, I assumed all to be guests. As soon as I’d ordered a pint of Heineken from the tall and thin Belizean man, who proudly cleaned glasses throughout the duration of the night, I was into conversation with a man who sat at the bar. He was drinking Bloody Mary’s and

introduced himself as Bill, immediately obvious as an American.

“So, tell me Francis, what’s a Brit doing here? Didn’t British Honduras cease to exist when Belize was born?”

“Ha, I’m just a journalist doing a piece on the infrastructure in the South.”

It felt great to finally release my cover story and I was looking forward to the challenge of keeping it up with the research I’d done. Bill however wasn’t particularly interested in my job, fictional or otherwise.

“Right, you saw an opportunity for a couple of weeks holiday. Let me guess it’s been raining in London for a few months. I went to London once, it rained for two weeks straight. I mean if I want rain I can go to Seattle and see the Sonics shoot a few hoops, right?”

“Actually it’s been really nice lately in England, my girlfriend and I live near a large deer park just to the West, its perfect for long walks on sunny evenings.”

It’s true Heather and I enjoyed the walks in Richmond Park, but how long had it been since we’d last done so, I couldn’t remember.

“Ah sounds very romantic. Myself and my significant other are partial to a cook out, can't beat a grill and a few beers on a Saturday.”

“Where in the States are you from Bill?”

“San Francisco. Yeah, I know you're thinking hippies and progressive education but they've got a good football team too. You do get grid iron in the UK don't you?”

“It's available if you want it on some channel or other, it's a minority sport though.”

“Mmm, minority, I don't know about that. You guys are all wild about soccer, right. It's ok, I do get it, the beautiful game and all. It's of growing interest where we are, but I guess you could say it's a minority sport, if you get my drift.”

“And why are you in Belize, Bill?”

“Oh, business, well charity as a matter of fact. We run groups of students down here, high school really. Give them a taste for what's happening in another part of the world. They're all fresh faced but we take them into schools and basically show them how lucky they are. It's a good program and some of them come back later, we have a teaching angle on the whole thing. It's good for the Belizean kids to have some contact with the US, we offer scholarships to Colleges to the

brighter ones and our guys get that experience of stepping outside the protection of American society. It's a win win."

"You know Bill, that gives me hope. Don't get me wrong I think America is an incredible place but just to know that you do what you do, well it's encouraging to know that..."

"To know we're not all selfish capitalist imperialists with a view on dominating the world."

"Something like that."

"Yeah, it's been good for me too, meeting people like yourself since I've been doing this, it's broadened my horizons I can tell you. I'm sure you'll like Belize, they like soccer here too."

"Tell me, what do you know of the political situation here?"

"Oh, don't get me started, it's a can of worms. They've got a lot of problems, and no one knows the solutions. I can say this though."

Bill took a drink and then leant in close, first checking that the barman was out of earshot when he spoke in a hushed tone.

"The CIA is here."

"You sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. I spoke to one, right here in this bar. He seemed a little uptight but I was just

glad to speak to a fellow American. I bought him a load of drinks, mainly cos he looked like he could do with them. He was young and not too confident but then he opened up a bit.”

“What was he saying?”

“Not much to start with but after a while he couldn’t really help himself. All that training, he had a cover story and everything, but I started talking about the movies and suddenly he was all about how they get it all wrong. Turned out, so he said, that mostly it’s all intelligence gathering, they need facts, numbers, statistics. He was all over me next about my dealings with the government, the bureaucracy. It all seemed overly secretive from my point of view, except for the fact that I think this was his first assignment and he just needed to unload. I guess he thought I was a safe bet.”

I was fairly taken aback, my slightly drunk state had lulled me into a kind of haze, especially due to the slow laconic drawl of Bill’s gravelly accent. But at this mention of CIA all my buttons were pressed. As a journalist you often come into familiarity with the workings of various intelligence agencies, they pop up with surprising regularity all over the world. Then as my research had continued

in addition to all the sprawling conspiracy theories they seemed to be everywhere.

If Dante had disappeared so successfully it seemed likely that he would have needed help and such intervention by security forces may have been expedient, or at least available to such a well connected man seeking escape. The secrecy required would be just up their street and from what I knew of the man, Dante would have made the best use of such resources. One of the more common theories was that MI5 had sanctioned his execution because he had come too close to information that would compromise national security. It was all so absurd but these departments of government are not fictions, they have a purpose and just like the fabled and equally secretive SAS, upon occasion they are brought into very effective use.

Bill sat there stirring his next Bloody Mary with a cocktail stick, all middle aged spread, I got the feeling that he may have been a sportsman of sorts before the steaks and beers took over. I was so close to introducing Dante as a subject of random conversation, to fish for a perspective from the other side of the pond, but I held my tongue. This was my secret mission and I wasn't going to blow it or indulge myself like Bill's CIA encounter with

idle chat. I had what I had, I knew where I was going, I just had no idea of what I would find.

We spent the next couple of hours talking about movies, both American and European and I learnt a great deal of one American's point of view on "Hollyweird" as Bill called it. Obviously a vast business and one of great pride for many, Bill himself was thoroughly disillusioned with the illusion of film.

"It's the same old story, the old films seem to have more substance and character than anything that's produced now and you can bet that teenagers today will be saying the same of the films they watch now when there's an appreciable duration of nonsense between their formative years and when they're stuck with a family and job in the future."

"But you liked the movies when you were growing up then?"

"Sure I did, all American kids do, it's a kind of introduction to reality and it's the backbone of our culture. But then you wake up and you realise it's all a bunch of bull and you have nothing to show for it, that you would have been better off making your own memories instead of living out a bunch of fantasies written by some left brained LA film school graduates."

“Ah, in the UK we still revere the US film industry. I mean we have our own of sorts and that’s cool and everything, but a blockbuster comes out and we all go to the cinema in crowds. Movie stars from the States are still gods, bigger, better, faster, cooler, richer - it’s hard not to worship them in some ways.”

“Yeah, I get you. But check them all out when they get older. Save for a few national treasures who keep flying the flag, they all wind up with three divorces under their belt and some form of substance abuse, usually alcohol.”

Bill picked up his glass and took a drink.

“Cheers!”

It seemed Bill’s drinking and talking was going downhill and I felt somehow responsible for this decline.

“Well, if it’s of any use Bill, I think what you’re doing down here with your high school kids, the whole project, especially the teacher training program, well I think it’s a great deal more original, genuine and worthy than acting in some movie or other.”

Bill looked up for the first time in a while.

“Thank you Francis. You know that means a lot, to know you’re better off in your own reality than some fiction cooked up by someone else.”

“Too right!”

This simple truth suddenly hit me quite hard. My own existence and current intentions were almost entirely predicated on the life of someone else, indeed someone who quite likely no longer existed themselves. Then Bill stepped in with a seemingly harmless statement that compounded my feelings of a lack of integrity.

“I think I better turn in now Francis, I have a whole load of kids to be shepherding tomorrow and that’s not best done on a hangover. I hope your work in the South goes well, you do realise that news gathering and the stories you can uncover often have a great positive impact on the lives of the people concerned. You expose, that’s what I like about journalism, you throw a light on it all, so that everyone knows what’s going on. You should be proud of what you do too.”

We parted ways, vaguely agreeing to meet up in a week or so and as Bill went his way he walked with a happy whistle. It had felt good, very good to spin my little yarn about my purpose here and I had got into the swing of things, basically

lying through my teeth. However, I rarely fake of fudge anything if I can help it, so as I walked I did so looking at the floor, my little deceit getting the better of me in comparison to Bill's worthy purpose.

When is it ok to lie? To benefit personally is dubious, especially if there are negative consequences to be piled onto others. But for a greater good? To help someone else? What was my lie? What was Dante's? It was beginning to dawn on me that my search was now becoming one that was less for the truth and more one for some type of a lie. To talk with Bill was to be with a man, an American man whom many might stereotype as a born storyteller, if not a liar. But there he was as straight and real as can be and his work, his life and his philosophy were basically true and sound. The foundations of my own could not be said to be the same. Despite his kind words about journalism, I left that bar feeling somewhat of a fraud and a phoney. Misinformation is a horrible commodity and very messy as a medium of communication and I was heading into more and more of it.

As I got back to my room I felt a compelling urge to hold the tobacco tin and key in my hands. They were objects that had a direct link to the truth, their reality was unquestioned. Gina Royce's story

tallied with the days scratched out on the barn on The Isle of Arran and tomorrow morning I would be heading for an island that was most surely in the mind of Dante as scrawled his picture in that very same barn.

I was here, that was very real too. It was only an idea that Dante was here alive but that was why I was here, to follow the clues, to use my evidence, to realise the ideas. I went to sleep having reinforced my directive, having bolstered my personal value and wondering how I found myself now to be both in the middle of a story, and at a point where my own story was as vital as the one I chased.

Recognition

Walking away from The Majestic with my pack on my back and just my small bag in my hand I feel free, just like a tourist. I decide to walk as a way of experiencing the place directly but this turns out to be a bad idea.

It's only half an hour to the harbour where I intend to find a boat to the Cayes but after just ten minutes I'm accosted by a boy, he must be no more than twelve years old. He pulls a knife on me as I stroll down a reasonably populated street and demands money. I stare at him in disbelief rather than fear, but then I look at his blade glinting in the strong morning light and I put my hand in my pocket. Fortunately the change from my previous taxi ride is there, I pull it out and hand over all of it and then he runs away. I keep walking for a minute or so, in a slight state of shock due to the casual nature of the robbery and the smile on the boy's face.

I walk past a taxi which sits by the curb, engine running, then walk back to it and get in, riding the last couple of miles to the harbour. By

the time I have paid him and get out the thief is consigned to memory with a mental note to be far more careful. I'm carrying everything I have and that will be obvious to someone who has nothing.

The sea looks enticing. Every manner of vessels are represented. I see a couple of tankers out in the bay but here it is exclusively fishing boats and those of every size and shape.

Enquiry after enquiry to those aboard these boats leads me along the harbour wall to ever smaller boats. I feel like a joke, and I probably am to them, but all are cheerful and happy to direct me further away from the activities of the fishermen. The last man I ask is wearing a scruffy white captain's hat and he just points to a tiny boat floating isolated and alone some forty yards away.

"That's your best bet mister, over there."

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

And I find myself at the mooring of the boat that I hope will take me to the place I have been holding mind.

"Excuse me. Are you going to Tobacco Caye?"

"Yes, I am sir."

"Excellent, can you take me? It's just me."

"No problem. You pay now."

“Ok. How much?”

I start to look in my bag. I’m so relieved to have found transit that I’m ready to pay anything and he obviously sees me as a guaranteed fare and so can charge what he wants.

“Two hundred dollars.”

Stopping to check his face, which is smiling, I recall the young boy who has recently robbed me and flash out a counter proposal.

“I’ll give you one hundred.”

“You give me one hundred and you stay here. You give me two hundred and you arrive in Tobacco Caye.”

I’m pausing and see that I don’t have a leg to stand on. So I give him the two hundred which he counts, his smile increasing as he does so.

“All correct, we go in five minutes, jump on board.”

The boat is so small that had I jumped in I would sure have tipped it over. I slowly climb down a small rusty ladder attached to the harbour wall and having passed my pack down I sit and wait. It’s a single engined boat and the man plays with the motor which he keeps trying to start. Ten minutes pass with no success but eventually he get’s it going before turning it off again.

“We wait for someone.”

“Ok.”

We wait a full hour, during which time he leaves me alone in the boat on several occasions. On one of these a large Belizean woman turns up with some big bags and climbs into the boat. She is very friendly and speaks with a happy boom, laughing between sentences.

“Are you English?”

“Yes, how could you tell?”

“English always look English, its because of your hat!”

It’s just a white brimmed sun-hat but suddenly I’m aware that it might give my nationality away.

“You like cricket? With that hat you like cricket!”

“Er, yes, I like cricket.”

“I thought so, the English always like cricket!”

The boat was still now, the waves in the harbour were small but I wondered through what kind of water we would be travelling and indeed for how long. From this point onwards my travel plans were an unknown but as soon as our Captain rolled

up and came aboard, he started the engine and we were off.

Now packed to the gunnels with various boxes and bags we were soon moving at quite a speed, swerving in and out of the paths of many similar boats. The lady, whose name I learned was Ann Marie talked to me most of the way, mainly wanting to know all about England and London in particular. By the time we left the protection of the harbour and were beyond its wall we were well into the subject of my relationship with Heather.

Looking at our cargo I noted a small cardboard box with a Golden Virginia label on it.

The engine was loud, so too the slapping of the waves on the bow and sides of the boat as we progressed by jumping over the surface. Belize city quickly receded into the background, I gave up looking over my shoulder as it diminished on the horizon behind, after fifteen minutes it had gone completely.

I explained to Ann Marie almost everything, she was very easy to talk to with her booming laugh overpowering the surrounding sound as we had to shout to hear each other. It was great to be talking to a local, a real Belizean, and I realised how easy it was to tell my life story to this woman. Of course it

was also easy to leave out the details of my actual purpose here but surprising how little it counted for in the overall picture of the journey.

“So you’re on holiday for just this one week Mr. Henderson, you’ll wish you had more time before you have to start your job.”

“It would be lovely to come back again after my work is done.”

“It’s a beautiful place Mr. Henderson, not many people know about it, not many people there either, you’ll see, you’ll fall in love.”

“What do you do Ann Marie?”

“As little as I can! Ha ha! No, no, I cook and I clean. Not too much to do, I’m the very luckiest woman.”

“How long does it take to get there?”

“Another hour, a bit longer.”

I couldn’t keep up shouting for too long, instead I found moments to reflect on how I had come to be here and that so soon I would be arriving. If there was no evidence of him being here, I would have a week’s holiday on a remote and exotic Caribbean island to finally let go of the whole thing. However, it was possible there would be leads pointing to his past presence, clues that could suggest where he might have gone next.

Previously I had been unable to allow myself to think of him actually being there, in person, but now I was too close not to.

What would I say and how would I conduct myself? I only knew that improvisation and adaptation would be of the essence. He would not make himself known to me, of that I was certain, but the point here, I had to remind myself, was that this was my hero. This was the singular person about whom I knew the most and I had some confidence that it would be him who would be in control, of me and of the world he may have created for himself.

The island came into view ahead, minuscule on the razor edge where sea and sky meet. It hardly grew as we approached, a little gem of an oasis, surrounded on two sides by a coral reef and then suddenly this dream, this paradise was of immediate reality.

The boat drew up next to a wooden pontoon and a couple of men walked up to greet us. One, a short and stocky Belizean man of an age hard to guess, the other a rangy white man wearing a T-shirt and shorts who had no hair save for a large beard which covered his face. My heart was beating wildly. The Belizean began to unload the boat

without talking, the white man came to the assistance of Ann Marie, they muttered a few pleasantries and kissed, then he turned his attention to me.

As I clambered out of the boat in a rather ungainly way he held out his arm. Ann Marie introduced us.

“Harry, this is Mr. Francis Henderson, he’s from England.”

I grabbed Harry by his hand as he helped me to disembark. In an accent that wasn’t quite American and in a bass tone he spoke, looking me straight in the eye.

“Welcome Mr. Anderson, I hope you enjoy your stay here.”

In that moment I knew it was him. With my stare locked on his for several seconds longer than was necessary I was finally able to say something.

“Thank you. Nice little corner of the world you’ve found for yourself here!”

“Well, we call it home.”

No Man An Island

Henderson stepped onto that island as a kind of newborn. Everything he knew, or thought he knew was to be brought into question. In place of a historical biography of a deceased man with whom he had just shaken hands, he was now no longer writing, he was living, and breathing the same air as a person about whom he knew nothing. He was not a blank page, for his previously well organised perspective was now a mess, a childish sprawl, a mix of crazy coloured crayons on a canvas that had no rationale. His preparations for this state were scattered and virtually useless and he was at once immersed an environment in which he had no reference.

The man, Harry, the person whose presence he was trying to casually ignore, was so definitely the source of his investigations. It was all in his eyes, that blue sapphire stare framed by titanium white and pupils that cut into his mind. Having established contact with these target eyes it was as though Henderson's own mind had been flashed

with a light, erasing his erroneous knowledge. A new memory began in that instant.

On the part of Harry, this young, thin, white Englishman could have been anyone too, except for Harry it was so easy to dismiss him as one traveller amongst many who had visited the island over the years. Still, every newcomer was of interest, first-hand word of mouth news from the outside world was sometimes welcome and every traveller had stories to tell.

It was still mid-morning, both the sun's heat and light beat down relentlessly but there was a constant breeze coming in off the ocean that made it somewhat bearable. Henderson could see that shade here was at a premium, various hammocks were tied between some of the palm trees but the sand between them was too hot for bare feet.

Used as he was to arriving in new places his attempt to orient himself was an unusual challenge. Estimating the whole island to be no more than two hundred metres long by one hundred metres wide it made an impact just by how small it was, but conversely it was large enough not to create an immediate impression of some kind of claustrophobia. The sea in all directions was vast but currently calm to the point of tranquility. It was

easy to feel a very real sense of peace, the lack of any man-made noise and the rustle of palm leaves gently rocking the consciousness into a half-slumber.

Ann Marie guided him to his hut, one of only five on the island, the fact that this was an elite holiday destination was hard to see. Certainly no major company had yet to exploit Tobacco Caye fully. Instead of high end, lavishly built cabins there were just these shacks. He had booked the 'holiday' through a minor agent, the cost had been relatively low and he had yet to see evidence of any representative of the company. Why no one had seen fit to market the island more aggressively and charge correspondingly was a mystery. There were little traces here of luxury or commercialisation. The idea that this place was indeed a very well kept secret was vitally apparent. Henderson had feelings of privilege and an overwhelming appreciation of the raw natural beauty surrounding him. Mixed with the isolation and slightly barren austerity it left him as disoriented as if he were standing in a field with a scarf having just been removed from his eyes.

As for the hut itself, built of wood it was no more than a bedroom and a bathroom. Henderson

put his pack down on the bed and smiled, realising there was little danger of anyone stealing his possessions or at least for them not to go far. With a quick wash of water on his face a walk around the circumference of the island seemed opportune. It wouldn't take very long.

In one direction, the midriff of the island, was an area devoid of any buildings, hammocks or anything in fact save for a few hardy palm trees that looked like they'd seen their fair share of tropical storms. Francis strolled casually amongst them, away from the jetty where the boat had landed, and away from his hut.

There were little signs of life and once more he couldn't help but think this place was ripe for development. Even so, with these thoughts, the virgin nature of the place was so refreshing, so much so it was possible to imagine one were stranded on a desert island. It can't have been many years since this was in fact such a place.

Walking along the coastline it was easy to see the island was an oval shape and almost entirely without relief, a flat ellipse in an enormous sea. Sometimes with bare feet in the shallows, sometimes walking on the sand, shells of every kind were strewn where the water gently lapped up along

the shore-line. The water was warm, warm enough to be mistaken for bath water and there were indeed little bubbles in the foam of the surf to strengthen this impression.

Here and there small hermit crabs scurried about in the water where sea met sand. Tiny fish with bright blue flashes on their sides and no more than an inch in length darted in the shallowest water in schools five or so in number. The gentle, constant breeze caressed the palms creating a subconscious soundtrack to the paradise panorama.

Moving at an idle, Francis neared the farthest end of the island. There were two huts here, similar to his own, and lying in hammocks were two young, tanned people - a man and a woman probably both in their early twenties. The man lay in a hammock in the shade and was reading a scruffy, well worn, paperback. The young woman was sitting on a towel, also in the shade and seemed to be writing a letter on blue Air Mail paper. Francis approached slowly, not wanting to disturb them from their peace or to make them jump. He splashed his feet, ankle deep in the water in an attempt to announce his arrival and sure enough together they looked up from their words.

“Hey, there. You look extremely tranquil.”

The young man replied in slow and lazy English.

“Hi, yeah I was just saying, I think we managed to beam down in exactly the right place.”

“Ha, you can say that again. I’m Francis.”

“Hi, I’m Russ.”

“Jane, pleased to meet to you. How long are you here for?”

“Just a week, I think it’ll probably go very quickly. How about you guys?”

Henderson looked over to the girl, who had a natural beauty with brown hair lightened by the sun and dried by the wind.

“We’ve been here, what... five days now, it’s easy to lose track of time. We have to leave tomorrow.”

They were both well spoken and most definitely well educated but the silence that suddenly fell was a clear indication that neither of them wanted to talk much and were happy to remain relative strangers.

“I guess it’s likely I’ll see you round, not difficult to bump into people here!”

Russ’ next dry and uninflected comment stayed with Francis for the rest of his walk around the island. “Not so easy to get lost either...”

“Ha, see you later.”

Henderson walked away puzzled about these people. Were they a romantic couple, just friends, on honeymoon, recently met travellers, brother and sister? It was very hard to guess from their attitudes but he continued to walk still wondering at how getting lost here would be so hard and why Russ would make that remark the way he did. He didn't see them again assuming that they had left as they had planned.

Despite the beauty all around, or more likely because of it, the sheer remoteness of this place was quite profound. With this handful of people congregated on such an oasis, the idyllic nature of the place had an air of isolation that was hard to fathom. How long had Harry been here? What did he do with his days?

This could easily turn into a week's holiday on an island paradise but Henderson was already desperately trying to formulate a plan which would begin to give answers to his questions. The place being so small, no more than a square kilometre, coincidences and opportunities would always be close by. Continuing to walk slowly along the shore he quickly came upon the man who was to give him

an in-road, a way through the impenetrable psychological mess in which he now found himself.

The man's name was Drew and he ran the only commercial entity on Tobacco Caye, a bar. It was nothing more than a shack, built from wooden logs, various planks and palm leaves and Drew was sitting outside on a deck-chair, reading a newspaper, a white baseball cap back-to-front on his head, and just a pair of beach shorts and flip-flops to cover his heavily tanned and large frame. In his sixties he still looked very fit and as a younger man must have been quite a force to be reckoned with. He was American and Francis immediately felt at ease in his company.

“Ah looks like you might have exactly what I need.”

“A customer, Jeez. I might actually have to do some work!”

“Drew Henderson at your service.”

“Francis Henderson at yours.”

“Good God! What are the chances out here of all places, we're probably related!”

They shook hands and Drew went behind his bar.

“What can I get you Mr. Henderson if you please.”

“Something cold, if that’s at all possible.”

“Cold I can do, I have a fully stocked refrigerator.”

“Nice. How about a cold beer, actually I don’t have any cash on me, shall I just go back and...”

“Don’t worry dude, I’ll start a tab, it’s not like you’re going to be able to run off, not very far anyhow. Anyway seeing as how you’re practically family the first one’s on me. I’ve got Budweiser or Miller Lite.”

“Miller’s just great.”

Drew reached into his large standing fridge and pulled out two bottles of lager, both dripping in condensation and opened them up.

“Think I’ll join you. Do you need a glass?”

“No, don’t worry.”

“Good man, saves on the washing up.”

They drank, Francis felt the cool connection with civilisation from the moment he heard the bottles opened. Obviously this would be a place where he would be spending much of his time.

“How do you get electricity out here? I can’t hear a generator.”

With this question there opened up a whole area of interest.

“Ah well, I know a man. Have you met Harry?”

“Yes, just briefly.”

“Well, he’s got a wind turbine and a whole bunch of solar panels down the other end of the island, powers the whole place.”

“How long have you been here Drew?”

Drew looked at his watch.

“I usually start work around 11am, so just a couple of hours now.”

“Ha, no, I meant on the island.”

“Oh, I get you. Let me see. I got here in ’07 and, what is it now?”

“2028.”

“That’s right, ’28. So twenty years, give or take. I’ve taken a few holidays here and there but there’s no place like home.”

Looking at his beer, here was a truly satisfied man. Henderson looked to see another deck chair leaning against the shack.

“Do you mind?”

“No, how rude of me, of course go ahead, take the weight off.”

Drew resumed his seat and the two men sat sipping their cold beers looking straight out to sea.

“Pretty, ain’t it.” Drew put on a pair of aviator sunglasses.

“Pretty incredible and that’s a fact, I have to keep pinching myself to make sure it’s all real.”

“Its real alright.”

Fazed as he was by his new surroundings, Francis was still well aware of his mission and the necessity to focus on it as time would be a factor.

“Harry, he must have been here a while then too, heh?”

“Harry? Oh yeah, he got here, in let me see, roundabout ’21. That’s right. I remember it so well as it was my birthday, I helped him settle in and we got hammered, absolutely hammered. Said he wanted to forget everything. I reckon he has too as he never talks about his life before. Nice man, very clever man, you know he doesn’t talk too much about anything at all to be honest but when he does he just comes out with it, like he’s reading from a book or something. Strange man, very clever but strange. Best thing he did was marry Ann Marie, came home with her after collecting some supplies one day like he’d just bought a new car or something. They love each other though, they do. Have you met the kids?”

“No, no I haven’t, at least not yet.”

“Wonderful children, bright as buttons. Yeah, he’s quite a man whichever way you look at him. Wish I had half his brains, probably be a millionaire by now. I could afford to retire!”

“What did you do before you came here?”

“Soldier.”

“For real?”

“Yeah, it ain’t no big thing. I was in the Gulf War, first one. Fought and did some killing and some things I ain’t too proud of then went and got that Gulf War Syndrome, you hear of that?”

“Yes, I did, I’m not too sure I know much about it though.”

“Well that’s probably best. Luckily it went away after about ten years or so, pretty much since I’ve been out here, that’s a coincidence ain’t it?”

“Well, at least you’ve got a fellow American in Harry.”

“Oh him, he’s not American. He’s from some nowhere place in Canada, somewhere near Montreal if I recall. He’s got his children speaking French and everything, schools them right here, I’m talking four hours a day! He takes it very seriously. Personally I think they’d be better off on the mainland but what are they going to do, commute by boat? Something not quite right about not

mixing with the world like that. Still they're his kids, he's got a right to teach 'em as he sees fit. With his intellect they'll probably end up going to Harvard or some such place."

"How about another beer Drew?"

"Certainly Mr. Henderson, might just help myself to another, thirsty work all this chin-wagging. Same again?"

"Definitely."

Francis stared at the impossibility of the horizon. The few clouds that reached their way towards it drifted at an almost imperceptible speed and the sun, as near as made no difference directly over head, beat out the waving shadows of palm trees on the sand around where he sat, the softly lapping sea just a few metres from his feet.

