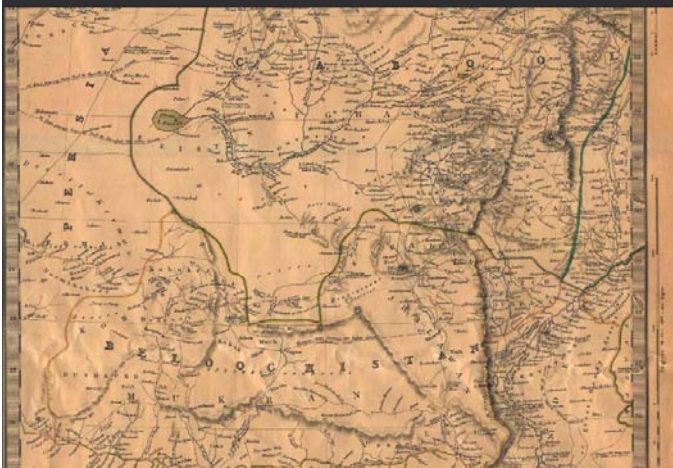


Paul Cudeneec



No Such Place  
As Asha  
An extremist novel

No Such Place As  
Asha

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Paul Cudenec

All characters and organisations depicted in this novel  
are fictional and any resemblance to real people or  
organisations is entirely coincidental.



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*“What is false creates taste, and reinforces itself  
by knowingly eliminating any possible reference  
to the authentic”*

Guy Debord  
*Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*





## CHAPTER ONE

I was lost and panicking in a vast and hostile railway station. I had to find the right platform for my train, which was due to leave at any moment. A confusing number of departure boards were scattered across a maze of interconnected concourses, all thronged with faceless, hurrying, people, but none of them showed the name I was after. The destinations shown weren't all clear: some of them were just shapes vaguely representing what a word might look like if one did not actually focus on it. There were a few which shone out and burnt into my mind. Paris, Algiers, Berlin, Florence, Moscow, Barcelona, Moulsecoomb. But none of them were what I was looking for. I span from one board to the next, desperately trying to find the right train, urgently scanning them time and time again, but still without success.

Then all of a sudden it struck me. I didn't even know what I was looking for! I had forgotten the

name of my destination! I made a huge effort, screwing up my eyes in concentration and plunged into a deep well of my own memory in which lurked, somewhere, the word I had lost. It was as if I was holding my rational breath so that I could swim down into areas of my unconscious to which I usually had no access. All was dark and still I fell, feeling and reaching towards the elusive prize that I knew I had to grasp.

I had it! I rose triumphantly to the surface with the word between my teeth and headed straight for the nearest member of the station staff to proudly present him with my discovery.

“Asha!” I barked to the pale young man in his smart royal blue cap who was manning one of the ticket barriers. “I am looking for the train to Asha!”

He looked at me curiously. “Asha?” he repeated. “How would you spell that, Sir?”

I told him and he jabbed his finger a few times at some kind of device he was holding. He looked up and shook his head slowly.

“I’m sorry, Sir”, he said. “But there’s no such place as Asha!”



It was at that point that I woke up. For a moment I was in that in-between confusion where you know that you have been dreaming, but the content still seems very real and relevant. I realised that Asha was a woman's name – wasn't there a song? – but I was also convinced that there must be a *place* called Asha, or that, if there wasn't, it plainly stood for some other place or concept which would quickly become apparent to me.

I switched the light on and started writing the dream down in the little notebook I keep beside my bed for that very reason. I was eager to get to the bottom of what it all *meant*. But as I did so, I realised with some disappointment that this had maybe not been one of those significant dreams which shed light on our mysterious inner workings, but just a common-or-garden anxiety dream. I was, after all, going to be travelling by train that very day. It is true that I was not likely to forget that I was going to Edinburgh. Or to fail to find the right platform at King's Cross. Or to be told that the Scottish capital did not exist. But there was enough uncertainty surrounding my journey to justify a few nocturnal jitters.

Even if my physical destination was clear enough, the actual purpose of my trip was much

less so. I had effectively been summoned up there by my friend Callum. I could have said “invited”, because it was always a pleasure to see him and his home city again and I didn’t need much convincing. But, generally speaking, *invitations* either revolve around a definite fixed event or they are fairly broad in scope. “If you fancy coming up for a weekend sometime in April or May it would be simply splendid to see you, old bean!” you might say, for instance. But “Can you come up to Edinburgh this weekend if I pay your ticket?” doesn’t quite qualify as a mere invitation in my book. I did, of course, ask why he was suddenly so keen to see me again, after nearly three years, but he was keeping his imaginary cards very close to his metaphorical chest. He did strongly hint that it might involve some paid work, which is always handy when you’re in my situation, but beyond that his lips were as sealed as they can be when you’re speaking to someone over the telephone.

I switched the light off again and lay back, listening to the early-morning racket kicked up by the seagulls. When it got a bit lighter I wandered into the bathroom and peered out at the Brighton below. I loved the view from here. You could see right along the coast as far as Worthing. One of the hills behind the grey blur of that wholly uninspiring resort was Cissbury

Ring, a magnificent ancient hill fort, but I wasn't sure which one. The sea was a pleasing shade of turquoise and although the sky was a little clouded, it wasn't raining. This was good news as it was a good thirty-minute walk to the station – down to London Road and up the other side.

I got myself ready. How much did I need for a few days? Some clothes, including my thickest jumper in honour of Scottish-style Aprils. A book for the train. Finally I remembered to grab a couple of notebooks and a handful of biros for the work in hand, whatever it was. That was an old rule from my reporting days, always to have at least two pens with you. Otherwise, sooner or later, you'll be left feeling even more useless than usual.

I looked around the sitting room and the kitchen before I left, seeing the place almost as if I hadn't lived there for twenty years. It was shabby, that was certain. There was that peeling wallpaper near the sink, where the water had come through. The sofa was looking decidedly saggy and stained. Everything was just a bit faded, decayed. We had never bothered much with decorating, even when Jennifer was still there, but since she'd gone I had found a way of bothering even less. Some of her stuff I had removed from view – various knick-knacks and

postcards she had stuck around the place. It hurt too much to see them there. But other items had stayed exactly where they had always been – the anti-war poster she'd made herself, the postcard of the Black Virgin of Monserrat, the cartoon cut out of *Private Eye*. It hurt too much to take them down. I sighed as I stepped out into my overgrown little front garden. I really ought to do something about this mess, I thought, ducking to avoid the foliage dangling off the front of the house. In fact, I thought, I don't even need a place this size just for myself. I ought to sell it and get a little flat somewhere. But why? I couldn't really summon up the energy. And, in any case, it would feel like a betrayal. It would feel like I was leaving Jennifer here on her own. For eternity.

There were certain highlights of the East Coast line from London to Edinburgh that I always used to look out for when I was travelling up and down there in my student days, thirty-plus years ago. That's when I wasn't on the cheap overnight coach from Parks of Hamilton, with its blurry-eyed 2am stop-offs at neon-lit service stations on the M6 in Lancashire. Compared to that character-forming experience, the five-hour train journey is pure luxury.

Peterborough Cathedral is the first sight of note.

Then York Minster always gave me a little thrill. The sweep across the river around Durham isn't to be missed and neither is the trundle across the Tyne into Newcastle. After that comes the Northumbrian highlight, where the energising views of the cliffs and sea are clouded by the nagging realisation that the wild and bracing atmosphere must be totally ruined, if you are actually there on the ground, by the high-speed trains whizzing past ten yards away. Alnwick and Berwick are definitely worth looking out for, as is North Berwick Tor, but the culminating joy for me always comes when Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh's resident extinct volcano, comes into view. And once you have slipped under its shadow across bridges spanning cobbled city streets, the train is already slowing to pull into Waverley station at the heart of Auld Reekie.

This time, however, there was no sign of the landmark. Not even a shadow. A vast sea fog, a haar, had engulfed the whole Firth of Forth area and deprived me, for the last half hour of my journey, of any evidence of a world outside the train.

"That's very strange for this time of year, you know," said the kindly Scots lady opposite me who had been keen to share with me many fascinating details of her short stay with her

daughter and grandchildren in Hertfordshire. “In April, there’d usually be a wee bit of wind to keep it away from the coast, you know.”

Splendid. The weather had been laid on exceptionally for my benefit.

The sense of disappointment as I emerged from the station was doubled by the realisation that Callum hadn’t come to meet me. He hadn’t said that he would, that was true, but nevertheless I’d fancied he might pop down and suggest an early-evening pint or two in the Grassmarket before we went back to his place.

The city was looking decidedly sinister when I walked out into Market Street, behind Waverley station. I could hardly see the top of North Bridge towering above me and I half expected to encounter the ghosts of Burke and Hare, the celebrated Victorian body-snatchers. I made my way through the grey murk up the stone stairs leading to the Royal Mile, which seemed twice as steep and twice as long as when I was twenty years old, and wondered about treating myself to a beer or a wee dram somewhere on the way to Callum’s.

But it seemed a bit rude, when he knew what time my train was due and might well have

checked online to see if it was on time. Perhaps he had a hot meal waiting for me. Or, even better, had some excellent new bar he wanted to show me in Marchmont.

Flats in Edinburgh are not like flats in the south of England. There's something a bit downmarket about living in a flat where I come from, which is why estate agents have rebranded them all "luxury apartments".

But in Edinburgh, central Edinburgh anyway, the best kind of people live in flats. When you walk up the big central staircases of the massive tenement buildings, smelling of disinfectant and with the odd bicycle chained to the banisters on the landings, you have little idea what lies behind those closed doors.

Once you get inside, you often find yourself in a little middle-class paradise, all stripped floorboards, fancy rugs, nice furniture, tasteful framed posters, classical music and the smell of good coffee.

I had always imagined I would end up living in a nice place like that, one day. I could have, I suppose, if I had really wanted to. But I had never even made the effort. There had always seemed to be more important things to think

about.

Callum's flats had always been of this kind. Ever since he'd been a student, in fact. He'd moved around a few times since then, but somehow it always seemed to essentially be the same Callum's Flat, even when it was populated not just by Callum but by his wife, now ex-wife, Morag, and their son Henry.

I liked Callum Kennedy's way of being. I liked the music he played, the things he said. I liked Callum Kennedy. That was why I had come all this way to see him when he asked me to. But as soon as he answered the door to me I could see that this wasn't going to be the most enjoyable visit to Callum's Flat that I had ever experienced.

His face was haggard, as if he hadn't slept for a week. There was a sort of lifeless quality to it, as if he had lost the power of animating it, even for the purposes of greeting an old friend. He didn't really manage a proper smile, but there was a warmth of recognition in his eyes as he shook my hand which reassured me a little.

It was stupid of me, really, not to have realised that something was amiss. Why else would he so badly need to see me? I suppose I had somehow



imagined the issue at stake as something abstract, a kind of game or challenge with which he needed my help, rather than as something that had touched him to the very core.

Callum led me into the kitchen and apologised for the strong chemical smell – he'd just poured some disgusting fluid down the sink to clear a blockage, he explained. Showing me to a chair at an enormous pine table, he offered me a cup of tea. Not what I had been hoping for, but this wasn't going to be a cheery evening of catching up down the pub, that was plain.

I said yes and once he had handed me a steaming mug – a rather splendid Velvet Underground mug in fact – I decided there was no point indulging in small talk and aimed straight for the central question.

“So what's happened, Callum?” I asked. “What is it?”

“It's Henry,” he replied, looking at me with an expression of unbearable sadness.

“He's disappeared. It's been two weeks.”

I had to take a moment to think about this. I had no idea how many years it had been since I'd

seen his son and I had somewhat lost track of his movements since Callum and Morag had divorced. I didn't really even know how old he was now, though I didn't want to admit that to Callum.

“So, when you say he disappeared, what do you mean exactly?”

Callum shrugged. “He was here in the morning when I left the flat. Still in bed, but we called out goodbye. Then in the evening he was gone, without a word of explanation beforehand or since. I've tried phoning, emails, social media – everything I can think of. But I'm getting nothing back.”

“And he's taken his stuff? Clothes, toothbrush, mobile, laptop?”

“Aye. I'm not completely sure about the clothes, but I think so.”

“Passport?”

Callum smiled wistfully. “I've not found it in his room, anyhow.”

I leant back and breathed a little. The disappearance was not as alarming as I had

feared.

“So young Henry’s been living here full-time lately, then?” I asked, in a less urgent tone.

“Aye,” said Callum. “I mean he’s not been here all the time, but he’s been back since last summer. You’ll mind he was staying with his mother when we first split up, when he was still at school...”

I nodded gravely as if I knew this full well.

“Well, that didn’t work too well because he didn’t see eye to eye with Simon, who’s Morag’s new partner, and unfortunately...”

He looked up at me and suddenly grinned. “It’s not unfortunate, at all, is it? I’m not even going to pretend, Jon, not with you! I was *delighted* to discover that he couldn’t stand the sight of that cunt Simon and *even more* delighted when he insisted on coming back and living with me as soon as he could!”

I smiled, and was pleased that he had snapped out of his complete gloom, but didn’t want to make too much of this good, but old, news in light of the current situation.

“Of course, after that he was at the LSE and we didn’t see that much of each other, even in the holidays. You know what they’re like at that age. You know what *we* were like at that age... God, that’s incredible. He’s the same age now, *older* in fact, than we were when we first knew each other. Do you not find that a wee bit difficult to take in?”

“Well yes,” I said, sitting up straighter in the kitchen chair. “It’s certainly hard to understand how so much time has gone past. Just physically, thirty years seems like such a lot of time, so many weeks and days that I can’t quite believe I have actually lived through all of that.”

While I was saying this, I was weirdly aware that I was expressing something that I had once felt, but did not actually believe any more. Nostalgia about the passing of time, anxiety about the mere fact of ageing, loses all meaning when your existence has been marked by an actual event that has descended on you without warning, tearing your life apart with a stark and ruthless violence which has nothing to do with the gentle and inevitable winding down of our individual days.

“So,” I prompted Callum. “Henry was back here, but now he’s disappeared and you don’t know

where he's gone. Is that it?"

"Aye," he sighed. "But it's more complicated than that..."

He gave me a slightly strange look. "Do you want a biscuit?" he asked suddenly, springing to his feet.

"Yes, that would be good," I said. But I felt he was just trying to postpone the inevitable. I wanted to get to grips with what I was actually there for.

"Perhaps it would be best if you tell me what you think I can do?" I suggested. "Presumably you've got me up here because you think I can help, but I'm a bit lost at the moment. I mean, it's not like he's a missing child or something, is it?"

"Hardly. He's 23. Hang on!" he said, jumping back up again and heading for the other side of the kitchen. "I made this copy for you. I thought you'd need it. I took it myself not very long ago."

He handed me a photo of a rather serious-looking, pale young fair-haired man. I recognised Henry, of course, but there had been some important changes since his boyhood. There was a defensive, closed look about him, but at the

same time you could see at once that this was just on the surface. Beyond that his eyes, the set of his mouth, spoke more of sensitivity. He reminded me of someone else. Not necessarily Callum, I realised, shooting a glance at my friend to check.

“Thanks,” I smiled. “He’s a fine-looking lad. Is there really any reason to think that anything bad has happened to him? I mean, have you called the police? Tried to get hold of his mates, the rest of the family? Morag?”

“Morag, yes of course, and I’ve been in touch with everyone else I could think of, don’t worry. As for the police, no, I’ve not told them. I don’t think they’d take it seriously, at his age, and also I’d rather not have them involved.”

“Why not?”

“That’s what complicated...”

“Listen, Callum,” I said in what I hoped was a decisive manner. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to. Maybe I don’t need to be told. I don’t really even see why you think I’d be able to help find him. I hardly know Henry, in truth. Apart from that week camping in Ireland when he was about four, I’ve barely even

talked to him.”

“That’s just not true, Jon. You spent a lot of time with him when he was younger – d’you not remember? Football on the Meadows, walks up Arthur’s Seat, some kind of strange imaginary city the two of you put together with his Lego and his train set...”

I smiled. I had forgotten all that.

“Morag used to say that you were broody. That you needed a son of your own to look after.”

“Yes,” I said, with a haste born of a strong desire to change the subject. “But I don’t know him *now*, as he is *now*, and I haven’t got a clue as to where he could have got to and what he could be doing. Have you checked the Meadows to see if he’s kicking a ball about down there? Best I can come up with, based on my knowledge.”

“Ah, come on Jon. Don’t be like that. I’ll explain it all to you, but you’re going to have to be patient. I think you’ll understand where we’re at in all this, if you let me take it slowly.”

“OK,” I said, draining the last of my tea and sensing a window of opportunity. “Why don’t you take your time over a nice pint? We could get

some chips on the way to the pub. I'm a bit peckish."

"Oh, Christ. I'm sorry! I should have got something in for you! I just didn't think about it."

"That's OK," I said. "You can make amends by getting the first round in."



## CHAPTER TWO

While we were walking to the pub I took advantage of the pause in the main subject of conversation to catch up with what Callum was doing these days.

He'd always been into poetry and other arty affairs and for years he'd been publishing an occasional glossy journal that you could buy for the price of a book at galleries and over-priced coffee shops around the city. It went down particularly well with the cultured classes who infested the city each summer for the Festival and, although it was a supposedly local publication, probably had more loyal readers in Camden Town than in Craigmillar.

When he started the thing, it was all he could do to scrape together enough cash to get it printed and he had to earn his living elsewhere – at the airport, one of the big banks, an insurance company and, more usefully, at a trendy and

well-frequented bookshop where he was able to make a lot of useful contacts.

But now *edinSpire*, as it was called, had taken off in a big way. Somehow, Callum had tapped into a rich vein of “cultural” funding which had allowed him to ditch the day job and devote himself full-time to his project. There was National Lottery money, Scottish arts grants and all sorts of support from organisations I had never heard of – the Caledonian Cultural Forum, for instance, and the Lothian 2100 Initiative.

I got the impression that Callum in fact spent most of his time dealing with these various bodies and seeking out new subsidies, rather than in actually writing anything about the arts that were supposedly his life’s passion.

“It may sound ridiculous,” he replied when I put this to him, “but I just don’t have time for that any more. There’s just so much organising to be getting on with. Besides, there isn’t really any need. The journal just writes itself!”

I looked at him quizzically. If I didn’t say anything it was mainly because I had a mouth full of haggis and chips – you have to try the local delicacies when you travel abroad.

He didn't expand on his remark so, wiping the brown sauce from my chin, I asked him what he meant exactly, that the magazine wrote itself.

"There's just no shortage of content. Good content! People are desperate to get their stuff published in *edinSpire*, it's as easy as that! They don't even want paying!"

"You mean it's all free puffs?" I countered. "These 'people' of yours send you a gushing review of a simply marvellous new book, or an absolutely startling new film, or a very reasonably priced new macrobiotic restaurant in a converted kirk in Morningside – and you happily oblige by giving them a free four-page spread in your prestigious publication? Is that it, eh?"

Callum should have been used to my abrasive sense of humour after all these years, but I could see from his face that he was seriously offended.

"No, I don't *mean* that, Callum..." I said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"But you do, don't you Jon!", he retorted, shrugging me off. "That's exactly what you think, what you've always thought! That I'm some kind of bourgeois cop-out, the one-time youthful revolutionary idealist who sold his soul to

Mammon!”

“Come off it! All I was asking was...”

“No, sorry Jon. I have something to say here. I can see the criticism you’re making of me and I can see that there is some kind of justification behind it, OK?”

I started to speak but he held up a finger in front of me to direct me otherwise.

“The criticism *could* be justified in theory, right, but it is totally *not* justified when it is coming from you, Jon Harvey, of all people.”

I looked at him in a bewildered manner and shook my head. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? You really don’t know? I mean the *South Coast Investigator*, Jon. Surely you remember it? I know your memory’s not so good these days, but you did work there for the best part of 25 years, as I recollect, before you took your *extremely* early retirement. And how did that little muckraker pay for itself, I wonder? By selling thousands and thousands of copies every week to the grateful citizens of Brighton-Upon-Sea, thankfully alerted to the latest insidious attempts by the global capitalist conspiracy to

cheat them of their money and their liberty? Ah no. Well, fancy that! It was all paid for by a bunch of rich people behind the scenes!”

“Not *all*,” I protested. “We did sell quite a few copies. And there was the readers’ fighting fund...”

“Right. As if that could have ever been enough for even the likes of you to live on, no matter how many bourgeois luxuries you did without!”

“But Callum, it’s not the *same*. I don’t see how you could think it’s the same! The Fat Gitz gave us funding because they agreed with us, because they liked what we were doing, not because we printed free plugs for their albums or their gigs!”

“Are you seriously saying that you never mentioned a single Fat Gitz gig in the *Investigator*?”

“No, I’m not saying that. But I’m saying that we didn’t *have* to. It was never an advert. We didn’t have any fucking adverts, as a matter of principle, let alone adverts dressed up as editorial content.”

“I still think you’re deluding yourself, Jon,” said Callum, in a softer voice, and with a hand on my

arm. “I have the greatest respect for what you did on the paper. That’s why I asked you up here, after all. But you should realise that funding always comes with responsibilities. You can’t separate them. In your case, the responsibility was maybe just to keep on writing what you’d always written, to keep to the editorial line that the old punks were paying for. Maybe that suited you fine. Maybe that’s what you wanted to do anyway. But you had no *choice*, no more choice than I do with the people who pay *my* wages. You couldn’t just wake up one morning and decide to change it all.”

I said nothing for a moment. I was mulling this over.

“It didn’t suit me fine, Callum,” I said quietly after a while. “Not in the end, it didn’t. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe in it any more, it just wasn’t... *enough*. That’s why I got out when I did. My heart just wasn’t in it any more, I suppose. There was Andy of course. He needed the full-time wage to pay for the new baby and that made me feel good about going. But it was an excuse for myself really. I wouldn’t have left if I hadn’t wanted to.”

“I think it’s remarkable that you kept in there so long, Jon, to be honest. Especially after Jenny.”

“Jennifer,” I said softly. “She was never Jenny to anyone who actually knew her.”

“Sorry, yes, Jennifer. You two were always so close, seemed such a perfect couple, that I wondered at the time how you’d cope, if you’d be able to carry on in the same way...”