They talked for a long time, punctuating the hours with many more beers. Drew had next to him a man genuinely interested in his life and Francis had a host whose story included sparse but intriguing facts about the man who he'd yet to confront. Francis kept to his cover story and found himself increasingly adept and confident in its telling.

Water Wise

Well into the afternoon the idea to swim became overpowering for Francis. Having thanked Drew he left the bar. To cool off all he had to do was stand from his chair and walk a few steps forward into the great calm blue. With the alcohol swimming in his mind it was a decision that required little effort.

He walked straight out, slowly. The temperature of the water was hot and constant and then when he was waist deep it became just a little cooler. Catching himself by surprise a dive under the surface brought him the relief, the freedom and to some extent the oblivion which his body needed.

His first thoughts were of the temperature of water all around him. As he swam further out there was a noticeable cooling but the taste of the salt and white sand under his feet were only the beginning of this experience.

It was the fish that grabbed his imagination. Dozens upon dozens of tiny tropical fish, it was nothing less than swimming in a fish tank. In those tanks, that one sometimes sees, the fish are just an indication of an exotic life elsewhere but to be here,

in their natural habitat, and to see them swimming freely in a boundless natural jacuzzi was something which Francis had not previously imagined.

He was so free and indeed so drunk. Now fifty yards from the shore, but still able to stand should he so wish, he could get a kind of perspective on the size of the island. It compared well to the size of a football pitch but oval in shape, a cricket pitch? He mused over many things on that first swim, most of which were forgotten as this place possessed a force that played mysteriously with the memory. He didn't really care about much any more, he had truly arrived at his destination. Raymond Dante being here with him, and of this he had no doubt, meant everything, but now he was here there was a need to just be a natural part of the environment.

He swam with a vague notion of making it all around the island but tired quite quickly. When he reached the end of the island, where he saw a large radio mast, he thought it must be Harry's and felt no problem swimming right up to the nearest portion of beach and walking out to where he could see Harry attending to a boat. The two children whom Drew had mentioned, a boy and girl who

looked to be no more than ten years of age were throwing a frisbee nearby. Harry called out.

“So you decided to take the plunge!”

“It’s beautiful in here.”

“That’s what this place is all about, that’s what it’s all about.”

Francis had no trouble talking to Harry, the alcohol swimming in his mind having a loose and easy hold on him. He was talking freely man to man and was for now only interested in finding out what type of a man he was dealing with. Being so relaxed and energised, and feeling so free and easy, his first question was ill conceived, too hasty and even Francis was surprised as it left his mouth.

“Why a man would want to leave everything behind for all this I have no idea!”

Harry had no worries, here’s just another traveller come to get away from it all.

“Ann Marie told me all about you, a journalist she says. I can’t imagine why you would want to leave London, I’ve heard it’s a delightful place.”

Their tones were playful but Francis was the first to begin explaining himself and of course reverted to his cover story, his first lie.

“Well, I’ve only got a week here and then I have to begin my work.”

“That’s right, the road building in the South. You’ll have your work cut out to untangle that mess. There’s a lot of unhappy people and no end of government involvement.”

Harry continued working on the small boat, screwing a metal plate onto the oar housing. He was certainly interested by the man who stood waist deep in the sea just away from him but had yet to figure out why the infrastructure problems in Belize were of any importance to the British media. As far as he knew they now had no financial commitments in the area and as of yet the local inhabitants’ protests were just that, local. He had a contact in the Department of Transport, whom he might be able to talk to about the matter, liking as he did to stay in touch with local politics. He had many contacts in fact but this story seemed of little importance, even within the country.

Without knowing it Francis began digging a hole for himself.

“Yeah, my contact there says things are getting hotter every day.”

“Who exactly is it you work for Mr. Henderson?”

“Reuters. Call me Francis though, it might get a little confusing as I discovered Drew is a Henderson too.”

Francis had always wanted to work for Reuters, they had the kudos to which he aspired, the world renown quality that the organisation he worked for could only look up to from below. There was the thought that after his book was published and he had some commercial success he might be in a better position to apply to them in some capacity.

“Been there long?”

“Oh, just a couple of years.”

The kids’ frisbee landed nearby in the water and Francis threw it back to the boy.

“Thanks Mister.”

Harry stood up, seemingly a little more serious.

“My kids. Freddy and Juliette, they’re twins.”

“You have beautiful children Harry.”

“Yeah, you know they make everything worthwhile, give everything meaning. Without them we are nothing when you think about it, they’re our future. I’d do anything and everything I

can to ensure their progress. Do you have children Francis?"

"No, I don't, not yet. My girlfriend talks about it sometimes. We're waiting for the right time."

"If you want my advice don't wait too long. You might find that waiting for the right time is just wasting time. Do you ever wonder what you're doing with your time is just wasting it?"

"Er, I can't say I've thought about it like that. I work, I have my little pet projects, I'm living some kind of life I guess."

"Well, if I were you I would ask myself what kind of life that is, and I wouldn't guess either."

Francis understood that Harry was clearly giving him some kind of a lesson and he recognised the same tone he had recently heard from Dante, Sr. Instinctively he endeavoured to push away, to change the subject.

"That's some big mast you've got there!"

"Its for radio, I'm a bit of a radio ham. I've got a satellite dish too, just there, can you see the edge of it?"

"Wow, that's some dish! What can you get with that?"

“Pretty much everything, everything I need that is.”

“I bet you’re all hooked into the global media then?”

“From Sport to Politics, I’ve got it covered. I even have an internet connection.”

“I imagine you can sit back and control the entire world from this little paradise.”

Once more Francis had not thought about what he was saying. The years of research and familiarity with this man’s history, combined with his recent knowledge were fighting within for a way to the surface.

Harry looked long and hard at Francis who was still under the influence of several beers and his lengthy and tiring swim. Harry had been simply sizing him up but for any passing onlooker it would be obvious that something else, something deeper, was happening at the same time. Harry quickly brought the conversation to a conclusion and did so with an apparently spontaneous up-beat change of attitude.

“Well Francis, welcome to the island. I’m sure you’ll find your stay here to be all that you desire. If there’s anything you need, just ask.”

His outstretched hand over the boat was grasped by Francis who had been walking slowly to the shore and they shook firmly as Harry used his stare to look through Francis once again. Francis felt the calloused tough skin on the man's palm and consequently the soft, puffy nature of his own. He turned and left feeling somehow less than himself. With nothing to hold onto, nothing remarkable to think over concerning his first substantial encounter with the reality of the man he had studied for years, Francis walked away with a mumble.

“Thank you.”

Harry was himself puzzled and intrigued with Francis, making a decision to look into something later. Putting it out of his mind he was content as usual, returning to his work without worry.

Truth At Mid-Night

Harry had put Freddy and Juliette to bed having read to them their favourite book, “Le Petit Prince”. Ann Marie was clearing up in the kitchen when Harry looked in through the door.

“I’m going to be doing a little work tonight. I might not be to bed until late. Don’t wait up for me.”

“Ok Honey. I feel like an early night anyway, I’ll be off after this, my feet are killing me.”

Harry walked the short way to his personal shack. Inside for furniture there was nothing more than a sofa and a couple of chairs. The kids were sometimes allowed in here to watch some carefully selected television but by and large this was his zone, his connection with ‘The World’ and all of its perceived shortcomings.

Far less minimal than the furniture was the amount of technology stacked high all around. With a few switches flipped he was online and scanning the net for what he required.

The Reuters site came up quickly and with a deft navigation of the site and some largely unauthorised taps into its architecture he had the entire list of current Reuters employees.

...Friedrich Hench, Jo Hender, William Hendersen, Ralph Hendy...

No Francis Henderson. A cross-check with articles published by Reuters in the last two years proved to be another negative.

Harry sat back in his chair. This was not good. This required immediate attention. He powered down his system and left, going back to the kitchen which he gingerly entered, it was empty. Selecting the largest of five kitchen knives in a block by the sink he walked outside with a grim determination into the dark, using a small torch to light the way to Henderson's hut.

Looking through the window to confirm the man was in bed he quietly opened the door and stood by the body lying on its back under a single sheet. For a moment he looked on, watching the chest rise and fall with the slight sound of exhaled breath. Then carefully he put the knife to the neck.

The eyes opened and were immediately aware of the precarious nature of their life. Harry's

face was but a foot away and the knife edge was pressed into the skin.

“You don’t work for Reuters. Who are you?”

The question was placed with a calm but insistent resolve to match the positioning of the knife. The delay in an answer caused Harry some consternation.

“What are you doing here?”

Finally an answer came through nervous vocal cords.

“My name is Francis Henderson. I’m writing a biography of Raymond Dante.”

Harry didn’t flinch.

“Why are you here?”

“You are Raymond Dante.”

Harry was silent for seconds that kept Francis still, the knife preventing him from swallowing.

“I don’t like lies Mr. Henderson. I don’t like liars.”

“I know. I want the truth too. I want the truth.”

“I want you off this island tomorrow.”

“Ok.”

“If you mention what you think you’ve found here to anyone, anywhere, there will be grave, terminal, repercussions. I have contacts worldwide. I can reach you. I can reach your loved ones. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Say I understand.”

“I understand. I do.”

“Good. Now go to sleep.”

“Ok.”

With that Harry removed the knife. Francis began taking breaths of relief and Harry left the hut walking with the moonlight glinting off his knife. Francis did not sleep, the memory of the knife still at his throat and the presence of the psychotically calm Harry Thompson fresh in his mind.

Harry went to bed next to his sleeping wife. Lying on his back with his hands behind his head propped up on a pillow he thought for an hour or so and then at the end of this time a smile emerged. He turned onto his side and fell into a deep sleep.

Below Waves

Francis managed a few fitful hours sleep, whenever he woke from it he had the image of Harry's dark bearded face fresh in his mind, a madman with a knife at his throat. At last he dozed until the dawn light where he existed in a half-sleep before the door burst open. Harry was standing there with a pair of yellow snorkelling fins in one hand, but thankfully no knife in the other.

"Mr. Henderson, do you know how to scuba dive?"

Francis was with immediate fear and knew only to give a straight answer.

"No, no I don't."

"Would you like to learn?"

"I don't know, I guess so, yes."

"I thought I mentioned that yesterday, no guessing. Would you or would you not like to learn to scuba dive?"

"Yes, yes I would."

"Good, be ready to go in ten minutes."

Harry disappeared, leaving the door open and Francis desperately trying to assimilate last

night with what he had experienced just this minute, it was a pointless effort. He got up, got dressed and pulling on a cap left the scant protection of his hut to find Harry. No longer in any doubt as to who was boss in this tiny world he gave himself up to the lack of any control of the situation but the adjustment gave him some solace. For the first time since he began the biography he became under the command of someone else, namely the subject of his research. This being so he had become a player in a story of which he was no longer the author.

They left in due haste, motoring into the beyond, the island falling away into the distance over Henderson's shoulder. Seemingly heading nowhere they moved at speed over a crystal calm ocean with Henderson now only imagining what lay beneath. They didn't speak, the only noise being the motor howling and its propeller thrashing them forward in a relentless roar. After half an hour Henderson caught sight of a stationary vessel ahead which rapidly became as large as life. She was a hundred feet in length, paintwork aged and not the prettiest of ships but with a presence that required respect. The name in bold orange letters on her bow read "QUOTIDIENNE".

They approached and after some slightly awkward practicalities clambered up a ladder built of barnacle encrusted rope and sea-worn wooden planks, to the relative stability of the ship. Henderson was standing like a lost child but Harry soon directed him to the tuition of a rangy shirtless German calling himself Klaus.

“Klaus here will sort you out. Klaus, give Francis the basic course, don’t worry about the theory we’re not going very deep.”

Francis looked extremely apprehensive but with a very human touch Harry put him at ease, placing his hand on his shoulder as he smiled.

“Don’t worry, you’re in very good hands, I assure you.”

“Yeah right, I assure you.”

“Seriously, once you know the equipment and the basics you’ll be in and under and enjoying yourself. Man, I wish I could do this for the first time again, its like nothing else on the planet.”

Klaus took over and beckoned him to walk.

“Come now, I’ll tell you everything you need to know. Do you have any heart complaints, ear, nose or throat disorders? Any history of madness in the family? I’m just joking you, come along with me.”

“So what is this? You run dive holidays for the fortunate few?”

“No, no. This is a research vessel. Scientific research. We are studying the coral bleaching phenomenon which has swept the world.”

“Bleaching? Bleached by what?”

“Where the temperature of the ocean has risen, by only a couple of degrees, all the corals are dying. We want to know exactly how and why. More than a third of all corals, worldwide, have already been lost. The ecosystem is in total shock.”

“That’s crazy. Why don’t we know about this?”

“We do, but a few people shouting at their loudest doesn't always reach the people who need to know, and they’re all deaf anyhow. Do you know how many people don’t believe that Climate Change is a fact? That’s crazy, that’s what’s really crazy. Right let’s get you kitted out. I’m just gonna lay this all on you real quick, it's the best way. You’ll pick it up, its just like riding a bike, underwater, but you’re weightless and you’re breathing compressed air and there are sharks and stuff like that. I’m just joking you, it’s not at all like riding a bike at all actually, its more like being an astronaut or something like that. You know really,

it's not like anything except what it is, you'll see. Ok, this is your regulator, it works like this..."

After about an hour Henderson found himself in a mask, stabilisation jacket and fins, compressed air tank on his back and sitting on the back of the boat next to Harry. Still in a whirlwind and not quite sure what was happening to him, or what might be planned for him, he was as calm and ready as he could be for something so unknown.

He looked to Harry and noticed a large knife strapped to his leg.

"What's the knife for?"

"Security. Mine and yours."

Within seconds he was in the sea and Harry signalled him to go down, they descended slowly to a depth of about four metres, swimming slowly forward towards the ocean floor which was only another few metres below them. Harry signalled him regularly to check he was ok, Francis returned the signal enthusiastically as he had transitioned into a state of freedom and bliss, moving with little effort through the underwater seascape.

The only sound was the regulator and the stream of bubbles he produced as they rushed past his ears on their journey to the surface above. Between breaths there was a profound silence and it

was to this soundtrack by which the rich sub-aqua vision revealed itself to him.

The corals here were a rainbow flood of intense colour, their vibrancy matched only by the bizarre and wonderful variety of fish that swam amongst them. Of all sizes from those of the tiny blue flashed fish he had seen yesterday which were all around, right up to the occasional Barracuda. These were long, silvered-sleek, well muscled and sporting vicious sets of teeth. They floated menacingly and then suddenly darted off with a frightening sharp turn of speed. Their promise of danger was acute but Henderson, following Harry close by was already committed to this adventure with all of its risks. In fact the feeling of peace it imbued in him was as strong as it was new.

Now able to touch the ocean floor, here it was sand with a rippled miniature dune-like topography, Henderson finally found himself smiling, a hard thing to achieve with a regulator in his mouth. This was easy and he felt a natural but swimming past some dead coral he grazed his leg on its sharp edges and winced, it was only a graze but seeing a little of his blood escape into the salty water, his smiling ceased. This was evidently a hazardous environment.

When he looked up Harry signalled him to follow and they swam for a while suddenly arriving at an enormous expanse of white coral, bleached coral and then dead coral. The contrasts were extreme.

They returned the way they had come.

When they were only fifty feet from the boat Henderson saw a giant stingray launch itself from hiding beneath the sand and fly in a graceful arc right in front of him. Then just as he was approaching the boat he peered into the distance. The visibility in this water was incredible. As his eyes searched the distance he caught sight of a shiny bulk enter on the limits of his vision, it was clearly a shark, and a large one at that, and then it disappeared back into the darker blue beyond.

Francis increased his speed of swimming to cover the remaining distance until he reached the ship where he clambered out alongside Harry and ripped the mask and regulatory from his face.

“There was shark! There was a bloody shark!”

Harry laughed.

“Yeah, I saw him too, a little Short Finned Mako, they’re the fastest shark in the ocean. You were lucky, they’re fairly rare.”

“Lucky!”

“Yes, lucky.”

“Lucky I’m still alive more like!”

“We’re all lucky to be alive Francis. Did you enjoy that?”

“Yes, it was unbelievable. A shark though!”

Klaus who was helping them out of the water started laughing.

“Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water!”

“It’s not funny. A shark!”

Harry started laughing but Francis was still in quite a state of shock.

“Ha, ha, laugh at the first-timer English guy shark bait!”

Francis slowly realised with a release of his fear that, yes, it was indeed funny and he began a nervous laugh too.

With a cup of coffee Francis sat with his legs dangling over the edge of the boat. Harry came up, also with a coffee and sat right next to him.

“So what did you think? I mean really think?”

“It was out of this world. I’m still trying to take it all in.”

“It is another world, an alien world, a microcosm I suppose.”

“Everything looked to be so harmonious, apart from when you showed me the bleached coral.”

“It’s an ecosystem, everything depends on everything else.”

“So different from the world we’re used to.”

“No, not so different. Above water we are all part of an ecosystem too, its just we’ve become indifferent to it, we don’t see it anymore, that’s why if we destroy part of it we don’t notice the repercussions until they effect us directly and by then its often too late.”

Francis looked up from his dream-like state and looked at Harry, for the first time examining him properly. He noticed a small tattoo on his neck and a gold earring in his left ear. The beard was thick and dark and matted although cleaned by the sea, his skin was so tanned as to heighten the wrinkles in his skin around the eyes and forehead.

“Harry, how long have you been doing this? I mean all this.”

“I stopped counting the month after a year, and then I stopped counting the years. It’s been good to me. You cannot imagine how much one

learns from just being here and it's not just knowledge either. There's a sense of oneness and belonging that simply cannot be found... elsewhere."

"You're Canadian right?"

"Born and bred."

"So what were you doing before this? Were you in Canada?"

Harry paused for a long time before getting up.

"I'd rather not talk about before this Mr. Henderson, not right now. This is what matters most, this is what is happening now and I'd ask you to respect that."

Francis could see the task ahead of him was going to be hard and convoluted, yet now he could see some kind of light ahead that gave him hope. Harry was not some twisted psycho or set adrift madman. The putting of a knife to Francis's throat may have seemed like an act of desperation but now Francis began to see that he may have been just defending his own life, a life with a family, a life with this research vessel and a life with a philosophy of its own to be marvelled at and learned from.

Harry knew what he was doing with Francis and for now that meant putting him at his ease. As he drank his coffee and looked out at the reflections of the sun on the water he was at peace here.

The story of Harry's reincarnation, if it was to come, would be in Harry's own good time, he was in control in this place and he was custodian of his own story. Francis saw that it was all he could do to wait patiently and hope to draw it from him.

They gathered for lunch; Francis, Harry, Klaus and the three other members of the crew.

Chez was an Australian with severe but good looks, sun-bleached hair and the body of a strong swimmer, she must have been in her late twenties and was involved with documenting everything on board. She was in charge of detailing the results of the coral bleaching, its scale and position as the boat moved from location to location and was also making a documentary film about the expedition.

Rom was a New Zealander, a well built Maori of few words but seemingly involved in every element of the ship's activities from keeping, cleaning and preparing the dive equipment to maintaining the ships engines and communication equipment.

The chef, Callum, was a short Irishman, always talking to himself and on this occasion at least proving to be a very good cook indeed. The staple diet of the crew was, not surprisingly, fish and he took great care with his expertise in how it was prepared. The crew of the *Quotidienne* ate like aristocracy.

Only seconds after they were all seated and eating Harry, clearly the father figure here, kicked off the discussion.

“Francis here is an Englishman, from England. Makes his living writing so he says.”

Francis was not expecting to be the focus of such a blunt approach but Callum, who was the last to sit down took great joy in following up on Harry’s statement.

“Best thing to do if you catch an Englishman is to throw him back overboard. They don’t make for very good eating, too tough and stringy.”

They all laughed, except for Francis.

Rom seemed genuinely interested.

“Francis, is it true that in England, its illegal to wear a hat indoors?”

Francis laughed. “No, that’s not true, you can do pretty much whatever you want to do in your

own home, but I guess it's polite to take your hat off in someone else's house."

Harry jumped in.

"Rom raises an interesting point though. The English class system, which the hat represents here, is still very much alive in all sorts of ways, something that some care to ignore and others wish to strengthen."

Chez, with a soft Aussie accent added a little more.

"It's the one thing that everyone else knows about the English that they can't accept for themselves."

It seemed to Francis that he was under some unprovoked attack which he tried unsuccessfully to deflect.

"Times have moved on in England, we're more of a meritocracy now."

"Rubbish!"

Harry was starting to enjoy this conversation which he'd cleverly started.

"Its denial. The English have no way of looking at themselves anymore, no mirror to give them an idea of who they are. They look at each other and they still blindly see only the differences between themselves whilst being obliged to express

their similarities, to be polite. It's the same old story, they can't put themselves in each other's shoes, everyone's got their little subjective point of view that they stick to, everyone's made their own minds up with the help of the blinkered visions they adopt according to their place in society."

It was quiet until Klaus, who had been silently eating, made his presence felt.

"Damn straight. Meritocracy my arse. And you're wrong Callum, I imagine an Englishman would make for very good eating, sweet and tender, like rare roast beef, nice with some horseradish. Do we have any horseradish?"

Francis wasn't happy being talked about as food and felt he needed to make a mark of his own.

"Well, I'd put good money on any one of you hardened sailors resorting to eating each other if you were set adrift for long enough. Personally I wouldn't eat any of you... certainly if there wasn't any horseradish."

The laugh that followed went on through the meal and indeed throughout the day. The afternoon was full of play as they dived off the boat from increasingly high places. Sometimes playing cards, or reading books the research vessel was evidently a holiday boat as well as a place of serious scientific

research. Francis found himself integrated into their number, occasionally giving details of his life to those who asked.

Political Fish

The seemingly continuous supply of beers flowed with the arc of the sun overhead but it was only when night fell, the light of the three quarter moon and dome of stars covering the ship, that Francis had an opportunity to quiz Harry once more. He approached him with a beer whilst Harry was dangling his legs in the water at the dive platform on the back of the boat.

“I was wondering if you were in a frame of mind to talk about politics, maybe it's a pet subject of yours.”

“Ha! A pet subject! Truth is there's little need for it out here, perhaps that's why I like it so much. Now about that shark you saw...”

“I'll never forget it.”

“That shark is so fast, 35 miles per hour top speed, and it only eats other fast fish, tuna and swordfish mainly. It's designed that way and it's a top of the food chain predator, like Man. You know if it was removed from that food chain, all that would happen is that there'd be a lot more tuna and swordfish around. But you remove something at

the bottom of the food chain, something simple and basic and the whole chain collapses.”

“So you’re saying if Man ceased to exist it wouldn’t make much difference to the ecosystem?”

“Exactly, in fact the ecosystem would probably be better off, would probably recover to some more harmonious dynamic.”

“I understand, I do.”

“I’m not sure you do Francis. That shark, the Mako, you were afraid of it right?”

“Damn right, yeah I was afraid.”

“But you knew nothing of its nature, its feeding habits, its life.”

“No, but its got big teeth.”

“Politics is like the underwater world, it’s a system about which most know very little, in fact its power is based on this ignorance. Once you dive in though and you begin to learn about how it works, you become part of it. In your case you were afraid of being attacked, even eaten.”

“I’m sorry but I feel it was a natural reaction.”

“Fear is natural, and universal, and unfortunately it is the currency of politics. You were afraid of the shark in his world, what if you learned of such a shark in the sphere of politics?”

Harry looked at Francis and there was a moment between them.

“Would you fear it? Would you wish to study its nature to be less ignorant of it? Would you try your best to avoid it? Would you want to kill it?”

Francis felt he knew what Harry was getting at and where this was going.

“I would probably want to get out of the water.”

“Exactly, but as I said before, once you are in the water, you too are part of its ecosystem, you are part of the way it works, in such a situation it would be hard to simply ‘get out of the water.’ Do you see?”

“I imagine in such circumstances you would want to become something other than part of the food chain.”

“That’s right. That’s right. The problem with a world that exists in a microcosm is that it’s next to impossible to believe in a world that exists outside of it. That’s what faces you when you live in a bubble. If you want to burst the bubble you have to be sure of what there is outside of it but your frame of reference is only that which is contained within.”

Harry was talking very quietly and Francis was just as deep in thought as his companion. Their speech was low and saddened. Francis was reluctant to voice an idea as he felt Harry's intellect might dismiss it as nonsense but still, spurred on by the beer he said what was on his mind.

"I know, just from school stuff, that life came from the Sea, that it was amphibious creatures that first left the sea to populate the land. Would this be one way of leaving the world beneath?"

"Ha! I like the way you think Francis but I'm afraid to tell you that the ability to live in two worlds, to span them so to speak, is a fantastic quality and one that can be used sometimes if you're smart enough, but ultimately for Mankind, if you wish to continue to evolve, you must decide in which world you wish to live. You have to decide what kind of animal, maybe what kind of fish you are Mr. Henderson."

"What about mammals that returned to the water? Dolphins and Whales, have their origins on land and they went back to the sea to adapt to life in water. Have you ever had thoughts of returning to such a life?"

"We're talking of millions of years of evolution and adaption here Francis. Sometimes

Man has to make these adaptations, these kinds of decisions, within one short human lifetime, maybe even within a few months, a few days, or even in the moment. Besides I have more than enough water to explore right here, thank you very much. Right now, I need to sleep. Good night sir, I'll see you tomorrow."

Harry got up and left, leaving Francis with half a bottle of beer and one of the most idyllic moonscapes he had ever seen. Low on the horizon with a dancing road of light leading directly from his position at the back of the boat to this great reflector of the Sun's rays.

In one day he had come closer to Harry than he had hoped, from being treated as a suspicious stranger, and indeed enemy, to becoming a friendly listener. He was sure this change in status was under the complete control of Harry. If they were to discuss anything more openly it would be at a pace and in a style of Harry's choosing.

Whether it was even possible to mention the name of Raymond Dante again, how it would register with Harry and where this line of questioning would lead was beyond Francis. He was very much the guest here and he had no intention of disrupting his host any more than he

had to. However, still attentive to his own needs his only idea was to play this by ear because he felt sure Harry would talk, in more than just a metaphorical way.

It was clear that Harry Thompson and Raymond Dante were deeply connected but whether they existed still as an identity within the same man was hard to know. The relationship between the two would be at a level of consciousness that would be difficult for Francis to fathom, even aided by the beauty of these surroundings.

Was Dante truly dead now, in any real sense of what it means to be alive? Would it be possible for Harry to become some kind of medium through which to channel Dante's life secrets? He would give Harry the chance to surface, to reveal however much he was prepared to reveal, but for now Francis was able to act only as a catalyst to the process.

Finishing his beer he walked to the bunk he had been allocated and was lulled to sleep by the gentle rocking of the *Quotidienne*, she bobbed alone under the stars on her own bed of waves. With his dreams aided by the day's underwater activities he tried to answer Harry's question; what kind of fish was he? Just as mysterious were two more elusive

questions; what kind of fish was Harry and what kind of fish had Dante been whilst alive in political waters?

Conditions of Confidence

Up bright and early Francis soon found himself with Harry on the small boat back to the island. They did not speak, the waves were a little choppier than yesterday and the sound of the engine made for an uncomfortable ride but pulling onto the shores of the island was subsequently of great relief for Francis. To be on solid ground albeit of such small area, and placed so distant from any other, meant a return to a solid and stable train of thought.

Very quickly after landing Harry took Francis by the shoulder.

“As soon as you’ve freshened up, meet me by my hut, next to the Satellite dish. I’ll have Ann Marie make us some coffee.”

“Sure, will do.”

They walked in opposite directions but after a wash and a change of clothes Francis made his way back. As he walked he bumped into Drew who was wearing a red bandana and drinking a large smoothie.

“Hi, these make the perfect breakfast, can I make you one?”

“Thank you, maybe a little later.”

Francis continued, soon arriving at the hut. The door was open, he peered around it to see Harry sitting in a large chair and so went in.

The hut was a cave of electronica, three of its four walls were stacked floor to ceiling with digital equipment. Amongst that which was unknown to him Francis noticed two computers and screens, two television screens, radio equipment and a bank of hi-fi. Currently all were switched off but Harry sat at the centre of it all, evidently the human hub of its operation.

“Sit down, sit down please.”

The other chair was a leather recliner and Francis eased his way into it, glad of its comfort but a little unnerved as to his surroundings.

“It's clear to me Mr. Henderson that if I were to tell you that Raymond Dante came here shortly after he went missing and that I befriended him, that he told me his story in confidence before disappearing as quickly as he had arrived, you wouldn't believe me.”

“No, no I wouldn't.”

“Having thought about our situation I have found it to be of the utmost importance that you do

believe me and that is why I have brought you here, to this, my little studio.”

“It’s, well, it’s quite impressive I have to say.”

“Impressions are one thing. You may put everything I am about to tell you in your book Mr. Henderson. In fact it is the only reason I will tell you this, the only reason you’re still here. I want the whole story to be told, to be made public, to be free in the realm of print. However, I am in regular contact with some very powerful people and not all of them are what you might call ‘good’ people. So I must remain anonymous, merely a source that you have discovered in your research. If you disclose my identity or more importantly my location, it will cause myself and my family here great inconvenience and you will regret it immediately. You will be tracked down, and your family too, and you will simply cease to exist, more permanently so than Raymond Dante. Don’t allow yourself to think that this isn’t possible, the strings I can pull are very long. Are we clear?

“Yes, completely clear.”

“You will come to understand that the facts of Dante’s story are quite incredible but I can assure you they are all true, my memory of them is

startlingly fresh. The only problem is that many who read your book may not fully believe them to be so and as a result I fear that what you write, what you will be able to write with these limitations on your creative freedom, may simply become yet another of the many conspiracy theories that abound. So be it, people believe what they want to believe, but there will be at least two people in this world, namely you and me, who will know the truth has been spoken. There will be a version of events that hold together with a unifying coherence and that is enough for me, it should be enough for you too. I don't know how good you are at writing the truth, or indeed fiction but if you do a decent enough job I have no doubt your book will sell. As a version of Dante's life, yours will be definitive, whether it will allow his memory to rest in peace only time can tell."

"I have to say, I was hoping for something like this, but I had no idea that you would... well what form it might take."

"How could you? I'm going to record what happens here and I've a little device that will transcribe what we talk about which I can then print off for you, you will then have the facts to hand for your book. Is that agreeable to you?"

“That sounds just fine.”

“Good, then lets begin.”

Harry leant back in his chair and casually flicked one switch. A set of lights and one large green light came on but at that second Ann Marie happened to come in with a tray of coffee and some cake.

“Here you go Mr. Henderson, I hope you like ginger cake, I made it myself, you will have some won’t you?”

“Thank you, thank you very much.”

Putting the tray down she turned to leave.

“You two have fun now.”

Perhaps Harry invited very few people into this inner sanctum. As she left and in a voice that could only express happiness she began singing “Frère Jacques”, the French nursery rhyme, its melody floating away with her.

Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques,
Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?
Sonnez les matines, sonnez les matines
Ding ding dong, ding ding dong.

With the soft Belizean lilt of Ann Marie’s song, lingering in the air. Harry Thompson began

to speak his story, the story of Raymond Thierry Dante. It was with a slow confident tone, in his low and rounded Canadian accent that he spoke with a seamless ease, and as he did so Francis Henderson found himself hypnotised and lulled into a gentle state of attentiveness.

Cyber Heroism

I was 26, so this was back in 2017 when I was working at Prebon-Carter. Having worked there a couple of years I knew they were good years. We were a small but successful firm of architects based in Reading and I was happy, really, truly content with my life. As the chief Computer Aided Designer I'd already seen two of our projects from conception through to completion, it was satisfying work and I've got to say I was well paid.

The buildings we worked on were all high tech constructions, we used the most innovative techniques and creatively used many of the new materials that were being developed. The New Reading Community Library was one of ours and it made us all feel proud to see it up and working, remembering all the decisions that were made to create it just so.

Josef Prebon and Richard Carter were quite remarkable people, vision and flair, knowledge, energy, expertise, all in overdrive. They liked me as a person, it was kind of a family, but mainly they liked me because I could quickly translate their

sketches into a digital framework malleable enough for us all to work with. The Computer Aided Design software we used was great, cutting edge stuff, and I'd taken to it quickly because it was so intuitive. After just a while there wasn't a tool or a function in that thing that I couldn't wield like a ninja. It was cool. Geeky people find it hard to share how cool they find these things but Jo and Rich could see I was enjoying myself and could handle the workload they were throwing at me without any trouble. We talked a lot, we worked hard and I learned every day.

I had this ok apartment, a small studio bachelor pad with just the necessary luxuries. I kept it tidy and I had a few friends that came round every now and then, mainly because I had the best games console and an extensive library of games. I was popular, popular for a geeky nerd at least. I didn't have a girlfriend at that time, I don't think I was looking for one either, just drifting along in my element really.

My folks were in London and I saw them from time to time but mainly we just talked on the phone once a week or so. All they needed to know was that work was ok, which it was, and that I was looking after my health. Dad used to drop hints

about me moving to the capital, for better work prospects and Mum always wanted to know what I was eating but by and large as long as I knew they were doing ok too we didn't meddle in each other's business.

I had a cat, Jedi, a big lazy ginger Tom that the previous tenant had asked if I wanted to keep. He did nothing, just lazed around. He'd sit in the sun on the little balcony, curl up on my bed all day and was no trouble. I didn't have to take him to the vet once, he ate and he slept and if I played Jazz music he would purr loudly like a motorcycle idling over.

Weekends were often a little lonely I suppose if the guys weren't around. I'd usually go and see a film on a Saturday if I was alone and bored, American blockbusters mainly. The stars, the storylines, the locations, the CGI, they were all obviously about as far removed from reality as it gets so it was pure escapism but I used to think of the business and industry in themselves too. It was the ultimate world in a microcosm, I imagined the trailers, the generators, the cameras, the lights, the costume departments and when the credits came up at the end I would sit there until they were done, just marvelling at the scope of the production, every

name, every job title all organised to produce this two hour spectacular. Were it not for the presence of the great and famous company logos at the outset of the titles to give reassurance, one would think that such enterprises would be simply impossible.

I read, I liked authors like Franz Kafka, Hermann Hesse, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Paulo Coelho. I don't know what that says about me, I figured my taste was kind of random because I just stumbled across these writers really. There were also subscriptions from my parents and a couple of godparents; Scientific American, The Economist and National Geographic. On a Sunday I'd read the latest and get up to date, you can learn a lot in such a way and after a while the knowledge becomes very real before you. These magazines were stacked quite high in three piles in one corner of my living space.

The thing you have to remember about nerdy, geeky types is that we're fairly committed, obsessive even. Take that CAD software. I'd noticed a few bugs and had ideas for a couple of extra tweaks they might make to improve the workflow, so I'd contacted them. They were a start up called 'Architect FX' based in Seattle and I got into a good communication with one of it's

Directors and then one of its head programmers. It was only a few months later that the improvements appeared on an update. There was no money involved in this exchange, although they did give me an open invitation to visit them, should I be on the west coast of the US anytime. I was just happy to help where I could and it was a buzz to see the adjustments they made due to my input. There's a kind of community of geeks around the world, all wired together and maybe this kind of thing is not so uncommon.

I guess it's a kind of a dream for many to go to the States to work. I had done so as a very young man and perhaps took the experience for granted. With the help of some family connections and a ridiculous variety of specialisms already under my belt I'd been able to work for a while at Google during my gap year, so I felt I'd already done that gig.

There had been a computer virus, what they call a Ransom Ware Virus, in June 2017, they called it "WannaCry". It had been global in nature, and caused financial damage of as much as \$5 billion and the UK had been hit pretty hard, harder than most in fact.

It transpired to be a twenty-one year old whizz kid from Cornwall who was instrumental in terminating its progress. He appeared on the news one night and was a type of cyber-hero with which came his corresponding fifteen minutes of fame. Later in the year the FBI picked him up at San Diego airport after he'd been to the Code One Hacking Convention. It all seemed very suspect to me but the point was that this kind of world-wide cyber security attack had become very real and the powers that be were suddenly much more alerted to its danger.

I'd seen a lecture on television, on the BBC, given by the ex-Director of the CIA who had focussed on this style of activity as the next big threat to nations and their governing bodies. No one really knew from where it had originated but fingers were pointing at Russia, China and North Korea. He stressed many times that this was what he called a Wake Up Call for the West and that it must be taken with the greatest of seriousness. Like many of those with an interest in the area, the shady side of computer hacking, I was immediately hooked and began looking into the whole mess.

Working at Google you can't imagine how much I'd learned and not all of it purely legal. I

thought I'd left most of that mind-set behind but what happened next took everyone by surprise, it shouldn't have done because we'd been warned, but it did. However, when the next wave of cyber breaches occurred, the next year, I think it was in July, I was fully primed to give it my complete attention.

I continued at work but was at my machine every evening and up all night, then over the weekend I immersed myself in its detail. It became known as the "Houdini Hijacking" and the more I looked into it the more I found myself in a unique position to do something about it.

The weird thing, the lucky, coincidental thing, was that some of the software architecture in the virus resembled the CAD system I was familiar with. It didn't make any sense but the lines of code concerning the structure of hierarchies had obviously been directly copied from parts of this system. I could see its weaknesses because of some of the bugs I already knew about. Suddenly I realised I had this thing licked and so I stopped. Having known what had happened to the previous 'hero' I was reluctant to do anything but gradually something came over me.

Call it pride or call it some version of patriotism I felt more and more strongly that because I had the solution to this potentially lethal problem in my hands, because I had the freedom and power to help my country, I had a clear duty to act upon it as a responsible citizen. Hospitals were going down as well as stock market values and there was a need to get my 'fix' 'out there' to the right people who could implement it nation-wide. I considered every manner of approach, hoping initially to remain anonymous but I thought any delivery method to the appropriate authorities which appeared covert would ultimately back-fire landing me in trouble. In the end I simply phoned the relevant government department, gave my details and within minutes someone rang me back and the whole thing was set into fast and efficient motion.

After only four hours or so, I'd sent my 'counter-virus' to them, they'd tested it on a closed system and then released it into the wild so to speak. It was all over so quickly, amazing the speed people can move when money, people's lives and most especially political capital are at stake. I went to bed and the next day, a Sunday of all days, all hell broke loose.

In my tiny flat that day I had suits from the government and their cyber experts, three different TV companies complete with cameras, a couple of uniformed policeman and several shady types who hovered around without saying anything. It was clear they were all there in order to know everything that I knew, quite a weird feeling. I was open and honest and that night I was on the News.

I've got to say the experience was hyper-real, inspiring, exhilarating and frankly quite fascinating for me. Aware as I was of the fate of the previous cyber-hero, I was content to stay in England, stay at my job and let the whole thing calm down for a while. I had plenty to think about, even if I had no means of its expression. Jedi slept through the whole thing.

Apart from the overwhelming sense of achievement in having stopped the most vicious attack on the country in recent history it was the start of an incredible journey for me.

I went back to work as normal on the Monday where of course I was the super-star all day. I didn't do the slightest bit of work but instead floated on the shared euphoria in the office. We had the TV on all day. IT support workers, hackers turned good, software designers and computer

geeks in general were all being mobilised in a nationwide effort to get back online, back on track. Their work was being lifted to great heights by the media and their role was being likened to saviours such as Fireman and Doctors and they were all using my piece of code.

My picture kept appearing as if I was some kind of guru for whom all the disparate but technoliterate workforce were working for. Sound-bites of my interviews from the previous day kept popping up and my humble network on social media was going berserk. I was in demand in a way that was indescribable. It was a party and an almost messianic status was being loaded onto me, Ray T. Dante from Reading! It was overwhelming and if I'm honest quite scary too.

Of course various government agencies were in regular contact during this time including MI5 and MI6. Over the next couple of weeks I went to London a couple of times to meet with them, in the way of a debriefing. Once the craziness had subsided and other news stories of national and international concern replaced Houdini they apparently just wanted to see if I was ok. The finer details of my counter-virus were now well understood by all those who needed to know.

Without exactly being given a job offer the intelligence agencies were keen to extend a hand to me in the interests of the health of the current status quo and knowledge of the nature of future unknowns and I was happy to be of assistance. I was unable to help them with locating the source of the outbreak but this inability was met with varied levels of encouragement, suspicion and often disbelief. It was a little unnerving the way those conversations waxed and waned from congratulatory to interrogative.

In a life changing stand of a few minutes I even received a telephone call from the Prime Minister, who wanted to thank me personally. It didn't come as the complete shock out of the blue that one might think, as I was called just prior by an aide and told to expect 'a short moment of gratitude from the leader of the country.' She mentioned that my ingenuity, fast thinking and co-operation with the intelligence agencies was of itself nothing less than heroic.

After the call I sat in my chair, phone in one hand and a bottle of lager in the other trying to decide whether my life was real anymore. I came to the conclusion that it was not and that I had no more training for an 'unreal' life than I did for most

other things so I'd just have to wing it as usual and pray that the gods, of which there were apparently many, would treat me favourably in the future, whatever it had in store.

Needless to say, barring the occasional phone calls from the press, things began to die down. Except that is for the social media. I was wired into every network there is both in the UK and abroad and the only way I can really describe it was that now I had this monster fan-base, hundreds of thousands strong. I was the guy.

I made the most of it. I started going out more, meeting new people, making new friends. For several years I'd become rather reclusive but there had been a time when I had been far more gregarious and now this side of me was coming to the fore once again. The cool thing was that I was still kind of anonymous, apart from the people who knew me directly, the people I wanted to know me and the people I was now mixing with, my face was largely forgettable. It's not like I was a football player whom everyone kept bothering in bars or restaurants. I was able to go out, increasingly in London at the weekend, with a growing group of good friends and have a great evening without being hassled. It was a nice kind of fame, because

every now and then someone, usually a geeky type ,would come up to me and want to shake my hand so I occasionally got some recognition and respect like that too.

Russian Rendezvous

It was around then that I met Misha. It was at a high class charity function that I'd somehow got invited to on the strength of one of my new friends. I didn't know who she was, she just came and sat down next to me, all I knew was that she was beautiful and spoke with a soft, husky, Russian accent.

She knew me, she flattered me and told me she had followed my 'little story'. We drank and laughed and I kind of lost track of where my friends were. By the end of that night we'd made out together in a secluded little corner. I got her number and she took mine and we agreed to meet at The Russian Tea Rooms in Fulham the following week. I went home back to Reading that night being driven by a friend. According to him I was talking about her all the way and it was then that I discovered who she was.

As my friend drove he realised that this was Misha Konchalovsky, daughter of the billionaire Yevgeny Konchalovsky. We'd been working on a building design he'd commissioned so there was

this weird connection. My friend had said that Misha had been on one of these TV shows about the wave of Russian money still flowing into London.

When I got home I put her name into a search engine and up came all this stuff about her and about her father. She'd even been photographed for a spread in "Hello!" magazine. It was fine because she hadn't mentioned any of this when we were together; I just got to know her as she was that night. I thought that was how she'd wanted me to see her, as separate from all her fame, and of course, her money. She had been relaxed and funny with me, was thoroughly personable and I had no reservations in calling her the next day.

We talked on the phone about the night before and about our 'situations', after more phone calls that week it seemed natural and easy to meet as we had arranged in Fulham the next weekend.

It was great, we were alone together and able to talk freely and personally. We talked a lot about the global political climate at that time. I suppose the thing that sealed our friendship and interest in each other was this shared insight. She had studied Psychology and Politics in Moscow and my degree was in Economics which had a great overlap with Political concerns too. Intellectually

we met with this common language. From my point of view Misha was clearly not solely a superficial blonde and billionaire's daughter, and she often remarked that I wasn't just the geek that she thought I might be.

She was so animated and happy to find me genuinely interested in what she had to say, my being able to add to it, and my being uninterested in the affairs of her father. We talked for hours, we drank a lot of tea, and then we went back to her unreal apartment in Battersea and did some serious loving, loving of the hungry, wealthy, famous kind.

So for two weeks we got together a lot, she even came down to Reading a few times, it was kind of weird having her in my pokey little apartment when she was obviously used to so much more but she didn't seem to mind. I think it was more of my hang up as a matter of fact.

It was on one of these occasions that we were talking about politics again and I happened to mention that I'd read the MP for Reading West had stood down recently and that the seat was vacant. There was going to be a by-election and I said with little importance that I didn't know if there was some kind of constitutional time frame by which a seat had to be taken up again.

“Find out!” she had said. “Go on.”

And that was my first step. She thought I would make an excellent Member of Parliament. I told her all about my father’s involvement in Canadian politics and the more I talked the more Misha encouraged me. It was frightening how I took to the challenge, I didn’t really have to question if what I was doing was the right thing or whether I wanted it at all, I just got on with it. There was a great deal of hasty research as to the paperwork and rules and legality. I was a little concerned that I’d been born in Canada but as I’d become a British citizen it wasn’t a problem.

The first thing we ran into was the cost for running a campaign. The average figures given were around the £34,000 sum. Misha was insistent and almost dismissive of this, she would pay all costs and could be my Election Agent as she was legally registered to vote. All this seemed very natural as we worked through the days and nights.

The date of the by-election had been set and I needed to file my nomination in person nineteen working days beforehand. There wasn’t a great deal of time. I’d be running as an Independent and needed to get ten registered electors as signatories.

I needed to get myself out in the community too but this I knew was going to be my strength.

There was a vast base of people who knew me, I was both a local and national hero after all. Every single contact I'd made during the Houdini attack was alerted via social media. I got some friends to do some awesome publicity and I worked hastily but vigilantly on my manifesto. The days flew by and Misha turned out to be some kind of genius as my campaign manager. We whipped it all into shape using every kind of digital marketing ploy known to us collectively at that time.

If anything, we overdid it a little bit. There were a lot of young people especially, who would have voted for me whatever my policies and ideas were. Our slogan was "On Line. On Air. On Message." It was kind of an American style of campaigning and I wasn't sure it would go down too well with the people of Reading but the card up my sleeve, which I played often and to great effect, was that I had helped to design the shining new library. I believe that detail tipped the balance for many.

All regulations met and the nomination submitted we had eighteen days to take a run at the thing. It was a very serious and committed effort and with Misha's expertise and my growing

recognition it started to look very good indeed. All this and we managed to keep our humour and our relationship climbing to great heights.

Flying on the wave of optimism we had generated, my highlighted fame, and the inspiring, newly found political interest of the previously directionless Millennial generation, many of whom were voting for the first time, we couldn't lose.

A record turnout for Reading and we smashed it. The majority was a little embarrassing to tell you the truth and I actually felt sorry for some of the other candidates.

My standing for the position had been a minor news story but when I actually won I was all over every media and with my recent experience I knew exactly how to handle it. Misha was never far away in the background and the small but dedicated team we'd assembled felt like they were just getting started. The champagne flowed, and still in my little flat, which was crowded with the handpicked stars who helped me to win, we celebrated through the night.

After some formalities, the next day we travelled back to Misha's place in London in her car. It was suddenly just the two of us in our own little bubble. When we were finally completely

alone together in her apartment, it seemed like we had just run a marathon at 100 metre sprint pace and finished holding hands as joint winners. With love and money and power running through your veins the past, present and future can seem very hazy. It's a hard feeling to explain to anyone who hasn't felt anything similar. Soon I'd be in the company of many others who would be able to relate to parts of this journey, but whether they would be able to relate to what I had to say, or whether I would be able to understand any of them on a meaningful level, was unknown.

The Aquarium

Total immersion into a new environment necessitates rapid adaptations and navigation within the 'rules of the game' in which you find yourself. If you fail to adapt, you fail to survive and every way I looked it was perfectly clear that there were a hundred and one ways to lose, not withstanding the obvious fact that there were plenty of experienced onlookers who would be quite happy to see me do so.

Losing in this job would mean a high profile media story. The new Independent MP for Reading West, the geeky young upstart desperately clinging onto his momentarily found popularity via becoming an accidental cyber security hero, who falls from whatever grace such rise to fame deserves.

Now though I had something else to think of, and to be proud of, this being the backing of my supporters and the wellbeing of all my constituents. It was an honour, a responsibility and a pleasure from which I had no intention of backing down, at least not without seeing how high I could raise my

own game, and not without firstly fighting from my hard won corner.

The establishment I had now entered; Westminster, The Houses of Parliament were like a castle to me. I felt like I was stepping back in time and this was the first feeling that gave me cause for meditation. Without doubt I was new, modern, of my generation and as such I felt greatly out of place with immediate effect.

There was no way for me to blend in here, no way to assume the trappings and attitude, the approach of my colleagues. In the best interests of democracy I made my first decision, I would hide in the open. I was the new kid in town and the only way forward was to fly my freak-flag higher than the rest, to stand out by design rather than accident.

I would become a thorn in the side for many, I would be a shining beacon of hope for others, but I would make myself known. To shrink from my task, my challenge, my station and its duties, would not only be cowardly but it would be a one way ticket to catastrophe. I decided to be unafraid of making mistakes, in fact the more I made the merrier. I would risk making a fool of myself, even invite it upon myself but I would not allow my intelligence to take second place. Humour, the put

down, creative use of powerful satirical language would mean that I would become a force to be reckoned with. There would be many who would think twice when considering to question my logic, my arguments, my rhetoric, my observations, simply by fear of losing face. A quick tongue would dispatch them and send them to question themselves.

I had no Party, I had no support by means of safety in numbers but then I had no Party line to tow, I had no Chief Whip to answer to. To me all were fair game. I had only to weather the embarrassment I would surely feel when falling into political bear traps and to survive the onslaught of the press who would certainly heighten my every trip and stumble. In this way I would create an image for myself, a perception of what kind of man I was in the mind's eye of each and every person with whom I came into contact.

I had the freedom to explore, to experiment and to examine in a privileged way that was inaccessible and hidden to most. I was a free agent, and as such I could choose to be a loose cannon, an objective outsider, an enemy within and a pain in the neck for anyone who might consider to cross me. I had constituents who would rely on me to

represent them and that was my first priority. What did they want and how could I help them?

It was with these thoughts and with this approach, combined with a pocketful of controversial political philosophies surrounding constitutional reform that I walked into the Palace of Westminster. I felt like a loner, but I felt like a King. The more I expressed myself, on every available occasion, I began to feel like a warrior on a mission with a mandate to dispatch any assailant who would see fit to block my path or challenge my status. With the ensuing respect from those who heard of my abilities I would make influential friends and increasingly disheartened enemies.

Whether these feelings were power or simply pride I don't know. They say that power corrupts and that pride comes before a fall and often this is true but how else do you frame such feelings? I was committed and focussed, but it was with an intensity that I doubt many have experienced. The truth is that in many important ways I had to put feelings, both good and bad, to one side. Now I was the owner of a state of mind, a will that had been sharpened to the point of it being a weapon. I had to be careful to wield it with reference to both heart

and reason and I had to learn with a window on the effects it could cause.

The first thing I noticed, the first time in The House of Commons was that this mind, my mind was crucially just one, as individualised and unique as it could be, and that surrounding me was the Mind of Government. It was a Hive Mind in that it had a life of its own, it worked in mysterious ways and although split along different Party lines and even within parties it had been operating effectively and sometimes furiously in the defence of Democracy for many hundreds of years. It was a collective mind with an ingrained set of its own peculiar psychologies.

When I gave my maiden speech, really just a formal tradition to introduce my voice to the many who had spoken there before me, I was as a child. My voice faltered, my confidence in my delivery was undone, I coughed, words fell from their intended places, the paper I held in my hands quivered enough to be noticed. The sentences I'd carefully crafted took on dual, unexpected and unwanted extra meanings as I read them aloud. I had tried to make my self understood but had not worried myself to make sure that I wasn't misunderstood.

From that first day the project became one where the primary object was to build myself or rather to re-build myself from what I saw as a collapse in my own constitution. Building was something I knew about, I had been working for a firm of Architects and this idea, the idea of actually building my work and my character became vital to my integrity and of paramount vitality.

I was not so much a fish out of water, we all have a type of political strand in our DNA. I was more a new breed of exotic fish with my own specialist genetic mutation. I had been introduced into these dangerous waters and it was up to me to ensure the survival of this mutation, to benefit from the advantages it gave me and to avoid my limitations undermining this task. It was sink or swim, so I started swimming.

I had once seen a robotic fish, a foot or so in length that was remote controlled by the operator from the side of a pool. The fish could swim slowly, and faster. It could angle downwards or upwards and it could turn quickly to go in a different direction. I wondered if I had inadvertently become such a fish. I wondered at the scope of my programming and technical prowess, but most of all I thought about the operator.