“No, well, that’s when I needed it most. I had to throw myself into my work, fill up my time, distract myself, keep the guilt at bay. That was when we did some of our best stuff, in fact. The private security thing, all tied up with that council official – I must have sent you the link at the time?”

Callum nodded.

“And the seafront redevelopment project, how that so-called sustainability money was being channelled into building a shopping complex and a fucking casino!”

“I remember. That was in *The Guardian* in the end, wasn’t it? The whole thing fell through, a raft of high-level resignations. An historic victory for the *South Coast Investigator*!”

“Yes,” I said. “Not that anyone remembers that it was us who broke the story first. Apart from

those councillors and their dodgy friends, of course! I sometimes still wonder if I'll get a knock on the door at three o'clock one morning from the Sussex property development mafia..."

Shortly afterwards, we arrived at the bar. I knew it from years ago, when it was called The James Proctor Bar. Now it was Proctor's Pantry.

As we stood waiting to be served, I looked around and remarked that I didn't recognise it at all.

"That'll be because they completely gutted it six or seven years ago," said Callum. "Even the door's not in the same place."

"Good evening! Are you wanting to order some food?" enquired the very smiley neatly-dressed young woman behind the bar.

"No, no, just drinks," I said, wondering if this was still actually a pub or just a novelty pub-themed restaurant. There were certainly menus everywhere and the table service seemed to extend to beer, at least for diners.

Callum read me a mile off.

"There's gentrification for you, comrade!" he said. "You can't get away from it. From Berlin to



Beijing, it's the same global story. I imagine even Brighton isn't completely exempt?"

*"Even Brighton? You're joking! I suspect the whole concept was rolled out in Brighton to see how fast a vibrant urban sub-culture of crusties, environmentalists and awkward-squad locals could be magically transformed into a giant open air shopping mall specialising in hand-woven falafel, Buddhist coffee and vegan bondage gear."*

We sat down with our beers, which in Callum's case was a disappointing half. Disappointing for me, anyway, as I like to be kept company. I tried not to let this spoil my appreciation of a fine Yorkshire bitter. I used to happily drink the local varieties when I lived up there, because there was nothing else, but now that English-style real ales were available there seemed little point in opting for a fizzy 80 Shilling.

After a brief update on the recent footballing fortunes of Hearts, which had hitherto completely passed me by, I broached the question of Henry's disappearance and the complications involved.

"I don't even know where to start," said Callum, holding his head in his hands and evidently slipping back into the state of mind in which he

had opened his front door to me earlier in the evening.

“It doesn’t matter!” I said breezily. “Start where you like, then go back a bit if you fancy, then leap forward a few stages and come back up behind yourself in a complete circle! A good journalist doesn’t need to be told the story in the right order. He should be able to piece it together himself, if he has been provided with all the relevant information.”

“Are you going to be taking notes then, Mr Journalist?” joked Callum.

“As a matter of fact...” I replied and produced a notebook and two pens from my jacket pocket. “Don’t worry,” I added. “I’m not looking for incriminating quotes. I just might need to jot down a few dates, names, that sort of thing. I’m taking this seriously, you know!”

“Yes, of course. Thanks, Jon. I appreciate it.”

I smiled. We were back to getting on, which was a relief.

What Callum told me was that Henry had made a great success of his studies in London and had blossomed into a self-confident and articulate

young man. There had been a steady girlfriend at one point, as well, though that seemed to have petered out. And no – he'd tracked the girl down and Henry wasn't with her.

The only fly in the ointment was Henry's politics. He'd become extremely right-wing – alt-right in the contemporary transatlantic parlance. Callum partly blamed himself for that because, although he had been very militant, if not quite revolutionary, in his student days, he had become very disillusioned with the left and tended to voice his misgivings in no uncertain terms. Looking back, he thought that he was unconsciously try to steer Henry away from making the same “mistake” that he had made, in being drawn into left-wing radical circles. Clearly he had very much succeeded in this respect, but had ended up pushing Henry a tad too far in the other direction.

This wasn't the only influence on Henry's thinking, though. The lad had been educated at one of Edinburgh's better schools but he'd fallen in with a bunch of very right-wing fellows there, Callum explained. I didn't say anything, but smiled inwardly at the blinkered parental perspective. The other dads were probably complaining that their sons had fallen in with the very right-wing Henry.

“So what did they actually *do*?” I asked. “Whatever you think of their views, there’s not a lot of harm in a few precocious schoolboys exchanging daft opinions.”

“They formed the SS,” said Callum.

“What?”

“Officially, it was the Secular Society but they used the initials in that nasty jagged Germanic style and used it as a cover to spread a load of fascist bilge around the school.”

“Presumably the ‘secular’ thing was about opposing the ‘Islamification of British culture’, or some such bollocks?”

“Aye, that’s it. Except it was even worse than that. It wasn’t just the Muslims, it was the Jews, and the Hindus and the Marxists – because communism was a ‘religion’ according to them. They just took all those clichéd prejudices on board and whipped them up into a pastiche Nazi party line calling for all the subhuman lowlife to be rounded up and thrown out of Scotland.”

I shuddered. “They said that?”

“Afraid so. And of course there was hell to pay

when the school realised what they were up to. One of the Jewish boys there told his dad and the whole thing very nearly went public.”

“Were they expelled?”

“The others were – all five of them,” said Callum with a rueful smile. “But not Henry. And while it may have been his mother who got him into the school in the first place, it was very definitely his father who kept him there.”

“How did you do that, Callum?” I asked softly.

“Oh, I pulled a few favours. You wouldn’t believe the connections I’ve got these days! You know who Jim Murphy is, I assume?”

I nodded. “Former leader of the Scottish Labour Party. Your version of Tony Blair, in a way. Mixed up with some dodgy neocon organisation, as I remember?”

“Ah, for Christ’s sake, Jon! Dodgy organisation? You’re so predictable, stuck in your tired old conspiracy theory clichés. It was the Henry Jackson Society. It’s not right-wing – it’s cross-partisan, democratic, liberal, modern! That’s why it’s got Labour people involved in it. Anyway, we ran a big interview with Jim a few years back...”

“Whoah! It’s ‘Jim’ to you now, is it Callum?”

He looked a bit bashful. “Well, OK, I don’t know him very well, personally, but he’s a decent guy, Jon, and working with him and the other Better Together people opened a lot of doors for me, I can tell you. I managed to get introduced to the Jewish boy’s father, from the school, which I think helped a lot. I explained that we weren’t a racist family, that Henry had just got in with the wrong crowd...”

“So you blamed the others?”

Callum shrugged. “Well... I think that’s what you’re supposed to do as a parent. Protect your offspring from the big bad world out there. Wouldn’t you have done the same, if he was your son?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Yep,” I concluded. “I think I probably would have.”

“Anyway,” said Callum. “That’s all I did, blame the others. I managed to reframe the whole situation, if you like.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

I thought for a moment he wasn’t going to

explain. There was something about his expression, or his body language – he had his arms crossed in front of him – that strongly suggested a degree of hesitation.

But he did go on, and he told me, in a rather convoluted way, how he had discussed Henry with a contact of his from the world of Culture, who also happened to be a governor at the school. The “reframing” of the situation involved laying great stress on the anti-leftist and anti-Islamist aspects of Henry’s political viewpoint and playing down the Nazi anti-semitic side. This ideological laundering process had transformed the young fascist into a staunch defender of stability and the law, an heroic partisan for Western freedoms and values.

Apparently this had all gone down particularly well with this chappie, who turned out to have some connections in the cosmopolitan world of think tanks. He suggested that Callum get in touch with the Kitson Institute for Democracy. They ran a range of programmes for young people, aimed at instilling in them an appreciation of the liberties we all enjoyed in our society and the importance of defending them against extremists of all kinds. In this way, he had suggested, Henry could be weaned off the unacceptable aspects of his adolescent political

position and, at the same time, given a positive direction in which to pursue his opposition to radicalisation. Who knew where it could lead? KID did, after all, like to refer to the graduates of its educational programmes as “tomorrow’s global leadership”. Callum had thought it was all a great idea and Henry had had little choice in the matter. Within a few months he had been signed up for a five-year placement on KID’s internship scheme. He could combine his studies at the LSE with an online training programme, with occasional weekend seminars in the UK and summer school in Virginia – which was why his father hadn’t seen too much of him. KID even paid his expenses and a contribution to his student fees.

“The perfect solution!” declared Callum, leaning back in his chair. He had hardly touched his half pint, I suddenly noticed. Too busy congratulating himself.

I must have been wearing a slightly sour expression, because Callum felt obliged to defend what he had done.

“I know, Jon, that KID isn’t exactly your kind of thing. It’s very middle of the road, Establishment, stuff. Centrism. But you have to admit it’s a step in the right direction from where



he was!”

“Yes,” I said. “I can see that, although I’m not sure that being more left-wing than the SS is much of a recommendation! It’s a bit like defending Tony Blair – now there’s a good centrist for you! – on the basis that he isn’t quite as much of a warmonger as Adolf Hitler. But I take your point, yeah.”

Callum looked vaguely satisfied.

“The question is, though, Callum, did it work? Because if it did, I can’t see what all this business has got to do with Henry disappearing and all the complications around it...”

The look of satisfaction had disappeared from his face.

“No, you’re... The thing is...”

He tried to find the right phrase.

“The fact is that I don’t know if it has worked or not, OK? I imagined that it had done so, after all this time. He seemed to enjoy the KID stuff, he was getting good reports and so on. He was due – he *is* due! – to hand in his final project this summer and I thought it was all going very well.”

“But?”

“But, I don’t know, there was something worrying me about the work he’s been doing. Or rather his *reaction* to the work.”

“What does it involve, then? What was his reaction? Why does it worry you?”

Callum raised his eyebrows.

“You really are in full journalism mode this evening, aren’t you? Easy with the questions, Mr Harvey, I can only answer one at the time, OK?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I replied. I was slightly annoyed with him but I had also been waiting for a good excuse to present itself. “I’m going to get myself another pint while you think about some answers. I presume you don’t want another half since that one’s still sitting there in a pristine state?”

On my return, Callum had composed himself enough to give me his account of Henry’s most recent assignment. It involved a report on the ideas and influence behind certain strains of left-wing thinking, roughly around anarchism and environmentalism. He said he suspected Henry had deliberately been given this area to

investigate because of his record of disliking such ideas. It was part of his education, to be exposed to ways of thinking, and to the individuals expressing them, that he could not have previously tolerated. Someone with left-wing leanings would have been sent to find out about right-wing circles. That way, there was also no risk of them being too sympathetic to the ideas they were assessing, which would have compromised their work.

“OK,” I shrugged. “It can’t have done him any harm to hear some common sense being spoken, for a change.”

“I don’t think that’s the way Henry saw it”, said Callum. “In fact, I know that he hated having to listen to and read all that anarchist ‘common sense’, as you call it. It made him angry.”

“Well,” I said. “Maybe that’s not a problem from KID’s point of view. As you said, he’s not supposed to actually agree with them. That’s the last thing they want.”

“There’s a difference, Jon, between disagreement and anger. When I say Henry was angry, I mean he was *furiosus!*”

“Really?”

“He’s always had that in him. Even when he was a bairn, he was forever throwing a fit. We talked about it once, after he nearly killed me, throwing the bread knife at my head over the breakfast table. He must have been about 14 at the time. He said he just couldn’t get in the way of the anger. The emotion just welled up inside him and completely took him over, took over his speech, his body, his movements, everything. I’ve never been angry to that point, myself. I always somehow manage to rein it in. But I suppose some people just can’t do that and explode with rage, time and time again.”

I was feeling sick. I was thinking about Jennifer. I was seeing her running out of the house in Brighton. I was hearing her slamming the door of her car.

“Jon...” Callum was saying, reaching a hand across the pub table. “I didn’t mean... I wasn’t talking about you...”

I shook my head to suggest that I hadn’t imagined he was.

“It’s true that you did always have a bit of a temper on you! Always starting a fight over nothing. I can think of a few moments, there... But that was a wee while ago now, eh? You must

have chilled out a bit, these days, in your old age?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s difficult to tell when you live by yourself and don’t go out much. There’s nothing to test yourself against. There’s nobody to make you angry.”

“Surely not! I can think of a few well-known political figures that must wind you up a fair bit!”

“No,” I said truthfully. “None of that makes me cross any more. I hate them, certainly, and I could make a good moral case for assassinating any one of them. But I don’t want to do it myself. I don’t *feel* anything towards them, other than a sort of cold disdain.”

“Well,” said Callum, giving me a slightly patronising look. “That’s progress of a sort, I suppose. From murderous rage to mere hatred. You *have* mellowed, my old friend!”

I snorted. “Huh! And I suppose that Henry, being 23 years old, is still at the killer instinct stage of emotional expression?”

“Exactly,” confirmed Callum, dropping the light-hearted tone as he did so. “And that’s what

worries me, as you can imagine. I heard him in his room, shouting. Swearing! I think he must have been reading something and reacting to it out loud.”

He looked around him to see who was within hearing distance, and like the good middle class boy he was, lowered his voice before giving me some examples.

“‘That’s just bollocks!’ he was shouting. ‘Fuck off!’ ‘Ah, you commie cunts!’ He was totally out of control. And he was thumping the wall, as well. Punching it, or kicking it. I hope he wasn’t using his head, in any case, though I wouldn’t put it past him!”

“Blimey!” I said. “I’m not sure he’d get on so well with his Uncle Jon these days, with my notoriously pinko opinions.”

“I raised it with him later on, when he was on his way out, and he started up again. He wasn’t angry with me, mind. He was telling me how I’d been right all along about these left-wing wankers and how he couldn’t stomach their shite any more. He wanted out of the whole KID set-up.”

“Right,” I said. “We’re getting somewhere now.”

So you're worried that Henry's walked out on this five-year global leadership apprenticeship you wangled for him and thrown away his main chance of a rosy and prosperous future?"

"Partly, aye. But I'm also worried that he's *not* walked out and is continuing his investigation but with something alarming in mind."

"What sort of something?"

"Well, you know, the murderous rage thing. That he hates these people so much that he wants to kill them. That he's planning to do something like that and he's walked out on me because he doesn't want me to know about it and he knows I'd try to stop him."

"Do you think he's capable of that?"

"I don't know. Not on his own, maybe. And that's another worry. What if he's fallen back in with the far right crowd? What if that's where he's gone? What if he's with them even now and they're planning some kind of attack on the left?"

"Have you sussed out the other boys from the school SS? Checked with their parents if they've seen them?"

“I tried. They weren’t too keen to speak to me, as you can imagine, seeing that Callum was the only one who wasn’t expelled. They’re not all staying with their parents, these days. One of the mothers said she had absolutely no idea where he was. Another one’s joined the police.”

“The police? Shit! Still, he should find plenty of kindred spirits there.”

“And it might not be those lads that he’s with. Edinburgh’s a long way from London and I don’t really know who he was hanging around with while he was down there. I met his girlfriend and a couple of flatmates, but the rest of his life is a complete mystery to me. If you’re up to something dodgy, you don’t tell your parents about it, do you?”

“No,” I confirmed.

“I just don’t have a clue where to start in trying to track him down him. And to stop him, if that’s what he’s up to! I don’t want KID to find out, because that would screw up his career, if he still wants it. I’m not going to tell the police because, even if he’s doing nothing wrong and I’ve got the wrong end of the stick, the mere *suggestion* that he might be some kind of right-wing terrorist would stay on file for the rest of his life...”



“... and pretty much guarantee him a fast-track entry into Her Majesty’s Constabulary, by the sound of it!”

“It’s not a joke, Jon. Not this time. This is fucking serious.”

“I know,” I said. “But I still don’t understand why you think I can help. I don’t have any personal connections to the London Hitler Youth. I don’t know any 23 year olds at all, in fact. I don’t do social media and I haven’t even got a smartphone. How the hell am I going to track him down?”

Callum looked at me intensely.

“Instinct, Jon,” he said. “I trust your instinct. I remember you telling me once, down in Brighton when you’d first set up the *Investigator*, that that was how you worked. You said you ‘played it by ear’. It always stuck with me, that phrase. I imagined you as a sort of scribe cum musician, playing it your own way without having to read the official score. Other journalists went about collecting all the facts and then they wrote them up into a story, giving it the angle that stood up best, you told me. But you began from the other end, with an intuitive, almost mystical, understanding of what was going on behind the

scenes and all you had to do was hunt down the evidence to prove yourself right. I think you can do that with Henry. I think you can find him, even if neither you or I know how. I trust you. Jon, and I need you.”

“My instinct tells me you’re going to buy me another pint,” I said.

## CHAPTER THREE

I had found the right platform, somewhere in the furthest and gloomiest reaches of the massive labyrinth of a station. There was a small sign on the outside of the carriage in front of me, of the old-fashioned pre-electronic variety, bearing the word "Asha". I got in and found there was nobody else there. It seemed unlit, dusty, grimy. It was perhaps an old "smoking" carriage that they had hauled back out of retirement without ever having got round to cleaning.

I sat down on the far, right-hand side of the carriage, facing the front of the train. Immediately, with a jerk, the train set off. I really had only made it by the skin of my teeth. We pulled out of the station, which looked a lot like Brighton station, except that I knew for a fact that we were heading south and if you head that way out of Brighton you are likely to get a little wet.

I couldn't really see where we were going. The double-glazed windows were fugged up a little on the inside and it seemed greyly dark outside. But I quickly became aware that we were veering away from our southwards direction and heading towards the west. In fact, this became more and more obvious to me. The little light that there was inside the carriage seemed to have shifted. I got to my feet and peered out of the window on the other side, as if to try to see the route we should have taken, the place we should have been heading.

There had clearly been a mistake. I had to warn someone! I pushed open a connecting door into the next carriage, but it seemed to consist of endless cupboards, out-of-order toilets and guards' compartments forbidden to passengers. All the doors I passed were locked. Finally, I came into a proper carriage, but still there was nobody there. I pushed on, feeling an increasing sense of anxiety as the train turned further and further towards the west and away from my hoped-for destination.

Suddenly, in front of me was a very different sort of carriage. It was not grey and grimy but beige and warm, as if lit by a cosy log fire. This was first class and, at the far end, was a first-class passenger, clad in a tweed sports jacket and face

hidden by the pink pages of the *Financial Times*. I wasn't sure about entering the carriage to approach him, since I hadn't got the appropriate ticket, so I called out to him from the door.

"Excuse me! Excuse me! Did you realise that we're going the wrong way!"

The man lowered his newspaper and revealed himself to be Callum.

He smiled smugly at me without saying a word.

"Callum!" I shouted. "Did you hear me? We're going the wrong way! We're going the wrong way!"

Still he met my words with the same nonchalant expression and my frustration forced me out of the dream and into the early-morning light of the real-life Callum's guest bedroom.

I needed a moment to recover. Heading in the wrong direction! Was this my famous investigative instinct coming into play? But I hadn't set off in any direction at all yet. I certainly needed to write this down, though, and in the absence of my bedside dream diary I forced myself to get up and find the notebook I had been using the night before. I turned it up the other

way and started from the back. Eventually, somewhere along the line, the dreams beginning from this end would collide with the facts coming from the other, I mused. If I got that far, that was.

Callum was highly amused, over breakfast, to learn that I had brought with me no means of connecting with the internet.

“Of course you can use my old laptop, Jon, but I’m just astonished that someone in your line of work doesn’t carry one around with him, especially someone with a mobile phone that looks like it dates from some time in the last century!”

“It’s my age, I suppose. And my natural aversion to technology. I use the internet now, of course, quite a lot. But I never feel that I *need* it. In fact I know that I don’t need it because we didn’t use to have it and life seemed to function perfectly well.”

“But your investigations, Jon! How could you find out all that stuff, do all that research, without the internet?”

“I can’t deny that I’ve found out things online that I could never have found out otherwise – not

without travelling all over the world, anyway.”

I looked down, playing idly with spare keys that Callum had given me so that I could come and go while he was at work.

“But, you know, we used to manage. When I started the *Investigator*, we phoned people up, we talked to them. We went to council meetings, trawled through the agendas and minutes, the planning applications. We went to the library and looked through the microfiche records of the national newspapers. We spent mornings sifting through volumes listing companies and their directors. We used the phone book and the Yellow Pages. We had our own filing cabinets, stuffed with clippings and photocopies and letters with information that might just come in handy one day. And we had our own minds. We knew things. Who knew who people were, what their history was. We hadn’t outsourced our own memories to the worldwide web.”

I paused and looked up at Henry, meeting his eye.

“And our knowledge of the world wasn’t filtered by the web, either,” I said.

“Ah, Jon. You’re going a bit far there! The

internet doesn't filter the world – it reveals it to us in more complexity and detail than we could have ever dreamed possible back in those slow, clumsy days of typewriters and newspaper clippings!”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I'm not sure. Sometimes I think the only way to get to the real truth is to come off the internet altogether and go back to trusting what you experience directly yourself – what you see, what you hear, what you feel...”

“And what you read? Are you doing away with books as well, here, Jon? Because the printed word is a filter too, you know. Newspapers as well, of course, even ones like the *Investigator*. It may be your *choice* of filter, but it's a filter none the less! Everything anyone says to you is filtered as well, come to think of it! You can't escape filters, Jon! They're part of existence!”

“Individual filters, yes of course. We know they're there. When we read a novel or a newspaper article, or listen to somebody's account of something, we know that that's just their take, their *version* of reality. They don't pretend to *be* reality, they don't try to lull us into the false security of *imagining* that they are faithfully reflecting the whole of reality and that we don't have to look elsewhere for the truth...”



Callum brought me over a fresh warm wholemeal slice from the toaster.

“The only reality I’m interested in at the moment, Jon, is where Henry is now and what he’s up to,” he said rather too glibly, evidently wanting to draw the conversation to a close.

“I don’t really care about the overall integrity of the internet if it can serve as a tool to find that out. Your philosophical questions are all very interesting, but I think I’ll put them on the back burner for a while, until I have less pressing matters to attend to! Which reminds me, I really have to get moving.”