Was I in effect under the control of a greater being? Were there forces at work about which I knew nothing? Albert Einstein had once asked : “What does a fish know of the water in which it swims all its life?” As an analogy for the human condition, for a long time I thought that the answer to this question was clearly ‘nothing’. But it occurred to me then that the answer for some particular few in my new environment could equally be ‘everything’. Obviously knowing nothing, except that there were others who might know everything, put me at great disadvantage from the start. How much autonomy did I really have? How far could I push the envelope in order to discover my answer to this question and what were the possible consequences of doing this?

Creating ripples, waves even, was one thing but expanding the possibilities for actually changing my new environment was another far more interesting and edgy prospect. Deciding upon the need or wisdom for doing so in any particular matter, either tiny or vast, was at the forefront of my creative thinking.

First impressions of the job were that it existed purely to service a larger body of which I was but a small part. It was an archaic, rusty

dinosaur of a system that begged for modernisation if not wholesale reinvention. Of course, although I was a tiny anomaly in this institution, ideas of making much of a mark were not accompanied by some delusion of grandeur. Quickly though, I realised I was a Member of Parliament, which was surely enough to justify any number of delusional ambitions on my behalf, it would only be normal. As long as I initially kept my grand schemes to myself I ran no risk of becoming a laughing stock.

Change by small incremental alterations is no new phenomenon. The right adjustment to a Bill here or a little mention of something sensitive to someone appropriate there, a shift laterally one way, one day, then a return the next, these creeping movements can all add up in a spectacular fashion over days, weeks, months, years. After a long enough period, say one party's full term of office, the electorate can often wake up to a surprise. Legislation by stealth is very real and I intended to participate in it to my own benefit and to the advantage of the very good people of the country that this collection of exotic misfits, this supposedly representative few, had been elected to serve.

Within just a few days it became overpoweringly obvious, to me at least, that

government, although able to make great change to the 'outside world' operated itself in the confines of its own bubble. The degree of its ability or inability to understand the workings, character and needs of the people outside of this bubble were currently a mystery to me. The politicians in this aquarium each had their own names and beauty to be sure, but my only working knowledge of them was limited to one law - big fish eat little fish.

The freedoms of these people were also perplexing in nature. They were only people but the power they held, should they choose to use it, was immense. The temptation to abuse such freedoms and powers must be sizeable to some members and now I was one of them. I was a politician, I had to keep telling myself that in order to believe it myself but I wondered if all my colleagues were as engaged with the personal questions that accompanied this job. What effect would the freedoms and privileges I had been given have upon me? It was a sobering question but one that lit a mischievous beacon deep in my soul.

My own abilities were yet to be explored or tested, the extent of my reach, the boundaries of my abilities to cause any effect were unknown and in those first few days I tried many approaches when

in conversation with other MPs in order to have some clarity on this.

Initially it was no surprise my influence was the most limited out of any one of my colleagues, its hard even now to say peers. However I soon stumbled upon my saving grace, my Cambridge degree. As soon as people knew this fact one of several things happened.

Either a door was opened along with the friendliness of the conversant, who would then explain which college they went to, what degree they took and who else was in this group, those who could be trusted implicitly. There would then be an exchange of details and information which would clearly make my life easier and more productive. For the first time in my life I found that such an 'old boy network', which now included many 'old girls' too, really did exist and the strength it conferred, simply on the basis of academic merit and an apparent guarantee of good character, was helpful over and over again. I had evidently not been exposed to this before and although it came as something of a surprise I quickly accepted its advantages.

On the other hand, when the facts of the geography of my education were revealed to others,

even those who were at 'the other place', namely Oxford, I was greeted with some suspicion, derision or even distaste. The scope for inverted snobbery seemingly had no bounds. Due to my selection for a place at Cambridge at the age of 18, or perhaps solely because I'd had the audacity to apply, some people would be able to instantly dismiss both my integrity and my intentions completely, without humour or any given reason. There was a lack of trust here that seemed unbridgeable.

There were many who fitted into a third group. These folk, more experienced and au fait with the whole Oxbridge Collegiate system would have many well prepared comments to make when I mentioned my education; 'No one's perfect' was the favourite of a few. Sometimes these people had a far broader perspective and were more interested and impressed with other more relevant aspects of my life, such as travel experiences and previous work. For those who had done their homework, my father's career was of the utmost fascination, as was the question of how deeply in my political psyche he had planted various aspects of Canadian political theory.

Nevertheless my degree gave me one important edge over my rivals and indeed enemies;

it gave me an establishment inroad into both the history and the operations of the institution of which I was now an integral part. It was rarely an incumbrance although it was a convenient handle by which many could begin to judge me, either erroneously or with some element of success. After a while I learned to wear it as a shield, whatever may have been going on personally behind it.

With my mind as my sharpened sword, my education as my deflective front and my father's philosophies as my wisdom, I was ready for combat. The chance to do battle came sooner than I had imagined.

Future Theory

My big idea, which I carried around in my head like a lucky charm, was something that I wished to develop and grow. I had no idea as to its sanity, let alone viability and even I knew it was an ideal that would take a long time to realise. I could be at best simply a seed for it or possibly a minor instigator.

I wanted to see a more direct democracy. The constitutional system as it stood was, like most, indirect. I didn't want to see a 'more political' country, after all we could all find more enjoyable things to do, but I had some kind of fuzzy vision of a 'more politically aware' country. My thoughts were that if there were more people 'switched on' to what was going on in this area there would be more time to enjoy life. In addition if the electorate grew in size because of this increased awareness, if more people voted, then those elected to represent them would be much more representative. This then could approach a more direct system whereby the decisions made at the top of the political pyramid were a more faithful reflection of those who find themselves nearer the bottom. Further, by

increasing the stability and satisfaction of these foundational base levels the integrity of the structure of the whole would be strengthened.

It was a personal theory that I played with and I'm sure there would be plenty of academic research done over the years, stretching back to principles laid down by the ancient Greeks, to bolster it and fine tune it. I had no idea where my baby ideology would fit into this immense body of work over the centuries but I was sure there were many others, far better read than I, who would be able to reference it, pull it to pieces or more hopefully analyse it with a view to building a modern working model.

A university director of studies gave me the idea. She had said, almost as a throwaway remark, that one day we'd all be voting via our remote control on the TV. It gave quite an exciting prospect. Come polling day we would all be voting from the comfort of our lounges and see the results come up live in a very short space of time. Perhaps there would be a twenty-four hour period in which we would all be required to vote. Of course it would be important that all who wished to vote were registered first as usual but the electorate would surely increase in numbers massively. All those

paper ballots and counting centres would be done away with which would be a loss for those nostalgically inclined but there would be a new excitement. Maybe all votes would be hidden until the appointed hour when suddenly the results would almost magically appear before the television participants. All campaigns would be fought as usual with maybe more emphasis on the televised debates.

Postal votes and votes from those eligible abroad could be made in advance online by computer and then, why not, why wouldn't it be possible for everyone registered, to vote via their mobile phone.

Most probably such a system would be met at first with extreme and fundamental skepticism especially by those at the top who felt they would stand to lose. All those great people of the country usually marginalised would now have a say in their own future by election of their preferred candidates. One might think that there would be a huge swing to the left however my theory was that the left/right divide or even three party politics would simply make way for a new more direct system.

Parties and their candidates would have to adapt their policies to accommodate a broader

appeal. Manifestos and their intended policies would now have to attract people by appealing to more direct methods. There would be the same need to persuade people of the virtues of their proposed actions, just the same as the old system, but these new actions would now necessarily have to address the issues that apply to the greatest number. Whether it would still work best to keep a first past the post method or to encourage a further move towards proportional representation was still not clear to me.

The more I played with it the more I liked it, in theory. I kept trying to find weaknesses and fix them with digital solutions and I kept winning. All I had to do was start trying it out on carefully selected Members but I had no preconceptions of how it would be received. All I knew was this was a futuristic concept designed to seamlessly replace an order, or disorder depending on your point of view, that existed at that point in time.

I kept trying to think of other systems that had been democratised in the recent past, or events that heralded in new approaches and attitudes towards perceived problems with modern digital solutions. I looked at progress.

Most people pay by contactless cards. Television became purely digital, the old analogue signal making way for the digitisation of the planet. Films are now exclusively shown as Digital Cinema Prints, doing away with expensive and bulky celluloid acetate rolls. Most movies are shot on digital format cameras and indeed film was being evolved out of the process completely. Landline telephones had long since 'gone digital'. Radio broadcasts with the introduction of DAB were now clear and hiss free on most radio receivers.

There are always the 'purists', personally I still like vinyl records, and some people prefer film photography to digital, but these choices are based on a preference for 'quality', 'look' and 'feel'. It's hard to have such aesthetics come into the equation when one is considering events or situations where financial considerations or global impact is concerned. Hence Compact Discs and then MP3 audio files. Something is always lost, for example the album art associated with LPs, but something driven by other considerations is gained. There are always arguable increases in aesthetic value too when paradigm shifts or leaps of progress are made. The latest version, or new medium, is often just simply better when considered from many new

and developing perspectives. Progress, evolution and change are inevitable and so it is foolish not to adopt it as such. The forward thinking embrace change.

How long could we stand to cling to outmoded methods analogue methods that seem to be failing us on a regular basis. The Information Age, started a long time ago now, we are in the full flow of its manifestations and I reasoned so should our system of governing ourselves.

All major retail businesses had to take the next step in providing online shopping. All major car manufactures had to begin considering emissions reductions and the design of cars that no longer use fossil fuels. These decisions are not just driven by having better 'credentials' or improving a 'brand image' they are the products of market forces, financial forces.

The electorate can be see as another market, of both consumers and producers. It has needs, wants and desires. The extent to which it is capable of meeting these determines the health, vibrancy, wealth and contentment of all individuals within that market. Its interests determine the demands placed upon those whom they elect to represent

them and then to serve them, on a local, national, international and global scale.

Voting for your MP by mobile phone is just the tip of the iceberg when making available to all those who wish to have their voice heard in the hustle and bustle of the digital domain that is the contemporary mass media market. Social media has already taken over with regard to interaction between people, it is more fashionable, more powerful and arguably more effective than talking to each other. Why not include this technology in every referendum? A quarterly or monthly vote by all those who so wish might at least give an indication of the climate of the digital market upon which their representatives can base their deliberations.

I called this project of mine the “The Democratisation of Digital Government”. To be honest I didn’t think it had a snowball’s chance in Hell of catching on, but I believed in its essence, and so I had a hope for a better future.

Imagining the way in which generations of the future will look back upon our time in the present day kept reoccurring in my ideas of what I might do, or try to do in the present. Reference to what I believed to be a forward thinking vision was

to help with my decision making. On every level, from general complaints about seemingly small matters from all types of constituents, right up to my head in the cloud ideas for major modernisation of the constitution, I kept thinking of the future.

Then, only a week into the job, my future came to me in the form of the Prime Minister herself. Would I be available to meet with her at No.10 on Saturday at 4pm? Needless to say I made myself available.

Special Interest

Misha made sure I was looking my best, I had a new tie and cufflinks. She was very good with details almost to the point of overlooking the reality of the situation.

Walking towards Downing Street on a weekend felt a little odd. It was breezy but far from cold and I fluctuated between smiling and frowning for the last five minutes of a stroll that created too many emotions to describe or count. She must have known I'd be feeling like this, she must have had an empathy for my novice state. I wished that I would be put at my ease by her quickly as I didn't want these uncomfortable variations in feelings to become a permanent addition to my work. Excitement often has a known goal, an event or an end point on which to focus, my emotional chaos was inextricably linked with the unknown.

The last ten metres, the closing distance often depicted by news cameras on television, had a generously different quality, self-consciousness isn't strong enough to explain it. In fact I felt this final leg of my journey was actually being televised,

although there were no cameras present but my behaviour altered all the same. A significant change in the comfort of my walking style combined with a temporary loss of anything substantial to occupy my mind, led to a weird sense that I was acting in some way, in some play, on some arbitrary day of my life. This unnerving annoyance stayed with me for my whole encounter with the PM and it didn't go away afterwards. I couldn't help but behave in subtle ways that were new and patently not my own, foreign gestures took over my natural self. It was involuntary Method acting, it had a grip on me and I didn't like it. It was the beginnings of a superior power having controls over my personality.

Being let through that black door, the oversized Policeman's presence enlarged by the occasion, was for the rest of my life an extended moment of being let into another world. This was not a world that could be made analogous to a microcosm, I had already fitted the entire government as tropical fish into an antiquated aquarium by such means. No, this was a secret world and even within this secret world its secrets were hidden. It wasn't 'like' anything, it didn't appeal to any metaphor making machine that would

clarify its nature and purpose to any later would-be audience.

Crucially, the story and the ongoing narrative of its existence was one that was most immediately set and framed by history. It was a building of living history, history that continuously comes alive in front of you. However, becoming part of that history, no matter how vital, means that you have to die more than just a little and that is exactly what happened as I moved across its threshold.

I was making my first mistake, I was making myself big. I put on an act of sorts to counter the unwanted manifestations of my personal discomfort, something by which to hind behind. Perhaps it wasn't a mistake because hiding would become something of a way of life for me but for now, pretending I was anything other than who I was becoming was a departure from any pre-planned protocol.

I had the confident appeal of a smart and successful young man with an ability to grapple with difficult concepts and to express my opinions without trouble. I was also an introverted geek, born into methods of self analysis and reflective contemplation. These two facets of my character

were at odds with each other in the respect that I often found myself saying that which did not correspond to my personally held beliefs and ideas. Misrepresentation of my self and bouts of self censorship meant that I was confused and frustrated with my projected persona on almost all occasions.

The PM greeted me in an informal and casual side room and was immediately disarming which gave me cause for concern as well as comfort. In the minutes following my entrance into her home I was made, or allowed, to feel much like a reassured schoolboy who had been summoned to the headmistress' study for an unknown reason. Curious, but knowing that a meeting of this sort might be accompanied by castigation as well as celebration I was driven by one question; what did she want?

Without being patronising she put me in such a place so as to be by turns motherly and then sisterly so that soon I felt as both a son and a brother. This angle of interaction seamlessly tapped into my family values whilst she then began professionally appealing to my University graduate, my employee and my winning candidacy for Reading West. Here I was an achiever, a success, a VIP and a welcomed new member to the program.

Soft introductions made, and one Independent MP settled into some sense of belonging, the meat of the meeting began to transpire.

Would I like to head up a think-tank, more of a study group really, focussed on issues surrounding cyber-security? I would have various facilities including cutting edge technology made available to me and there would be a small number of highly specialised workers under my command. Regular reports and updates to her personally would be required as would a liaison with a dedicated intelligence agent.

She knew specific details of my interviews with MI5 and MI6 following the Houdini Hijacking and I could carry on these conversations with the same personnel who had helped me then. Of course it would be a matter of great benefit to the security of the nation both here and abroad. My expert knowledge and current position would make the situation all that more expedient. Naturally I was free to decline should I feel that it would impinge on my duties to my constituents but should I accept I would be doing my country a great service. Could I give her an answer now? We could start the ball rolling immediately and build on the hard work all

ready done, work necessary to provide an effective defence to this very real and modern threat to democracy. What do you think Mr. Dante, is this something you would like to sign up to?

Well, I was flattered, and bowled over. It didn't occur to me to think that I might really be able to say no, not really. I mean where does one's heart lie? I was already serving the adopted country, which I loved warts and all, this was just an extension of my duties. I said yes.

She wasn't joking about 'signing up'. She made a quick call to another part of the building and very shortly a serious looking older man appeared with a small attache case from which he removed a piece of paper and held up a pen. If you would just like to sign here sir. The PM made it much easier. It was a special section of the Official Secrets Act, a very important formality in our agreement but after that was out the way we'd be able to press on. So I signed, in some kind of hazy dream zone, and with that done it was a cup of tea and a piece of cake.

The format and shape of the think-tank could be bashed out later. Was there anything about being an MP that I would like to talk about? Obviously as an Independent she surely wouldn't

force any party politics upon me, but was there anything I would like to ask? What were my first impressions? Did I have any questions about etiquette in the House of Commons? What were my ideas for moving forward?

I just blurted it out, here was an opportunity, my carefully constructed plans for a digitally modernised more direct constitution. At its heart, greater representation starting with voting by mobile phone.

She loved it, she laughed but she loved it. It would take a lot of time to implement but its just the sort of progressive idea she liked to think about. She'd definitely like to talk about it with me further, it's something that would need to be developed over time but if the time was right why not. She thanked me, ideas are what make the world go around, keep having them, keep evolving them. Incredible.

Obviously she was busy and had much to attend to but all in all I was in her company for nearly an hour and there promised to be further interaction with my updates and work for the think-tank. She said goodbye and I left, walking into a bold new stride. My world had turned, I knew it, but I wondered all the way home to Misha just how I had arrived at this point. I'm not sure it really

mattered too much, life often unfolds before us and we are simply tasked with dealing with it as it does so.

I'd never been much interested in the world of spies and espionage. James Bond did little for me and Ethan Hunt even less. From what my father had told me of the real world of intelligence gathering and counter-intelligence during the Cold War they all seemed like a bunch of faceless and expendable characters of dubious affiliation who lurked around in dark places only to have the results of their work brought into doubt by their equally shifty colleagues. I'm very sure there are those among them whose bravery has saved countless lives and theirs is the legacy of our taken for granted freedoms but most will remain heroically anonymous.

I wanted recognition, I wanted justified accolades for openly deserved efforts. The problem as I walked away from the attentions of the PM can be put into this one question: Was I now one of us or was I one of them? This led naturally to the unhappy conclusion that I'd crossed that line and had, at best, strayed into the categorisation of other. I had become public property when I was elected as an MP and now I was just required to 'do my bit'.

On the TV or at the Movies we can make a spy into a hero but in the rock bottom world of every day living, the kind of living facing the vast majority of the country, what is a spy? Spies are the lowest of the low; they observe, they record, they occupy identities other than their own, they trick, they deceive, they steal, they are by necessity fake, they switch loyalties, they gain the trust of the innocent to further their own ends, they work for the greater good but they do so by using anyone and everyone whilst exercising freedoms that are unknown to regular people.

I was being used and like most people who have this realisation there comes the prospect of being discarded once one has ceased to be useful. Throw-away culture reaches from top to bottom in the currency of market dynamics and it has little respect for concepts such as recycling or up-cycling.

I could look forward to a time late in my life where I would be a continuing and celebrated part of this battle against those who would disrupt our way of life by means of computer viruses, information theft and fraud. But having signed that little piece of paper I felt it far more likely that I would be nothing more than a silent cog in the

wheel of a machine that could be directed towards any target that those in charge saw fit. My suspicions would prove to have substance.

Right now I had just taken on another job, as if being an MP wasn't enough. Perhaps I should have asked for a pay rise or some perks to sweeten the deal. In actuality there was no 'deal', in what way had I become advantaged? My only consolation was the prospect of working with the promised cutting edge technology. It would be exciting because of its secret status but ultimately secrets aren't much fun unless you get a chance to tell them to someone else.

Marrying Rubles

When I arrived home to Misha I told her everything I thought I could, or should. She was fascinated and did not hesitate to say yes when later that evening I asked her to marry me in a logical continuation of my bizarre road of cause and effect.

We'd made our relationship into a poorly kept secret throughout the campaign, those we'd worked with were happy to allow us the charade but inevitable leaks appeared in the press who had only been able to speculate, it certainly wasn't front page news. It was clear now though that our impending marriage would spill over into the popular 'glossy' news. We pre-empted it with a carefully composed press release sent anonymously.

With Misha came the baggage of her father. She was not naturally gifted at being a famous socialite but save for her one time television appearance she had rarely been mentioned in the papers. There were, after all, plenty of daughters of Russian billionaires living in London at the time.

Suddenly the exposure exploded into an intense scrutiny by anyone who wanted to sell

papers. Misha was stalked everywhere she went and quickly came to be the most photographed woman in the country. She bought a lot more clothes during that time and learned to be prepared for hacks' questions with quick fire one-liners that we both worked on for fun in the evenings.

My appearances were fairly eclipsed by her fame. The only change in my own perceived image was that now I was being labelled variously in phrases like "Rogue Playboy Dante" quickly followed by "Red Ray". My politics were now a cause for major guesswork, was I really some far left capitalist, a kind of Soviet inspired fat cat? My campaign expenses came under close investigation, fortunately there really was nothing illegal for them to go on, but it didn't stop them from inventing whatever they liked.

The British people had never seen quite such a thing. All I could do was knuckle down to work, the more time spent in my constituency the better. I presented a competing image of myself as hard working and unaffected by the immense wealth of the family of my wife to be.

The summer recess in Parliament was coming up and it was natural to plan the wedding for this time. Any chance of having a 'small

ceremony' was out of the question. The man giving Misha away was one of the richest men in the world, let alone the country. All this should have been too much for me but my new found position as an MP, and a secret hacker detector to boot, gave me a confident swagger that saw me breeze through the arrangements. Misha was in control of the whole affair, I was just required to be there with a ring.

We were on a vast yacht in the Mediterranean. My mother and father were lifted up from their relative obscurity and I was so happy that they were treated as the most important people on the ship. My mother was beaming with pride and looked the most beautiful and elegant woman amongst many others. My father stood with great posture and pride and surveyed with an analytical eye what was really the most unfeasible of scenarios that he must have ever encountered.

I made a good show of myself, entering into conversation on all subjects with the mixture of strangers with whom I found myself rubbing shoulders. These were a collection of some the biggest players of big business. Interestingly there was no one of popular fame there. Misha's friends were not of that type and her father Yevgeny was not

noted for attracting the likes of film stars or footballers.

Essentially though, this was Misha's day. Having spent her life in the shadow of her father suddenly the light was finally upon her. What a light it was, the blistering mid-day sun just off the coast of Greece threw its energy on us all. Misha soaked it all up, coping admirably with accepting every compliment upon her appearance as was humanly possible.

The ceremony itself, performed by a Russian Orthodox priest known to Yevgeny from his youth, passed in a blur of expensive clothes and far more expensive jewellery. When it was all over, when the champagne had transformed the polite into cheers and laughter, and when we had said our goodbyes to our loved ones, Misha and I were given the send-off of a lifetime. A sleek speedboat, moored at the rear of the ship and piloted by a Russian Navy sailor, sped us away from the yacht into the setting sun. We cruised towards the nearby, tiny Greek island where we had chosen to spend our honeymoon.

With the sailor at the helm, the twin engines roared us to our own private beach. An ultra futuristic holiday pad, all glass and steel and

perched on a rock outcrop, awaited our arrival. We were dropped off, the sailor turned back to rendezvous with the yacht and we were alone on the beach. Misha still in her wedding dress and myself wearing an outrageously handsome suit, we kissed, our passion now able to express itself away from the gaze of others.

The week we spent there was without sensible description or rational comparison. There was the peace, the dreamlike tranquility, and the love of two people who knew how to enjoy their privileged place in the world.

Crewing Up

Upon our return, the wedding pictures taking centre spread in "Hello!" magazine, it was with some relief that the press had moved onto other stories. Of course Misha was still followed and ambushed here and there by the paparazzi but mostly in the name of the great cause of fashion. I was left to tend to my constituents, to read up on the workings of the government machine and to begin in earnest the work that had been discussed with the PM.

This transpired to be initially quite weird and then, as it developed, as far removed from normality as any one person could imagine. A nine to five it was not. My role began as a consultant of sorts with various freedoms to decide upon the structure and shape of the group, including the hand-picking of its personnel. I was to act as the architect and was supplied with a choice of the necessary fresh talent and was then assigned those who would represent themselves as liaisons with the intelligence community.

First there was the location which was strategically placed to be sufficiently out of the way

of potential onlookers whether they be public, paparazzi or any potentially interested party. The physical site was just outside the East End under an arched bridge which was part of the Docklands Light Railway, nice and easy to get to. We found ourselves in an almost hermetically sealed space, reminiscent of the clean rooms to be found in pharmaceutical research establishments.

Our place was compact in design but with all the amenities required to keep us going, including a kitchen and a bathroom, and it had quite clearly never been used for anything else before; it was purpose built for us and it was all brand new. This was a gentle little project that needed no unwanted attention. A quiet little operation ticking along in the nation's background humbly tasked with creating a guaranteed environment of contented and safe computer use for every citizen. This would include the individual user, the enormous public sector - from job centres to hospitals, and every physical and online commercial business and industry - from dry cleaners to investment banks and coffee importers to steel manufacturers.

We were a tiny team of geniuses with a remit to become a vanguard against the would-be virtual

assassins of the world and we were nothing less than the sharpest end of a much needed new cyber sword. At least that's what I told the group of five others assembled on the inaugural day of operations.

There was Talia, Graham, Hugo and Pete who were at the heart of the engine of the group. Between twenty-two and twenty-five years of age, they all had post-graduate degrees in computing except for Pete who was proud of being 'self taught' and whose inclusion I insisted upon on the basis of his nefarious former life.

Talia, I kept thinking, was far too attractive to be part of a group of government geeks. I found it hard to bridge that so sensitive gap between beauty and brains. She had both in spades and it was little intimidating if I'm honest.

Graham and Hugo found an immediate love/hate friendship that swung from mutual worship to derisory humour.

I was the leader of this mixed bag and must have appeared to them as a type of exotic hybrid or half-breed depending on the slant of the days activities.

The fifth member of our think-tank of six was, Mr. Simons, a Scottish man I guessed to be

roughly the same age as me, who was on loan from GCHQ. He was our own dedicated connection with the mothership. He was perfectly pleasant and knowledgeable enough to deserve his place in this team but right from the start he had that slightly stand-offish, overseeing attitude. Clearly there was a policing nature there and if I was the Captain he was most certainly the Referee.

We were given almost every asset that we asked for and as the technology filled up our space most among us realised that money was no object and if we could think it up or imagine it then it would be duly supplied. Transit vans would appear regularly at our workplace delivering to us like babies box after box, each containing merchandise and often handmade components of our increasingly elaborate studio laboratory.