Callum didn’t work from home any more, like he had always used to. He was renting a ground floor in Regent Terrace, one of Edinburgh’s poshest addresses. He admitted that he didn’t really need a separate office for most of his work. Phone calls and emails could be handled just as effectively from his sitting room. But what he really gained was a *presence*. With a real office and a real nameplate on the door, *edinSpire* was more than just a magazine – it was an organisation, an institution even. Callum explained that he liked to invite his “contributors”, which I mentally translated as “advertisers”, to meet him at the office, even if it

was just for a quick chat before they went out for lunch. He had an administrative assistant who was based there and, since his other paid staff worked from home, he made sure there was always a bright young work experience person on hand to impress his visitors.

Before Callum left, he showed me Henry's bedroom. Nothing extraordinary. A set of dumbbells, a pile of dirty and slightly malodorous clothes, a shelf of DVDs. A poster of an old, charmingly inaccurate, map of the world. Books on history and politics which Callum told me said more about the contents of Henry's university course than of his mind. Overall, it was disappointingly tidy. There were no piles of paper that might have yielded clues. Maybe young people didn't make little notes any more. It was all electronic, saved on their phone or laptop. And he'd taken both of those with him.

There was obviously a bit of cash going spare in the Kennedy empire, so I hadn't put up too much resistance when Callum proposed to pay me a modest wage for my efforts, as well as covering my costs. It would have been rude to have refused, I told myself.

When the Chief Editorial Executive of *edinSpire* had disappeared off for the day, dressed up in a

designer suit and waving around his car keys just to make sure I understood he wouldn't be taking the bus, I decided I had better get to work, since I was now employed.

I worked out how to turn on the laptop and checked my mail. There was nothing much, apart from news of a Summer Sale at Whitedean Garden Centre, which I had visited once, five years previously, in a short-lived moment of gardening enthusiasm. I had no idea why I had given them my email address – a prize draw or something I supposed – but they had kindly kept in touch ever since and I had never had the heart to unsubscribe. That and a reminder of the next quiz night at the Frog and Princess. I deleted both without opening, as usual.

I did my usual little round of news sites, to make sure I wasn't missing anything, then thought about how I could go about trying to find Henry.

I fired off a few emails and then created some social media accounts so I could send messages to the various contacts for Henry that Callum had left me. Just a friendly little "hello" from your old Uncle Jon, that entirely unmemorable friend of your father's that you met on a handful of occasions a very long time ago. If he was ever Down South, I'd love to take him out for a bite to

eat and catch up. It seemed unlikely to work, in the circumstances, but it would be absurd not at least to have tried.

Then I went through the usual obvious searches. There were a lot of Henry Kennedys out there, many of them in the USA, and although I did track down a couple of references to the right one, they weren't recent and led me nowhere.

Casting the net a bit further, I searched for "Secular Society" and Edinburgh. There was one, in fact – but a perfectly respectable and genuine one and nothing to do with Henry or his school. I chanced my arm with searches around Hitler, the SS, Islamification and so on, throwing in Henry's name from time to time, plus his school and the London School of Economics. But none of the many combinations took me anywhere useful.

I made myself a coffee and helped myself to a couple of biscuits from Callum's impressively-stocked barrel.

I checked to see if Henry had replied to any of my messages. No, not yet. I felt stuck already. So much for my famous instinct! I went and fetched my notebook to see if I could find something else that I had written down the previous evening.

When I opened it, I started at the wrong end and found myself instead revisiting the dream I'd had that morning. What was all that about? And what was this "Asha" place, anyway? Did it actually exist?

I put it into the search box and was surprised to see that, after the first three letters, the whole word popped up, alongside the little symbol which means you've already searched for it.

I followed through, arriving at an initial results page of sites which all seemed to have been previously visited on this laptop. Top of the list was the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and below that was a Wikipedia entry on "the decisive confessional concept of Zoroastrianism" which apparently couldn't be properly translated out of the now-defunct Avestan language.

The rest of the results on the page proved equally unhelpful – there was the name Asha, of course, plus some yoga classes and a trust providing education for disadvantaged children. I carried on to the next page. There was a band called Asha, and a horse rescue organisation in France. And there was the American Sexual Health Association. I sniggered to myself. All of these sites had already been visited by this computer.

Had Callum caught a dose of the clap when he was over in the USA last summer? He hadn't mentioned that in his postcard!

I kept looking. There were housing associations and spas, accredited social health activists, stock horse associations, tea houses and training centres, page after page. And every single link had been clicked on by a previous user of Callum's laptop. This wasn't just a casual glance. This was a thorough and systematic piece of research.

Research! Of course.

I rang Callum on his mobile. He was evidently in the middle of something but I only had a quick question for him.

"The laptop you lent me, Callum – did Henry use it at all before he disappeared?"

"Umm... Yes, in fact! His own one was in for repairs, caught a virus off some dodgy site I wouldn't be surprised, and I did lend it to him for a couple of weeks. Why? Have you found something?"

"I don't know," I said. "It might be nothing. But now I know he used it, I'll dig a bit more. I

haven't got much else to go on, to be honest.”

Having promised to keep Callum updated, I tried to access the browser's history of sites visited to see what else Henry had been looking at, but it seemed to have been cleared. So I tried another search – Asha and Edinburgh. This, like the others, had already been made. There was an Asha Takeaway which totally dominated the results. I felt a little deflated. It could have just been that – young Henry had ordered himself a curry, end of story. And my dream? Maybe fate was directing me to a Chicken Madras in Corstophine Road?

But on the third page down, I came across something a lot more interesting – The Leftover Library, described as “Edinburgh's leading collection of radical, subversive, and heretical writings, freely available to all”. The site itself was minimal – indeed it was only a page. “Welcome to an emergency exit from the suffocating surface of this painfully plastic planet!” it declared. “This library is Leftover from a parallel universe, another world which remains elusive but never impossible. From time to time, from side to side, from this to that, from here to nowhere, the ever-oscillating siren of gnosis lures us into the underground labyrinths of literary meditation, metaphysical revolt, ideological

paradox, poetical uprising and philosophical insurrection, where we hope one day to stumble across the key to the treasure chests of our deepest yearning and belonging. The Leftover Library is a place to be lured – lured into being truly alive!”

Underneath was the address and that was all. No sign of Asha, even when I searched the contents of the page. This did happen sometimes, though. It must have been some kind of tag or key word, hidden out of sight deep in the metadata. But the relevance to Henry’s research was clear. “Revolt”, “ideological”, “uprising”, “insurrection” – it certainly sounded of interest for his project on the radical left, whether that project was simply student research or something more alarming and right-wing. I checked back on the results page and saw that, although the next couple of links had also been visited, from that point on there didn’t seem to have been any follow-up. It was as if Henry had thought he’d found what he’d been looking for.

As, indeed, did I.



## CHAPTER FOUR

The library was in the old city of Edinburgh, the part I like best, so I was doubly motivated to go straight down there and find out some more. This is a strangely three-dimensional part of town, whose layout is difficult to grasp for somebody new to the place. The Royal Mile is essentially a long sloped ridge leading up to the castle, which perches on a rocky crag overlooking Prince's Street and the New Town to the north. On the other side, the south, is a valley, through which run Grassmarket and Cowgate. But you don't always realise the valley is there, because bridges have been built over it in the form of busy city roads, full of buses, shops and pedestrians. The buildings that you see at this upper street level are tall enough at first sight, but in fact they are the top part of many more layers of building reaching right down to the bottom of the valley below. The levels are joined by a myriad of little medieval passageways and stairs, plus a few winding streets, which give the

city a unique and mysterious charm.

The Leftover Library was apparently to be found in a little close near Candlemaker Row, the road which leads down to the Grassmarket from Greyfriar's Bobby, a faithful hound who was rewarded for his loyalty to his dead master by being transformed into a small statue widely admired by sentimental American tourists.

The fog had disappeared and there was even a touch of spring sunshine on my back as I ambled across the Meadows. After the excitement of having stumbled across some sort of lead to follow, I was now asking myself a few questions. This was all a bit mental, when you came to think of it. What did my dream have to do all with this? That was the only reason I had searched for this Asha place. It was true that this had allowed me to discover that Henry – presumably – had also searched for the term, and that this search had led to a lefty bookshop that may well have interested him, but there was still something unsatisfyingly irrational about the whole process. When I wrote down my dreams, it was to try to understand what was going on in my own head, rather than to look for mystical insights into the reality of the outside world. I was uneasy about my methodology and tried to work out an explanation that would put

my mind to rest.

After five minutes I had it. It was obvious! The key was the Indian takeaway, Asha. We must have had a meal from there before, when I was up. The name had lodged in my unconscious and when I knew I was on my way back up to Edinburgh it had tossed it back up into the twilight of my dream world, without my rational mind having any idea of its meaning. Henry, too, had started looking for the curry house. But while he was online, perhaps while he was waiting for his dinner to be delivered, he had carried on idly looking through the other results on the page, perhaps trying to find out why they'd chosen that name. When he came across the library site, he realised he had accidentally come across something significant for him.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Yes, it was quite simple. We'd both come across the same website purely by chance. The only mysterious force at work here was the hypnotic pull of onion bhajis and sag aloo.

I was nearly at the north side of the Meadows now and was half tempted to take a detour via Bristo Square and the university buildings where I had hung around in my youth, but I wasn't particularly in the mood for nostalgia – or rather

the depressing confirmation of how many decades separated me from the current generation of adult-sized children who would be milling around there.

Instead I made straight for the dead dog and, not even pausing to give it an affectionate pat on the head, I plunged down into the lower levels of the town. The passageway I was looking for, Deacon's Close, was somewhere off Merchant Street. This was a cul-de-sac, framed by an elegant arch of George IV Bridge which ran above, and it was not immediately clear that there were any alleys leading off it. But at length I found it – the narrowest of entrances that could only be seen from a very particular angle. After a few paces, the passageway became steps, which led me abruptly down between the dark walls of ancient tenements, twisting as they went. No chance of that spring sunshine down here, I was thinking, when suddenly I turned a corner and found myself in dazzling brightness. I had arrived at a little terrace, somehow perfectly aligned to welcome the sun through a gap in the buildings above. There was a lovely sweet odour, which I quickly saw was coming from the honeysuckle growing over some railings. And there was a little doorway topped by a hand-painted sign announcing The Leftover Library.

I pushed at the heavy old door and it opened to the tinkling of a merry little bell. The smell that immediately struck me now was that of books. And as my eyes adjusted to the relative darkness inside, I saw that there were hundreds of them here, on shelves covering every wall, from floor to ceiling. The space was narrow, which didn't give it much of a presence from the outside, but I saw at once that it more than made up for this in depth. I couldn't see where the library ended from where I was. As I scanned round, the last thing I noticed was that right in front of me, close to the door, was a sofa. And on the sofa were sitting two elderly men. My initial reaction was that they were the same person, duplicated, and my second more logical thought was that they were twins. But my third response was that they didn't really particularly resemble each other at all. The one on the left was thin, with sharp features, while there was something softer and rounder about his colleague. What made them look so alike was their clothing – they both were wearing rather crumpled black corduroy jackets and red cravats tucked into beige or grey shirts – along with their matching spectacles and some indefinable way of being that the two of seemed to share.

Both them were holding cups and saucers in their hands and both put them down on the little

coffee table in front of them when I came in.

“Good morning, good morning!” said the first of the pair, rising up from his settee. “Do come in, Sir!”

The other half stood up and echoed the greeting.

“Morning!” I said. “I’m glad you’re open! I wasn’t sure what sort of hours you’d keep here.”

“Oh,” said the first librarian, stepping forward to shake my hand. “We’re generally open, aren’t we Frank?”

“Indeed,” said Frank. “Or at least we tend to be open when people need us. It’s rather magical, I always think, Frasier!”

“Oh yes,” concurred Frasier. “Only I’ve never quite worked out whether we find ourselves open because a reader is coming to look for us, or whether the reader naturally comes looking for us when he realises we’re open! It’s all the same, in the end of course. One doesn’t have to always look for a cause and effect – overrated concept in any case, don’t you think, Sir!”

I was a little taken aback by this chain of thought and just chuckled in what I hoped was

an agreeable kind of way.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure before have we, Sir?” asked the first librarian.

“No,” I confirmed. “This is my first time here.”

“It’s always such a rewarding moment when we welcome a new reader here, isn’t it Frank?”

“Very much so, Frasier. The books can get so frustrated waiting for their Intended to come and find them!”

“Erm...” I began, “I hate to disappoint, but I haven’t really come to borrow a book. Not on this occasion, anyway.”

“There’s no disappointment at all,” said Frank. “Because it doesn’t matter *why* you think you’ve come here.”

“No, that’s not the point,” added Frasier. “It’s of no relevance to the overall picture.”

“OK, fine,” I said. “That’s good to know. What I did come here for was to ask you about a fellow who may have called in here recently.”

“Ah yes!” said Frasier. “He was certainly here –

not very long ago.”

Frank coughed and gave Frasier a disapproving look.

“I think my colleague here has rather jumped the gun, Mr...?”

“Harvey. Jon Harvey.”

“Mr Harvey. Of course. Delighted to meet you at last. I think you were about to show us a photograph of the young man in question, no?”

“Yes...” I said. “I was, in fact. His name is Henry. Henry Kennedy.”

As I got the photo out of the envelope in my pocket, I couldn't stop myself from asking Frank how he had known it was a young man that I was enquiring about.

“A good question, Mr Harvey. Well, for a start I suppose that young persons are generally more sought-after than us older ones. With age, we gain the ability to become invisible, to disappear if you like, without anybody being unduly concerned about our whereabouts. And then, I suppose, it would be fair to say that we only have a certain number of visitors here and most of



those we know very well. They are regular readers. We can *account* for them, you might say...”

“Although sometimes there’s no accounting for their taste in books!” added Frasier and both men collapsed into a near-delirious bout of laughter.

“And I suppose it’s pointless asking how you guessed I had this with me?” I asked as I handed Frank the photo.

“You would have hardly have come here without one, now, would you?” he smiled. “And when it comes to young people these days, there certainly seems to be no shortage of globally-available images of them from which to make a selection, is that not so?”

Frasier was peering over his colleague’s shoulder to have a look.

“Ah yes,” he said. “America, of course!”

“Sorry?” I said. As far as I’d noticed, Henry was standing in front of a brick wall that could have existed anywhere from Croydon to Calcutta.

“Yes,” said Frank. “He’s right. It’s just that little

corner of the sign in the top corner there, do you see? Very American! It's a shame the photo has been cropped in so tight or you might know a little bit more about his travels, Mr Harvey."

"Jon," I said, "do call me Jon", a little unsettled by this formal way of addressing me, which somehow carried with a slight undertone of teasing mockery.

"Yes, well of course young Henry was indeed in this very library not so long ago, as you seem to have already divined, errr... Jon," said Frank.

The "Jon" sounded even worse than the "Mr Harvey" – it just wasn't right coming from his lips – but I wasn't about to ask him to switch back again.

"I didn't really..." I began to explain, but was interrupted by Frasier, who inevitably had something of his own to add.

"He was here after his wee holiday in the United States, judging from his tan, wouldn't you say, Frank? He certainly didn't get that on the beach at Musselburgh!"

"Quite so, Frasier!" agreed Frank.

“And what did he do here, if I may enquire?”

Both of them burst out laughing again.

“Naturally,” said Frank when they had finally finished, “he borrowed some books. As a rule, that’s what people do here. This is a library, you know Jon!”

“Do you know what books? Did he come in looking for anything in particular?”

The two of them were looking at me with something approaching pity. Frasier was shaking his head, in a sad sort of way.

“Shall I tell him, or you, Frasier?” asked Frank.

“I can do it!” said Frasier. “Well, Mr Harvey...”

“Jon,” corrected Frank.

“Well, Jon, there are three elements at play here. Firstly,” – and here he raised one finger in the air – “there is the question of confidentiality. We’re surprised that a man like you would apparently expect a library, a library of our most intimate inner desires, to reveal one customer’s loan history to another.”

I tried to say something but he cut me short, holding two fingers aloft.

“Secondly, nobody ever came to a library who wasn’t looking for something in particular, even if they might not be capable of knowing *what* exactly it was they were looking for.”

He added another finger.

“Thirdly, you have no need to ask us what this young man was looking for, because you know the answer already. You are looking for him, and thus in order to track him down you are looking for what he was looking for.”

“Furthermore,” said Frank, “there is an additional point which is not exactly a fourth one but more of a logical extension to point three, I would say. If you, Jon, are looking for the same thing as the young man, then you will, by following the same intuition, inevitably come across the very books that he borrowed.”

I was struggling to follow all of this. I had no idea what they were on about.

“Look,” I said. “I should explain that I’m here on behalf of the young man’s father, who’s a friend of mine and is very concerned about his son’s

whereabouts and welfare. I quite agree that normally you should keep people's reading habits confidential, but I would really appreciate it if you could make an exception here and just have a little look on your database and see if there's anything there that could help us understand what's happened to him..."

As soon as I had pronounced the word "database" I'd realised that it had as much place in this library as an orang-utan in a jar of gherkins.

They were both laughing again.

I needed to try another tack, switch temporarily from Henry to something else.

"Asha," I said suddenly. "Do you have any books about Asha?"

That certainly shut them up. They looked at me with what could almost have been admiration.

"Well there you are..." said Frank.

"You *did* know what we were talking about, after all, didn't you Jon?" added Frasier.

"Help yourself!" said Frank. "Feel free to borrow any books you like!"

I shifted a little impatiently on my feet, glancing around at the shelves.

“Yes,” I said. “But where...? Where do I find the books in question?”

This time Frank and Frasier stopped themselves from laughing out loud, although it was clear they very much wanted to.

“How would you normally find a book in a library, Jon?” asked Frank.

“Well, I’d maybe look in the catalogue. Or I’d find the appropriate category and head for that shelf... I don’t see how else...”

“We don’t like categories here,” said Frank.

“There’s a whole way of thinking behind them,” explained Frasier. “It’s the way of separation, of dispersal, of fragmentation and multiplication! Categories are always arbitrary. There isn’t a single book worth reading that could be wholly contained within one single category. Why bother writing it, otherwise? You could just do away with the whole content and sum it up with one word.”

“The word of the category,” said Frank, in case I

had not understood.

“There’s always some kind of overlap. Some kind of nuance. Some kind of *depth* to a book that lifts it out of the dreadful one-dimensionality...”

“Alienated one-dimensionality, Frasier!”

“... the dreadful alienated, separated, torn-out-of-context one-dimensionality of belonging to a single category!”

“There’s always cross-referencing!” I muttered, feeling the need to throw a little cold water on this overblown polemic.

“Oh yes,” said Frasier. “Very modern, postmodern even! The intersectionality of categories! That’s where the truth resides!”

“Or in the gaps between them if you’re *very* clever,” chuckled Frank.

“But you’re still trapped on the same plane, on the same dimension!” continued Frasier. The subject of categories had brought him to life in a remarkable manner and he was now pacing around the front of the library, waving his hands around to emphasise his points. I supposed this was the sort of pointless nonsense you thought

about all day, if you spent your life stuck in a library.

“You’re still trying to build up a picture of reality, the overall complete reality of a book in all its richness and complexity, based on pathetic little thin metaphorical strips of paper with a single word on them. Having two or three of these little strips doesn’t make any difference. You could ascribe 20 categories to a certain volume and it would still *reduce* it to an extent that is unbearable to any real lovers of books and all that they mean!”

“All right, then.” I said, feeling this explanation had gone on long enough now. “So there are no categories here. And, I suppose, no catalogue?”

“No,” said Frasier, “the idea of trying to condense all of...”

“That’s fine!” I blurted out rather rudely. I had to try and keep calm here, despite the frustrating circumstances. This was the only lead I had so far and these two clowns were the only people who could help me. I tried to pull myself away from the immediate situation. I thought of Brighton. I thought of Jennifer. I thought of death. Nothing here could touch me any more.



“I’m sorry”, I said, smiling sweetly, and deploying an especially soft voice. “It’s just that it’s been very stressful for my friend, all this business, and I’m very keen to get on with finding Henry, the young man in question. I don’t even know if this issue of books is even going to be of any help, so I’d really like to move forward with this as quickly as possible. What I’d really appreciate at the moment, from you both, Frank and Frasier, is some practical guidance as to how I might go about looking for some information on Asha.”

I cringed a little at my use of their names – it sounded so fake-friendly – but decided that it was a proportionate response to their own style of speaking to me.

“What admirable clarity!” said Frank, positively beaming with enthusiasm. I was relieved to see that my outburst had not caused too much damage.

“Indeed,” said Frasier. “I would say you are definitely in the right state of mind!”

“For what?” I asked.

“For finding something!” said Frank. “First of all you need to be completely clear about what it is you are looking for and then you have to stop

looking for it.”

“*Stop* looking for it?” I queried.

“Oh yes,” said Frasier. “It’s the next level of clarity. All that desire and anxiety and effort just gets in the way. You need to cut all of that out, all the clutter and confusion, and leave enough room.”

“Enough room,” clarified Frank, “for the books to come to you.”

“So in practice,” took up Frasier, pre-empting the question that was already forming in my mouth, “this is what we recommend.”

He whipped a cloth from his jacket pocket. It was, I saw on further examination, a silk scarf, made up of dozens of little patches of different colours.

“I suggest we go through into the middle of the library, the heart of the matter if you like, and I will then cover your eyes with this trusty fabric. We’ll set you spinning around a little...”

“Like a Dervish!” giggled Frank.

“...and then we’ll let the books find you.”

Frasier paused and frowned.

“Of course, you understand that in a merely physical sense it will be *you*, rather than the books, that move...”

“I’m glad to hear it!” I answered, my mind suddenly filled with a vision of dusty tomes leaping off the shelves and crashing into my skull from all directions.

“... but it will nevertheless be the books that make the effort.”

“You need do nothing,” stressed Frank, “except step forward and welcome the books that have sought you out.”

Inwardly, I was highly amused by all this. I was already imagining myself recounting the whole incident to Andy in the pub back in Brighton. Library books that volunteered to be read! What a madhouse I had stumbled into! Nevertheless, I managed to keep a straight face and went along with their insanity, which seemed harmless enough.

I was certainly free from all desire and effort when they blindfolded me and twirled me around amidst the shelving. I was absolutely sure that

this whole rigmarole could serve no useful purpose whatsoever.

I took two random steps to my left and then immediately stepped forward and felt for the nearest row of books. I really didn't care which one I took, so I fumbled around a little and then pulled out the one that seemed easiest to extract.

"Aha!" said Frank's voice when he had taken it from my hands. "Excellent! Let's go for a second!"

This time I wandered a little further away from the starting point, stretched out a hand and literally took the first volume that I touched.

"Marvellous!" said Frasier, when he had seen my selection. "You're a natural at this!"

The next time I miscalculated my position and stumbled into a bookcase, which was evidently not as solid as some of the others and wobbled alarmingly. There was a heavy thud.

"Oops, sorry!" I said, realising I had knocked a book to the ground in my clumsiness.

"Don't apologise, my dear friend!" said Frank. "That is a beautiful thing to have happened! We said the books wouldn't be physically coming to

you, but that wasn't true!"

"They are very keen," added Frasier. "There's a real energy here. Quite extraordinary!"

I repeated the process another couple of times – spinning, stepping forward and quickly taking the first volume that came to hand. On each occasion the two librarians sounded delighted at my choices.

"I think we're done!" declared Frank.

"Oh yes, done to a turn!" Frasier chipped in.

"A turn of the perennial page, Frasier!"

"A left turn of course, Frank!"

"Depending on which way up you happen to be holding the book, Frasier!"

The pair of them burst out laughing once again. They really were quite bonkers, these old birds.

They removed the silk scarf and solemnly showed me the pile of books that I had pulled randomly from the shelves.

*The Meaning of Culture* by John Cowper Powys

*What is Art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys*

*The Patterns Within* by Anahid Vishnyakova

*Natural Solidarity: the Organic Anarchism of Peter Kropotkin* by Mathijs Z. Jansen.

*The Book of Chuang Tzu*

I picked up a couple of the books and flicked through a few pages of each. I glanced again at the titles of the others.

“These really do look very interesting,” I said.

“But?” asked Frank.

I smiled – he had read my thoughts.

“But I don’t see what any of these have got to do with Asha.”

“That’s just what *he* said!” said Frasier in a delighted tone.

“Who?” I asked automatically, then realised.  
“Henry?”

“Yes,” said Frank. “In the very same words. Remarkable!”

“So...” I went on. I was having difficulties with all this. “So the books he found weren’t to do with Asha, either?”

“Where to even begin with that question!” said Frank. “The books *he* found? Not *to do with* Asha?”

“And the *either* just compounds the whole confusion!” said Frasier.

“Sorry, I don’t...”

“The *either* is a nonsense because there is only one set of books!” Frank cut in. “I thought we had explained this already. The books *he* found are the books *you* found!”

“Are you trying to tell me that Henry came here and picked out exactly the same pile of books that I have just pulled off the shelves?”

“Absolutely! Magical, isn’t it?”

I was shaking my head. “I’m afraid I really can’t believe that... The same books? It’s just not possible...”

Another objection suddenly struck me.

“Did he come back later, to return the books he’d borrowed?”

“Oh no,” said Frank. “Not yet. But there’s no hurry. We’re very patient here.”

“So how can I have borrowed the same books? If Henry’s still got them?”

The pair looked at each other and sighed in unison. Frank seemed to give the nod to Frasier to speak first.

“We wouldn’t be much of a library, would we Jon, if we only had *one* copy of every book?”

“Especially of the most *important* books. The books that know they are waiting for their readers to come along.”

“What you see here,” continued Frasier, “is only the *public* part of the library. Out the back are the storerooms and they are *very* extensive, believe me.”

“One day, perhaps, we might agree to show you a small part of our archives...”

“When you’re ready for it. When you have a little more *understanding* of what we are about...”



“But I can tell you that I have been working here for more than forty years and I have yet to explore the whole of it.”

I drew a sharp breath. “You’re not serious?”

“Oh yes,” answered Frasier on Frank’s behalf. “He’s quite serious. The same goes for me. The previous librarian, Miss Freda, a very knowledgeable woman, once told me that the lower levels of the archives...”

“They reach down, you see, right down towards Cowgate and possibly even deeper...”

“... that the lower levels reach out far beyond these buildings here, this close and the streets around. She told me...”, and here Frasier leant towards me in a conspiratorial whisper, “... that they stretch right along under the Royal Mile. She said that there’s an underground passage between the Castle and Holyrood Palace and that on either side of the passage can be found vault after vault of our archives, endless resources of knowledge and wisdom lying patiently there, half asleep, waiting for the day when Scotland and the human race decides to call upon them.”

I was about to ask how on earth they could ever find what they were looking for in this

impossibly enormous storage area of theirs, when I realised that I had already personally experienced their methods. I was lost for words. I didn't believe anything of what they were telling me, but it felt appropriate to play along.

"I see," I said rather weakly. "So you're saying that Henry and I chose different individual copies of the same books?"

"Exactly."

I looked down at the volumes in question. Art. Culture. Patterns. Nature.

"But," I blurted out. "Why *these* books? What's their *relevance*?"

"For that, Jon," said Frank. "You're going to have to *read* them!"

"It's the best way to grasp the relevance of any book, I've always found," added Frasier with more than a hint of sarcasm.

I glanced again at the stack in front of me and must have looked apprehensive.

"If you're in a real hurry," volunteered Frasier in response. "If you have a *lot* of relevance to digest,

there is a particular technique that can be employed. It follows on from the way you found the right books. If you accept that it was in fact *them* that found you, then you can also allow them to *show* you their most important contents...”

“Important for you, of course” interjected Frank. “Because, from an objective point of view, every single word in a book is as important as any other.”

“Indeed, Frank. So if you want the books to tell you what you want to know, I suggest you surrender yourself to the flow of chance, as you did just now. Carry the books with you at all times and when you want to hear them speak, close your eyes and select one at random...”

“It would work better with the library scarf, of course, but unfortunately we cannot allow it to leave the premises...”

“... and then allow the book to fall open at whatever point it fancies. Somewhere in there you will find what you were looking for...”

“... or *not* looking for! Because you mustn't try!”  
“That would spoil it!”

“They don’t like that!”

“You have to set them free!”

“Let them speak!”

“Let the knowledge flow!”

“Do you understand?”

“Do you trust us on this?”

“Yes,” I told them, although this was not entirely true.

I put the books in my rucksack. They weren’t interested in taking down my details, or even noting my name.

“But we know your name, Jon!” said Frank.

“We know *exactly* who you are, don’t you worry!” added Frasier.

As I prepared to leave, I became uncomfortably aware that a handful of library books were not necessarily going to get me any closer to finding Henry. Even if I could accept that these were the same books that he’d borrowed, which I couldn’t, they didn’t hold out any specific promise of

tangible leads. I felt somehow that there was something I had missed, something else to be gained from my visit.

I had a look at some of the other books on the shelves, the ones that I hadn't picked. There was the same eclectic mix. None of them seemed to be displayed in any sort of logical order. After a few minutes, I gave up looking.

"Did Henry talk about anything else?" I asked. "Did he ask any questions?"

"Questions?" replied Frank. "Oh yes, there were a lot of questions!"

"A lot of very stupid questions!"

"A lot of stupid and impertinent questions, but then what would you expect from a young man of his kind?"

"Kids will be kids, as they say!"

Much laughter ensued.

"But what *about*? What were his questions *about*?" I persisted.

They both looked at me, knowingly, but without

replying.

I noticed suddenly that behind the door was a wall bearing a display of posters and a little table covered with leaflets. I'd missed all this on the way in. I glanced at the posters and looked through the leaflets. A talk on the French Revolution at a bookshop in Stockbridge. A "laughter yoga" workshop in Leith. A series of Polish classics at the Edinburgh Filmhouse.

"Did he take any of these, do you remember?" I asked, without turning round. There was no response, so I carried on rifling through.

My eye was suddenly caught by a very different kind of leaflet, not at all of the smooth and professional variety. There was a hand-drawn black and white image of a masked and hooded young person, arm raised behind their head as if they were throwing something. Beyond were rows of police helmets and riot shields. "Mayday Mayday! Smash the WF!" declared the headline in a very fetching Stencil font. I flipped it over and saw that the WF was the World Forum, which was apparently meeting in London in a week's time. There was a big "day of action" being planned for May 1, during the summit and a "convergence centre" was being set up beforehand to welcome "comrades from across

the UK, Europe and beyond who want to join us in telling the neoliberal capitalists of the WF that they are not welcome in our city – or in our world!”

There was a website address plus email and mobile phone contacts. I tucked the leaflet into an inside jacket pocket and looked round to see the two librarians grinning at me. Smirking was maybe the word.

“Well there you are,” said Frank.

“Questions have a funny knack of answering themselves,” added Frasier.

This time I didn’t feel the need to ask them anything, not even a confirmation that Henry had taken one of those leaflets. I seemed to be getting the hang of their peculiar way of thinking. Instead I simply thanked them for their help, promised to bring back the books within a month or two and stepped outside. There was still a glimmer of April sunshine on the terrace.

Far above, from some unseen flat, echoed the drifting sound of a lonely saxophone solo. It wasn’t a tune I knew, more of an improvisation I’d have said. Somebody playing it by ear.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I was back in Brighton and yes, it was definitely warmer down here. I had planned on going straight to this “convergence centre” in London to see if there was any sign of Henry. Callum had got quite excited about the prospect when I told him. He thought this was exactly the kind of lead his son would have been pursuing as part of his research for KID.

“But the worry is that he hasn’t told me about it,” he’d added. “We’ve always *talked* about these things, Jon! We’re on the same side, you know. If he’s not telling me what he’s doing, it’s because it goes *beyond* his work. He’s got something in mind, with whoever it is knows in London. I am so fucking grateful, Jon, I’m sure this is it. But we’ve got to find him and pull him out of there. Shall I come with you? I’d drop everything for this, you know that.”

I’d told him that, for the moment anyway, there



was no point in him coming south. I would find these Smash the WF! people first, and try to establish if Henry had made contact with them. I'd had it all planned. I'd insisted on taking an early train from Waverley so that I'd have most of the day in London.

My initial attempts to track down the convergence centre had not been successful. The website still said that details would be "announced soon". Nobody was answering the phone. I left a message, of course, and sent an email, but there had been no response by the time I set off from Callum's flat. I tried the phone several times on the train down, on the concourse at King's Cross, and for a final time on the Brighton-bound connection when we had crossed the Thames and just before we pulled away from the capital towards the coast, but to no avail.

After an early start, the frustration surrounding London, and then the gruelling climb up Brighton's Via Dolorosa, aka Southover Street, with my cross of heavy reading, I literally collapsed on to my creaking old sofa. It was only early afternoon, still, but I felt like I was ready for bed.

After a while I got up to make myself an energising cup of tea – with a couple of

shortbread biscuits for that extra lift. While the kettle was boiling, I pulled the library books out of my rucksack and spread them out on the kitchen table. I realised I was hesitating even to open any of them. Since that was the short-cut method of understanding them, I wanted to do it properly, wait for a moment when I wasn't too tired and distracted.

I checked my email. There was news of an all-day lawnmower maintenance workshop at the garden centre and a jazz-punk evening at the Frog and Princess, but no reply from Smash the WF! Their site hadn't been updated either, so it was all still a dead end. I found myself wandering upstairs, mug of tea in hand, wondering what to do next. I went into Jennifer's room. It would always be Jennifer's room, even if it had filled up, over the last five years and four months, with cardboard boxes and piles of papers, books and sundry other items which I didn't have room for in the rest of the house. We'd had separate bedrooms for years before she went. It wasn't that we didn't share a bed at the appropriate moments, but we didn't *sleep* in the same one. *She* didn't sleep, in any case. I thrashed around in my dreams and she lay there suffering and insomniac.

For a while, ten years maybe, we'd both

identified the other bedroom, the back bedroom, as belonging to the child we expected to arrive one day, without ever having said as much. But, gradually, the phantom of that never-to-exist person had faded into the mist of a love without object, a love that had gathered and lingered and waited for the arrival that would allow it to attach itself to a real being, and become alive. What had happened to that love that we had conjured up between us? Why hadn't we been able to transmute it into something that would have bonded us as we moved, together, into a different future to the one we had always assumed lay ahead? Instead we had let it go sour and sad and it had become a shared disappointment that hung around the house like the smell of damp. I started using the back bedroom as an occasional refuge from her unhappiness and ended up staying there.

After she left on that frosty December morning, after I chased her out of my life, out of this world, for ever, I had tried moving in here to be close to her, to somehow make amends for what I had done. But now it was me that couldn't sleep. She was too present. And every time I pulled the curtains and looked outside, there was the twenty yards of road she had travelled along before she died, and there was the place it had happened – the place it was still happening, and

would always be happening, in this mind saturated with grief and guilt.

She still talked to me, though. Or at least, I liked to imagine she did – I knew she didn't really exist any more. I would come in here sometimes and ask her things and she would answer me in that matter-of-fact tone of hers, not exactly hostile but slightly superior, as if I was a dim and dreamy child who needed to have the basics of common sense spelled out to him by somebody sensible, somebody like Jennifer.

“How am I going to track down this convergence centre if they won't answer their bloody phone or reply to my bloody emails?” I asked out loud.

A bus went past at the end of the road and I shivered, as I always did. A cold little draught blew in through the window at the end that didn't shut properly.

“Oh for Christ's sake, Jon, it's obvious isn't it?” Jennifer said, from somewhere that was both within and beyond me.

“Ask Andy, of course!” she added. “He went to all of those summit protests back in the day – Prague, Genoa... He was even at Seattle, wasn't he?”

“Well yes, but that was years ago. He barely gets out of Brighton these days, what with his allotment and the kid and everything...”

“Otto” said Jennifer.

How come she remembered the boy’s name and I didn’t? Andy hadn’t even met Lucille when she was alive.

“And that hasn’t got anything to do with it, anyway. He’s bound to still know people in the scene, isn’t he?”

I wasn’t sure.

“There’s no harm in asking, anyway, is there Jonathan?” she asked with an invisible toss of her hair.

“You’re right,” I murmured. “You’re right, Jennifer. As ever.”

When I went downstairs I looked again at the books. Maybe I would just take a quick glance, after all. I closed my eyes and picked out *The Meaning of Culture* by John Cowper Powys. As I did so, a page came open towards the back of the tome, an old-fashioned hardback that had lost its dust cover. I took this as an indication that I

should read its contents.

“Not to possess absolute self-control is either to be always an uncultivated barbarian or to be, at moments, simply a madman or a madwoman. Culture and self-control are synonymous terms – no refining of one’s taste in aesthetics or in literature can palliate the enormity of being guilty of uncontrollable anger.”

Right. Thanks Mr Powys, whoever you are or were. That’s just what I wanted to hear, what with my history. I inwardly relegated *The Meaning of Culture* to the bottom of the list for future sampling. Uncultivated barbarian that I was.

After checking once more to see if there was any more info from London – there wasn’t – I set off down to the office in Kemptown. The office of the *South Coast Investigator*, that is, which remained “the office” in my mind even though I hadn’t worked there for some time now.

I always had mixed feelings about going back. I liked seeing Andy, Roz and the others who were always popping in and out, of course, but I’d rather do that down the pub. Being in the office only reminded me of the fact that I wasn’t part of it any more. Andy had moved over on to my desk

when I left, which was the obvious thing to do as it was the best spot in the office, beside the window, but whenever I saw him there I had the impression he was in *my* place and I felt that somehow he ought to stand up and let me sit there. It was if he was only *borrowing* my desk, my job.

I like to think that the *Investigator* has always come across as very professional. It may not have quite as many readers as *The Guardian*, *Private Eye* or even the *Brighton Argus*, but it still has a certain social status, if a newspaper can be said to have such a thing.

I don't think it would retain that status if its readers were invited to come and have a poke around the *Investigator's* office! The place isn't much bigger than a large walk-in cupboard – an old-fashioned larder, perhaps. It nevertheless boasts three and a half computers (don't ask), two long desks, five chairs (one to be used only in emergencies), multiple piles of random stuff that nobody has got round to sorting out, four big old metal filing cabinets, covered on the outside with stickers and Sellotaped cuttings from the end of the last century and crammed full, on the inside, with the archives of a largely pre-electronic world. There is also an impressive collection of mugs, mostly chipped and missing their handles,

invariably stained brown on the inside and there is usually even one that contains the hard green remains of a milky coffee left to rot on a window cell many months before.

“Dude!” said Andy when I tentatively pushed open the door against the resistance of a pile of unseen paper which had somehow become wedged underneath.

He didn’t exactly look like your typical office worker, even the more alternative, journalistic, variety. He was wearing a pair of tatty old combat trousers, a purple hoodie with some kind of Japanese logo on it, and was still sporting the same old dirty-blond dreads, although a rapidly encroaching bald patch was lending them a whole new dimension of shabby-chic grunge.

We did the obligatory hug and he introduced me to a young woman, Salima, who was sitting in Andy’s old place.

“Salima’s been with us for a couple of weeks. Doing some great stuff on Palestine, the Occupied Territories, BDS and all that.”

“Nice,” I said. “Are you planning on staying long-term?”



“Oh no, I can’t,” she said. “I’d love to, but you know I have to do some paid work... Well, I know this is paid, but...”

“But it’s peanuts,” I agreed. “Especially if you’re in the part-time seat, as Andy here will remember all too well!”

“Bollocks,” said Andy. “It was never about the money, anyway. It’s about staying alive so that you can do the stuff you need to do – and I reckon peanuts amount to a sufficiently nutritious diet!”

“Especially when washed down with a pint or two of Hophead,” I added, then turned back to Salima.

“Shame you can’t hang around a bit longer,” I said. “But you’re not the only one. It’s been like this for a few years now, hasn’t it Andy? Young people just haven’t got the time that they used to. Back in the day, they’d be queuing up outside to come in and tap out a report or two – and that was without being paid anything!”

“Back in the day’...” laughed Salima. “You make it sound so long ago. And so... classic. Back in the Age of Legends.”

“It *was* a long time ago,” I insisted. “A completely

different era. When we started up, we wrote everything on typewriters.”

“You’re joking!” gasped Salima. “Typewriters!”

“Yeah, I remember that,” said Andy. “Carbon copies, changing the ribbon, typing rows of ‘x’ over your mistakes...”

“Ripping it up and starting again when it was too much of a mess...” I added.

Salima was still shaking her head in disbelief. I supposed she hadn’t even been born then, though it was too painful to do the maths.

“We’ve still got them down in the cellar, the old typewriters!” announced Andy.

Now it was my turn to be astonished.

“I thought we chucked them out years ago!”

“No, and I remember quite clearly that it was you, Jon, who insisted that we keep them. ‘Just in case’...”

“Just in case of what exactly?” wondered Salima.

“Just in case the computer era turned out to be

the temporary fad, the passing phase, that I always suspected it to be,” I said, recalling quite clearly how I had been thinking at the time.

“When the computers all stopped working...”

“Because of the Millennium Bug, perhaps?” prompted Andy.

“When the computers were all brought down by the Millennium Bug, and the grid collapsed under the weight of its own inherent contradictions, and...”

“And the miners went back on strike, finally bringing the ruling class to its knees!” suggested Andy with some enthusiasm.

“Then, comrades, we would bring back the typewriters from the cellar – and the oil-lamps and the wind-powered printing press – and embark on the serious work of writing the opening chapters of the People’s Revolution!” I declared.

Young Salima seemed to find us a reasonably amusing pair of old idiots, though she did suddenly remember she had a pressing engagement elsewhere.

When she'd gone, I caught up with Andy on what they were working on. Fracking was one of their big subjects, these days. Andy had been on to it from the start and had been one of the first arrested up the road at Balcombe in 2013 – for sitting on a log blocking the site entrance. Now he had pulled back from direct involvement, because of young Otto, but was more than making up for it through his investigations into the very dodgy world of fracking companies and the complicated financial manoeuvres behind them.

They were also doing a lot on privatisation. This had always been one of the big topics for the *Investigator*, but seemed more relevant than ever nowadays.

“What do you know about the WF protests?” I asked him at length.

“In London next week? Yes, well there's the demo on Mayday and they're supposed to be opening a convergence centre any time now... Why? You thinking of getting involved, now you've got a bit more time on your hands?”

I smiled faintly. “I might go and have a look,” I said.

I don't know why, but I didn't want to tell Andy about what I was doing. I trusted him, of course, it wasn't that. Maybe it was myself that I didn't trust. I didn't trust myself to come through on this, to find Henry. If I told anyone what I was trying to achieve, and then I didn't achieve it, I would have to explain at some point that I had failed.

Andy moved towards his computer – “They might even have put the details up on the...”

“No,” I interrupted, gesturing to him not to bother. “I checked before I came out.”

“Still, it could have gone up two minutes ago”, he said and looked anyway. It hadn't.

I asked him if he knew anyone involved.

“Mouse and that crew are all up there,” he said. “You know Mouse?”

“Oh yes,” I said. “Or rather, I *knew* her. It's been a while now.”

“She came in here last week, in fact, with some details on what they're planning in London. It's going in on Friday.”

“Right, so she’d know where this convergence centre is? Could you get in touch and ask her?”

Andy gave me a reproachful look. “Come on, dude, you know how it is with squats. Nobody can say anything until the last moment, until it’s all sorted and ready to go public. I know they were having a lot of shit finding somewhere so the fact that there’s nothing on the site suggests that might still be the case...”

“But could you phone her...?”

He shook his head. “She’s not going to talk on the phone.”

“She’s not going to say *where* it is, no, but maybe she could at least give us an idea of *when*... when it’s all going live?” My brain was racing ahead with this. “I could make sure I was up in London, ready and waiting, if I knew when they were going to make the announcement.”

Andy frowned. “What’s this all about, man? Why are you in such a hurry to get along to the convergence centre? I wouldn’t have thought it was quite your thing, to be honest...”

“OK, yes, well I have got a special reason,” I admitted. Obviously this wasn’t going to make

any sense to him without that minimal clarification. “There’s, errmm... someone I’m hoping to run into up there, who’s very hard to get hold of. For a story I’m working on. Some freelance stuff.”

“Really?” said Andy, looking interested. “Good news, dude, that you’re getting back into writing! Have you got someone lined up to take it? Only, I happen to know of a small but highly-respected publication in the south of England that’s always on the look out for a good story...” He smiled ruefully. “Pays peanuts, though!”