Some of these made-to-order products came from afar; China, Germany, Japan, The USA and Switzerland. We had to wait sometimes for certain specialist items to arrive but we always had enough installation work to keep us busy. I feel the group began to become rather greedy, our budget seemed to be unlimited and as everyone started to realise this there was an escalation from what I believed was strictly necessary to 'it would be nice if we

could get 'an X,Y or Z. In the interests of leaving no stone unturned and not finding ourselves caught short for want of the latest solid-state hardware, I was a soft touch and my requests through Mr. Simons were never met with a negative response.

There was standard fare too, top of the line laptops, large high-resolution screens and all the necessary connecting cables peppering the work environment. Once up and running it felt as though we had transcended our expectations but although we had the power and the machinery, which we all agreed to be essential for the purpose of our existence, we had all been tip-toeing around the delicate issue of whether we had the combined right stuff to deliver.

The group looked to me for guidance and around this time I started to be given certain instructions by the increasingly shady Mr. Simons whose spooky aura began to infiltrate not only our actions but our ideas too. I could see I would have to play him at his own game here. As long as he believed this group was under his jurisdiction, as long as he maintained a strong feeling that we were nothing more than a satellite of the much larger instrument and organisation of his employers, then

we would be left to operate with certain assumed freedoms crucial to our efforts being successful.

The crew assembled, we set sail in our virtual cyber-submarine, heading for dangerous waters where digital warfare awaited us in formats and algorithms foreign in both nature and design.

Coding Sonar

Those first few weeks were a blurring whirl through a maze of theories and ideas. The principal focus, given our vast resources of hardware, was to see where we could get to on our own without the huge assistance of the mothership. As a relatively independent satellite we could in some ways prod and poke our way into the vast and sometimes darker corners of virtual reality with some notion of our supposed 'enemy'.

This adversary who we began to call by the name of 'Mirage' could in theory take any form. It could be anything from a teenage hacker to a state sponsored lone-wolf, or a dedicated bi-product of a private commercial enterprise or a full scale government department. The more generic and the less specific we were about Mirage the better, as we wouldn't be closing our minds and actions to any candidates who may otherwise have been overlooked due to assumptions of their structure.

The only criteria for a particular Mirage suspect was that in some way they had less than benign intentions towards the UK, indeed the whole

endeavour was to track aggressive advances, from source to target, hopefully before they could take hold and do any damage.

It took us a little while before we dreamed up the reality that perhaps there were others, just like us, in other countries who were part and parcel of bigger operations, just like us, and that we may well be a 'Mirage' to these entities. This mirroring of corresponding circumstances was intriguing to us all but there was a feeling that we were doing something very different with our days. The independence of our group and the freedoms we were being given seemed to be above and beyond that which other individuals in other countries might be afforded.

We began to ride on this autonomy and Mr. Simons was more than happy to keep at arms length and allow us to do all the things we began to action. Whether our operations were strictly legal or, as they increasingly came to be, bending the rules to beyond breaking point, it didn't seem to matter.

With Parliament still in its summer recess, I should have been spending most of my time attending to constituency matters. The letters for my attention piled up thick and fast but to my shame

I gave them little due. I was spending more time with the group, who had named itself 'Phantom'.

We came to the point where we had to reach out. Much like a submarine underwater we decided upon a strategy whereby we would cyber-ping possible targets. If our ping was successful we would receive back from otherwise unknown entities an echo and so be able to begin piecing together some kind of picture of the complexity of the competition. It wasn't an altogether sophisticated ploy but after much discussion, and formulation of the exact way in which we would go about it, this approach won amongst a host of other ideas.

The problem with active sonar is that, for the information it gives, it also has the by-product of giving away one's own position and details. This unfortunate side effect of our method could have been seen as a hopeless flaw, however we began to see ways of turning it to our advantage. If we could project with our ping a false signature of our true nature then we would have achieved a double whammy. We would get the precious data concerning our suspected pirates and for their part they would receive erroneous data concerning ourselves. It was a bit like a submarine sending out a signal and for its target to be alerted only to the

presence of a small fishing vessel. In essence our digital signature would be as slippery as a Moray Eel.

What we needed was an encoded foreign transmission that would at once lend itself to being unencoded as an intriguing message of strange but possibly very real meaning. We talked for a long time over certain ideas. Were we best served by sending fake news, an outright lie, confusing and conflicting facts or an actual piece of sanctioned information that was essentially true but out of date? None of these would do what was required. We needed something that would circulate, arouse interest and then gather substance with every repetition or mutation.

What we needed was a rumour. After many great technical deliberations it was a pleasant surprise that this lowest tech solution to the problem was in fact the best, the most elegant. What would work? It had to be believable up to a point and it had to have direct relevance to our greater goals. Inspired by an unlimited supply of coffee and pastries we joked our way around various conspiracies, we laughed at exaggerated truths, we conjured up parallel worlds, and we felt

clever inventing situations of a global nature that didn't quite hit the mark.

In the end, also originating in a joke but one that over and over again was seen to have legs for evolution, we came to rest on one simple imagined fact - The British Intelligence Agencies had been and were currently colluding with The Russian Secret Service to manipulate global elections by means of covert cyber operations. As a ploy it also had the cheeky bonus of flipping off our umbrella organisation, and that was something we needed to enhance the feeling of independence that kept us motivated.

It had everything we needed. It created an unnerving sense of unease whereby higher powers were abusing their positions of power for the greater good. Furthermore it raised questions as to whom would be at an advantage if such a situation did in fact exist. The cold war was a long time over. Was it possible that these two agencies were now cooperating with each other? The USA would find itself in a highly compromised position if it were true given the robust and long term status of its special relationship with the UK.

Did this new age of information give itself over to some kind of 'free market' for intelligence?

*Was it now every man, and every nation, for itself?
How and in what way are allies and allegiances
formed in such a deregulated and apparently
uncensored terrain?*

*It was clear to us where our hearts were, in
our mouths and in the service of our country. We
had been tasked with the job of defending our
nation, our little rumour was merely our creative
inroad into the big game of international cyber
hacking. If we could catch these rogue intelligences
in the act, and leverage ourselves onto an elevated
digital platform we stood to gain a privileged
position of power over our would-be adversaries,
whoever they were and wherever they came from.*

*We assumed nothing. Hidden in our state-
of-the art hideout, under our unassuming East End
arch, we were an island in our capital, and an
island in our island. Working with the best, we
stood to gain our prize: Given time we would be
able to deliver to the Prime Minister the ability to
cut at the roots any, and every, cyber attack directed
at this country prior to it's taking effect, and to
accurately identify its exact source. The talent to do
so would be of supreme political value, its benefit to
security worth an untold financial figure and the*

possibility of sharing it with others a precious bargaining chip on the international stage.

So we programmed diligently and when complete, sent our subliminal ping into the great abyss. Then we waited.

Sound travels farther and faster underwater when compared to air and our hope was that in the virtual domain of cyber-space our package would do just the same. Rumours tend to spread like wild-fire in a school playground or the workplace, tweets and youtube videos have a viral quality built into them that merely switches into action after a tipping point has been reached. But some rumours, ours would be one of them, ones that are potentially sensitive, can take a little longer as the candidates for spreading them are reticent to pass on the rumour as they are more wary of their own position should the rumour be tracked back to them. This is what we were counting on, a kind of filtering process that would self-regulate to the point where only the most interested of parties would participate in our ruse.

Surprisingly after only minutes, minutes, there was information to work with. People who had quickly deciphered our dummy code could be pinpointed. Unsurprisingly these were the big

players; The Chinese, The Russians, The Americans. Then came a succession of targets, not only other countries such as The French, The Australians, and The Canadians, but many more individual customers with no marked affiliation. The following domino effect was nothing less than an avalanche and we left the computers running for seven days straight to analyse the data as it continued to pour in.

The project was intended to run indefinitely, but with the systematic treatment of the echoes of our work beginning to crystallise it slowly emerged that our first effort may have provided enough data to meet our needs. The group were intensely focussed on their work, even more so than myself. Some of them had begun sleeping at the site to be closer to the action at all times. For myself I realised I had been away from Misha for great periods of time and that perhaps I hadn't been giving my new bride all that she required of me, my time and attention had been elsewhere.

Convolution Of Interests

Misha had settled into the role of Mrs. Dante perfectly. She grew into being a wife in a way that was playful and full of joy. It was, she said to me, as though she were Doris Day or even Grace Kelly in a sixties movie where all was bliss and sunshine. The problem with movies is that due to the nature of the beast they require a dramatic conflict, a driving problem either physical or psychological, that must be overcome by the protagonist in order for there to be a resolution and a happy ending.

When I came home one evening I began to get the feeling that the instigating moment in such a conflict had occurred in my absence and that the main portion of the film, the part where the hero or heroine has to successfully navigate obstacles in order to survive, had already begun.

Misha looked somehow grave, like there was something she had to tell me, or something she had to do, something that was absolutely necessary but unsavoury as a prospect. However, whatever it was she kept it to herself and no speculative probing of

her emotions would give me indications of its character.

Later I came to believe that her father had spoken with her and the content of that conversation had altered everything; our marriage, my position as an MP and certain vital details of the work I was carrying out for The Ministries of Intelligence. At this point in time however, I felt she was just in a slump of sorts, I even questioned her as to whether it was certain symptoms of morning sickness.

Yevgeny and I had spoken to each other on a few occasions and only some of them at length, I hadn't really formed an opinion of the man. His powerful frame and confidence matched his status, and his clothes and appearance all pointed towards an exceedingly rich man but as to his character he gave little away. This could have been his trick in business, to show so little and yet to be so decisive in his actions. He didn't strike me as a kind man and on a few occasions I heard him bark at various individuals on his staff, giving orders on a whim and expecting them to be acted upon immediately. I wouldn't like to have worked for him but, although I didn't know it then, I would soon come to understand via a tortuous route this was in fact exactly what I was doing.

It wouldn't take a genius to imagine that Yevgeny had connections with the Russian mafia. It would have been impossible to rise as far as he had and make his money in an immaculately clean way. There would have been people to pay off, bribes to make and serious weight behind some of his larger more industrial interests. To say that he was in any way the head of any criminal organisation might be pushing things too far but he would have had influence, he would be able to make moves and if he needed the kind of services that various mafia can deliver he would have been only a couple of phone calls away from getting just what he needed.

No doubt the Russian Intelligence Agency, The FSB, would have extensive files on Yevgeny, including his known and suspected contacts with the underworld. This knowledge would have been used to keep him in line in many respects and to ensure that he represented the Russian government's interests both in Russia and abroad. Yevgeny was a superhero of the new era, he could do little wrong but if the Premier, for example, needed a favour, Yevgeny would be in no position to refuse. The coin has both sides and mafia could easily be persuaded by third parties to turn against the hand that feeds them at the drop of a hat.

With me he had made not the slightest negative comment, except for a joke and a slap on the back on the day of our marriage where he laughed and suggested how uncomfortable breathing would become in the event that I should cheat on Misha. Other than that he was pleasant, personable, interested in my work and happy to talk of his childhood, his business empire and his love of ice hockey. Misha talked about him rarely and I often wondered at the style of her upbringing surrounded by the trappings of wealth, and mixing only with the children of the super rich. She had a kind of lonely zone that she would drift into every now and then, I was learning to accept it as just a facet of her character, but currently she was moping in her melancholy in a deeper and more private way. It was clear I was not to have access to her on any meaningful level whilst she was like this.

When she finally came out of this sullen trance it was with the most outlandish of requests. She wanted us to go to New York for the weekend, just to do some shopping. I had to explain that I couldn't just drop what I was doing and do something like that. I was very busy with the work and we were getting very close to a breakthrough and if that wasn't enough the press would have a

field day with it. No, definitely not, I was all for her going with one of her friends if it would make her feel better but she insisted that she only wanted to go with me.

I wish I'd had the joy in spontaneity to have gone with her. Knowing what I know now its very likely that Misha was trying to get me away from London, and from the UK, for a very good reason, but one that she was unable to tell me. Had we gone to New York for the weekend at that point in time there's quite a chance that we would have stayed.

After I had said categorically no to her very insistent request for this holiday Misha went into her shell for a while again as I continued to focus on my tasks.

From what I later learned Yevgeny had ordered, not just asked but instructed, Misha to spy on me. How he might have phrased this instruction or what the consequences would be should she refuse I do not know, however, from small clues over the coming months I noticed Misha developing an ever increasing interest in my work. She was very casual and demanded nothing, merely obtaining pieces of largely irrelevant details here and there which I found inconsequential to divulge. There

was nothing that I talked of which could have been of help to any foreign power and I saw her inquiries as simply her expressing interest in my work.

When her questions started to become more specific, especially those which evidently required that she know more than I had already told her, I began to become suspicious. It's a slippery slope suspicion, especially when it is of a loved one whom you have no prior reason to suspect. Bit by bit it dawned on me that she was actively building a picture from the information I casually gave her and that further to this her knowledge was being augmented by an outside source.

It was a fuzzy line that she began to cross but as she did so, and with an equally foggy transition I realised what was going on, her character changed. No longer the fun loving and quite fiercely intelligent conversationalist her behaviour became almost robotic. She would do everything she did before but in different more emotionless ways. I was too busy to try to affect any change in her manner and on the few occasions I ventured to broach the subject she would shut me out.

There was one moment over dinner when she began to ask about a piece of software we were

innovating. Couching her inquiry with a precursor of how interesting it must be for me to be working with such brainy people using state of the art technology, there was a sudden direct query. I stopped eating and thought for several seconds knowing that I had not told her about the software before, I simply could not have done so because we had only installed it that day. She must have been supplied with this question by some outside agent. I did the only thing I could do in the situation short of interrogating her on the subject, I lied.

Furthermore I surprised myself by lying in such a way as to mislead and misdirect. I gave an answer that was perfectly acceptable to anyone who knew what they were doing but I supplied a crucially erroneous fact. When we were installing the software we found a bug, the fix for which was relatively straightforward but the answer that I gave to Misha would have made this bug almost invisible. I continued eating.

That night as I lay in bed unable to sleep I began to think things through. If Misha was spying on me for someone, which clearly she was, then it was possible that other agencies were doing the very same thing. MI5? FSB? Was the apartment

under surveillance? There could be hidden microphones, even cameras.

As it transpired Yevgeny was being investigated by MI6 in relation to election fixing both nationally back in Russia but, of greater relevance, in relation to The British government itself. It was here in the UK that Russia's reach by way of cyber-crimes was indicated by the intelligence gathered.

Naturally I had come under scrutiny because of my marriage to Misha. Now I reasoned it was highly likely that I too was under surveillance in order to make sure the information I was privy to at Phantom wasn't being syphoned off by the Russians, via Misha, via Yevgeny, via the FSB. This was exactly what seemed to be happening.

Whoever was observing my behaviour would be questioning my loyalty to the UK. Was I being used by Misha? Was she some kind of plant? Who did she report to? Was my work being influenced by the FSB indirectly via Yevgeny and Misha? Was I thought to be obviously unaware of my compromised situation or would they have thought that had I willingly gone over to the Russians?

I had to work out where I stood in all of this, what my current status was, knowing as little as I

did, and what I should do about it. For the moment I decided upon inaction. No one except me knew that I had suddenly worked all this out, although surely they must have ideas that I might find out sooner or later. My assumption was that as long as my behaviour didn't alter drastically from recently no one would suspect that I had begun to catch on to the subterfuge that was plainly playing out.

I stayed cool for a week. Phantom was beginning to get results that were of great interest to me and to those high up in GCHQ whose feedback we sometimes received. Our reports to Mr. Simons were such that I'm sure the powers that be were more than satisfied with their little experiment. As long as we were getting good, verifiable results the project would continue and I would be seen as a valid and valuable citizen, at least in this limited arena. Outside of the bubble of the arches possibly I was coming under scrutiny.

Then the moment of truth came. One of our pings bounced back directly from a source within the FSB. If nothing else we had cracked their defences but more than that the encoded data had a shocking statement hidden in its architecture. I was there with Pete, who had mastered the strategy, when the message came through. It was plain, clear

and so very carefully hidden that any chances of it being a deliberately targeted piece of misinformation seemed unlikely.

It stated quite simply that agencies of the UK government had been, and still were, complicit in colluding with Russian intelligences to alter the outcome of a number of European elections by means of cyber manipulation.

It was our ping, our joke, our little deceit bounced back with interest. We had started a rumour only to find out that apparently it was true. Now we were not only the source of the rumour but in possession of its confirmation. I hoped, I prayed in this instance that the results we had received were somehow open to corruption and that we were the victims of some prank by unknown counterparts in Moscow but the system, the code, was not in error. This was live and direct access to secrets of the highest order, just what we had aimed for and just what we had received. Highly classified data of such a nature isn't just out there for anyone to grab but if you design surveillance with built in verifiability and it is successful you have to treat the intelligence gathered with great respect.

In this moment I felt shocked, amazed and the initial stages of true fear began to kick in. If

this information was secure, or even if enough of the relevant people believed it to be so, there was now a direct connection between MI6 and the FSB and I was right in the middle of it.

The idea that this kind of scandal, this political horror, went all the way to the top filled me with dread. How many people knew of this particular relationship? How many knew of my place in it? My freedom for movement within my own life was now drastically reduced and certainly my freedom of expression had been vastly limited when compared to only a few days ago.

My mind raced as to people I could talk to about any of this and it kept drawing a blank. I felt isolated, hideously alone and the fear within grew slowly and surely with every passing minute. If I was to do anything stupid right now, anything to show that I had caught on to the time bomb of the century my liberty and indeed my very life, I reasoned, were in real danger.

My subsequent concern was for Pete and what we might tell Mr. Simons about our discovery. I made sure Pete's eyes were locked onto mine and told him that none of this was to go any further. He understood but talking to him in this way I realised I was alone in this even though we were together.

Visions of future meetings with the PM came to mind and I found it incredible how quickly the brain begins to imagine stories to tell to people in order to save one's own skin and divert attention elsewhere. There was one story for Simons, one for the PM, and one for Misha. How much each one knew I was unable to tell at that time but certainly they knew more than I in ways that put me in the most contorted of psychological positions. I had to simply keep my mouth shut tight until the situation developed further or until I was able to make some creative moves, moves that would involve solo action.

The Idea of Flight

I left the arches and headed home. It was a cold, dank night and I was insufficiently dressed having left my coat at home in the warm morning. As I walked, through the relatively empty spaces of this part of town, I became increasingly paranoid.

The slightest of sounds around me were cause for attention, identification and analysis. I was unable to ignore any otherwise unimportant audio cues. A man dropped his motorcycle helmet as he was unlocking his scooter. A dog, tied to a railing, whined for its absent owner. A woman walked by, talking to her handsfree mobile phone and I overheard a snippet of her conversation that made no sense out of context. A scaffolding pole was dropped somewhere with a tremendous clang.

All this sound made me edgy and unable to reflect upon my personal circumstances. Then at a corner I heard footsteps behind me, obviously the heels of a woman shoes. Surely they were only ten feet behind me at first and I tried in vain to ignore them for as long as I could, perhaps just a minute.

Then I had to look, stopping at another corner I glanced around.

She was young and pretty, and walked away in another direction at that junction. The need for fear, being part of the survival instinct, I could keep in check, people occasionally find themselves walking behind others, sometime they walk at different speeds and sometimes overtake one another; generally their paths diverge as quickly as they have intersected.

I crossed the road, nearly at my usual DLR station and I was somewhat more relaxed than earlier minutes. There was nothing to be physically scared of, at least not yet. Of more concern was the lack of mental breathing room I needed to process the problem. I decided to walk to the next DLR stop, maybe twenty minutes further on, walking being a fine cure for stalled trains of thought.

Surely I wasn't just a tiny cog in a huge machine, an anonymous numbered servant to an overpowering master, someone to whom knowledge was just data and for whom it had no meaning. I wasn't some grungy hacker in a basement leaking documents online. I was a public figure, I had a public image and persona and I had access to the biggest platform in the country. At any given

moment, largely of my own choosing I was able to tell the whole world what I knew. Perhaps at Prime Minister's question time, perhaps as a statement direct to the press. Suddenly and without warning many influential people and their jobs would be brought into jeopardy. My knowledge contained power as well as fear.

But who would believe me? There's no doubt certain figures would come under the microscope of investigative journalism, but there are advantages to occupying roles at the higher levels. I would be protected. Not only do the people at the top cover their questionable activities, they have others to help them do it for them. Any thoughts of making a targeted or personal crusade against such well defended ranks would have been foolhardy and would definitely have backfired.

In fact, whichever way I looked at my options, all avenues of action led either to me shooting myself in my foot or enabling someone else to do that for me. It wasn't just my feet I was worried about. Eventually there would be someone who knew that I knew what I knew, that was the inevitable scenario. The way to make sure I was not the fly in such a person or organisation's very sticky

ointment, would be to do away with me completely, permanently. But who was that person?

I was worried about Misha, she was clearly under instructions to extract information from me. Yevgeny was not far from my thoughts, as a man of influence he probably had his fingers in this pie, amongst many others, FSB and Mafia connectivity could mean that it had been commanded of him to obtain secrets from me via Misha. I was worried about the Prime Minister, she would be clean, I was sure of that, but she could make things very uncomfortable for me and have me under her thumb forever. I was worried about Mr. Simons, from now on he would have to be out of the loop on many levels. And I was worried about Pete, confident he wouldn't leak or crack but as unsure of his safety as I was of my own.

The fundamental crux of the problem was my complete ignorance of the depth to which GCHQ had its long tendrils into the minutiae of Phantom's operations. If they were studying us as intimately as we were studying the cyber hacking operations of others, then it would not be long before someone came knocking on my door. To threaten me? To blackmail me? To do me harm? To take me away? To force me to do something

against my nature and my principles? The immediate realisation was that very possibly I had very little time.

I slowed my walk, in the attempt to slow my racing thoughts.

Upon returning to home and Misha the atmosphere was tight and tense, at least that was my subjective experience. One wonders how reality is shaped by one's own interpretation of it as much as it changing materially outside of one's interaction with it. Now everything seemed of sharp relevance. Every word of Misha's potentially had some double or triple meaning. Every remark I made potentially said more than I wished. Every minute that passed was one that seemed to hang on a crux, a balance that could swing one way or the other.

The nature of critical personal moments where all ideas, suspicions, knowledge and speculation must necessarily lead to an action, where inaction is no longer a viable option, is something that came to the front of my mind at this time. The criteria that have to be met in order to provide a tipping point where a permanent and all changing decision must be made and acted upon had yet to present themselves.

I worked furiously to formulate options, choices that could be taken if various conditions were met. My usually slow and deliberate thinking raised itself to a higher level, sometimes driven by moments of panic, sometimes despair at dead end routes of logic or invalid arguments based on premises that were incorrect or not fully known.

Cracking

During this time, Parliament was now back in session, I tried my best to be a normal MP whatever that was supposed to mean. I started replying to many of my constituents letters, sometimes to good effect. Also I began trying to make an impression in The House.

Being an Independent I was given little attention by the major parties. However, perhaps because I represented a different perspective on events, perhaps because I had somewhat of a celebrity status, I was given multiple chances by The Speaker to ask my questions and state my point of view. I think also that sometimes he just got bored, so much so that when he saw me stand he was favourably inclined to give me the floor as much to amuse himself as anything else.

They must have thought I was some kind of alien. All my dialogue was sourced almost entirely from text books on modern political philosophy which I began to understand more fully, in particular those on constitutional reform. I would memorise entire paragraphs from these academic

materials and quietly pass them off as my own. Concepts that became common in my speech were items such as; Pure Democracy, Hyper Real Spiral of Change, Open Source Governance, E-Democracy, Free Software Movement, Collective Wisdom, Platform Development, Self Determination, Popular Initiative, Collaborative Governance, Big Data Predictive Modelling.

I started to get some positive press, now I was 'Radical Ray' or 'Revolutionary Raymond'. It was quite flattering but I felt my impact on people who might really make a functional, practical change with these ideas was very limited. Largely the reaction was encouraging and promising but praise, although from some big names, was usually accompanied by a sort of patronising tone. It's amazing how small one can be made to feel by a few well chosen words delivered from a great height. Still I plugged on for want of another way of operating.

The PM still singled me out for special interest. With small remarks here and there directly to my person when we happened to intersect and even some official documents relating to the work with the Phantom Group, it was clear she had taken me under her wing. I was summoned to No.10 on

several occasions for conversations much like the first, only now there was a more friendly attitude. The most obvious addition to her advances was that now she would often talk of party political matters and began making suggestions that I might like to think of joining her party at the next general election. There would be many benefits to my career having a whole party system behind me and perhaps even a new cabinet role with a special title, something like 'Cyber Liaison Secretary'. I said I'd think about it, and I did, often.

Meanwhile back at the arches our rumour, our lie, had seemed to be the first domino piece in a domino effect. The intel we gathered mostly direct from the internal workings of other countries' security agencies was breathtaking. We were hacking into the heart of these supposedly locked safe systems and it was exhilarating. Pete and I knew we were getting in way over our heads, especially as we were sharing none of this with Mr. Simons, but we carried on, we couldn't help it. This was our little state sponsored hack and further to any illegalities of it we were the sole censors of what we passed on to our superiors. It felt anarchic and hot but somehow sustainable.

Then a bomb with my name on it dropped, it fell squarely on my head and I nearly didn't get up from it. Our privileged access anonymous source at the FSB came through with an official message: Raymond Dante under investigation by MI6. Pete looked at me with some empathy and said; "You've had it mate." I looked back at him with a look that simply said ; "Help me!"

I walked back my usual route, the paranoia now fierce and immediately present. My memory of a catalogue of comments by my fellow MPs, all slightly sarcastic and under the belt, started to play in the theatre of my mind. All suggestions hinted at my naivety within the political arena. Some of the words I remembered mounted up to one piece of advice; Watch Your Back.

I was in it up to my neck but it wasn't until a very rude and physical awakening from this purely psychological turmoil that I was motivated to take action.

I had the feeling I was being followed again, this time by a man who wore one shoe that made a different noise from the other. I tried to ignore it, remembering the last time, but this time he began to get closer, making ground on me with every uneven

step. I turned to look, too late as he was suddenly upon me, then pinning me to a wall.

He was big and ugly and Russian. From his bearded mouth, carried on breath that stank of vodka he muttered in a loud whisper: "Your people will come for you, your own people. They will take you away to a very small place, hold you under your Official Secrets Act, ask you questions you cannot answer. They will send you down to prison, your name will be dirt, when you come out your life will be dirt. You do nothing and this will happen or you phone this number and come to live in Moscow, you can bring your pretty Babushka bride and you can have nice life with us. You choose, but choose soon or you might die."