Buoyed by the thought of a news story, Andy disappeared down off into the back yard to make the call to Mouse. He said wanted to smoke a fag, but I understood that he didn’t want me listening in. It was going to be a delicate call.

I could immediately see from his face, when he returned, that the news was positive. “Right,” he said. “You’re sorted. Mouse says they should be opening the squat tomorrow afternoon. She’s got a meeting in the morning, sorting stuff out, but she can see you before that, give you a bit of a low-down, make sure you are in the loop as soon as it’s on. She can meet you outside Brixton tube at 8am.”

I winced a little, despite myself. That was an early start from Brighton.

“Yep, fine,” I said, with steely resolve.

“I told her it would be,” said Andy. “It’s a date.” Just as I was about to be on my way, and leave Andy to soldier on with the paper, he pulled me back gently by the arm.

“I’m really pleased you’re working on something again, man,” he said. “Because to be honest I’ve been a bit worried about you. You seem a bit...” He was looking me up and down, as if to search for the right term.

“Fat?” I suggested. “Fat and pale and vaguely miserable?”

He laughed. “You look like you could do with a holiday in the sun, that’s for sure! What I really mean is, are you all right, dude? After what happened with Jennifer, and then leaving the paper... I feel pretty guilty, sometimes, taking your job like that...”

“You didn’t *take* it, Andy,” I said, looking him straight in the eye. “I *gave* it to you – don’t ever forget that. And if I gave it to you it wasn’t out of charity, it was because I didn’t *want* it any more.



I did my bit, I served my time here. But there comes a time when you have to move on. OK, I might keep my hand in with the odd piece from time to time, like the one I'm working on now, but my heart's not in journalism any more. It's not what I'm looking for..."

"What are you looking for, though, man? Do you even know? That's the question."

"Yes, that's the question, Andy. And when you ask a question, it's because you don't know the answer. I don't know what it is that I'm looking for, but I know that I'm looking for it. And that's enough to be getting on with."

"I get that," said Andy. "It's funny, but it reminds me of when I was younger. Before I got into activism, before I came here. There was just this empty feeling, like I was in life's waiting room and nothing would ever happen to me unless I *made* it happen. I would just die of old age without having ever *done* anything, ever *been* anyone. But I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing, who I was supposed to be. Now that's all in the past, of course. I know exactly who I am and what I have to do, at work and at home, every minute of every day. I've surrounded myself with all this identity I've created for myself. I made myself a life."

He looked down before carrying on. “But I can see that all this could change. I can see that I could be where you are, one day, dude. I can see that it’s not just in the past, that emptiness, but possibly in the future. It comes round in circles.”

“Not circles, really,” I corrected him. “Spirals. And the thing about spirals is that you’re never really back in exactly the same place as you were before. That emptiness you’re talking about, for instance. I remember that as well, when I was young. That feeling you don’t really exist. But it’s not that for me, now. I know full well that I exist, that I’ve done things, been someone. But I don’t know what it *means*. What it *really means*. That’s what I could never have found out if I’d stayed here, poking away at the surface of life, politics, society. I want to find out what’s underneath.”

“And how do you count on doing that?” asked Andy gently.

“I don’t know,” I said. “By looking out to sea, perhaps. Walking on the Downs. Giving myself time to breathe, to think. Maybe,” I said, smiling inwardly to myself as I thought of my strange new acquaintances up in Edinburgh, “I just need to give the answers enough room to come forward on their own.”

## CHAPTER SIX

Mouse was late. Or, at least, in my terms she was late. But in activist terms that wasn't the case. Nobody on the radical scene in Brighton ever turned up at the time stated. It just wasn't done and everyone was supposed to understand that. When you said eight, you meant half eight at the earliest. I'd read somewhere that this was one of the first factors that had alerted one group to the fact that they had been infiltrated by the police – the man in question was always on time for meetings, turning up at the appointed hour with a “military precision” which was evidently a complete give-away.

I was always on time. I couldn't help it. Maybe I should abandon my position outside the tube station and go for a walk round Brixton. That way, if I turned up again 40 minutes late, I would presumably be judged entirely trustworthy and shown straight to the convergence centre.

No, I couldn't do it. Suppose Mouse wasn't there when I got back? I wouldn't know if she'd come and gone or if I should stay here waiting for her. I stuck where I was, tucked in beside a sort of metal pillar outside the tube station, and absorbed the sight of the crowd flowing in towards the escalators. It was another world, a parallel universe, these Londoners rushing off to the daily grind. There was a bit of that in Brighton as well, of course, but I tended to steer clear of it. The people I saw in the streets were more often ambling – or staggering if they were trying to get back up the hill from an evening out. The pace here was intense. There was an energy shared by these people, mostly young, that I could only observe from the outside. Their faces were diverse in every respect and their ways of dressing were far from uniform, but somehow these working people were as much a part of a single identifiable crowd as were the newsreel hat and coat wearing commuter crowds of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dashing off in great swarms to their offices around the capital in choreographed daily efficiency. The briefcases had been replaced with rucksacks and the newspapers with smartphones, but the creature behind the guise was the same old London entity, the faithful flesh-and-blood motor of the wealth of the Empire. This organic fusion of individual ambitions, fears and responsibilities enabled the

survival of a system which its faithful constituent parts regarded as the benevolent source of everything they knew and depended on. Past generations had been and gone, and their strange conservative ideas had gone with them, but the worker-beast constantly renewed itself, grew new skins. All sorts of liberating modern ideas might be flashing around in the heads of these young people passing me by – and they could rightly be proud to have left behind the xenophobia, homophobia and gender-related certainties of their parents' and grandparents' generations. But, deep down, what had really changed? They were still going to work. They were still spending money. They were still keeping the show on the road.

There was a tap on my shoulder and I must have jumped six inches into the air.

I span round and, of course, it was Mouse.

“Hey!” she smiled. “Shall we walk?”

I agreed, although I was bit surprised at the lack of the usual social ritual before we moved off – “how are you?” and all that nonsense.

Mouse was dodging nimbly through the oncoming crowds and I was struggling to keep up

with her. I followed her over a strange pedestrian crossing that seemed to be composed of Batman logos and on to Windrush Square. It was only now that we had pulled clear of the densest part of the throng that she finally turned round and waited a few seconds for me to catch up.

It's funny how people change over the course of time. Everyone has their own way of ageing. Some people gradually lose a certain allure, a certain freshness, in a way that is difficult to describe. Others, particularly men, suddenly look thirty years older than when you last saw them. They are bald, for instance. Or fat. Even fatter than me. Mouse now had grey hair, that was true. But apart from that, she looked exactly the same. She was still slight, agile and athletic. Her hair was cut in the same short and slightly spiky style that it always had been. The skin on her face looked healthy, radiant even. And she still beamed intelligence and mental strength from those sharp brown eyes of hers.

“Have you got a phone on you?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, fumbling for my pocket, “do you want to...?”

“If you could take the batteries out,” she continued.

Seeing the objection written on my face, she added: “Turning it off doesn’t work. You have to cut out the power or it can still transmit.”

I fumbled around ineptly. I hadn’t done this before and couldn’t work out how to open the thing.

“Here,” she said, and did it for me, then handed over the duly-separated phone and battery.

“So how are you these days?” Mouse asked, as we set off again. She was leading the way across the square. “I gather you’re not at the *Investigator* any more?”

I confirmed this.

“Shame,” she said. “I used to love that. It was the highlight of the week. One of us in the house used to go out every Friday lunchtime to pick up a copy at that place near the station. Then we’d all read it together. You’d have someone peering over your shoulder from the back of the sofa, not letting you turn the pages until they’d caught up.”

I smiled and felt a glow of pride creeping over me.

“It wasn’t always good, though,” she added, as if she had spotted the signs of egotism and wanted to counteract them. “Sometimes we were *highly* disappointed. We’d be like ‘Is that it?’, turning the pages to find something worth reading, and it would just be going on and on about some irrelevant crap the council was getting up to.”

“I don’t think you could say that anything...” I began, instinctively defending the author of the articles in question, who I knew full well would have been me.

But she was laughing at me. I had forgotten that side of her.

“Yes,” I said, letting her know I’d understood. “Some of the writers there were a bit *obsessional* at times, let’s say. And totally lacking a sense of humour.”

I didn’t smile at my own joke. Just to reinforce the point.

“But presumably you still read it,” I added. “Andy said you were in there the other week.”

“Ah, but it’s just not the same without *you* writing for it...” said Mouse and this time I cottoned on straight away that she was taking



the piss.

“So are you up here, now?” I asked. “You’re not based in Brighton?”

“I’ve been up here six months or so, yeah,” she said. “With Patti. We’re in a squat over in Lewisham, which isn’t bad. But to be honest, that’s mainly because of the WF stuff. We needed boots on the ground, up here in London, so it made sense to come and live here for a while.”

“There must be London people who could have handled all that, surely?”

“Yeah, sure. But not enough. Not enough that are into this, you know. There’s other things going on – housing struggles, migrant support, anti-fascism, Kurdish solidarity, you name it. There isn’t the capacity to do everything at once, so we thought little London could do with some reinforcements from mighty Brighton.”

“OK,” I said. “So before that, anything much been happening for you, in your life.”

“Oh, no, not really,” said Mouse, puffing out her cheeks. “I went to Palestine and got interrogated by the Israeli army, came back here and got nicked for throwing doughnuts at a bunch of

nazis on the M1...”

“Doughnuts?”

“It’s a long story... Then me and Patti got married...”

“Oh! Congratulations!”

“It’s more for the paperwork, really. She’s Lithuanian you know. Then, what else... Oh yeah, I’ve been really tied up with all the spycops stuff, for obvious reasons...”

“Yeah?” I said rather dubiously, to make it clear that the reasons were far from obvious to me.

“Didn’t you know? Pedro the full-on anarcho-insurrectionalist, once of Brighton and latterly of Nottingham, turned out to be a policeman.”

“I knew that, yes.”

“And I was stupid enough to be taken in. I was shagging a cop for two years, basically.”

“Shit.”

I hadn’t known that Mouse and “Pedro” had had a thing. But then I didn’t know much about the

inner goings-on of the activist scene, even though I'd been mixing with most of them for years. I was more of a fellow-traveller in some ways, a sympathetic journalist who turned up for demos from time to time. There is a tendency among people outside those circles to sneer at activists. Callum did that a lot, for example, but he wasn't by any means the only one. These cynics basically agree with radical left criticisms of our society, but don't actually want to *do* anything about it. So, to convince themselves that they are not lazy or spineless, they make up a narrative about activists – how they are so puritanical, intolerant, simple-minded, cliquey and so on.

I didn't depreciate activists. I admired them. They were, for me, a kind of superior species of powerful beings. They were dedicated to what they did in a way that I knew was impossible for me. I didn't want to chain myself to the underside of a lorry for five hours. I didn't want to climb up a rickety ladder on to the roof of an arms factory. I didn't want to get arrested time and time again, spend months of my life in police stations and solicitors' offices, caught up in a constant spiral of legal aid applications, bail conditions, appeal hearings and fresh new moments of crisis when I knew I would be called upon to put my body and my peace of mind on the line again for the sake of what I knew was

right.

Mouse was the incarnation of these activists, for me. She always had been. She represented everything I appreciated about them and, at the same time, everything that separated me from them. She had a strength that I could scarcely aspire to.

As we walked, Mouse updated me on the position regarding the convergence centre. It had proved extremely difficult to crack a suitable squat ahead of the week of action. They suspected that the cops had been contacting property owners and warning them in advance. Twice they had turned up ready for action only to find private security on the premises, which was unusual. Nothing seemed to be working out. Finally, someone had pointed them towards an existing squat right in the heart of central London. The crew there were happy to share the building with Smash the WF! They'd had a meeting with them last night and it was on. There hadn't been enough time to set things up properly, but people were down there right now, doing their best. They were going to make the details public later today, so if I wanted to hang around I could be one of the first to come in – the first outsiders, that was.

For a while now we had been walking through a pleasant city park and we stopped for coffee and carrot cake at a little café beside an open air swimming pool. Although the mums around us were clearly not interested in our conversation, Mouse seemed to make a deliberate decision not to talk about the specifics of the squat here. Instead, she told me of her concerns regarding the wider political situation in the UK. There was a certain reluctance in radical circles to get involved in the mobilisation, she said. This sort of thing seemed to have somehow become unfashionable and was regarded as a sideshow or distraction, something that had little to do with the real day-to-day social struggle.

I was surprised at this. It had always seemed to me that anti-capitalists, by making their presence on the streets so forcefully felt around the turn of the century, had succeeded in doing what I would have previously thought was impossible – they had forced the Establishment, in the form of the mainstream media, to admit that capitalism actually *existed* and that it was the system under which we lived. Previously it had always been used in scare quotes, as “capitalism”, and was understood as a word used by left-wing fanatics – communists in fact – to describe the Western democracy they so despised.

Making the general public aware of the existence of capitalism was not the same as defeating it, of course, but it was surely a necessary first step and, you would have thought, a cause for encouragement.

“I sort of get it,” said Mouse. “The whole summit-hopping thing was becoming a bit much, maybe. You can’t *only* do that and not be involved in your own community, that’s for sure. But I don’t think that was really ever an issue. It wasn’t an either/or situation. You can be out campaigning to save your local library one week and be out campaigning against global capitalism the next. There’s no contradiction. It’s just different aspects of the same fight. And now it’s just got to this stupid point where people have got a kind of ideological blockage against anything to do with summit protests, as if it had suddenly become so totally uncool that nobody in their right mind would want to have anything to do with it.”

We got moving again and it struck me that Mouse hadn’t even asked me why I was so keen to get into the convergence centre. I felt I should tell her, but I wasn’t sure what Andy had said to get her to see me. I didn’t want to undermine his story with my own account. So I kept quiet, as if this was something that had already been discussed and digested.

“Are you going to stay up for a bit?” she asked at one point, turning round to talk to me because she was half a pace ahead.

I wasn't sure what she meant.

“For the week? Are you going to stay up in London for the week of action?”

“Erm... I hadn't really... I'm not sure where I'd stay...”

“Well there's the convergence centre of course! That's pretty much the point of it. But if you don't fancy that, we could probably find you a spare corner at our place.”

She peered at my small rucksack. “Didn't you bring your sleeping bag?”

I felt embarrassed. This was exactly why I wasn't made of the right stuff to be a proper activist. I liked sleeping in my own home. In my own bed. Next to my own bathroom. I couldn't think of anything worse than kipping on the floor of a squat for a week. I felt I'd rather commute up and down from Brighton, if necessary, than sacrifice my personal privacy and comfort.

Luckily for me, something else had grabbed

Mouse's attention.

"Don't look back," she said. "But I think we might have a tail."

"Really?" I replied. This seemed a little paranoid.

When we next crossed a road, I took the opportunity to glance round and, sure enough, there was a fellow strolling along 20 yards or so back. He certainly could have been a policeman – he was tall, well-built, in his 30s, and carrying a rolled-up newspaper which he was swinging around with a certain nonchalance that could easily have been false – but at the same time there was no real reason to imagine he was deliberately following us.

We'd come out of a street of terraced houses into what was the start of a little high street and on the left was a bookshop.

"Ah!" said Mouse. "Let's have a look!" and she steered me over to the shop window, pointing at one particular title as she did so.

*Cottages of the Cotswolds*. How very interesting.

"Try and look a bit fascinated", she muttered through gritted teeth as, out of the corner of an



eye, I saw the tall pedestrian approaching.

A lorry grumbled past, choking the air with toxic diesel fumes. I played the required role and tried to look absorbed by the window display of what must have been one of the world's most mediocre bookshops. *Knitting for Novices. The Art of Meringues. Christianity and its Message of Love. Curtains: How to Hang Them. The Illustrated Book of Welsh Cheese.* We chatted and pointed merrily while Mouse's suspect walked by, pretending we were unaware of his existence. We half-watched him as he passed the little parade of shops and crossed the road further up. And then, to my astonishment, he started coming back down the road towards us, only on the other side.

"Good grief," I said. "How did you know?"

Mouse shrugged. "Just a feeling," she said. "I'd like to say that I can spot a cop a mile away, but that wouldn't be funny after that bastard Pedro. Or Sgt Malcolm Whittaker as we now know him."

"So he must have been following us all the time? Even when we were at the café?"

"Well, yeah. But he wasn't inside with us, that's for sure."

As our police tail disappeared off down a side road, Mouse announced that we'd better split up. She took a note of my number and said she'd let me know as soon as the squat went public.

She must have noticed that I was still looking a bit alarmed.

“Don't worry, it's *me* they're following, not you,” she said before we parted. “I'm sure they'd dearly like to know where I'm going and who I'm meeting. But just to be on the safe side, if I were you I'd try to shake them off, in case they're still lurking. You know the sort of thing – walk into a block of flats and out the other side, double-back on yourself a few times, maybe jump on a bus if one happens to pull up next to you...”

I nodded solemnly as if I was very familiar with all of this.

“Cool. Seeya later!” she said, with the flash of a smile, and darted off down a little alley between the shops.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I did end up catching a bus, in fact, not least because I had little idea of where I was or how far I was from a tube station. It took me right up to London Bridge and I decided I might as well have a wander around the centre of the old imperial capital while I was here. I came to London as infrequently as possible these days, and the skyline was looking increasingly unfamiliar. Strangely-shaped glass towers, monuments to deconstructed postmodern finance capital, made the eastern reaches of the city look to me more like Tokyo or Abu Dhabi. Or maybe I had somehow stepped through a gateway into a different century.

“Yes, Jonathan,” said Jennifer, as a gust of fresh air blew up from the water of the Thames. “The *twenty-first* century.”

I chuckled to myself, possibly out loud in view of the slightly frightened look on the face of a young

woman who happened to pass me at that moment. It was true that I remained culturally anchored in the last millennium. Not the 1980s any more – I reckoned I had got beyond that – but the 1990s still seemed to me to be fairly fresh and recent. What derision we would pour, when we were young, on adults who thought themselves up to date but were clearly stuck two decades behind reality, which at the time meant the 1960s! And here I was, living out the same middle-aged stupidity, writing off everything that had changed since The Year Two Thousand as a kind of unfortunate mistake, an irrelevant and reversible footnote.

I thought about a young bloke that had come to do work experience at the *Investigator*, just before I left. We'd got on very well, even been out for a pint. I had been vaguely reassured that I wasn't completely incapable of connecting with the current generation and was bold enough to recommend some of my favourite films, none of which he had heard of. I'd offered to lend him the DVDs, in fact, but it turned out you didn't need to do that any more. It was all online somewhere, if you knew where to look. I asked him a week later if he had had the chance to watch any of them. He was clearly a bit embarrassed. He had started one or two. Nearly finished another. But...

“To be honest, I have real difficulty with old films,” he’d said.

“Old?”

“Well, I guess what I mean by that is films that were made before around 1990. There’s something about the way they made them that just doesn’t feel... right!”

This had amazed me, initially. Then it had amused me, immensely. After a while, though, it had dawned on me that I knew exactly what he meant. I thought of the “old” films of my youth, from the 1950s or early 1960s, with their stilted dialogues and technical clumsiness. You could watch a film like that, of course – and there were some truly great films amongst them – but it did take a bit of cultural effort. It was like reading a book in old English. You had to concentrate a bit, put it in a cultural context and regard it as something of a historical artefact. You couldn’t just relax and let it flow through you, knowing that its references and nuances would be largely your own.

I ambled through Borough Market, once a hidden gem of authenticity and now very much part of the South Bank/Tate Modern/Globe Theatre tourist trail, and gasped once again at the Gothic

glory of Southwark Cathedral.

I stopped for a coffee and reassembled my phone. I had to reset the time and date. Did Mouse and the others really go through all this every time they had a conversation about anything other than the weather? It wasn't as if she had actually told me anything that would be of interest to MI5, the CIA or whoever she thought was listening. I was beginning to feel the effects of my very early departure from Brighton. It wasn't even 11 o'clock yet and I had no idea how long it would be before I heard about the squat.

I crossed the Thames via the Millennium footbridge, which was definitely a welcome innovation amidst all the misery of gentrification, despite the wobbly start that had seen it close before the end of its original opening day. I was playing the tourist here. I toured the outside of St Paul's, refusing out of principle to pay the £18 entry fee, and sat on the steps for a while, thinking of the Occupy movement at the end of 2011. I'd been quite excited about that at the time, and had come up to interview some of the participants for the *Investigator*. Needless to say, I hadn't actually had the commitment to bring a tent and take part.

There was still no word from Mouse and I found

myself heading up Cheapside towards the Bank of England. Another protest memory. The 2009 anti-capitalist demo that had been dubbed a “riot” by the mainstream media and in which Ian Tomlinson, a newspaper seller, had been fatally pushed to the ground by the police. It had all happened in the wake of the banking bail-out and there was a lot of anger out there, and also hope. People really thought that capitalism was on the point of collapsing. Not me, of course, because I was already a cynical old hack, but I remembered doing an interview with someone I vaguely knew from Sussex, one of the crowd from the Save Mutley Woods campaign in less-than-lovely Worthing. What was he called? Steve? Simon? Something like that. He’d given me a whole spiel about this being the final days of a system on the verge of collapse. The capitalists were seeing their house of cards falling around them, and so on and so forth. It didn’t seem so daft at the time, what he was saying, but he probably wouldn’t want to re-read the interview today.

I could do this for a living, I thought. Anti-Capitalist Nostalgia Tours. Liverpool Street station for the 1999 Carnival Against Capital. Parliament Square for the 2000 Mayday, when Winston Churchill got his turf mohican. Oxford Circus for the infamous Mayday kettling of 2001.

Maybe Grosvenor Square for the 1968 protest at the US embassy, to give a bit of historical and geopolitical context. I was five years old at the time, so I had a good excuse for having missed that one.

My daydreaming was interrupted by the sound of an incoming text. It was clearly from Mouse, though there was nothing to say as much. There was simply an address. The name of the road, Gilders Street, meant nothing to me, but I knew that the WC2 postcode meant it was right in the heart of the West End. An impressive location for an anti-capitalist convergence centre! Being a bit old-fashioned and not having a smartphone, I still carry a mini A-Z around with me when I go to London and soon worked out how to get there. It wasn't far, in fact. Nothing is very far away in central London, except when it's raining.

I knew where the squat was as soon as I turned into Gilders Street, thanks to the crowd of people on the wall outside. They seemed to be pretty much all dressed in black.

The building behind them had its windows boarded up with grey metal sheets and what looked to be the main entrance was also firmly closed. The way in appeared to be down some steps behind the railings. I felt slightly



apprehensive as I approached the squat. I didn't exactly look the part. I had a horrible feeling I would be identified as a journalist, which wasn't entirely untrue, or as a policeman. I suspected that neither of these would be particularly welcome, even if the place was theoretically open to the public, and as I approached I was repeating to myself in my head the way I would introduce myself. "Hi, I'm a mate of Mouse's." Was I really her mate, though? "Hi, do you know if Mouse is around?" That was better. That way, I wasn't even necessarily asking to go inside. What if they didn't know her? "Mouse from Brighton" perhaps? Or was I even supposed to mention her name? Was that a security risk? The only visible police presence was a patrol car right at the end of the road, on the far side, but after the tailing incident I imagined there might be a few others wandering the pavements, trying to pick up scraps of information.

As I reached the building I noticed that most of the people out there were not only hooded, but masked. I knew why. They didn't want to be identified by the police. But the sight still made me that little bit more nervous around my likely reception. I now had my optimal phrase firmly in mind: "Hi, how's it going? Is Mouse around?"

Nice and casual. But wasn't it a bit phoney-

sounding? Stuff it. That would have to do. I braced myself for hostility.

“Hello mate!” said the man sitting beside the gate, unlooping a rope and opening it for me. He was one of the unmasked ones and grinned at me through uneven dentistry and a slightly ragged beard.

“Good to see you! Straight down the steps and turn to the left when you get inside.”

And that was it. No questions at all. “They didn’t even ask me if I was a copper!” I thought to myself, slightly indignantly. Somehow I couldn’t help feeling that they had failed in their gatekeeping role by letting me straight in like that.

I trotted down the stairs, trying to smile in a benign and comradely manner at the young men and women around me, negotiated a huge sofa which was almost blocking the entrance, and stepped inside. There were people immediately behind the door, hammering away at a plank of wood.

I found myself wandering through some kind of kitchen area. A couple of people dashed past heading towards the street, not even pausing to

glance at me. This was clearly a busy moment. I came out into what looked like a main hallway, with a staircase at one end. A blue-haired young woman had just stuck something up on the wall so I went to have a look.

“World Forum of Resistance!” it was headed. “Provisional workshops”.

I glanced down the hand-written list. A lot of it was very practical stuff, obviously part of the build-up to the Mayday protest. “Self-Defence and De-Arrest”. “Know your rights – protest and the Law”. “Affinity group principals (sic) + training”.

But there were also some theoretical workshops. There were several about the World Forum, international trade agreements, NATO and related subjects. Another about climate justice. One on solidarity with indigenous peasant movements. And one on Mutual Aid and Anarchist Theory. Hang on, what was the name beside it? Mathijs Z. Jansen! The author of one of the books from the Edinburgh library! I groped in my head for the title – yes, that was it. *Natural Solidarity: the Organic Anarchism of Peter Kropotkin*.

I was ridiculously excited by this discovery. I had

accepted, without much scepticism, the librarians' claim that Henry had borrowed exactly the same books as I had. In that case, if he was planning to follow up the lead from the leaflet he'd taken (or which I was *told* he was taken...), he would surely be bound to come along for the workshop, I reasoned.

I pulled out my diary to note the time of the meeting. It was tomorrow afternoon, 5pm, in the Upstairs Space. The link with the book had given me another cause for joy. There was no question now of me feeling I ought to be staying in London overnight. I had important research to do – I had to look at the Jansen book. Of course, I had never intended to stay in the first place, but there had been an uneasy cloud of guilt lingering around that decision which had now been cleared by the fresh breeze of an excuse so good that it was a reason.

There was a tap on my shoulder. It was Mouse.

“Found something that interests you?” she asked cheerfully.

“Of course!” I replied, while at the same time realising that what I was really hoping to find was Henry and that the book link had momentarily blinded me to the possibility that

he could be here, right now, in this building.

Fortunately, Mouse was in any case planning on giving me a tour of the squat so I took the opportunity to take a close look at the faces we passed – maybe too good a look for the comfort of one young man who, from a few yards away, very much resembled the image of Henry on the photograph and who very pointedly turned his back and pulled his hoodie tight around his head as I approached. But I had seen enough by then to know that he wasn't the man I was searching for.

The building was old and vast. Apparently it had once been a police station – an irony much appreciated by all those who had voluntarily turned themselves in there. But it seemed to have lain empty for some years now. It had a ruined feel about it. The toilet fittings had all been ripped out to deter squatters. Compost toilets had been obtained from somewhere or other and installed in the yard behind the kitchen, showing a level of self-organisation that would surprise those who picture anarchists as incompetently chaotic.

There was quite a flow of people in the centre, new arrivals wearing rucksacks and looking for a good space for their sleeping bags in one of the

upstairs rooms designated as dormitories. These were mostly “internationals”, Mouse explained. They had been doing a fair bit of “outreach” on the continent – she and some friends had recently given talks in Berlin, Nuremberg and Rotterdam – and this had attracted some interest from German and Dutch activists, amongst others.

The building was not pretty, that was for sure. There had been no time to make it look nice and the conditions were basic. But it wasn't depressing, like some squats I had visited in the past. There was an atmosphere here that had been created by the people who were present. And this was overwhelmingly positive. Who were they, anyway? Some of them were UK activists with the motivation and determination to put months of their lives into organising something on this scale. Others were foreigners with the motivation and determination to come to London, braving the uncertainties of border controls and police attention, not knowing where they would be staying when they arrived, and yet trusting that it would all be worthwhile. How could this combination fail to produce a dynamic buzz in the most unpromising of environments?

“After you,” said Mouse, gesturing towards a little ladder leading up from the corridor on the

top floor. I raised my eyebrows, adjusted my little rucksack and started climbing without asking anything.

“Just push the hatch,” she called up. “It’s stiff but it opens.”

It was pleasantly warm when I emerged on to the roof. I looked around and saw two men sitting on fold-up chairs a few yards away, sharing a spliff. One was Asian or Middle Eastern and in his mid-twenties, while the other was more my age, scrawny with long hair tied back in a pony tail. They nodded to me.

The view was magnificent from up here. The rooftops, the taller buildings rising up beyond, and above all the sky. You don’t see the sky very much at street level in a big city like London, but here it felt as if you were immersed in it. The light was fading a little and the sun was hidden by a nearby office block, but there was a beautiful wash of pale blue across the heavens, decorated with broken lines of delicate pale-grey cloud. I took a breath and it tasted good, which was absurd given where we were, bang in the middle of dirty old London town. But somehow here we had escaped from all that. We weren’t *in* London any more, but *above* it. *Beyond* it. We had found a secret passage leading up out of the

depressing noise, grime and claustrophobia of the birthplace of capitalism and had found ourselves elsewhere, in a suspended dimension between that world and another. What was that scent on the breeze? The rolling fields and downs of England? The salt of the great ocean? Or the perfume of possibility drifting through a briefly-opened door to the future?

“Of course there are always people up here, round the clock,” Mouse was saying. “We’ve got a rota.”

I was slightly taken aback, being pulled out of my reverie. “Why?” I asked.

“The police, of course,” she said in a matter-of-fact way. “They might decide to come in from the top, either with climbers from that block over there, or from a helicopter.”

I waited a moment to see if she was joking. She wasn’t. It must be very stressful being involved in something like this, I told myself.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Kropotkin was therefore at odds with the interpretation of nature offered by both conservative and radical thinking at the time. He did not of course, accept the existence of a Social-Darwinist ‘nature’ which allocated to every human being a certain place in the great hierarchy, according to their innate capacities, their fitness to survive in a harsh competitive world designed to filter out the weak and incompetent. But neither did he subscribe to the liberal, or left-wing, view that the unstructured and dangerous chaos of ‘nature’ had to be countered by the concerted and organised efforts of civilised (or socialist) society. For Kropotkin, this latter stance had fallen into the deadly trap of accepting at face value the right-wing interpretation of ‘nature’ and was thereby impelled to fall back on the need for a state to redress its undesirable aspects. As a scientist, Kropotkin saw that nature was more concerned with co-operation than with competition and as

an anarchist he saw that if co-operation, mutual aid and social harmony could arise naturally, the age-old excuse for authority and tyranny – that without them there would be nothing but chaos and murder – dissolved into thin air and could safely be discarded.”

I put down the book. That would do for now, Mr Jansen. It was heavy stuff, the “organic anarchism of Peter Kropotkin”. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand it, but more a question of digestion. When it came to political theory, I needed to chew it over a bit, absorb it one mouthful at a time.

I hadn’t said anything to Callum about the Jansen talk when I’d phoned him when I’d got back to Brighton the night before. I had pretty much skirted around the whole books issue, in fact. When I imagined myself telling him about what had happened at the library, it just all sounded too weird. And, worse, I sounded too gullible. What made me think that there was any relevance at all in the books I had borrowed? What made me imagine that Henry had *really* taken copies of the same works as me? How could I even be sure, in fact, that he had *been* to the library in the first place? Had the librarians just been going along with everything I said as a joke? Were they laughing at the thought of me

even now?

As far as Callum was concerned, a website Henry had visited had led me to some people who said they had met him. This had then pointed me towards a place in London that he might be intending to visit, particularly since he presumably still had friends there and could well have been planning on staying with them anyway. Now that I had tracked down the place in question, Callum was worried about what form Henry's visit might take. To be honest, I didn't really share his fears in this respect. This young right-winger seemed to have managed a perfectly polite visit to a left-wing library in Edinburgh. It still seemed likely to me that he was continuing his academic research and while, at a pinch, he might be tempted to voice his animosity to the left in the form of some heckling or pointed questioning, I couldn't imagine him storming the squat at the head of a gang of armed neo-Nazi commandos.

I'd told Callum as much, in fact, which had provoked a bit of a reaction.

"But you don't *know* him, Jon," he'd insisted. "In your head he's still a smiling 12-year-old kid with nothing more in his head than the desire to kick a ball around in the park. You've not seen

him when he's in a fury. It's like he's possessed! There's something not quite *right* about him, Jon, and that's what worries me. It's probably just his age, all those hormones pumping around inside him, and it'll all calm down in a year or two. But I want him to *get* that far, intact, without fucking his whole life up with some stupid gesture. He doesn't just *have* political opinions like you do, Jon, he *is* those opinions. He's a total fanatic. Christ, I could even see him walking into this place of yours with a ton of explosives strapped to his body and blowing himself up and half of London with it."

What had been less clear than Callum's concerns was what exactly he thought I should be doing about them. Obviously he still didn't want to involve the police and I doubted in any case that they would be much concerned at the prospect of an attack against an anti-capitalist convergence centre. They'd probably send a liaison team to facilitate his intervention. Neither was it a good idea, from the point of view of Henry's welfare, to alert Mouse and her friends to his existence and to the fact that he possibly represented a threat to them. If he *was* thinking of doing something stupid against them, and was wavering as to whether or not to go ahead, then having his head kicked in by a bunch of anti-fascist squatters might well prove a decisive moment in the

decision-making process.

In the end the only option left was that I should try to intercept him myself. In all innocence I could take him off somewhere for a cup of coffee or a beer and try to find out what he was up to.

In any case, whatever he said he was doing there, I should make sure he stayed away from the centre, Callum had stressed. "Say what you like, Jon," he'd told me. "Tell him the lefties are on to him and it's not safe for him to go back. Tell him the squat is about to be raided by the cops and he's going to end up in a cell. Lie to him in whatever way seems most useful. Tell him I'm ill. Or that Morag's ill, in hospital. Or his granny's on her deathbed. Or just physically grab him and put him on a train back up to Scotland, Jon! Anything to keep him away from that place!"

All of this, of course, depended on me finding Henry in the first instance. During the conversation with Callum I had been quietly confident on this score because of the Jansen connection, but it was when I examined the basis of my confidence in the cold light of the next morning that I'd started to have doubts. If Henry hadn't in fact taken the same books as me, there was no reason why he would be at Jansen's

workshop. Even if he *had* borrowed them, but they were of no real interest to him and had simply been foisted on him by Frank and Frasier, then there was no reason why he would be keen to meet the author.

I sighed and went up to the bathroom to shave. The seagulls were wheeling and shrieking outside. The day was bright and the sea was glittering but there were some very black clouds approaching from the west. Dark-grey streaks slanted down on to the distant downland. It was raining in Worthing. The very image made me shudder. That bloody place was depressing enough in the sunshine. I decided to make a move for the station before the deluge hit Brighton.

On the train I got out the Jansen book and flicked through until another passage caught my attention.

“For the liberal mind, ethics are the product of education, of carefully-nurtured social attitudes that need to be instilled in each generation at an early age to avoid the slide into barbarity that, from this perspective, forms part of our untamed nature. In his *Ethics*, however, Kropotkin argues that morality, in its broadest sense, is not a human invention but forms part of the natural

evolution of all living creatures, for whom relations with others have always been the key to survival and happiness. Nature herself was the first teacher of morality to humankind, says Kropotkin, and it was on nature's foundation that we went on to build the more complex versions of morality that we know today. This was as true of individuals as of societies, because for Kropotkin the nature within us was not a restrictive force reducing the individual's capacity to freedom by imposing innate rules or limits, but a positive basis on which the individual could build his or her own individuality and moral code."

He sounded interesting, this Kropotkin. I'd never read any of his stuff, but I knew who he was, of course. The Russian prince turned anarchist revolutionary. He'd lived in Brighton for a while and there was even a bus bearing his name ploughing the city streets.

A horrible cold thought ran suddenly through me, striking dread into the core of my being. It was with some difficulty that I pushed it away. No, of course not. Why should it be? There were hundreds of buses in Brighton. Why would it have been that one? Pull yourself together, Jon, for fuck's sake. What sort of life are you going to lead if you can't even think about a bus without

going all weird on me?

It was just before 3pm as I emerged out of the tube and made my way towards the convergence centre. I had a couple of hours before the Jansen meeting, but Henry might well turn up beforehand too, if he was coming for that, and if he was simply planning on popping in for a look round – working out where to plant the nail bomb, in Callum's nightmare scenario – the extra time would give me a decent chance of bumping into him.

The first hint I had that something was amiss was the shuddering of a helicopter hovering overhead, reverberating through the narrow road leading to Gilders Street. That and the large number of police vans wedged up on to the pavement beside the Chinese restaurants and fancy boutiques. The vans were empty and as I turned the corner I saw what had become of its occupants – the street ahead was jammed with people and beyond them a double line of riot police barring the way towards the convergence centre.

All seemed calm at the moment, but there was an aftertaste of tension in the air and, indeed, on the road, which was littered with broken glass. Behind the line of shields and helmets a police



dog barked. The road beyond was completely empty, except for directly outside the squat, where I could just about make out a knot of people.

I weaved my way through the crowd in the road, most of whom were carrying rucksacks and sleeping bags and looked as if they were heading for the convergence centre. In front of the police lines was a press photographer, who was leaning up against a shop front having a smoke. Clicking into my journalistic habits, I asked him, rather than anyone else, what was going on.

“Nothing much at the moment”, he said. “But it all kicked off an hour or so ago.”

He explained that he had missed the start of the action, but that it seemed there had been scuffles between the police and some protesters heading for the former police station that had got out of hand. The cops had quickly brought in reinforcements, gone into riot mode, and shut down the whole street, from both ends.

The photographer looked me up and down. I had the impression he had spotted the journalist in me, although there was no doubt something not quite professional about my appearance and demeanour.

“So do, you, err... live around here?” he asked, by way of satisfying his curiosity.

“No, I’m a reporter,” I said. “Freelance these days.”

“Ah,” he smiled, immediately placing me as a has-been hack, fired, redundant or walked out of the job, now desperately trying to scrape together some beer money flogging stories to the nationals.

He produced his card, quite magically, as if he had a permanent supply up his sleeve ready to drop into the palm of his hand at the appropriate moment.

“If you’re after some pictures...”

“Cheers,” I said, and moved on. Maybe Andy would be interested, but we’d never really liked paying for anything at the *Investigator*.

After twenty minutes on the scene, including a wasted trip up to the other end of Gilders Street, which was also blocked, it was clear that there was no way I was going to get into the squat for the moment. I had even asked the police, flashing my out-of-date press card in their general direction, but nobody was getting

through.

Never mind. They weren't going to stay there all day. I decided to sit down for a coffee and try again a bit later. There was plenty of time still.

As it turned out, I found myself in a pub, The Green Man. I was going to order a coffee, nevertheless, but there was something about the atmosphere, the damp beery smell perhaps, that made me change my mind at the last moment and opt for a pint of porter. I even bought a packet of peanuts to go with it. I was being paid for all this, after all. "Cheers, Callum!" I said inwardly before drinking my first gulp.

There was huge TV screen showing one of the rolling news channels and I couldn't resist reading the captions. Yet another apparent leadership crisis in the Labour Party. A minor Conservative politician had resigned over some kind of Twitter controversy that I hadn't been following. Images of dead bodies being pulled from the rubble of a bombing raid in the Middle East. Flooding in Wales. This is the news. It never stops. It always changes and it's always the same. We turn to it because it's there, it's solid, it's happening but it hides so much more than it reveals. It's a shell so thin and brittle that it is always essentially fake, even if it is

constructed from a collection of details and facts that are true. Yes, it's correct that yesterday there was an earthquake in Mexico, an air crash in Pakistan and a middle-order batting collapse in Melbourne, but no, this is not what you *really* need to know. On any level. We weren't the worst on the *Investigator*, of course. We had a different angle that took us in behind the surface of the mainstream 24-hour news illusion, but it didn't take us far enough. We had never shaken ourselves free from the *idea* of news, the idea that the novelty and excitement of the immediate was the only way to engage with reality. Like all journalists, we had carried on surfing the froth of the breaking news wave without turning to contemplate the depths of the ocean at our backs.

I finished my pint and went back round the corner to see how things were. I'd assumed the incident would have blown over by now, but this was far from the case. In fact there were more people than ever in the road in front of the police lines. There were still plenty of potential guests for the squat, with their bulky bags, but they had now been joined by what seemed like a spikier, angrier local crowd. There was a chant going, and fingers jabbing towards the cops. "No justice, no peace – fuck the police!"

One or two young lads, in the crowd of what

could now fairly be described as protesters, were occasionally advancing towards the police lines to taunt them. The cops were looking jittery, some of them raising their batons above their heads, waving them threateningly at anyone who came near. The police dog was barking ferociously.

At one point I wandered up to the police blockade, trying to see what was going on at the squat. One of the cops said something to me, telling me to step back, but I took no notice as I was only going to be there for a few seconds. The next thing I knew I received an almighty thump on the chest, pushing me back into the arms of some people on the pavement behind, which fortunately saved me from falling.

“Are you all right, mate?” said a woman of roughly my age, with touching concern. “You’re just a bunch of thugs, that’s what you are!” she shouted at the cops. None of them reacted at all. I looked at the hard little eyes and smug, closed expression of the one who had pushed me – using perfectly legal force, of course – and remembered that they had always been like this.

I recovered my poise and ambled around a bit, at a safe distance from the police, wondering if I was going to make it to the squat within the next hour for the meeting. Suddenly a great shout

came up from behind me, and people started scattering. I turned round in time to see half a dozen police horses literally charging into the back of the crowd, the cops on their backs swinging wildly as they ploughed into us. Women were screaming, everyone wheeling and stumbling in fear and confusion. I watched a policeman smash a teenage girl on the back with his baton, sending her sprawling to the ground. Her friends rushed forward to pick her up and pull her on to the side of the road. People were trying to get out of the way of the horses, cramming on to the pavements and hiding in shop doorways. But even here there was no refuge. The police riders were following them there, forcing their horses' frothing mouths towards the protesters, screaming inaudible orders at the crowd and flaying the air with their batons.

"Cunts!" I found myself shouting. "You fucking cunts!"

I hadn't felt like this in years. I'd thought that was all in the past, for me, but here I was again, the fury rising within.

"Scum! Scum! Scum!" I shouted with the others in the road. Someone behind me was screaming "shame on you!" at the police, but that seemed

weak to me. They didn't know the meaning of the word "shame". They couldn't care less about moral judgements of their thuggery. The law was on their side, would always be on their side, and that was all that mattered to them.

There was a great shattering of glass behind me. A hooded protester, now masked up, had put in the windows of a corporate coffee shop behind me. A great cheer went up and a couple of others kicked away the remaining glass and clambered inside. There was no sign of any customers or staff – presumably it had shut when the road was closed off.

With the cavalry having sown their confusion, the infantry were now moving in, the line of riot police advancing towards us. A hail of beer cans and plastic bottles was being thrown towards them but they paid little attention. Then, from behind me, came a sudden volley of heavier, solid objects that crashed to the ground around the police. One hit a cop right on the side of his helmet and he staggered and reeled from the blow. I looked round and saw that a supply of branded coffee mugs had been looted from the shop and were being passed out into the crowd beyond. They were having an effect, too, as the foot soldiers had now halted in disarray. The mounted cops, however, had seen what was going

on and were heading over to confront the problem. Everyone around me now seemed to be picking up the mugs which were being passed out of the shop.

There was no more chanting, just yelling, everyone finding their own words of abuse to scream at the advancing enemy.

“Fuck off!” I was shouting. “Fuck off!” A police horse was just few yards away from me now and its rider was looming up over me, faceless in his riot gear and baton raised above his head. There was something timeless about this image of oppression, of violence, of authority physically imposed on human beings by sheer naked force, by the punishment of pain, the bruising of flesh, the breaking of bones, the shedding of blood. We were the peasants, the people, the mob, the rabble, the strikers, the rebels, the defiers, the resisters. They were the king’s men, the mercenaries, the enforcers, the hired thugs, the huntsmen, the executioners, the violent psychopaths given licence to vent their toxic hatred on innocent flesh by the badge of authority, law and order, the Crown.