He pushed a business card into my jacket pocket and walked away. My heart was pounding and my nerves prickling my skin all over. I breathed, at least I tried to breathe and then I began to find myself. I looked around, there was nobody here, no one saw this. I was alone and took a good minute before continuing to the train stop.

To be in a contorted mental place is no easy thing. The mind is used to working with tangibles, it is usually able to adapt to new situations but when it cannot, when it runs out of resources with

which to act, it goes into a mode that is either irrational, seeking random solutions, or one which shuts down into hibernation to give the subconscious a chance to work upon that which the conscious mind has failed to throw any light. Fortunately my mind tends towards the latter and so on this journey home I looked and felt like any other pedestrian, any other traveller on a train.

A person recognised me and said hello, as sometimes happened to me, but this time I just stared at them until they looked away. On autopilot I made the last part of my journey to the front door on foot and didn't make one observation, didn't entertain one idea or play out one memory. Perhaps this is what is meant by a dead man walking.

It only hit me in a great wave when I put my keys down on the kitchen table and laid eyes on Misha who was reading an interior design magazine, sitting on the sofa in the living area. Her accent tapped into my recent encounter with the man and I lost it.

Far from being a letting loose, to-hell-with-it kind of breakout, my loss of control manifested itself in a way with which I was entirely unfamiliar in my own behaviour. It was a state of mind and

manner that shocked me as it took over from my usual character and seemed to be a type of possession. I believe a Psychiatrist might have diagnosed me in those moments as clinically psychotic. My words were delivered with crisp clear clarity, it was a kind of inner rage expressed in a controlled clipped fashion.

As I became used to this surprising feeling, as Misha and I talked of mundane matters, I began to feel that she too was behaving in a similar way, the way I had noticed her before. Only now I was matched to it and strangely she didn't seem to notice. After ten minutes occupying this stance, I began to relax and as I did so I realised in horrible moments of truthfulness that I did not love her, not in any way that had any meaning anymore.

Only then with this dawning revelation did I begin to think of someone that I did love. As I thought of her any vestigial remains of my temporary psychosis died away and I returned to my natural self, the person I recognised. The person I thought of was my old University flame and someone I had been seeing as a secret lover on and off since I became an MP. Gina, Gina Royce. We had a great relationship, a long lasting friendship full of laughs and loving, she was far

smarter than me and perhaps that's why historically I had moved away from her, a kind of intellectual inferiority complex. In many ways she was the one that got away. I thought of all that we had done together, all that I could remember. I thought of the time I had seen her in Los Angeles when I rushed through in a half-hearted attempt to re-establish what we had once had. Of course I thought of the times we had met in secret too over the last six months, really only a handful of quickly and carefully managed moments, but nonetheless moments that seemed more than ever now to take on great significance.

I didn't sleep, but after she spent twenty minutes of talking non-stop in a monotone about matters of no consequences Misha eventually did. That night my personal separation with Misha began and was completed, now seemingly something of an automaton she lay next to me and I would never look or think about her in the same way. It wasn't just her spying on me and handing information to Russian agents via her father which was so obviously the truth of our current situation, it was the cold, emotionless way in which she was going about it. It was sad but I didn't worry about it, because with the pleasant thoughts of Gina

began the embryo of a plan that was designed to get me out of my otherwise impossible predicament. After seven hours of constructive creative thinking, by dawn my plans had taken their shape. I knew one thing; I needed the help of The Americans.

Bursting The Bubble

The next morning, bright and early, I went to the corner store and bought a reasonable pre-paid phone and all the bags of beef jerky strips they had, maybe fifty of them. My regular phone would be sure to be tapped and I need a fresh, clean means to orchestrate my plans. Gina's number would be unaffected, I had to risk assuming that. I had to bank on no one thinking or knowing that she might be a contact of mine as I felt sure our relationship and meetings had been as unnoticed as they had been clandestine. She was still living in the Cambridge area as she'd fallen in love with both the city as well as me whilst studying at the University.

Gina was someone I could trust, perhaps the only one. When you've shared so much intimacy, hopes, dreams and desires it's impossible not to form a bond that is stronger than mere friendship. In addition we had always parted on good terms with the best of wishes for each other. Still, when I heard the ringing tone this time it seemed an age before she answered.

The conversation was short and sweet, in less than five minutes we had reacquainted once again and arranged for me to visit her the very next day in Cambridge. She must have sensed the urgency and indeed fear in my voice as she remained very calm and rational throughout, reassuring me that everything would be fine. I told her as little as possible of my reasons for contacting her this time and my very special need to see her but I felt she could sense my distress. So much would hinge on our meeting and I did a good job to stress the gravity of my circumstances without giving any details that might scare her or worry her unduly. I hung up and didn't waste a moment as there was a great deal to be done.

I wanted to see my parents, I needed to see them. I wondered whether their phone would be bugged too, I couldn't chance it so I decided just to drive to their house that very evening, they didn't go out much. Next I had to pack, everything I would need for at least a month. There was no chance of doing this with Misha in the house so I phoned a friend of hers to tell her that Misha had been a bit down lately and maybe she'd feel better if they went shopping and had lunch together.

It worked. When I went back to the apartment Misha told me she was going out and so I had what I needed, the place to myself. Thinking quickly, sometimes too quick to be efficient, I gathered everything into one large day-pack; Toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, shaving gel, beard trimmer, watch, spare set of clothes and trainers, large rubbish sacks, a sleeping bag, an inflatable camping mattress, the beef jerky and a five foot length of rope.

Shutting the front door on the way out was a marker and the solid reality of a definitive course of action taken and acted upon. The contents of the apartment meant nothing to me now. Shutting it all out, out of my life, behind me, was shutting a portal on a world in which it was dubious I actually belonged from the start. As the lock clicked I felt it to be locking a safe door on a part of my history that puzzled me. How I had entered that world, how I had come to be entwined in its machinations was a blur of money, fame and influence. I closed that particular book and indeed I dropped the front door key in the nearest bin outside, more as a symbolic gesture to myself than an affirmation that I simply didn't need it anymore. After all, I had already unlocked more than enough doors within that

bubble to discover the unseemly secrets it had at its core. All I was interested in then was all that lay outside of it.

Loved Ones

My parents lived in a beautiful little house in a secluded spot in Rickmansworth. The drive there was easy and my head was clear enough to enjoy the run and forget for an hour or so the enormity of what I was engaged in. Once I arrived the feeling of false comfort evaporated as I'd not imagined what I was about to try saying to them.

Dad opened the door and was pleased to see me but quickly ascertained that I was troubled. The greatest sadness was that my mother was not in and was abroad in France with her work. He gave me a beer and sat me down. I couldn't begin to explain and at any relevant moment where I might have had the courage to do so I moved the conversation on to other topics.

We talked of childhood, both his and mine. The nostalgia was vibrant and pleasing but contained elements of regret on both our parts. Our rambling dialogue lasted for hours, somewhere along the line we ate, drank more and it grew late. I could only hint at my circumstances and my plans.

It was with my own shame that I was unable to translate the crazy scenario I had somehow built for myself. On the whole I was ruled by the overpowering need not to give him any information that might put him into a troubling spot should he be questioned later. However, this directive felt more to be a way of covering my own tracks and looking out for number one.

When I slept in the spare room it was with the aid of half a bottle of brandy and some kind, relaxing words from my father. He knew next to nothing of why I had come to see him, why I was apparently so confused and nothing of my ideas for the foreseeable future.

Waking with a start it was as though I was late for an examination, a head full of knowledge and an imperative to use it as wisely as possible. I refused breakfast, taking only a coffee and asked to borrow my father's car. I don't know why this was important to me, perhaps at the time I was fearful there would be operatives following my route by way of number plate recognition and that I wouldn't get far being traced every step of the way. I may have been overly scared about such things but at the merest idea of my plan being put into jeopardy, I would remember the Russian on the corner by the

arches. The business card he placed in my pocket was still there as a tangible reminder of the alternatives to my inaction.

Dad leant me his car with no questions. It felt low to have to lie to him about this detail but I told him the air conditioner was broken on mine and I had a long drive ahead. He asked me nothing, he knew something was deeply awry and he knew I would I have told him what I could but he stayed quiet. There was a profound moment when he shook my hand and told me to drive safely. He repeated it slowly - safely. I promised him, turned, got in the car and left without looking back.

Forcing myself not to think, allowing myself only the company of a news channel on the radio, I drove to Cambridge, far away from London, closer and closer to Gina, her help and the hoped for consolidation of the future I had hastily composed for myself. It was a three hour drive, three hours of news, none of which I registered but I did drive carefully, just one car amongst many on the M25 and then the M11.

The arrangements for our recent liaisons had been in relatively random geographical locations but certainly not here. It was bizarre arriving in my old University town again, so

familiar and yet so distant and firmly rooted in the past but my knowledge of the roads was still fresh as if I'd been here only yesterday. I didn't have a car back then but knew every turn by virtue of having cycled the city for three years. To park and begin walking towards the agreed meeting place with Gina was to step back in time and for a while relive some of the joyful memories I had felt all those years ago.

Gina had carefully chosen a place for us to make this meeting which she was clearly aware to be of a different nature from the locations we picked for our little affair of the last six months. It was a beautiful tucked away art gallery as quirky as our relationship and where we used to hide together from University life. It was called Kettle's Yard. I was half an hour early and so had a chance to look around. Much had changed but the building layout was just the same, the only addition was a little coffee area. Half an hour was enough to reflect on what I was doing, have significant doubts and then to reassure myself that my intended actions were really the only rational course of events I could take. Every other eventually I had considered and dismissed. This was it, this was my line in life, very narrow, very self-centred, very real and the sole

direction to ensure the security of everything that I cared about, including my own skin.

Gina arrived and she looked so beautiful, so homely and warm, so friendly and gentle. We hugged for so long, I didn't want to let her go. As we talked for nearly two hours I told her everything, I couldn't help it. None of this was real until someone else heard it, she was someone who didn't judge, someone who listened and loved.

When she spoke it was with such wisdom. Frantically I tried to reimagine my plans to include her but it was in vain. How could she come with me? There must be a way.

When in California, when we were together there briefly she had told me she was dating a guy who worked for the CIA. It seemed so silly and so ridiculously American, like a scene from a film, I dismissed her relationship joking about it as though she thought she was a Hollywood star. I think it hurt her at the time because they had been together quite some time and she had been going through some security checks by The Agency so they could be a 'fully sanctioned couple'. My frivolous comments lead to a stupid argument and the last time we had been in contact, before connecting

again after the elections, she had told me that the relationship had ended shortly after I had gone.

My hope was that she still had a connection with him and would be able to get word to him. She said she would try, she had his personal email address, but whether he would be in a position to act upon what I had asked was another matter.

It was all just hopeful order from chaos, a picture that only I could see amongst the random white noise. When I left Gina it was with a heavy heart but not as heavy as I feared to be the burden I had placed upon her with my request. She had been nothing but helpful, without query as to my motives. When I rambled at length about Luck, and how much of it I needed for my continued existence she had removed a bracelet of semi-precious stones from her wrist and placed it on mine. It felt feminine and caught the light in a rare play. As we said our goodbyes, my requests delivered, she pushed a tin of tobacco into my hand, telling me to bide my time as well as maximising my luck when it showed itself.

I left in the knowledge, that should I be successful I would very likely not see my loved one again. It seemed at the time I was leaving not just my life behind but all its love too.

Destination Isolation

It was not long, when I hit the road again, this time heading further north towards Scotland, that I began to cry. Not a sobbing throaty cry but just a steady waterfall of tears that would not stop. I didn't want them to stop, I wanted to feel the suffering that I was causing others and to be in that mind space where nothing makes sense until the crying stops.

It did so as I travelled over a long bridge. I could see myself standing on its lateral limits, standing on the edge preparing to jump. The vision overwhelmed me and I considered pulling the car to one side to enact my hallucination. My right foot hovered over the brake, I slowed and my sobbing ceased as I wiped the tears away. Saved by a cargo lorry hitting its horn as it came up fast behind me, I pushed the accelerator and from then on the tears never returned. Once more and for a long time to come my personal survival became the motivating priority to which I referenced all action.

There was a holiday I had been on with my parents on the Isle of Arran and I was heading there. No one would look for me at this place, at

least not until I so wished. It was early evening when I arrived at the coast, a place called Kilwinning but I just missed the last ferry so stayed the night at a pub called The Wheel Inn. It was a nice enough place, I kept myself to myself and no one seemed to recognise me.

The next morning I took the first ferry at 9am and drove around the island for a while in the way of reconnaissance. Certain parts of the landscape were laid down in my memory of that childhood holiday, as it was of the most idyllic nature. On this island I felt at home as anywhere, separate from the mainland, from London, from England. Recognition of past life's experience is like a life-line that connects you to former lives. I swam in the memories of my boy-hood sensations and for a brief period I was happy.

The luck that I needed came in like magic from the sea. A storm of some proportions loomed on the horizon and I began realising my plan.

There was a small public house I remembered called The Albion. Nearby there was a small group of boats moored in a tiny makeshift harbour by a rocky jetty. I went over to enquiry about hiring a boat for the afternoon. There was a man called Jack, I didn't like the look of him but for

fifty pounds he gave me the use of his small craft, not much more than a dingy really but perfect for my purposes. She was called 'Lucy', a pretty little vessel but I had no sentimental attachment to her from the outset.

I inflated my camping mattress and tied it to my pack, which I'd place in rubbish sacks, and then tied this to my leg with the rope. Ungainly installed, I set sail, pushing straight out to sea with the storm brewing on the horizon. It was with wild abandon that I steered her towards the impending onslaught, for I was heading in that direction personally too. As soon as the rain began and the wind whipped up I felt an urge to simply keep going, sail away from land and chance my life to a battle with these elements. Time and again I neared capsizing, the waves turning the boat this way and that with the mast at many a dangerous angle.

Once my instincts had been tested enough I swung the boat round and headed straight back to shore, driven by gusting forces that leant me great speed. Not only was it dark now because of the heavy clouds that had gathered but daylight was fading fast. I came in towards a rocky piece of the coast that was not far from The Albion.

Now shouting madly at the chaos of nature, my voice heard by no one I picked up more speed and aimed my tiny vessel at the rocks. They closed at what would have been a frightening pace but I had no fear, only will and madness. I hit hard and was thrown clear of the boat, catching my head on the jib arm. The boat was an immediate wreck and I swam for my life hampered far more than expected by my makeshift survival mechanism. Hauling myself ashore, cutting my legs on the razor-like granite I found a moment to pull myself together. Breathing heavily, with extreme exhaustion for such a short ordeal I could see the extent of the damage to Lucy. She continued to break against the rocks as the waves broke repeatedly forcing her to come apart.

I could not rest, untying myself and deflating the camping bed I made myself as composed as I could be and set about walking along the road. It was where I needed luck again, there were no cars to see me, only acres of barren landscape to walk through, so I walked for many miles, continuously through the black night. Still surviving mostly on adrenaline and stamina I felt myself to be ploughing a field or carrying a large stone as commanded by some unknown master.

It was early morning, just before daybreak when I reached my goal, an old farm outhouse. I'd driven past it earlier and remember playing in it as a child, it had hardly changed. Having fallen in love with it then I fell in love with it all over again now becoming reacquainted with its character. Its door had a key in the lock which I turned to enter the spacious interior, then closing the door behind me I locked it from the inside and held onto that key tightly in my fist, a piece of reality in which I took much comfort and security.

As long as I could remain undisturbed there I would have time; time to think, time to forget, time to wait and time to change. I collapsed with the weight of a man who understands that sometimes his weight is all he can comprehend.

Phases Of The Moon

I slept, drained and delirious for several hours and the rest of the day awake was primarily spent catching my breath and coming to terms with the pressure and events of the previous weeks. I ran through everything in both non-linear and chronological ways replaying all developments. I began to remember details that were of no significance at the time but now jumped out as relevant overlooked data.

Generally my head was together, I was after all still in the process of acting out my own plan and so far, with great luck it was moving according to my design. This gave me reassurance and confidence in my abilities. The next phase was a waiting game.

Like anyone I had waited often in life; in restaurants, in line, at airports, for trains and sitting in a car for various durations but this task, for that is what it was, would require that I wait one whole month, alone.

Eating a bag of the beef jerking gave me strength enough to look for water, it wasn't hard to

find as there was a large metal trough outside that was full from the previous night's rain. I drank in vast gulps, my body aching for its cold and clean restoring effect.

Night fell soon enough so putting my sleeping bag down in a corner on top of some dry straw I hunkered down for the night. As I lay on my back I could make out a jagged portion of a new moon through holes in the roof. The moon had never held much interest for me, but here in such a lonely and remote corner of the world it was a companion with whom I would come to be well acquainted.

My sleep that night was unbroken with natural dreams that held no menace or twisted symbolism, there was here no horror and any fear that came my way would only be generated by indulging my imagination. The deep dark beauty of that night's slumber came to an end only when the rays of sunlight, breaking through gaps in the wooden planks of the barn fell across my face.

I worried only about being discovered, a roving farmer or perhaps in a few days a police patrol. I could be as much as thirty miles from the site of my disappearance, that first night's walk was as much as ten hours and even laden as I was, three

miles an hour seemed like a fair estimate of my progress. I hoped this barn would be overlooked by any search party but I resolved to stay put inside, especially during the day in order to avoid any chance of being seen from the road.

It was a self-imposed solitary confinement, only I somehow found new freedoms in this prison. I would be a king here, if I had subjects, but my castle was more a monastic retreat where I would be able to meditate on the ethos of modern life and begin to formulate a fresh philosophy on my future.

I was quiet, the roar in my consciousness had abated to be in harmony with the sounds all around. The wind wove its way through the cracks in the building's walls to create a tone that was sometimes high pitched and then a low bass note, almost inaudible. There were trees nearby whose leaves added their bristling rustle to the moving air inspired orchestra. Then there were the birds, mainly black birds but occasionally a crow or a magpie. My barn was a cathedral of natural sounds whose notes rose high to the roof and fell upon my ears like gentle music.

Having explored the inside of my new home to perform a kind of inventory of its space I found myself quite naturally sitting in its centre area,

cross-legged and entering into a period of breathing exercises which lead onward to the deepest meditation I had ever been able to achieve. There are varying levels of reflection, but to empty one's mind of all things, although a skill easily learned, requires repetition and devotion to master. I had not applied myself to its simple practice for many years but the opportunity was here in abundance and I made full use of it.

Eating rationed packs of the dried beef and drinking a lot of water my days passed without boredom. I was in a zone of some harmony, so far away from that which could destroy it. This state of mind was not far from a trance; existence for a month so isolated required a serious transformation to be enacted. To shut down my higher functioning and analytical mind became a daily exercise which left me not much more than a simpleton, aware and concerned with only matters of necessity. These were food, water, washing, sleeping and exercise. Such were the physical elements of my life during that time, with meditation my only concession to the life of the mind.

I survived, maintaining a certain degree of sanity and it was only my chosen food source that left me undernourished, suffering with hunger pains

and poor bowel movements. After a couple of weeks I ventured out and, whilst exploring the local area just after sun down, I discovered an old apple tree that had fallen on its side but was still bearing fruit. Happy to supplement my diet with this bounty, from then on I felt quite well.

There was the matter of the reinvention of my appearance as well as the complete rebuilding of my soul. I did not shave, my beard grew quickly but without a mirror I could not keep track of my looks. In fact I looked forward to the day when I could visit a civilised bathroom and see the superficial changes for myself.

Internally I was shedding ideas, histories and memories on a daily basis, so much so I often forgot myself. I believe many hours would pass where I sat staring at a wall imagining I was watching the television. What was actually happening during those moronic and even catatonic periods was a complete denial of impressions made over the years through popular culture, their deletion and replacement with a blank slate, a tabula rasa.

Quite likely, if I had been discovered around then I would not have been able to present myself as a person better off than a poor homeless man,

unkempt and wild. In truth there was a new persona growing within me, a character I worked on daily much as a sculptor would work on a piece of stone. I chiselled away with persistent determinism to recreate myself and by week three I was nearly done.

Each night I slept in the same place, most nights when it was clear I followed the trace of the changing phases of the moon as seen through my roof window. In this way I kept track of time. I had my phone but that was destined for a single purpose and I did not look at it or touch it until I was ready.

Shaving my hair back to the skin with the beard trimmer, I took a photograph of myself, with a white T-shirt hanging on the wall behind me as a backdrop. I sent it to the one number on my phone with a short message to Gina.

As I waited in the hope of a quick reply I looked at the photograph I had taken of my face. It certainly wasn't me anymore.

I had always disliked the term reinvention, it works well for technology but not so for people. The telephone was reinvented as a mobile phone, it can perform the same function but is in its essence a completely different beast. Those who seek to reinvent themselves do so unsuccessfully, often the

result is a complete, maybe even unrecognisable transformation but always superficial, skin deep and affected.

There are those who undergo religious conversion from one to another and they often succeed in that they become an entirely different person but in these cases what was good in the person in their original state is almost always lost in the transition. Loved ones often have great difficulty in relating to such people for they not only look different but their former self is often totally inaccessible. It's as if one is erased to make way for the next.

What I was attempting was entirely personal. My creative endeavour was to retire my former self whilst keeping his heart and soul. I would be no longer be an MP or Computer Specialist but I would be the same man, the same boy in spirit as my parents had brought me up to be. However, my key reference was that I would no longer continue to be British but return to an imagined version of my earlier Canadian self. How would I be had we not travelled to the UK from Canada? How would I have developed and into what kind of person? I had free rein over this personal reconstruction, upon looking at my image

I felt I was well on my way to achieving that which I desired.

To this end I had begun talking to myself in a Canadian accent. It wasn't difficult after a while to inflect the slightly nasal drawl of a type of French Canadian living on the West Coast, somewhere in British Columbia. The effect was quite dramatic as the phrases and sentences I constructed in this pseudo mid-Atlantic style were markedly different in content from what I had developed over the years with a Cambridge education and slight London front. Gone was my slightly rarefied arrogance replaced by a noticeably dumbed down casual attitude. I liked it, it began to give me what I felt was a more personable and approachable manner which I practiced almost constantly everyday.

A side effect of this was that I was able to drown out the left over thoughts and ideas of my immediate past and bring in concepts and topics for the future. A method actor would have been proud of me, for as I rehearsed so I evolved into a new version, a reimagining of who I might have been had my life not branched off in the way that it had.

In only minutes Gina replied, and thankfully in the positive, telling me that all was good to

proceed and that we should meet as planned in a week's time in the location we had agreed upon. My heart soared.

This was effectively the conclusion to my reboot. From this moment forward I didn't speak in my naturalised English tongue ever again. I had a week to get myself together working out by using the structure of the barn as a gym; pull ups, press ups, squats, lifts, jumping, stretching, stretches and lunges. I was sore all the time but even this gave me something to enhance a dialogue with myself in my ever improving Canadian. The more I did so the more I found my inner voice affected too, I was beginning to think in this new accent and with continual surprise it leant itself to innovative and substantially altered trains of thought.

As the final week neared its conclusion I allowed myself to smoke some of the tobacco Gina had given me, learning new body language as I did so. I tried alternative methods of walking, lengthening my gate as I paced back and forth and putting more action into my hips. I posed and looked at the horizon through the open door, envisioning another such horizon far away. I continued in this overall direction by learning to use my arms more as I gesticulated to accompany

the new organisation of words that seemed naturally to come to mind.

There was one thing that I didn't change. Apparently separated from the rest of my body by my watch on one wrist and Gina's bracelet on the other, I looked at my hands. My hands were good. One of the partners with whom I worked at the firm of architects before I entered the world of politics used to talk of intelligent hands. Hands that would do what was required of them with the appropriate dexterity, strength and control, without uncertainty and most often without having to be instructed by the mind. The creativity and wisdom required by-passing cognitive powers, hands acting on their own but on behalf of the person's best interests.

I washed my clothes and packed my bag. Stepping out of the barn at first light one morning it was as a new man. With a short walk to the road I was hoping for a passing car to give me a ride. I had to try out my new persona for the first time and this was as good an opportunity as any. When I heard a vehicle approaching from behind I put out my thumb, the car slowed and a pleasant old Scottish lady asked where I needed to go. With the ferry as a destination I hopped in and we drove in

comfort along the smooth road making pleasant conversation.

Incognito

I had perfected my accent to accompany a simple story, a traveller from Canada on holiday exploring his roots in the area. Nearing The Albion public house talk turned to the death of Raymond Dante. The lady was well versed on the subject, for her it had been a tragedy as "He had so much more to give." On passing the site of my disappearance and supposed death I noticed that my car, my father's car, was no longer in the parking spot where I had left it a month ago. Not a surprise, but to see space where once there was a concrete connection to the life I had lived, was to hammer home the reality of my new condition. Having borrowed it from my father there was the reminder by its absence that he too would be absent from my life, forever.

We sped past, no remnants of the thorough investigation and media presence to which the lady eluded. Then at the ferry she dropped me off without incurring the slightest doubt as to who I said I was, or indeed who I had not said I had been.

The wait for the next crossing was awkward, in spite of having had a week in a mode exclusively

composed of waiting type behaviour I felt as though I was still practising. With time and the occasional brief interaction with the various assembled number waiting in their own ways, I felt more natural and composed. Had there been anyone watching me, and I was sure there was no one, I imagined that I would have looked liked someone worried, impatient and uncomfortable. With a focused self attention, by the time we boarded the ferry I was now a traveller from another continent who was on the last leg of his journey, homeward bound.

It's not easy to be nonchalant and casual when one has been away from human company. Behaviour is such that it demands to be observed, when alone the alternative is to put one's head in a book or a magazine and to shut out all that is around. I fell somewhere in between on this short sea trip by sitting reading a newspaper from which I looked up regularly to scan my surroundings. I felt less suspicious and was of course hungrily interested in the continuing story of my own disappearance that was still running in the first few pages of the paper.

Everyone was devastated, there were a few quoted lines from Misha which I obsessed over for a while, the search had been called off some time ago,

and the inquest was only just beginning. Knowing that the grief of the people described was real, was a hard pill to swallow. I had caused all of this, the aftermath of my disappearance was full of genuine suffering. But I didn't feel guilty.