I glanced down at my side and there was a coffee mug, sitting there and waiting just for me. I picked it up, pulled back my arm, took aim at the



helmet of the advancing foe and then, at the very last moment, I froze. A voice had stopped me.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” It was Jennifer. In the sudden, momentary, calm, I felt the slightest of breezes caress my forehead. “For fuck’s sake, Jon, think about how you’re acting for once. Look at yourself! You’re more than fifty years old! What good is this going to do you? How is this going to help Callum? How are you going to find Henry this way? Haven’t you done enough damage in your life, Jon, with your temper? Haven’t you hurt enough people as it is? I’m dead, Jon, because of you. And still you haven’t learnt your lesson? You should be ashamed, Jonathan Harvey.”

I dropped the mug and suddenly everything around me had stopped mattering. The volume seemed to have been turned down. The battle was now just a stupid game. In a daze, I walked straight out of the front line zone and through the crowds that were watching from a safe distance. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the window of a nail parlour and saw that she was right. I was old. I was grey. I was fat. I was crumpled. I was pathetic.

Before I knew it, I was back in The Green Man downing another pint of porter. And another

after that. I didn't even notice the TV news. I was somewhere else. I was at home in Brighton. I was angry. I was shouting at Jennifer. She was shouting back. I didn't stop shouting. I didn't want to. I was in the right. She was to blame. I was asserting myself. I wasn't going to be bossed around by anyone. I picked up every psychological weapon that came to mind and hurled them furiously at her. Some of them struck home and I was pleased. I was winning. She was cracking. I racked up the pressure, pressed home my advantage, raised my mighty baton of logic above my head and prepared for victory.

She broke down in tears. She grabbed her coat and car keys and left the room. I felt nothing. The front door slammed. The car engine started up. I felt nothing. I heard her reverse out of the drive. The car screeched and she headed towards the end of the road in the wrong gear. You could hear the instability. There was the shortest of silences and then the worst of all sounds. The sound that will go with me to my grave. The sound of the double-decker bus, coming down the hill from the racecourse, smashing broadside into her car. She was killed outright. She can't even have looked before she pulled out. It wasn't the bus driver's fault. It was mine.

## CHAPTER NINE

I didn't completely lose track of time, despite the state I was in. I was vaguely aware that the road was unlikely to be open again, given what I had witnessed and given the fact that the helicopter was still thud-thudding overhead and sirens wailing all around. Accordingly, at 4.55pm I ventured out of the pub to check if I could now reach the squat in time for the 5pm talk. At 5.15pm I was back in the pub again, with a fourth pint of porter and another packet of peanuts.

I almost went straight back to Brighton after that, since I had missed the meeting, if it had gone ahead, and was not in the best of mental conditions. But I had a job to do, so I forced myself to go and have a final look. To my surprise, things had now quietened down and, despite a heavy police presence at the end of Gilders Street, I must have looked sufficiently harmless to be allowed to proceed unmolested to

the squat.

It had been chaotic the day before, but now the scene at the convergence centre was on a whole different level. You could hardly move in the main downstairs spaces, there were so many people milling around. People were still arriving, of course, trying to find a good sleeping place, looking for their friends, working out what was going on. But there was now also a sense that there were a lot of people who actually *belonged* here, who *lived* here, who *were* the place. They tripped up and down the stairs with a sense of purpose, called out to each other with confidence. They knew what they were doing. Behind all the bustle and apparent confusion there was a strong sense of cohesion.

While I was touring around looking out for Mouse or, even better, Henry, I ran into Al, the Asian lad I had met on the roof the day before. We'd had a short chat, in fact, in which he'd explained that he had finished his degree the previous summer and had no idea what he wanted to do in his life. So he'd decided to try being a revolutionary. For a year or two, anyway.

"Some people go travelling," he'd said brightly. "But at the end of the day that's just moving around. It's horizontal. I'm going for the vertical

version. Why, obviously, is why I'm on the roof!"

"Still travelling vertically, then?" I said as we crossed on the staircase.

Al didn't know where Mouse was, but was able to explain to me what had happened earlier in the afternoon. Apparently the cops had turned up first thing in the morning and started searching everyone coming towards the squat, going through their bags and everything. Legal observers had gone down there to give people advice on what they did and didn't have to do and the police had got a bit bolshy. Finally, a bunch of Danish autonomists had turned up, seen what was happening and decided to avoid the bag-searching by pushing through the police cordon and making a dash for the convergence centre. They'd managed it, as well, said Al. But as a result the cops had closed the whole road and it had all kicked off, as I had seen.

I asked him if the afternoon's workshops had gone ahead, in the circumstances. Maybe they'd been postponed and I'd get a second bite at the apple? But he confirmed that everything had taken place as planned.

"Everyone was stuck in here, so there were probably more people involved than if nothing

had happened,” he said. Then, with a mischievous glint in his eyes, he added: “In fact, to tell the truth, the whole thing was pre-arranged with the Met Police to make sure we had a good turn-out for the meetings.”

I explained that it hadn't been such good news for me, as I had missed out on a speaker I had particularly wanted to see. He asked which one and when I told him he said: “Oh, Mat! He's still here if you want to meet him. He'll be here all week. He might be a bit too busy to talk at the moment, though!”

There was a frenzy of activity in the kitchens. Steaming cauldrons, people lugging boxes of vegetables and several teams of peelers and slicers at work. At the far side of the room was a very tall, pale man of about 40, wearing a white chef's hat and chopping up a supply of large but somewhat cracked carrots with a frightening, furious and noisy efficiency.

“Mat!” called Al.

Mat stopped chopping and looked up.

“This is Jon,” said Al. “The British state wouldn't let him come to your talk and he'd like a chat when you've got a moment.”

“Hey, Jon” said Mat, smiling warmly. “As you can see, I am just a little bit busy for the moment preparing food for my family of three hundred very hungry anarchist children, but maybe afterwards, in one hour, we can go for a beer if you know somewhere good near here?”

I did, as it happened, and so it was that I found myself again in The Green Man. It was starting to feel like home. It had filled up a bit now, and while I waited my turn at the bar, I glanced at the TV and saw that this afternoon’s events had made it on to the 24-hour news. “Central London: Anti-capitalists clash with police ahead of World Forum.” Funny how the police never clash with protesters. They’re always on the receiving end of the sentence, in the skewed grammar of mainstream news.

Mat explained that he was in London as part of the Zwarte Komijn, or Black Cumin, catering collective, which specialised in cooking vegan food for big mobilisations and festivals, normally in northern Europe and Scandinavia, although they had recently been to Lesbos in Greece for a migrant solidarity meet-up.

He had got into anarchism via anti-militarist politics and was still very influenced by the concept of non-violence, he explained.

“Intellectually, I know that the violence of the state came first, that as anarchists we have the right to protect ourselves against that violence, but sometimes I think we fall into the trap of thinking there’s something beautiful about this counter-violence in itself, whereas for me it can only ever be something that is necessary but ugly.

“That’s why I’m part of the kitchen, I think. I don’t want to be in a riot, fighting the cops, but I accept that it’s a necessary part of the struggle. So I make meals for the people who are going to go and do the fighting. I participate and I don’t participate, at the same time. All to take care of my pacifist conscience!

“You know, I even wondered whether I should come to London when I saw the group is called Smash the WF! Why ‘smash’? Why not ‘stop’ or ‘oppose’ or ‘defy’ or... anything but that! But I can see that, in fact, we have the same political positions, we just express them a little differently!”

He explained that once he had decided to help out with the London convergence, he had taken the opportunity of volunteering to run a workshop on Kropotkin’s anarchism, which was his spare-time passion.



“You’re not a full-time writer, then?” I asked.

“Ah no,” he laughed, deftly twiddling a beer mat with his huge white hands. “I don’t think in the world you will find very many full-time anarchist writers. Unless they are rich, I suppose, but then they are a funny kind of anarchist if they don’t want to give their money away or share it in an anarchist project...Or if they are old, I suppose. Yes, when I am seventy years old I will be a full-time anarchist writer. And cook. In the meantime, I must continue to work for my living. But I enjoy teaching, also, so it’s not a problem.”

I was a bit surprised that Mat managed to combine a professional teaching job with writing about anarchism. I wasn’t sure if that would be possible in the UK. Weren’t there rules against domestic extremists working in education? I could almost picture the exposé in the *Mail on Sunday* – Anarchy in the classroom: teacher’s double life as sinister extremist.

“So,” said Mat, once the opening introductions were over. “You have a special interest in Mr Kropotkin, I suppose?”

I should have expected this question, of course. Why else would I have been so keen to meet him? But in the confusion of events, and perhaps

partly because of the beer I had been downing all afternoon, I hadn't thought this far ahead.

"Well, I do live in Brighton..." I ventured, as a diversionary tactic.

"Not in Chesham Street, I suppose?"

"No," I said, understanding that this must have been where the Russian anarchist had lived. "But not far from there, just up the hill from Kemp Town."

There was a short silence so I carried on.

"I am in fact reading your book at the moment," I said, patting my bag to show that it was in there somewhere. "And it's very interesting, which is partly why I wanted to come to the talk."

"Mmmm..." said Mat. "But also?"

"But also," I continued, "it was because I am looking for someone who I thought might have come to the meeting."

I pulled out the photograph of Henry and handed it to him.

"Ah yes," he nodded, giving it straight back

without a second glance. “He was there.”

I couldn’t quite believe it. “Really?” I asked. “This man was at your talk this afternoon?”

My mind was racing. I had been so close and I had missed him! Maybe Henry was still there! Maybe he was staying at the squat! I almost felt like rushing out of the pub and back to the convergence centre to try and find him.

The Dutchman was looking at me with curiosity. A curiosity tinged with pity – as if, in his calmness, could barely understand the anxiety that was undoubtedly rippling visibly across my features.

“You seem surprised,” he said. “You tell me you think this young man was at the workshop but you find it incredible that this was actually so!”

“Yes, I know,” I said, laughing at how absurd I must have appeared. “It’s a bit complicated. I’m a friend of his father’s, who needs to speak to him urgently. I was hoping he would be there, so I could talk to him, but...”

Mat seemed to be reading my thoughts.

“I don’t think he’s there now,” he said. “We can

go and look if you like, but I am 99 per cent sure he left. I asked him if he was staying to eat, but he said he had to go. And then I saw him heading for the door when I was going to the kitchens.”

I nodded and steadied myself a bit. This made sense, after all. Henry would hardly feel comfortable enough at the squat to hang around there longer than he had to. But “had to” for what reason? That was what I needed to find out from Mat.

It turned out that Mat had recognised Henry so instantly because at the end of the workshop they had had quite a discussion, which had continued after the other dozen participants had left.

“So he was interested in your ideas?” I asked.

“They’re not *my* ideas, they’re Kropotkin’s! I don’t claim to have created anything, I just try to explain, to educate, as you would expect from my profession. But yes, he was obviously interested, although...”

“Yes?”

“Although there were traces of an attitude I wouldn’t have expected in this sort of

environment.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he was certainly very polite. He had even seen my book, although I didn’t have the impression he had read it all. Rather just read the odd passage where it had happened to fall open, I think...”

I smiled sympathetically. Some people, eh?

“But there was a questioning towards some of the fundamental ideas behind what I was saying. Towards anarchism, even, I would say, although I don’t know if that is fair to him...”

“Yes, possibly,” I said. “That’s partly what I’m trying to find out. What exactly was his angle?”

“His angle was quite strange, really, in content and in style. To start with I thought he was maybe a communist. He asked if it wasn’t ‘naïve’ to imagine that mutual aid and solidarity could come naturally to human beings and that society could be built on such a basis, without a state.”

Mat remembered something and laughed. “He even asked what I would say to somebody who thought the anarchist ideal was a ‘cloud-cuckoo

land', which I didn't understand at all and someone else had to explain to me... Then later he was asking about nations, and how they fitted into Kropotkin's ideas, so I was no longer sure where he was coming from."

"And the style? You were saying that there something odd about the way he said this?"

"Yes. It was odd. Confusing for me, even. He was asking questions in this neutral sort of way, which was in a way disguising a criticism. But at the same time I felt he was really listening to my answers. He was open to being persuaded. I wouldn't have carried on talking to him otherwise. I think we got somewhere, after the meeting finished. I was explaining about mutual aid, as Kropotkin saw it, how it was a tendency in human and animal societies, a necessary tendency for survival. There was nothing naïve in this, I explained to him, because it wasn't some kind of moral fantasy that people always acted altruistically, or something like that, but just an observation on how they actually tended to act, and had to act. The Social-Darwinists said evolution was all about competition, competing to see who would survive and give birth to future generations, while Kropotkin said evolution was more about co-operating to ensure survival. The ethical element is also practical."

“And he got all that?”

“Yes, I would like to think so. We also talked more about tribes and nations. I explained that although solidarity and mutual aid would naturally mainly be practised among people who lived together in certain communities, these principles didn't limit themselves to those entities. Selfishness on behalf of a tribe or a nation is just the same thing as selfishness as an individual, but on a larger scale. The point of the principle behind mutual aid, the ethics, is that it is a principle of opening to the other, of an understanding that we all rely on other people – other individuals, other groups, the rest of nature and so on – for our welfare. Dividing people into separate little bundles of self-interest, nationalism in other words, goes against the natural ethics of unity and solidarity.”

“And he didn't react badly, when you criticised nationalism?”

“Badly? No. He's clearly an intelligent young fellow and I think he could see where I was coming from. We didn't have enough time, to tell the truth. I had to start preparing the meal with the others. But I gave him a suggestion for some further reading – once he had actually read my

own very important work!” He laughed. “I’m joking of course. He doesn’t have to read it now anyway, I’ve told him all the best bits!”

“What did you suggest?”

“I suggested a very interesting author who writes about nature in a much deeper way than I could ever do. She’s an anarchist, I know, but she’s not always completely explicit about it in her writing. Anahid Vishnyakova. Have you heard of her?”

I was getting so used to being surprised that this time it hardly registered.

“Yes I have,” I said. “Didn’t she write *The Pattern Within*?”

“Just so, yes. Have you read it?”

“No, but I’m going to!”

“That’s exactly what *he* said. Your young friend! You’re not related are you?”

I assured him that we weren’t.

“He said he would like to speak to this writer, Vishnyakova, in person, like he had spoken to



me. Reading a book was all very well, but you couldn't ask a book any questions, he said. There was a strange urgency about him, I have to say. Ideas are very interesting, of course, but most of us are quite happy to take our time exploring them. Not him, though. He had to find out everything there was to know. Now! The impulsiveness of youth, I suppose."

"And where does she live, Vishnyakova?"

"The same question as him again! She lives in France, in a little place up in the mountains. A friend of mine in Amsterdam went to stay with her a few years ago – they knew each other from Berlin, years back."

We had finished our pints and were heading back up Gilders Street towards the squat. Mat had to get up early in the morning to prepare breakfast.

"So do you think he's going to try and go and speak to her?" I asked.

"Why not? It seems possible. She's not difficult to find, she even puts her address on her website, as I told your friend. And you? Are you thinking of dashing off to France to try and intercept this mysterious young man?"

I smiled. "It seems possible."

After I had thanked him for his help, and we had swapped contact details, he made for the squat entrance, which still seemed to be guarded by the same group who had been on the door when I first arrived. The street was completely quiet now, with no sign of any police at all.

Suddenly, just as the chains were being lifted from the gate to let him through, I remembered something important.

"Asha!" I called out. "Does the word Asha mean anything to you?"

"Three out of three!" he called back. "You really are working from the same script! No, it doesn't mean anything to me at all, I'm afraid, although now I have to admit I am a little intrigued. Try asking Vishnyakova. Maybe she knows! I told your friend the same thing so perhaps you can ask in unison, like a pair of funny twins!"

## CHAPTER TEN

“But why?” Callum was saying on the phone the following morning. “*Why* would he suddenly take off to the south of France looking for some woman who wrote a book that some other guy he just met said he might like to read? I don’t buy it, Jon! It just doesn’t make any sense!”

I was regretting not having shared with him the full story of the books. It was making my reasoning quite difficult to follow, I realised, and I was having to invent justifications for my thinking to fill the void left by my omission.

“It’s his research, Callum!” I said, suddenly grasping a decent explanation. “I think he’s still doing his homework for KID. He’s on the trail of something interesting, something that’ll get him good marks when he hands his work in. He’s found a little corner of the left-wing world to explore and he can’t wait to follow up every lead that comes his way. He’s enthusiastic, that’s all!”

I used to be like that, as a journalist. You never sit on anything, in case the lead goes cold or someone else gets there first. You drop everything and go for it!”

Callum said nothing, which was a good sign in this context.

“Listen, Callum,” I said, pushing the point home. “We don’t know why he’s gone off like this, without telling you anything, but I’m beginning to feel a sort of sense behind it all. Maybe you’re right and he really *is* planning some crazed terrorist attack on the enemy within, but for the moment I think he’s following a trail. Perhaps he’s after the key thinker behind the whole anarchist ideology, or something like that. Perhaps he does intend to slit their throats when he tracks them down. Who knows? But in the meantime, it seems to me perfectly logical that he’s going to take the next step on the path that’s opening up for him. He’s in the flow, Callum, and he’s going to see it through to the end.”

“I don’t know...”

“He’s got his passport, right? And he’s got money, from KID?”

“He has, aye, but that’s not what I’m

questioning. I'm not saying he *couldn't* go to France if he wanted to, but I'm telling you that I don't see *why* he would want to. And, I guess Jon, I'm worried that if you go flying off after him, on a wild goose chase, and he's still in London planning some horrendous act with those fascist friends of his..."

"The Dutch bloke has met him now. He says he'll let me know if he turns up at the squat again. In the meantime, I've got nothing. I've got no leads at all in London. What am I supposed to do? Sit around waiting for him to show his face in Gilders Street? Wander the streets for ten hours a day looking for him? London's a big place, Callum, a lot bigger than Edinburgh."

"Aye, thank you Jon," said Callum sourly. "London's a big place. I'd never have known that if it wasn't for you."

In the end I persuaded him I should go to France in search of Vishnyakova and, of course, of Henry. Callum even volunteered to book my flight and accommodation for me, which made sense as he would be paying for it and could keep some control over the cost. I had the vague feeling that Callum somehow objected to me going to the southern end of France at his expense. As if I was taking advantage of him,

creating an excuse for a little free holiday. That wasn't the case. But at the same time, it was certainly true that I was quite excited by the idea. Maybe that was the problem. I was being too enthusiastic. If I'd been a bit more cunning I'd have presented the whole thing differently, shown a bit of reluctance about going abroad, let him think that it was *his* idea to look for Henry out there. But cunning wasn't really my thing. I'd tried it from time to time and it had never worked for me.

Callum got back to me that afternoon. The good news was that he'd got me on a flight to Nîmes in the morning. The bad news was that it was departing from Luton Airport.

"There's a direct train from Brighton, so it's nice and handy for you," he said breezily.

Yes, I thought to myself. A direct train that takes two and half hours, with a bus trip at the other end. Gatwick Airport was a convenient 25 minutes from Brighton, on the other hand, although I supposed Callum couldn't necessarily be expected to know that. Or care.

He'd also found a "very reasonable" hotel near to Vishnyakova's address.

I had sort of managed to get in contact Vishnyakova. By this I mean that I had called the number on her website and left a message asking if I could call in and speak to her the day after tomorrow. Later, while I was out at the shops, she'd left a message saying that I was welcome at any time between 10 and 17, which was French for 5pm. I'd tried to ring her back to introduce myself properly, but had come across the answering service again and let it drop.

I would have gone to her place even without that confirmation, in fact. She lived right out in the sticks, on some kind of farm which wasn't just her home, evidently, but the Institut Cévennol de la Nature Intérieure, a venue for various activities open to the public, such as "natural immersion therapy" and "instinctive poetry" workshops.

I had been suffering a few doubts about my mission after talking to Callum. Couldn't I have just talked to her over the phone in the first place – assuming I could ever get through? But then how could I show her the photo of Henry? And if he was indeed down there, what could I *do* about it from Brighton?

Other tricky issues had also come to mind. How much should I tell Vishnyakova about what I

was after? If I told her in advance to look out for Henry, would that help me or not? Wouldn't it just alert him to the fact that I was on his trail and – if he was up to no good – help him avoid me? On the other hand, I was not exactly clear as to how I expected to bump into Henry in the French mountains, if indeed that was where he was headed. Even if she had seen him, would she know where he was staying or how I could find him? Maybe he would be conveniently de-immersing himself from a poetry workshop as I walked on to the site? Maybe he would be staying at the same hotel as me? Or even be on the same flight out of Luton Airport? Oh well. I would just have to trust in those famous instincts in which Callum was putting so much trust.

I printed out my plane ticket, eventually found my passport in my sock drawer, and started packing my bag. I picked up Vishnyakova's book and thought about having a quick look, but something told me this wasn't the right moment. I would have plenty of time for that on the journey and even tomorrow night at the French hotel. I put it straight in my bag. I added Cowper Powys's *The Meaning of Culture* in case I felt in the mood for a bit of self-flagellation.

The other books I had borrowed were still sitting there on the kitchen table, glaring up at me



accusingly. I really should be making more of an effort here, I told myself.

I picked up the first one that came to hand – *What is Art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys*. I remembered having seen something by Beuys at the Tate Modern. Some kind of monstrous ugly installation. I couldn't even remember what it was, but I doubted I would be much illuminated by the artist's line in conversation. Nevertheless, I closed my eyes and opened a page at random, then read the first paragraph.

“Social sculpture or the social organism is not a thing that one can perceive, unfortunately not, or thank God not. For if it could be perceived people would die of terror. Because this social organism is so ill that it is absolutely high time to subject it to radical treatment, otherwise humanity will go under. And our social organism exists like a living being in a condition of the severest illness. Through these activities, undertaken consciously, one can school oneself to perceive this, to perceive the sickness of the social organism as a living being, to perceive its movements – to see what has been formed – in other words to compare the contemporary shape and form of the social organism with its archetype.”

The archetype of a social organism? Wasn't that what Mat had been getting at with this idea of Kropotkin's natural ethics, an idea of mutual aid that was imbedded in the human mind?

My eyes scanned down the page and picked up another passage. Beuys was saying how difficult it was for people today to say how human society should be structured, what form it should take. "Because they have no sense or perception of the archetype, that is, of the healthy condition of a social organism as it evolves."