I had reached a kind of inner peace with the whole set of events that had forced me to make the decisions I had made. There was no question that my reasoning had been logical and that it had been based upon facts that I knew to be just so. I had not excluded anyone by virtue of their privileged position alone, but whomever within the British government had made the links with the Russians and colluded, or conspired, or was successful in altering the outcome of the number of European elections of the last year, it was they who were to blame. It had whipped me into a fury which was expressed only on that night when I rammed the boat upon the rocks. It was a fury that had taken a whole month to subside and one which I felt I would never be able to direct at a single individual.

The betrayal, the deceit and even the treason of this person or persons would, I felt, go unpunished and this lack of justice within a system, that people could only trust, left a very bitter taste in my mouth. The death of Dante would leave

behind it questions, and theories of conspiracy but I knew these would be left unanswered and unproved.

His timely disappearing act saved my skin and saved an inquiry that may have followed given the certainly secretive nature by which I would have been questioned. I had already gone over in my mind the possible results of such an inquiry. Figures in high places quizzed and pushed into tight corners but eventual blame coming to rest upon a few or just one or two bureaucrats or pen-pushers within the agency. A couple of otherwise anonymous people might lose their jobs but the Prime Minister, for it was she to whom my agile mind had dared to point, would come away cleaner than a brand new, cellophane wrapped, mobile phone.

I had already trained myself to forget much of my previous thinking and was now concentrating on thinking solely as the person I had re-imagined myself to be. To help I would sometimes think in French, a picture of Montreal in my mind. Having convinced myself that I'd had enough of British news and the British media machine I left the shelter of the interior of the ferry and rolled a cigarette, there wasn't much tobacco left by now but I stood outside, watching the waves and enjoyed the

momentary connection it gave to Gina. I would be seeing her soon.

No one recognised me, no one looked at me. I kept my eyes hidden as much as I could but after a while this made me feel so introverted that I began to crave the eye contact of any of the other passengers. In order to do this I had to stare at a chosen person for a while in the hope that they would glance my way. On occasion they did so and for satisfying momentary glimpses I was once again identifying with others, if only in a minimal way. Before long this gave way to wondering what any of them might think about me based solely on my appearance, but without talking to them, a step I was at this minute reluctant to take, I would never know so I ceased in the attempt to imagine their impressions of me.

My best bet was to live the character I had made for myself so I began once again thinking to myself in my revised Canadian accent. This was surprisingly easy, the days and hours of practice paying off, so much so that I soon found thoughts of images of British Columbia flowing through my mind; moose, beaver, orca, bears and even wolves populating the wide open spaces of landscape, some of which I remembered from youth.

For now I was in Scotland with Scottish accents all around and that leant some comfort as in some respects this was a foreign land to me. Certainly the English way and the corresponding use of language prevalent in London, was in fact something with which I wished to spend very little more time. I love England but the duration spent within the Houses of Parliament left a cold impression to the way the Queen's English is spoken. Perhaps the content of the speech I am talking about doesn't lend itself to poetry but, with a few notable exceptions, the sheer lack of creativity combined with the acerbic quality of the rhetoric made for ugly listening.

The crowd on the ferry moved towards their cars, foot passengers gathering at the front. I blended into this small mass of people and disembarked with the others. I was a free man but had no inclination to stroll around and exercise this freedom, heading straight for the train station I bought a ticket to Euston. The train was as good as empty, I had my pick of seats and took one of four with a table, next to a window facing forward. The train pulled away quietly and with increasing speed my experience transitioned from slow motion to a rapid race through the beautiful surrounding

countryside. A smile grew but it was not mine so I left it unattended to resume the serious mien my soul had adopted over the last month. This was more natural, reflected my constant feeling of focussed control and was to stay with me for many a year.

I think I slept, I couldn't be sure. There were definitely moments when consciousness ebbed and flowed, blurred memories mixed with hopes for the future. However long I was under it surely helped the time pass for it seemed quickly that I neared London.

From about an hour outside the capital many more people joined the train, filling its seats and eventually the aisles too. My journey having started with not a soul for company now the train was full to bursting. The levels of sound increased dramatically and I tuned in to various quiet conversations; parents trying to keep their children occupied, a young couple talking of a party the night before, and an old couple on the way to see their new grandchild. It was a radio cacophony and having spent so long voluntarily out of broadcast range from anyone I welcomed the chance to listen in on these slices of life, pleased that in this environment, the conversations were in

many assorted accents, a glorious variety of a mashed up metropolitan mix of cultures.

However, when nearing Euston some of this rich audio visual experience was beginning to get to me. My month in isolation had given peace and tranquility, here was chaos and turmoil. I was back in the heart of the city with both the claustrophobia of the train and then the subsequent agoraphobia as hundreds of us spilled out into the expanse of the station concourse. With nothing above my shaved head except for the high roof of this place, with the seemingly random milling of many all coming from somewhere and going someplace else, I dreaded the forthcoming tube trip.

To my new self this type of transport was forced and awkward. Used to living in a wide open landscape with occasional visits to modern cities, as this Canadian was, the idea of forcing oneself into a cramped environment underground was akin to burial alive. Down, down and further down the sounds of the trains as they pulled onto the platforms was deafening to my sensitive hearing and more so the silence of the passengers when squeezed together inside. It was only one stop but felt like an eternity.

Central Intelligence

It was clear from the outset that I would be very early for my meeting. Starbucks didn't seem like a very romantic rendezvous but it was one Gina and I both knew. I had no desire to wander around shops or venture outside the station so I headed straight there.

Buying a large latte here was no different from doing so at any of the other commercialised cafe outlets in the country or, for that matter, around the world. There was no personalised treatment only the minimal and rehearsed customer formalities born from extensive repetition. I sat down with some three hours to wait.

Alert but unexcited, observant and not at all bored, I had thoughts of keeping a diary. There were numerous details to document in a busy railway station, all of which were helping me from reverting to bouts of inner reflection. Without pen or paper I resolved to make mental notes which I hoped I could commit to memory.

I had four cups of coffee and visited the bathroom twice. I avoided reading newspapers of

any kind for fear that their contents would cause unwanted conflict within my fragile mind. For most of my time here you would have found me staring into the mid-distance, apparently thoughtless and purposeless. Although the latter may have been true I was far from inactive mentally. Unfortunately due the nature of my condition at that point my thought processes were entirely circular. It was just not possible to make any headway with what to think when one's life now depended on the actions of others.

As the time approached I began to look around, increasingly attentive to every person who might be Gina. It became necessary for me to see her before she saw me, so that I might identify myself to her. She had the photo I had sent but most of all I was looking forward to the smile I knew she would have for me and the one that it would cause in myself. I searched the concourse. Shortly before the allocated time whilst absorbed in this search a young man in a grey suit who carried a small suitcase, pulled out the chair next to me and sat down.

I remember his words to this day. In an educated American accent, probably East Coast Ivy League he said, "Hi there, my name is Bill

Chapman, I understand you're Gina Royce's Canadian friend." He put out his hand. I looked at him for long moments, incredulous to be so recognised and identified and so accurately for the first time in my new guise. All I could mutter as this person, in my best Canadian was, "Yes, where's Gina?" It was his turn to look at me for a long period before saying, "Gina will not be coming with us." I shook his hand.

My last act as Raymond Thierry Dante was to write a check to Gina which I dated a month previously. It emptied out my account and I could think of no one better who would put the money to a good use. In a sort of pathetic, childish way I folded it in two and placed it in the tobacco tin which also contained the key I had kept from the barn. I gave it to Chapman who said he would make sure she received it, whether he did or not I'll never know for sure.

And then I remember very little indeed. Chapman presented me with my new passport and an Air France ticket to Belize City via Atlanta. He was to be coming with me. There was little discussing my options, transparently there were none. Not only was there nothing for me in England anymore, there were forces above and beyond my

sphere of understanding that did not want me in the UK any more.

With Bill as my guardian and custodian we travelled by tube to Heathrow, took an aeroplane to Atlanta, changed flights and then caught another plane to Belize.

His debriefing was businesslike and he required only limited information from me. After staying in a hotel for one night we took a boat to Tobacco Caye and he introduced me to my new home.

That's how I arrived here.

I have lived every day on this island with a great desire to make the most of the life I have been given, this second chance. All the while I have been fearing the day when someone, someone like you, would follow my faint tracks to try to steal my soul. And here you are.

You see Mr. Henderson, I am nothing but a ghost, a ghost who goes by the name of Harry Thompson. You have tracked me here, but you see I have followed in your footsteps too. I feel in an essential way that it is you who are now the spy and I am just a man who had a story to tell, a story that would be hard for any rational person to believe. Do you believe what you have heard? I wonder

what you would be without my story Mr. Henderson? A ghost yourself? A spook still searching for a source?

All I see before me now is one man's story in another man's mind. Don't you see Mr. Henderson, in this very same instant that you have what you will call your story, I have become a man with no story at all. Unlike you, however, I have my life on this island. I don't know what it is you think you have, just that you will put your name on it, you will try to sell it and you may make some money from these sales.

Your soul has become primarily a vehicle for my story, please write it well and please remember our agreement concerning the fundamental privacy of this location and the anonymity of myself as simply a very well informed source. As I explained the consequences of your doing otherwise are not very pleasant to consider.

Now if you don't mind I believe that concludes our business together, you would be kind not to talk of it with me again. I have much to be getting along with, so please excuse me.

The Right Place To Write

With that he stood up, flicked the switch on the bank of electronica and left the shack with me sitting in it. After the silence and company of these banks of inert communication equipment became too much I left, there was nothing else to do, but I had no thought of where to go knowing I couldn't go far.

There was only one imperative now, I had to finish what would become the best selling "Long A Sleeper", the unauthorised biography of Raymond Dante. It was my only purpose and it needed to be completed in whatever way I was able. It would now be an entirely different beast, most incredible in scope but also vitally restricted and limited with the central truth I now held. I knew its writing would demand from me a delicate balance, one that encompassed the truths I could now tell whilst negotiating those I could not. The fact of the matter was that I would have to be more than economical with the truth, I would have to carefully and creatively manipulate a lie.

It was early evening now and I badly needed a drink. Hoping Drew was still open for business I headed his way and sure enough there he was, much as I'd found him the first time in his deck chair by his bar.

"Ah, have you had a pleasant day in paradise?"

"Yeah I guess, I've been with Harry all day."

"Has he been telling you his stories?"

"You could say that."

"Well then you'll be needing some refreshing libation I'd imagine."

"That's the truth."

"What'll it be? A beer?"

"Have you got something a little stronger?"

"Ah, now you're talking. Tequila, White Rum, Whiskey?"

"Rum sounds good. Can I have a beer with that too?"

"Not a problem sir. Anything to keep the customer satisfied."

Drew got up and fetched the drinks. I took a seat in a deck chair and he quickly returned with a cold beer for each of us and a whole bottle of White Rum with two small glasses, before sitting down next to me.

“This is the best stuff. Turn you into a sea captain before you know it.”

We drank and watched the sun slowly set towards the horizon. The temperature began to drop but it was still a beautiful warmth with which Drew and I spent the next few hours. As the alcohol did its work so my new knowledge soaked into my understanding.

“Drew, have you ever been married?”

“Three times.”

“Oh. So where’s Mrs. Henderson? Or at least the last one.”

“Not sure now. First time I was just a teenager. That didn’t last as I was away on duty all the time, she went off with the manager of the local liquor store whilst I was on tour. Second was a nurse from a hospital where I was a patient for a while, she was regular army but I cheated on her with my rehab officer and she left me too. Third was a Philippine lady, didn’t speak a word of English but she just kept smiling at me. I sort of ran away from that one.”

“I see. So just you on your own now then?”

“Best way for me. All they want at the end of the day when they’ve got you married is money and kids, in that order. I never had much money

and quite honesty the idea of children scared the hell out of me. Are you planning on any such foolhardiness?"

"Well, maybe. I'm not sure yet. Heather and I haven't been on quite level terms recently, well for quite a while if I'm honest. I'm thinking she might want to get married, get married and have a baby. I don't know how to find out."

"Ask her. What's the worst that could happen? She might tell you you're crazy or she might just throw her arms around you. Find the right moment, the right place, the right time and see how your luck is."

"You make it sound easy."

"It is easy, people have been doing it for millennia. My only trouble is that I found it too easy. Sounds like you've been thinking about it properly, wise man. Don't listen to me about anything, nothing if not full of it."

"I'll do it, I'll give it my best shot."

"Do it, you'll never look back. As long as she's the right one for you of course, don't run into anything, don't do anything stupid like me. Only fools rush in."

"Yeah, I'm settled, that's it first thing when I see her."

“Do you mind if we talk about something else. I don’t know why but marriage and all that other love stuff kind of depresses me, maybe its the thought of what might have been that spins ‘round my head from time to time.”

“Hey, no problem. Thought I might stick around for the week. I was thinking of writing a novel, maybe I could start making some notes.”

“You’re certainly in the right place, no one to disturb you here. I just came for a week and ended up staying, funny how things go, never thought of writing a book though. What’s yours about? You know just a rough sketch.”

“Er... It’s an allegory.”

“What’s that when it’s not on holiday?”

“Well, its an extended metaphor”

“No, I’m afraid I’m still not with you.”

“Its kind of when you compare one story with another to make a point.”

“So what are you comparing with what?”

“The world of politics with the underwater world.”

“Yeah, ok, so what point are you trying to make?”

“I’m trying to say that although politics and politicians affect all of us nearly all the time, you

can look at them as their own self regulating ecosystem, like all the life under the sea. Everything effects everything else, everyone has their place, and sometimes that's a very dangerous place where everything is basically food for something else."

"Well, you say that politicians effect us all, but out here on this island at least, there's very little need for them. What would a politician do here?"

"That's a very good question but in the world at large what one individual politician does with their powers can have huge consequences for very large numbers of other people."

"Nah, for me, if politicians are fish, then they aren't fish in the sea, they're all fish in a fish tank, happily swimming around making no difference to anyone whatsoever."

"That's true too. I wonder though Drew, you see your analogy creates a very interesting idea. It's about freedom, how much freedom they have, how they use it and how they abuse it."

"Fish in the sea can do anything they want that's true, but they also stand to get eaten, out of the blue, just like that, generally by other bigger fish."

“Yes, yes, Drew, and fish in a tank have very little freedom of movement but they are generally safe, safe from being eaten that is.”

“Unless of course you put a bloody great big hungry fish in the tank and it just goes about its business of eating all the other unsuspecting fellas. Like shooting fish in a barrel you might say.”

“Drew you’ve hit the nail on the head because if that were to happen somehow, all you’d be left with in that fish tank is the biggest meanest fish, all on their own with nowhere to go except round and round in circles just getting more and more hungry.”

“Seems a bit sad, I’d want to take that fish out and put him in the big blue ocean, let him have his freedom, let him go where he wants, eat what he wants. It’s no kind of life for a fish, or any animal for that matter, being isolated all alone, just so as people can stare at him. I never liked zoos. More rum?”

“More rum, indeed yes.”

We got drunk as sailors. Drew told me all his war stories which were extremely enlightening and exhilarating, there’s nothing like hearing about otherwise hidden elements of the world straight from the horse’s mouth. I laughed a lot, because

although much of what he had to say was harrowing and full of horror and fear, he would always without exception have a spin attached to it. Delving deep into the bowels of human wartime reality only to come to the surface again, often with the aid of the darkest humour I have ever heard. He knew how to do this, how to tell stories, especially how to tell them to people who had no direct experience of their nature.

The next morning, very early, there was a knock at the door. I woke from dreaming, it was Harry. He held a folder which he threw down on the table.

“Here’s the transcript for you. I printed it off so that you can finish your book. I kind of assumed that you’d be working on it here, tell me if I’m wrong.”

“No, yes, I thought I could finish it here, it seems like the right place to write, if that’s ok with you.”

“It’s a free country Mr. Henderson, you can write wherever you please, but I’d be grateful you don’t be too long about it.”

“No, I write quick. I’ll be done and gone in maybe a week.”

“Good luck.”

He disappeared.

For that next week every evening I went to Drew's bar, drank a huge amount and short of letting on my true reasons for visiting the island we talked about every thing under the stars.

The rest of the days, from early morning I spent writing in the shade of my shack, only breaking for a swim every now and then to cool off. Hours would pass whilst I typed furiously to get down into my little laptop the rest and most vital parts of the story that I had begun almost two years ago.

Harry was always kicking about, we didn't say much to each other. One evening, after a few drinks with Drew I took the tobacco tin and barn door key that Gina had given me and offered them to Harry as I saw he was in his shack. I handed them over to him as though they were the effects of a deceased loved one and he took them as such, as in a sense they were. He looked at me and turned them over in his hands without saying anything. I then told him I had recently interview not only Misha but Gina and his father too. Again he said nothing but after I told him that Gina still loved him and still believed in him and that his father was

more proud of his son than any one could be he just said “Thank you” and walked away.

We spoke no more than a handful of passing words after that.

Completion

Writing freely on Tobacco Caye, I stayed up through the last night finishing the biography. I read through the first few pages, written so long ago, trying to assimilate my researched knowledge already gathered with the experiential account I now possessed.

My approach at the outset seemed so cold to me now, the facts so divorced from the reality. Still it was the beginning of my book and I tried to re-read it in the detached and objective manner in which it was written as a hook for my target audience.

This material had been my spring-board upon embarking on the journey. I had to face the fact that now there were in effect two books to be written; the one a document of his life and the other my subjective and filtered perspective of the man as I have perceived him to be after his 'death'.

I knew I could no longer tell the truth to which a journalist might aspire but had instead to create an acceptable account based on a fiction. My initial documentary style, one in which I was merely the writer distanced by both time and space

from my subject, had morphed into a movie where I was an active player both in front of and behind the lens. The transition from one to the other would not be easy to relate to a potential reader. I simply had to trust my journalistic talent and experiment with the feel of a first time novelist.

I did my best and was aware as I was writing, of my reasonable satisfaction with the results. I found myself slipping with ease and apparent seamlessness through the facts, the fictions and the lies as I now held them. I already had the vast bulk of the manuscript written and it needed little alteration however, the last few pages were almost impossible to write, given the restrictions I now had, but I wrote them as best I could in order to complete the book as a whole.

My only credible direction was to steer the would-be reader into putting some belief in one or more of the conspiracies surrounding Dante. It was the only way I could point to suggestions of the truth as I knew it. That one of these theories might be true was the closest I could come to revealing the reality of the facts that had been revealed to me, the facts I was obliged to steer around.

As I neared the concluding thoughts of the book in its final chapter, I found myself travelling

down a different path, guided solely by my imagination. With a flurry I raced to the end, my fingers dancing over the keyboard in a last burst of creativity came quickly to a finish. What I found myself writing came as a surprise to me even as I the words appeared before me. I knew for certain it was exactly the conclusion I had been searching for.

I wrote:

Perhaps the most intriguing and persistent theory, going back to where it all began with The Houdini-Hijacking, is the idea that Raymond Dante was in fact behind this deadly and costly cyber attack himself. Was he its originator, its conceptualiser and the origin of the chaos that followed? If so we would have to create a new category for him: that of a criminal and an enemy of the state at that.

To secretly create a virus of such destructive power only then to magically and publicly provide the antidote would be a stunning trick to pull off, maybe only possible for one so talented as Dante.

Such a magician would risk everything but would no doubt stand to benefit greatly, largely by virtue of the recognition, the fame

and the fortune which would be generated. If one were able to somehow conceal the means by which this illusion were performed one might be able to fool everyone. Is this in fact what Dante did?

The truth of this theory, it seems, was either never questioned publicly or by the powers that be, or it was simply not possible to prove at the time. Had it been discovered to be true at a later date, at a time when he was fully ensconced in the workings of government, the evidence would most probably be safely tucked away in an encrypted file marked "Classified" in an extremely secure government data base.

To have later cheated death and then to have further performed both a disappearing act and a permanent escape would be worthy of Mr. Harry Houdini himself. Too strange and beyond the scope of reason perhaps, but in such a theory, one which we can only hope to imagine, he is still alive somewhere and living a life that would appear to us as a dream playing out in a world so very far away.

Long live Raymond Thierry Dante.

Clarity

I was satisfied, and had finished before dawn. The boat would be leaving in a couple of hours, and I was to be accompanied by Ann Marie who was doing the supplies run again.

With time for one last swim, using a snorkel and mask I'd borrowed from Drew I walked into the sea in the near darkness. A half moon and the stars in the sky were mirrored in the still sea. Floating in the warm, salty water, slowly making out the shadows of various fish, the sun gradually came up and its rays penetrated through to the sand only a couple of feet below.

Now the colours of these tropical fish came alive, metallic and vibrant to extremes, indigo blue, scarlet red, neon orange, silvery green and golden yellow all in abundance. I couldn't help but wonder whether their reflective surfaces were for attraction of mates or simply Nature's way of showing off what she can do for the sake of beauty in itself. If I was a fish I could only hope to be one of such beauty.

Who was top of the food chain? Who was the shark? Dante? The Prime Minister? The Head of one of the intelligence agencies? Were they all just various exotic varieties of tropical fish only with subtle differences in colouring?

Perhaps Dante had in the beginning been merely a common goldfish in a goldfish bowl with everyone looking in on him, simply owned and fed by powers greater than he could possibly imagine. He was certainly horribly out of his environment in the fiercely competitive company of the microcosm of The House of Commons. With his escape, had he left behind one nature and been able to assume another? With his leap to freedom, had he evolved into a better version of himself? Having seen his lifestyle here I was perplexed by the type of freedom he had now. On recalling our journey underwater together and considering his interest in the ecosystem I felt sure he was currently in his element.

Designed to walk upright on land I now find myself floating on the surface of the ocean gazing at the splendid variety of creatures all perfectly adapted to their surroundings and I'm thinking one of them is me. However, as peaceful, harmonious and tranquil as I feel, I know that I belong

elsewhere, somewhere amongst people who are exactly what they appear to be. I belong at home, at home with Heather.

After an hour of this neutrally buoyant visual meditation, satisfying my sensory appetites more than they could possibly demand, I had just one last person to say good bye to and to ask for a little help.

Harry had been charging my laptop on occasions and now I needed to book my flight home. He was in full control of all technology on this island and I hoped he could assist.

It wasn't a problem and within half an hour I had a ticket leaving in two days with British Airways to Paris via Miami and had booked a double room at The Grand Hotel du Palais Royal. I also wrote an email to Heather inviting her to meet me there. Although it was rather hastily written, due to the time constraints as much as my inability to find the correct tone I was aiming for, I hoped it contained enough intrigue for her to be able to rendezvous with me on the specified day at a suggested hour.

It struck me as a little odd that the beauty of this island was precisely its remoteness yet the world was just a few keystrokes and a credit card

away from anywhere one might dream of. Entering my card details I was acutely aware that I might be approaching its limit and I began to care more about monetary matters from this moment forward.

I didn't know if Harry had ever, or was ever 'allowed' to venture off the island, maybe to Belize City, but I doubted that he ever had need to use the passport given to him by his guardians. Whether he would ever want to do so was another mystery.

He said goodbye without emotion merely thanking me for being someone who could listen to his story. He also mentioned to look after the transcript he had given me as it would be of great value to certain interests. He said it with a seriousness and that blue-eyed glare that put a chill in me enough to heed this brief advice.

It wasn't easy for me to find the right words with which to part company and I merely opted for a handshake and an assurance that the legacy of his predecessor would be justifiably celebrated. He merely nodded and waved and within minutes I was in the boat with Ann Marie, steered by the very same Belizean who had brought us here and then it was only minutes more to be in the open ocean with the island quickly receding into the past.

Ann Marie was great company once again, talking loudly to be heard over the course sound of the engine and its thrashing propeller in the water.

“You going home now?”

“Yes, to see my girlfriend.”

“Lovely, you’ll be in her arms soon enough. Then you’ll be watching the Cricket with your slippers on and a nice cup of tea. Ha! Ha!”

“It’s a great picture. I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

“Oh praises! You’ll never look back you know. Make sure you make it special. Take her someplace pretty.”

“I’ve asked her to meet me in Paris, at a hotel we once went to.”

“You’re a romantic Mr. Francis Henderson. She’ll say yes, I know she will, you’re a good man.”

“I hope so, I just feel I need a bit of luck!”

“Luck, oh luck is easy. Here take this.”

She removed the bracelet from her wrist and put it around mine.

“You give her this when you are in Paris and tell her it has brought me as much joy as I can handle and two wonderful children as well. Tell her she is lucky to have a man like you, tell her Ann Marie said so. She can’t say no then! Ha! Ha!”

I looked at the tiny coloured rocks around the bracelet and marvelled at the history of this one item. From Gina to Raymond, from Harry to Ann Marie and now it was in my possession, I had only to give it to Heather and somehow its story would be complete.

“Thank you so much. Thank you, it means a great deal to me.”

“Ah, luck comes and it goes but sometime it just flows! You love your lady right and tell her she needn’t have more than two children, any more is greedy. Tell her I said so.”

“Hah, I will do, thank you again Ann Marie.”

“Pleasure.”

The rest of the boat trip we didn’t talk. I gazed out at the calm waters and it occurred to me that after all this time I had finally finished my book. It was not with elation or even pride, merely a sense of relief. Thoughts turned to how best to get a copy of the biography to my agent.

I had been working without online Cloud back up, if anything should happen to my hard drive, any corruption whatsoever, and dropping it in the ocean counted as such an event, all my recent work would be in vain. All I really needed was a

utility removable drive, a USB stick would do the trick nicely.

The more immediate was my concern that I needed to make a hard copy. Asking Ann Marie if there was a Printers near the harbour and a post office too, she gave me a name and a location and we said farewell with a giant hug. I hailed a cab and gave the driver instructions.

Shake Down

Arriving at Ann Marie's suggested location was like going back in time. The shop was down a little back street and given my experience with the boy with the knife I was hyper alert as to my safety and the security of the material I carried.

Going into the shop was a little different. The place was small but evidently reasonable high tech. I asked if they could print off a hard copy of my book and they were very amenable, linking my laptop up and transferring the document before printing it onto A4 and binding it at my request. I also obtained a stick drive copy for my own peace of mind and bought a large brown envelope in which I put the printed manuscript.

Having paid I left the happy employees and walked the short distance to the post office but all the while trying to decide to where I would send the thing. Directly home was a sound idea, or perhaps straight to my agent. However little pangs of paranoia commanded that I leave no trace of my Belizean location as directed by Harry so I ruled out sending it straight to the literary agent. So home it was.

As I prepared to address the package I hesitated. Sending home may mean that it would lie inert and undelivered in some post office as I would optimistically be in Paris for well over a week. If Heather joined me, we may stay in her favourite city for longer, maybe she would like to be the first person to read it. Is there such a thing as a marriage proposal proof-reading holiday? I was feeling lucky. If she said yes there would be plenty of time for the package to arrive and if it didn't arrive in time I could get the hotel to forward it to my address in England.

It was a confusing calculation based on emotions rather than rationality. I decided to address the package to The Grand Hotel du Palais Royal with a note on the reverse side in both English and my best French to ask if they could hold it for me. If Heather was somehow unable to come and it arrived early I might even be able to proof-read it myself.

Having paid for the most expensive express postage they offered and handed over the very weighty proof of my work I left believing I had been ridiculously over cautious in this exercise but it was done and in many ways it was a weight off my mind. I held the original on my laptop and a

copy on the memory stick and then the original hard copy of Harry's transcript so I had no need to worry unduly anymore.

One last taxi trip to The Majestic Hotel, I had no inclination to walk, and I found myself in its familiar surroundings once again. In the foyer and then at the counter for a moment I realised that I had made no reservation. Luckily there were plenty of rooms free, I was even able to get the same room I had stayed in before and upon closing the room door behind me I collapsed on the bed with a sudden awareness of my own weight and a great inability to think, a buzzing in my ears telling me I had been thinking for too long.

As the buzz subsided I began to fall into a sleep demanded by mental fatigue, the sounds of the streets below outside my open window were no competition for my exhaustion and there was just a will to achieve the kind of oblivion that only deep slumber provides.

Coming round from this peaceful intermission I dozed for a while in a half sleep and then began to move into a dazed wakefulness. I was hungry and then looking at my watch, and realising it was evening, decided that I might be

able to get something to eat down in the bar and restaurant area.

I ought to have showered, I ought to have changed my clothes but now it was only hunger that ruled my actions. Down the stairs and soon I would be eating steak and chips and drinking a cool beer. So it came to be. It wasn't until I was half-way through this meal that I stopped, put my knife and fork down, took a drink and then looked around. I was alone.

I had always been alone in some respects. I'd had friends, I was able to speak to most different types of people since my youth and increasingly so in my job as a journalist. However, it had always been a suppressed notion that the way I thought and the way I behaved, the way I took action, all these would lead me to places, both physical and mental, where I was basically an individual apart from others.

There is a solace in solitude and a peacefulness in the ability to be solo which can lend confidence, but I had never really questioned whether I liked it. Fundamentally though it was always knocking around somewhere in a back corner of my mind that I would always rather be with someone other than myself. The company of

another was always seen as a bonus rather than a goal.

I carried on eating, resigned as always to this seemingly inevitable fate but the joy in my heart could not be hidden when my plate was cleared away by the lone waiter and Bill walked in with a lazy gait and sat down at the adjoining bar. I wiped my mouth clean with my serviette, stood up fully energised and walked over to greet him.

“Bill!”

“Hello Francis.” He didn’t seem overjoyed to see me, sort of reluctant really, but I was so relieved to be with someone I recognised, someone that represented something real. I put out my hand and shook his vigorously, although Bill seemed less enthused. I sat down on the stool next to him.

“Boy, you’re site for sore eyes.”

“Did you have a nice holiday?”

“Oh, it was quite amazing, great to unwind. I didn’t think such places as Tobacco Caye could ever really exist. Now I’ve got to get my head around reporting on the road building in the South.”

“How was Harry?”

“Oh, he’s an amazing man, we got along quite well.”

Then I stopped as Bill looked at me with some kind of resignation.

“Yeah, he’s a crazy old fool really.”

“You know him?”

“Did he tell you his story?”

“I mean how do you know him?”

“I’ve got to level with you here Francis. My name is Bill Chapman, I’m with the CIA.”

He took out some identification and showed it to me, it looked real but I read it in a state of disbelief.

“Harry’s ours. He’s been working for us, with us for, well, for quite some time now. He provides an invaluable service, kind of like an independent analyst, he has an aptitude in solving certain problems. I assume he showed you all his kit.”

“What’s this got to do with me?” I found myself trying to act as an innocent tourist.

“We’ve had a tag on you for quite a while now. Ever since you published some of your ideas on certain political matters of some eight years ago. When you booked your ticket to Belize a little flag came up on our system next to your name and, well I’m here to make sure you understand the nature of our problem.”

“I’m sure I can’t help you Bill.”

“Look, Harry is a very special person but what you have to understand is that he is one of us, he’s our special person. I have to make sure that whatever it is you do that you don’t jeopardise any interests that the US has both nationally and internationally. You do appreciate the significance of the special relationship between our two countries?”

I had begun to accept that this was a situation where it might be in my best interests to tell some truths.

“I’m a journalist writing a book, and I’ve just been out here doing some research.”

“I know Francis, I know. I can’t stop you doing whatever it is that you think you want to do, its a free country after all but it’s my job to make sure that you don’t take away with you any sensitive material that might compromise life this side of the pond. I have someone right now searching your room and if you don’t mind I need to check you over, personally.”

“I don’t think you have the right to be doing this. I have certain rights even outside the UK.”

“Please don’t be a stiff ass Brit about this, I have to do what I’m asked to do. It would be silly to kick up a fuss.”

Harry opened his jacket to reveal a neatly concealed gun in its shoulder holster.

“Can we just get on with this Francis, it’s awkward for me too, it won’t take a minute and then you’ll be free to go about your business as you please.”

“You want to do this here?”

“As I said, it won’t take a minute. If you could stand please.”

We both stood and Bill went through what must have been for him an often performed search routine. The barman glanced over a few times but went back to cleaning glasses, perhaps he’d seen stranger things in his life. All I had on me was my wallet, my hotel key and the USB stick. He looked through my wallet, then held up the memory stick.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to confiscate this.” He kept the drive but handed back my wallet and room key.

“And there’s nothing I have to say about it?”

“Nothing much. There I’m done, that wasn’t so bad was it?”

“Someone just doing their job.”

“Unfortunately yes. I don’t suppose I can buy you a drink, it’s the least I can do.”

“You know sometimes I wonder what drives people like you to choose the line of work that you do in the first place.”

“Just think of me as an exotic kind of policeman.”

“Ah yes, to serve and protect. That’s what you do isn’t it, protect?”

“It’s not a perfect job but someone has to do it.”

“Who are you protecting Mr. Chapman? Me? Harry? Your country? Who is supposed to protect us from you? You can do pretty much what you want to right? I bet you could shoot that barman over there and have no problems leaving the country, couldn’t you?”

“Look, let’s not get into some great big political discussion. Harry is a very special person, I’ve been assigned to look out for his interests over the years. You’ve met him, you obviously understand the need for secrecy in this area.”

“I understand his need for privacy and I understand my need to write freely whatever I feel the people of my country need to hear.”

“I think we understand each other Francis, as I said there’s little I can do about what you write but I would press upon you the fact that you have some responsibilities here and that you would be best advised to consider them.”

“I’m well aware of issues surrounding my responsibilities.”

“I’m not sure if Harry was able to make clear to you the necessity, for your own personal safety, that you refrain from exposing the details of his location. We have been in touch with him just yesterday and he assured us that he had made this point quite clear.”

“What I can and can’t write is altogether very clear. Being a journalist can bring up plenty of issues regarding the nature of the truth and how best to present it. You can rest assured that whatever I do write, bearing in mind the limited nature of my source, will be in Harry’s best interests as well as those of our respective countries. I don’t think we have anything left to talk about. Now if you don’t mind I’ll go and see what you’ve done to my room.”

I turned to go but Bill stopped me, holding me back by the arm.

“Write your book, by all means, you’ll be in print, you’ll be successful most likely, but I’m afraid I can’t allow you to make public what we both know. Harry is just too valuable right here, right now. As you may guess we have people all over the world, unlike Harry you won’t be able to find somewhere to hide.”

I stared at Bill.

“So the story is still just one big conspiracy theory then.”

“I’m afraid so. We like our conspiracy theories, they tie up the imaginations of those who might otherwise find the truth, people like you for instance.”

“You have my word Mr. Chapman but only for the sake of Harry. He has his life, I’ll not attempt to take that away from him. My story will be just that, a story.”

“No hard feelings hey Francis. Bill put out his hand and looked me in the eye. I took a while trying to figure out what this signified but eventually we shook, it seemed like there was a great gulf between us.

“Good bye Mr. Chapman.” I turned and left.

There was no way to return to normality very quickly after this encounter. My feet led me to

the stairs and as I walked up the first flight I passed a well-built man in a suit coming the other way carrying a large duffle bag. He tried to avoid contact with my eyes but I made sure I looked straight into his. He looked away, shifty with an aura of guilt.

Arriving in my room there was no sign of disturbance but my bag had been placed carefully upon my bed, not where I had left it. Upon checking it I found that Harry's printed transcript, my phone and laptop had all been taken. I sat down. In this moment there was no anger or even frustration, just a strong desire to be home and away from all this subterfuge.

I had a long cool shower, the heat, sweat and salt-water of the week having pushed its way deep into my soul. Afterwards I got into bed and had no trouble vexing over any matters, I just wanted to see Heather. I set my alarm and passed out.

Paris In The Springtime

The journey was a seemingly endless stream of flight numbers, times, departure gates, lounges, magazine articles half read, take-offs, landings, flight safety information, plastic food and as much alcohol as I was permitted. I only remember touching down in Paris, Charles De Gaulle airport because there was a very strong cross wind and we came in at a crazy angle with a rather abrupt bump. It was morning.

I felt more of a pedestrian than a flyer and was soon out into the brisk, European fresh air. It was bright and sunny but the wind was whipping up everywhere and I looked to the sky to see small clouds moving rapidly and very low.

It was a taxi drive to the hotel, so different in one way from the taxi's I had recently taken in Central America but oddly it gave a similar moment to reflect. Parisiennes drive in a mad style that makes London feel perfectly organised and under immaculate control, weaving through traffic my driver was happy to participate in the lunacy.

Once again I found myself checking into a hotel but here The Grand Hotel du Palais Royal, was one I recalled with great fondness. Heather and I had spend just the one night here, a night to remember, shortly after we had started going out with each other, on a spontaneous trip by Eurostar. It held a great memory for me and I hoped beyond hope that this memory was shared by Heather, enough to entice her away from her work and the normality of life in Richmond.

My credit card went through ok but I realised I was dancing dangerously with its capacity as I'd only been keeping a running tab in my head as to an approximate spend over the last billing month. I couldn't help but ask in my basic French if there was any mail for me but when this came back as a negative I was hardly surprised, simply asking them to expect something.

The room was beautiful with a view over a part of the city I had not seen, certainly from a vantage point like this being on the fifth floor. I hardly wanted to disturb anything putting my bag down on a chair and walked around to inspect its graceful and tasteful layout.

I had arrived, at least I had arrived somewhere different from where I was. Already the

events of the previous month and especially the last week were fading and strangely that was how I wanted it to be, I was free to think about the future, my future with Heather, our future. I looked at the bracelet around my wrist, moving my fingers over its colourful stones set in a matt, dull metal. It was not shiny or gaudy and for me possessed a sort of understated magic conferred upon it by its own journey. I would offer it to her as a gift to transfer its lucky powers and to explain its story.

Having invited Heather to be here tomorrow, around noon, I had what seemed like a long wait ahead. I had no mobile or computer so could not phone or send an email. I could have rung her from a public phone at home or borrowed someone's computer to send a message but there was something strong that led to me to practice non-action, to wait for her to make her own journey in her own time without contact.

I imagined the time before mobile phones, text messages and emails, there must have occurred many more of these meetings, encounters which relied upon and even encouraged the arrangement and making of a rendezvous sometimes long periods in advance. Nowadays anything can be communicated from late trains, to missed flights,

domestic complications to radical changes in plans. So much more reassuring but also business-like. Is it good to know everything about the whereabouts and activities of everyone you know all the time? Do you really want someone, all people you know to be able to know where you are, wherever you are, all the time? Does this not affect how free you are or at least how free you feel?

Something has clearly been lost in the information age. The tangible sense of expectation that lasts for days sometimes weeks when a traveller must wait, not knowing if the preparations for intersections of journeys will be successful. Just a time and place to meet has so much more mystery and anticipation to savour.

These thoughts were more a way of assuaging the anxiety I felt that she simply may not come. We had parted on rather rocky terms, I had pushed her perhaps more than usual, more than she could cope with maybe. I had lied about going on to Scotland, I had ruined the car and I had jetted off on my own personal mission far away, without her, 'chasing a ghost' as she had called it. Was this too much to forgive me for?

Booking this hotel was a stroke of genius though. It was where she wanted to be, I knew that, but did she want to be here with me?

I managed to snap out of these musings as I stared out the window. I was in France, I was in Paris and it suddenly dawned on me that I needed some new clothes. Leaving my room I cashed the last few travellers cheques that I had in my wallet at the hotel foyer desk and ventured out into the city.

The busy streets were somewhat of a culture shock. Every passer-by looked so markedly different from your average Londoner. Clothes seemed brighter and more colourful, even the way people walked was, in my perception, more stylish and laid back. It was after walking for quarter of an hour or so that I came upon some streets where the shops increased in number and I found an inviting window display that lured me in.

The shop was called “Blanc Bleu” and had a kind of nautical theme. Sailing jerseys and striped T-shirts and the like. I had no idea of current exchange rates but soon worked out with approximation that this was a more up-market chain than others. I had plenty of time and tried on clothes for over an hour, carefully totting up the price as I went and then paying with the cash I had

to avoid what I felt would be certain embarrassment with the card. I left the store with one very large white and blue bag.

Deciding against exploring further afield, I soon traced my steps back to the hotel if only to get clean and try on my new clothes. Swinging my bag with relaxed abandon I felt truly on holiday. My work with the book was done, this was the way to celebrate a considerable achievement and I was happy to be an active participant in the melee that moved all around.

A great hunger took hold of me but I pushed the feeling to one side feeling light and high with Paris in the Springtime. The trees that lined the roads and even the foreign number plates added their flavour to what was simply a feeling of carefree success. I didn't care how one would define this success anymore than I worried over where the feeling had come from.

Back in my room I ran a bath, adding all of the complimentary bath salts, I stripped off and sank into its warm luxury, cleaning myself deeply and washing my hair twice. When I noticed the water becoming cooler I added more hot and relaxed in a thought-free and scented world until I

remembered my new clothes and decided swiftly that I needed to try them on.

Soon dry and now wearing new shoes, trousers, shirt, jersey and of course socks and underwear I stood in front of a long door mirror. I looked like some kind of French yachtsman and I loved it, in fact I laughed at myself for my change of appearance and then once again more quietly at the idea I had reinvented or reimagined myself in a perhaps less superficial way.

I was really hungry now, and increasingly worried at how little money I had. There was a burger place just across the road which would have to do. Ultimately unsatisfying it did stop my intense hunger but I was annoyed that this unremarkable place marked the first outing as my new self, in my new get up.

Upon returning to the hotel I decided that the best thing to do, and the most frugal would be to install myself at one of the numerous arrangements of tables and chairs in the foyer to read from the newspapers that were strewn around.

“Le Monde” is an incredible paper by all accounts but my grasp of the French language was simply not able to give it proper consideration. Fortunately there were a number of British offerings

including The Times, The Telegraph and even a copy of The Observer. These were all at least a day old but hardly touched by any other of the hotel's guests, I made myself comfortable and started to read.

That's all I did for the rest of the day. Print journalism is strange in that one often only gets to read a cursory amount of any given newspaper, often indeed only scouring the pages for one's own articles. I hadn't had the first opportunity to read the news as a means of relaxation for as long as I could remember and so I read each paper, every article from headline to back page and I really thought about what I was reading.

The way politics was covered was of renewed interest to me. Every journalist, woman or man who had been commenting on the current political stories was at least partially interested in seeking the truth. Of course that is the way it should be, but I couldn't help feeling the essential elements of these stories were missing. Now I knew that behind the scenes, inaccessible to all who might inquire, were narratives that would never be found. Moreover the truths that were themselves missing, somewhere in the gaps between the lines of black ink on white paper, were most likely

hidden by virtue of the need to simply entertain and tell a good story.

If the truth is a fact, but the fact is itself the reality of a lie then one finds oneself no nearer the truth. To believe that there is some objective set of events that explain this lie may shed light on the story but it is no nearer the truth.

It caused me to remember, for that is all I could do, the way I had written the last part of Raymond Thierry Dante's biography. I had cause to fabricate the reality of my offering, to deliberately misinform any would-be reader and I had two reasons to do so. First I was simply under duress not to relate certain crucial details and this limited the truth I could tell. However, secondly I believe my story would not have been believed in spite of it being the truth. My book, and myself as a serious writer, would have been laughed away from any respectable professional treatment and I would simply have been discarded as another conspiracy nut. I had seen what this had done to Gina Royce and I didn't want to be treated as she had been and reviewed accordingly.

Ultimately I had created what I could only call a work of fiction. Ironically this would come to be the definitive text on Dante's life and work. It

would be read by all, including his father and it would give Dante the proper send off that he had never had. Gina Royce would be the only person who would see through the gaps and she would continue to maintain her own version of events, in the face of popular opinion following publication of my book, yet she would be so much closer to the truth.

There was some shame in what I had done, yet perhaps like Dante, I had found myself boxed into a corner with very little alternative. Finally upon analysing the papers that I had been reading I came to the sorry truth that on the whole people don't *want* to know the truth, they just want a good story, whether it be lies or revelations.

With this thought I felt at ease with the biography, I had made some accusations against those who were in power at the time, some of whom were still in positions of power, and these accusations would be extremely hard to refute. The nobility of the truth is that once it is uncovered, even in some small way, it can be very difficult indeed to get away from, and it can snowball very quickly to make life difficult for life's liars. The best part about this is that when the truth surfaces, it often requires no proof, it just stands head and

shoulders above the deceit and corruption and is obvious to see for anyone who so wishes.

As for the intelligence agencies, they appear again and again to be merely messengers and couriers, carrying the secrets and lies of others from place to place. Maybe they were their own species of tropical fish in their own special aquarium with their own dubious freedoms. I saw them as barracudas, lethal and lurking in the darker waters, ready to strike at any given order and operating outside of the laws that apply to the rest of us. I had seen at first hand that they were just doing their jobs and had no disdain for their existence. Indeed the fact that Bill Chapman was where he was, when he was, saved Dante's life. Harry Thompson would probably not exist if it weren't for Bill's involvement, I would not have had the privilege to have met my subject and he would not have been able to tell his tale.

Harry had said that the importance of our meeting was largely that one man had talked and another had listened. I wondered what became of the transcript of that event. As he had also implied my book would be of little consequence, perhaps only that it would provide some entertainment for some and some money for me.

I had come to terms with my experience. I imagined what it would be like if my copy, the sole manuscript in existence, were to be somehow lost in transit and would never arrive at this hotel. Strangely I felt that it wouldn't matter too much, I had in the process of its writing been able to let go of it and was now simply able to enjoy the catharsis it had given.

Of far greater importance was Heather, our relationship and its future. I knew she cared for me more than any other person I had met, she just wanted me to have some security in my job, for both myself and her. As I read the papers I began to study the form of certain journalists, some of whom I knew personally and I resolved to become the best journalist I could be, an ambition that had been lacking for many years.

It was late evening, I had been surviving on espresso's and some light snacks offered by the hotel, I had to sleep now but come morning I was back in the very same place awaiting any newspapers that came. Sure enough around 10am they arrived and I was treated to the latest news from the UK and every interpretation of all international stories its editors deemed to be significant.

My seat looked across the foyer to the grand glass and wooden revolving door that was the centrepiece of the entrance to the hotel. Guests would occasional come and go and the whooshing sound of its operation would cause me to look up from my papers.

I had invited Heather to meet me here at midday and as the hour approached I looked up more often, finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the news stories. Continuously I played nervously with the bracelet, counting on my luck for Heather to arrive. Twelve o'clock came and went, I ordered more coffees and subsequently became more edgy, waiting with increasing awareness of seconds ticking by. In an effort to alter this state I began attempting The Times crossword. Although never very successful with the mental contortions it required it did at least hold my attention and time must have begun to pass more easily.

I don't know what time it actually was, but with much focus and determination I had nearly finished that crossword for the very first time. So occupied was I with this intense puzzle, and chained to its demands, that I had ceased looking up at the door every time I heard its revolution. It still

affected me on a deep subconscious level, suggesting some machine that consumed people from one world, processing them, only to expel them into another.

Then, a far more beautiful sound coming from close by completely dissolved this solitary concentration. Dreams leapt high for their freedom as I heard Heather's soft and soothing voice.

"Hello stranger, what are the chances of bumping into you here..."

Raymond Thierry Dante: A Life-Line

- Born April 25th, 1991. Hôpital du Sacré-Coeur de Montreal, Canada. No siblings.
- 1995-2001: Aged 4-9, Infant Education : Montessori, Montreal.
- 2002: Aged 10, Family moves to Twickenham, London.
- 2002: Aged 11, Secondary Education : Christ's School, Richmond.
- 2003: Aged 12, First introduction to computing: Acquisition of vintage 1980s machines; Commodore 64, BBC B and ZX Spectrum: Begins programming his own original games.
- 2006: Aged 15, First entrepreneurial endeavour. Starts "EnterPrism" with three other students and many contributors: an online magazine featuring; cartoons, art, creative writing, advertising, and video-clips. The magazine runs at a profit selling advertising space to local businesses.
- 2007: Aged 16, Buys and repairs a scooter. Buys first synthesiser keyboard.
- 2008: Aged 17, Takes a two week Summer trip to Paris with his Irish girlfriend Fion Hannah. Competes in the 1st XI Cricket

team scoring two centuries and three half centuries.

- 2009: Aged 18, Secures a place at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University to read Economics. Officially becomes a British Citizen.
- 2010: Aged 19, Gap Year: Works for Google in its UK headquarters. Travels to South America for four months working for the NGO "Food Fund International" for two months.
- 2011: Aged 20: Matriculates at Cambridge University to begin a three year BA degree. Joins the Creative Enterprise Initiative group, the Cricket squad and, starts an Electronic Dance Music band called "Electeron". Enters into a three year relationship with Gina Royce, a Music undergraduate from Newnham College.
- 2012: Aged 21: "Electeron" plays at several college Summer Balls, makes money and records a demo album. Extremely upset when unable to compete in the Blues Cricket Varsity Match against Oxford University due to a broken bone in his foot. Starts "Cover Slip", a small business manufacturing tailor made neoprene laptop sleeves using local business contacts.

- 2013: Aged 22, Works in bar/restaurant as a waiter. Gets into a fist fight with the owner whom he accuses of exploitation. Grades begin to slip from 1st's to lower 2nd's when assigned a new Director of Studies with whom he has a personality clash. Spends more time with "Electeron" and gains a very minor recording contract. Grades continue to decline. Graduates with a 3rd Class Degree.
- 2013: Aged 22, Autumn: Travels to Beijing, Tokyo and Hong Kong using a digital camera for the first time to document his journey, focussing on the lives of everyday people and the 'digital cities' they inhabit. Becomes fascinated by Zen, Feng Shui and Jinba Ittai as related to design philosophies. Begins computer programming again.
- 2014: Aged 23, Returns to England via California, USA in a failed attempt to reconnect with his ex-girlfriend Gina Royce.
- 2015: Aged 24, Begins living and working in Reading, Berkshire. England. Starting with low-paid data entry work for "Prebon-Carter" a firm of Architects. He quickly moves up via IT consultancy, to some serious 3D computer aided design programming.
- 2015-2019: Aged 24-27 Continues to work for the same Architects.

- 2018: Aged 27, Instrumental in personally halting, eradicating and tracing the "Houdini Hijacking", the nation's most serious and highly damaging Ransom-Ware Cyber-Attack to date (several lives were lost and billions of pounds wiped of share values). Hailed as a hero by the popular media and personally thanked by the Prime Minister.
- 2019: Aged 27, Makes many new, influential and rich friends, including Misha Konchalovsky, the daughter of the Russian billionaire Yevgeny Konchalovsky. Is wooed and inspired by political possibilities.
- 2020: Aged 28, Runs as an Independent Candidate for the Reading West By-Election when the seat becomes vacant, winning 48% of the votes and a winning majority of 3,000 votes having designed and activated a genius social media campaign which reforms his University band "Electeron" as the campaign 'soundtrack'. It motivates and appeals to massive numbers of the techno savvy youth vote, the undecided and voters previously dedicated to other parties who are introduced to his infectious and confident charisma.
- 2020: Aged 29, Marries Misha Konchalovsky. Takes up his seat in The Houses of

Parliament, London. Voted GQ best dressed man.

- 2020: Aged 29, Reported missing after hiring a boat on holiday on The Isle of Arran, a Scottish Island. The remains of the boat are found smashed on coastal rocks and after a two week search by the Coast Guard is called off, he is pronounced missing presumed dead. Those who saw him last said he was his characteristically happy self.
- 2021: The enquiry into his death records a verdict of death by misadventure.

As the parents of Raymond Dante had such a strong influence on him as a boy, a youth and his philosophies of politics and life as a young man I wish to give these two formidable people a brief description. It will become clear later just how powerful their attentions to him were to be and how they were to effect Raymond Dante's decision making. I will go into greater depth with regard to this when these become relevant.

- Father : Pascal Thierry Dante : Born 12th June 1963. Studied International Relations at McGill University in Montreal. Rose through public service to become Chief economic advisor to the president of Canada for four

years. Dismissed under a cloud of controversy following an episode regarding the scale of the educational budget in which millions of dollars were unaccounted for. He was never charged with a criminal offence. Moved to the UK following this fall from grace in 2002 when Raymond was 10 years old and gained work on 'The Economist' magazine.

- Mother : Therese Dante : Born September 19th 1965. A celebrated anthropological documentary film-maker, having graduated from The University of British Columbia, whose work for Canadian Television exploring the cultural heredity and art-making methods of Native American Peoples had won many awards both nationally and internationally. Upon moving to London with her husband and son, began work with The BBC as a Producer.
- Married : March 1990 in British Columbia
- Mother, Father and Son all applied for and received British Citizenship albeit at different times.