So we had lost touch with the archetype, with an idea of how society was *meant* to be? It had been erased from our cultural map, declared to no longer exist? Beuys' ideas were a lot more interesting than his works, it appeared. I made a mental note to come back and have another look later, then picked up the next in my pile – *The Book of Chuang Tzu*. From twentieth century avant-garde German art-think to Chinese philosophy from the fourth century BCE. Quite a leap back in time!

I mentally put the Leftover Library scarf over my eyes and opened a page in the middle of the volume.

"The people have a true nature, they weave their

cloth, they farm to produce food. This is their basic Virtue. They are all one in this, not separated, and it is from Heaven. Thus, in an age of perfect Virtue the people walk slowly and solemnly. They see straight and true. In times such as these the mountains have neither paths nor tunnels, on the lakes there are neither boats nor bridges; all life lives with its own kind, living close together. The birds and beasts multiply in their flocks and herds, the grass and trees grow tall. It is true that at such a time the birds and beasts can be led around without ropes, and birds' nests can be seen with ease. In this time of perfect Virtue, people live side by side with the birds and beasts, sharing the world in common with all life. No one knows of distinctions such as nobles and the peasantry! If people are truly simple, they can follow their true nature."

That word again – nature. Maybe this age of perfect Virtue was society as it was meant to be, the healthy social organism described by Beuys? I flicked over a few more pages.

"I have heard of leaving the world open to its own way and not interfering, but I have never heard of trying to control the world. We let the world be, fearful of spoiling its innate nature; we leave it alone, fearful of those who adversely affect the world's Virtue. If the nature of everything under

Heaven is not distorted, if the world's Virtue is not despoiled, then what need is there to govern the world?"

That was definitely Mat's anarchy, there was no doubt about it. He'd credited Kropotkin with idea of a natural, organically-ungoverned social harmony, but here it was being set out by someone living more than two thousand years ago and more than five thousand miles away from Chesham Street, Brighton!

I put down the book and went off upstairs to ponder over all of this in the bath. After that, I thought I'd go to bed. I had another early start in the morning. It was almost like I was working again!

I was in the train again, the train to Asha. Except that it was a different train, a modern train. And I knew it was going to Asha because it said so on the electronic display in front of me. I was on my feet, walking through the train towards the front. There was no anxiety about which way the train was heading. I knew, somehow, that it was going the right way, which was to the south. Instead, I was trying to find Henry. I knew he was on the train, somewhere, and I had to reach him.

Suddenly, I saw the back of his head disappearing through the doors at the far end of the carriage I had just entered. I was on his trail! I quickened my pace to try and catch him, but when I reached the next carriage, he was again just exiting the other side. The same thing happened again and again, interminably it seemed. I had to reach him before we got to the very front because I knew that otherwise he would loop round to the back of the train, behind me, and I would have to turn the other way to try and reach him. I would be heading backwards, the way I had come, and that would be fatal. That way I would never reach Asha.

I woke up with a jolt of anxiety and was irritated to find that it was only 4am. I forced myself to switch on the light and jot down the dream, then went straight back to sleep.

I didn't end up reading at all on the whole journey to Nîmes, even though *The Pattern Within* sat on my knees for much of the time. I wasn't in the mood. There was far too much else going on in my mind. All the Henry thing, of course, and my nagging sense of self-doubt about how the search was going. But also the events of the day before, with the police, and all the Jennifer-related guilt that they had triggered.

Connecting the two was this idea of my instincts, on whose soundness so much was being staked. I could go along with that, if we were talking simply about investigative journalism. I did have a certain feeling for the task at hand, when it interested me, that could be notched up as a kind of talent. But on a personal level, what exactly were my instincts and where had they led me in life? I had had the instinct to throw corporate chinaware at the Metropolitan Police. I had had the instinct to keep shouting at Jennifer until she drove off to her death.

Again and again in my life I had had the instinct that I was right, that everybody else was wrong, and that I should carry on acting in exactly the same way regardless of what anyone thought and what the results were. I had an instinct, in fact, to follow my instincts – and this was not something that always proved very wise. It was all just too easy, to float along on a permanent wave of self-vindication, doing exactly what I felt like doing and immediately awarding it my own personal certificate of validity because I was obeying my own inner compass.

The hunt for Henry was not abstract, like a news story. It was real. It involved real people, real lives. My involvement was as a real person, not as a remote brain-in-a-jar observing all the

elements with objective calm. My actions mattered, my behaviour mattered, my relations with other people mattered. I was *inside* the story as Callum's friend, as someone who had involved himself with Henry's life and with the lives of the others I was using as stepping stones in my quest – Mouse, Mat and now this Vishnyakova woman. Could I trust myself not to let them down?

I thought back to the painful quote I had read in *The Meaning of Culture*. No, I couldn't. I wasn't trustworthy. I wasn't calm. I was a madman who regularly lost leave of his senses at critical moments in his life.

So what was the alternative? To *not* trust in my instincts? What would that look like? How could I do anything at all if I didn't have that foundation? Was I supposed to live my life in a plodding, calculated, ponderous way, carefully evaluating every possible action or reaction before committing myself to saying or doing anything? That just wasn't me.

## CHAPTER 11

The first thing I noticed when I walked off the plane at Nîmes was that it was hot. As hot at the end of April as at the peak of an English summer. The second thing I noticed was that this was the smallest airport I had ever seen. There were no other aircraft beside the tiny terminal building and the shuttle bus into town seemed to be there specifically for our flight.

We were dropped off at the *gare routière* behind the rail station and I took the opportunity to check the timetables for the next leg of my journey. As I had seen online, there was only one bus to Vishnyakova's village and it left at 18 o'clock – in five hours' time.

I had a more-than-adequate window of opportunity through which to discover the city and so I passed through the rail station and on to Avenue Feuchères, the big mainly-pedestrianised boulevard that leads up towards the centre. This



was pleasant enough, with park benches alongside a gushing urban water channel, but there was little shade and already I was wilting in the heat.

The avenue opened out into the vast expanse of a sun-baked square and beyond that was something that looked like the Coliseum. I drifted over to have a closer look, eyes squinting against the brightness. As I did so, I couldn't help noticing an extraordinarily ugly building, evidently new, on my left. It was obviously inspired by the deconstructionist movement and had been designed in such a way that it looked warped and broken. Hideous.

The original object of my curiosity turned out to indeed be a Roman amphitheatre. It was in pretty good shape, for something built 2,000 years ago. I couldn't image the new monstrosity over the square still existing in the year 4,000. Or even in 2040 for that matter. If it hadn't imploded under the strain of its own pointlessness by then, hopefully the next generation of *nîmois* would have had enough sense to complete its deconstructionist trajectory by tearing the thing down and replacing it with something more attractive and culturally engaging. A fucking great hole in the ground, for instance.

I was looking for somewhere to have a coffee but it still seemed to be very much lunchtime and the outdoors tables were all taken up by diners. I wandered into the old city centre, a little maze of shiny-tiled alleyways lined by boutiques so upmarket that their window displays gave little indication of what they were actually selling. I bought myself a croissant from a little bakery – because that is the sort of thing you do when you are in France – and then finally found a café opposite the cathedral with a table or two going spare.

“*Merci*,” I said in my best French and took a sip of my espresso. What a delight to be sitting down, in this pretty square, under a deep blue sky with the vitality of the Mediterranean spring in the air. It felt right being here, somehow. There was something homely about this place, as if I had known it in another life.

A cloud of cigarette smoke blew into my face and I realised that I had planted myself down next to a tobacco addict, albeit, I noted out of the corner of my eye, a rather fine-looking one, with swan-like neck, dark hair tinged with grey and a very fetching Gallic pout. As I took her in, she turned, looked straight at me and smiled.

I smiled back and then, a little embarrassed,

reached for my bag and extracted *The Pattern Within*. The cover was quite familiar to me now, having sat there looking up at me all day. It was an ink drawing of leaves, a layer of leaves, with all the intricacy of the edges, veins and stems beautifully rendered by the artist. Who needed to actually open the book?

“*You* do, Jonathan,” said Jennifer curtly, as a little warm wind blew up in the square. “You need to *read* the books you have been given! That’s the whole point, isn’t it? Or are you just going to sit there all afternoon stealing admiring little glimpses of that woman over there?”

I opened it up, since she’d told me to. I immediately saw the word “Roman”, which seemed a good omen in a city sometimes described as the French Rome, so I read on.

“The Roman god Faunus, also known as Pan, was the son of Picus, which means woodpecker. Demeter was associated with the pig, Circe with the falcon. The Oracle of Delphi, that epitome of human wisdom, was originally a dolphin-god, from where the name is derived. Everywhere we look, in every culture, every human dream, we find that apparently abstract ideas in fact have their roots firmly planted in the soil of nature. Mother Earth herself, Pachamama, the gods and

goddesses of greenness and renewal who are the plants which wither and revive through the annual cycles, all the archetypes with which we have pieced together an understanding of our world are drawn – from where else *could* they be drawn! – from that very same world. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols. These symbols, these authentic symbols of our deepest, most earthiest belonging, bypass the cumbersome workings of the rational mind, the straight lines and one-dimensional intersections of the classical ‘male’ mind which have become the grid to which all human thought must apparently be confined. These symbols connect us with reality, the actual reality under the surface of our artificial and mechanical ‘civilization’ – the complex reality, the multifaceted, intertwining, throbbing, bleeding, weeping, seeping, feeding, loving reality of life itself.”

Nice. I closed the book again, knowing that this was exactly how I was supposed to be proceeding. This is what Frank and Frasier had had in mind. Find the right passage, read it and then let the contents sink in. “Archetype”. That word again. The social organism, a vision of the social organism, the Chinese ideal of the land of Virtue, a land where nature governs itself, an archetype

arising from nature, bubbling up in the human mind, in human culture, a symbol that points to nature because it is part of nature.

Is this what Henry was researching? The connection between anarchism and nature, between leftist and environmentalist thought, between an ideology that looked forward to a post-revolutionary future and ideas that were rooted in humanity's origins in nature? But why? It had to be for a sort of academic essay, his homework for his sponsors. I couldn't believe that this was an angle that would interest someone who was merely hostile to the left and all it stood for. It was too abstract, too obscure. There were much better targets for an angry young right-winger. Anti-fascists, for a start. The self-proclaimed enemy. Or gay rights campaigners, feminists, Muslims, black or Jewish groups – all of those movements that seemed to make the alt-right's blood boil. This nature angle, these ideas being put forward by Mat and Vishnyakova, would obviously not be to the *liking* of someone inspired by the idea of rigid national identities, tightly-defended borders and “strong” authoritarian states. I could well imagine that Henry found the anarchist faith in human nature unrealistic to the point of naivety. But at the same time naivety is not generally a fault that makes you *hate* someone, let alone

want to kill them. Callum's fatherly anxiety was misleading him in this respect, I was sure. Henry wasn't on a mission to search out and destroy. There was something else going on here.

When the woman with the swan-like neck had moved off, with a second little smile as she went, I lost interest in sitting there and went for a walk. I passed the *Maison Carrée*, another monument to the enduring solidity of the Roman Empire, and found myself in the *Jardins de la Fontaine*. I read the information boards and discovered that the gardens represented three layers of history. Beneath the landscaped 18th century surface was the Roman presence, still in evidence in the shape of a temple beside the fountains and a tower at the top of the wooded slope. And underneath all of that was the pre-Roman Celtic site dedicated to Nemausus, the local water god, who had given Nîmes its name.

There was, it struck me, a fourth layer as well. There was the geological reality of the network of underground streams which emerged from the ground at this point, inspiring all the subsequent cultural activity. But then that was always the case, as Vishnyakova had pointed out. The reality of nature always underlay everything else that human beings dreamt up.

I found a shady spot on the grass higher up in the gardens and sat down. Suddenly, it came to me. Now I knew why there had been something reassuringly familiar about Nîmes. I had been here before! Years ago. We hadn't intended to come here, which was maybe why I hadn't made the connection. We had been driving back from Italy and had stayed at Arles, then we'd set off towards somewhere else in the south of France – Orange, perhaps? – and the car had started to conk out on the motorway. We'd just headed for the nearest big town to find a garage and we'd ended up having to stay the night. It was coming back now. We'd just had the one evening here and we'd come up to these gardens.

I got to my feet in excitement and tried to find a spot that corresponded to my rapidly-returning memories. I turned a corner on to a little clearing next to a children's play area and that was it. I felt a physical shudder run through my body. Something powerful had been triggered. I was back there, in the past. I wasn't just remembering it, I was within it. Everything that had happened since had evaporated in the southern sun. I was standing there as I was then, as a young man. A young man on holiday. A young man in love. And at my side was Jennifer.

I turned round to look at her but she wasn't

there. A couple of teenagers were approaching me, chatting and laughing, and I had to turn my back and move away fast before they saw the tears rolling down my cheeks.

I would never have imagined that it was possible to love anyone as much as I loved Jennifer. The first time I laid eyes on her, I *recognised* her as if she were someone I had always known, or had somehow always been destined to know. It wasn't even a simple case of being bewitched by physical attraction. Although she was a beautiful woman, it wasn't *that* which principally appealed to me. I remember how she blushed constantly as we spoke, that first time, at the anti-fascist fundraising gig, hiding behind the long hair that fell down either side of her shy face. She told me about her dreams, how she wrote them down, how she was looking for signs. There was something otherworldly about her, something mysterious and spiritual. As it turned out, there was a lot more to her than that. She was also deeply practical, hard-working and determined, but that wasn't the level on which we fell in love. We were transported into a fairy Otherworld of which we could dream ourselves prince and princess, boy-god and girl-goddess, timeless archetypes of creative union.

I remember looking deep into her eyes as we lay



entwined in bed on one of those luxurious bank holiday weekends where we had all the time we needed to do nothing at all except be in love. As I gazed into her pupils, I felt that I was within them, that we had somehow merged and that I could no longer be sure if I was me looking in or her looking out.

We talked, Jennifer and I. We always talked. We never tired of talking with each other. We always had something to say and to share. Sometimes we would look with pity at other couples in the pub who simply sat and stared into space, or read the paper, as if they had exhausted every possible subject of conversation between them. Jennifer and I could have lived for a thousand and one years without reaching that point, I am sure of it. We understood each other. We understood the world in pretty much the same way. We had the same reactions to other people, to places, to events. Sometimes I felt that we were one person, a composite human being, and that, perhaps, was where I went wrong, where I went too far, where I started to take it for granted that things would always be that way and where I stopped paying enough attention to the real woman in front of me, who was not a reflection of my own needs and desires but a being with her own independent destiny. If I had loosened my embrace just a little, if I hadn't

insisted so much, if I had sometimes walked away from disagreement rather than always faced it head on...

I got back to the bus station well before 6pm and thought for a moment that I had found Henry. But the tall, slim, fair-haired young man waiting for the Saint-Pierre-le-Brion service turned out to be German, as I discovered when he turned round to speak to his girlfriend. It wasn't a wild thought that Henry could have been on the bus. How else was he going to get to Vishnyakova's place? He couldn't drive. Any more than I could, these days.

I sighed inwardly. Something else I'd managed to mess up in my life. A huge row with Jennifer's father following an Easter Sunday lunch, after a few pre-meal drinks, a glass or two of red wine and a brandy. We were supposed to be staying over for the Bank Holiday Monday, a family walk in the Cotswolds the next morning. But then the old bastard had started talking about the "number one first" philosophy that had steered him ever upwards in life, up the company hierarchy, up the property ladder and higher and higher into the comfortable security of the social status he had always craved. I could have put up with that, in itself, if it had just been about *him*, about the choices *he'd* made in life, about the

way in which *he* saw fit to exist. But he always had to introduce a little sneering note of comparison with the knave who had dared to become his son-in-law, that useless idler wasting his days playing at being a journalist and failing to secure for Number One's Daughter the standard of living to which she was morally entitled.

Added to that was a certain contempt, I felt, for my parents. They'd shared a similar social background, in fact, but while George had Done Well For Himself, my father had never felt the need to be anything but a postman and amateur gardener, while my mother's part-time work at the hospital helped pay for an occasional family holiday, but had not been the catalyst for a class transition. Since the two of them had died when I was barely out of university – both of cancer and within a year of each other – George had never met them. But this hadn't stopped him from forming an opinion of them, and of me, which bubbled to the surface when he was feeling particularly pleased with himself.

“Any plans to move house, Jon?” he'd asked. “I really don't know how you two put up with it. Barely enough room to swing a cat. But I suppose you're used to that, with your upbringing!”

“No,” I’d replied. Calmly. Hoping he wouldn’t start off again on a familiar path. They never came to visit us any more, George and Deirdre, and I knew from Jennifer that this was because he found our home depressing. Small, shabby, in a scruffy neighbourhood. He didn’t want to be seen dead in a place like that. He’d spent the whole of his life escaping that world.

I cleared my throat. “We’re happy enough there for the moment, aren’t we Jennifer?”

“Oh yes,” she’d said. A bit unconvincingly, I thought.

“Just as well,” George had grunted. “I don’t suppose you’d get a mortgage for anything better with your part-time job.”

This had been the trigger for me. There was a bit of history behind this comment, beyond the general sense of social disapproval. Jennifer had once told me that, on being told that we didn’t have a lot of spare spending money, her father had suggested to her that I should change job – or even get a second one. Working in a bar in the evenings, or something like that. For him, my work at the *Investigator* was nothing more than a self-indulgent hobby. It was fine for Jennifer to work part-time on low pay, as a teaching

assistant, because she was a woman. But I was supposed to be the bread-winner, the provider, and in his eyes I was a complete failure.

I had kicked off at that moment. I couldn't recall afterwards exactly what I'd said, but Jennifer had assured me it wasn't pleasant.

"Right, that's it! We're going home!" I remember announcing at one stage.

"No, Jonathan, *we* are not going anywhere," Jennifer had replied, with a glance at her mother, and that had not helped my state of mind.

I'd finished by throwing a cupful of lukewarm coffee in George's face, storming out of the house via the patio doors, kicking in a pane of glass as I went, and deliberately trampling over his flower beds. Then I'd jumped into my car – that sounds odd now, "my car" – and roared off back towards Brighton.

I suppose I was lucky not to have caused an accident, to have killed someone or been killed. But I didn't feel particularly lucky when I was pulled over by the police. I was well over the limit, needless to say. I could have got my licence back eventually, but by then life had moved on.

I'd got used to not having a car and found I preferred the slower pace of public transport. And the fact that I could have a beer or two without worrying. In any case, Jennifer had eventually passed her test and got herself a little runaround. And we didn't have to go up to the Cotswolds any more because George was dead. He'd died of a heart attack three months after the row. I hadn't seen him again, obviously. Jennifer's mother, Deirdre, had moved down to Seaford, in Sussex, to be closer to her. She'd outlived Jennifer in the end, in fact, although I'd never spoken to her again following The Incident, even at Jennifer's funeral.

I snapped out of my fond memories. The bus had arrived and a great mob of schoolchildren was jostling past me towards the doors. The French don't go for queuing in the way we do in England.

The bus ride seemed to take an eternity, even for someone used to buses. It lasted an hour and half, in fact, which in terms of minute-by-minute value wasn't bad for one euro sixty. Being a bus, it didn't take the direct route to Saint-Pierre-le-Brion but wound in and out of picturesque villages through old narrow streets, gradually discharging its load of teenagers. We passed vineyards, crossed dry scrubby *garrigue*, lurched up steep hills around tight corners. From time to

time I caught a glimpse of some mountains in the distance, magically silhouetted in the evening sky. This was where we were heading, into the Cévennes. Gradually the bus emptied. Even the young Germans got off eventually and were greeted with hugs by a welcoming party in a little village square.

Eventually, I was the only remaining passenger. We were in the mountains now, great forested slopes on either side of the bus, captivating glimpses of a turbulent river rushing past us on its way down the valley we were ascending.

“*Au revoir*,” I said cheerily to the driver as I stepped out at Saint-Pierre-le-Brion, the end of the line. There was no end to my linguistic prowess.

I wandered towards the village centre. There was an old stone bridge over the river, with the forests and crags reaching up beyond. A couple of cafés decorated what seemed to be the main square, each with a handful of people sitting outside. I was tempted to stop off right away for a glass of something and a bite to eat, but told myself I’d better book in at the hotel first and save the pleasure for later.

The hotel was basic but clean. I’d had the smart

idea of asking the proprietor if Henry Kennedy had arrived, as if I was expecting him. In a way I was – where else could he be in a place this size? The manager seemed nonplussed by my question. There was no Henry Kennedy. He made me spell it out and had another look through the register. No, he was sorry. They were expecting nobody of that name. I assured him it didn't matter, although I was aware that he was now regarding me with a degree of suspicion tinged with embarrassment. He was called in to a back room for a few minutes and I watched some of the other guests come and go. They all seemed to be in their seventies, at least, I noticed. Where did young people stay around here, I wondered, people like Henry?

By the time I'd had had a quick shower, changed my shirt and headed out of the hotel I was definitely in need of a visit to a café. It was therefore quite a shock to turn into the village square and find the shutters coming down at the one on the corner of the road that I had earmarked as my first choice. A few yards further on and I found the second one already dark and empty. Where had everyone gone? I looked up at the clock on the church tower. 8.15. It was hardly closing time! Not in England, anyway.



I set off round the village in search of somewhere open. I became quite excited by one well-lit establishment at the end of a twilight grey street, but it turned out to be a launderette. Everything was shut, even the corner shop. On the food front, there was no crisis as I had made sure to buy some bread, cheese and olives in Nîmes, with this emergency scenario in mind. I had also bought a single can of beer, which I had intended as a sort of late night addition to what I had envisaged would be a happy hour or two in a little French bar. Now this single can was to be the focal point of a whole evening's entertainment, it seemed.

I asked the hotel manager if there was any drink for sale there, but the question evidently seemed absurd to him and his refusal only deepened the mood of mutual distrust between us.

I went back up to my room, sat on the bed and put on the bedside light. It wasn't very bright. This was becoming a slightly gloomy evening, in more ways than one.

I decided to keep myself busy for five minutes by separating my British coins from the French ones. I emptied the contents of my pockets on to the bedspread and noticed that I had more keys than usual. I still had Callum's spare set. Oops! I

gazed idly at the rather ugly logo on the fob, featuring a couple of intertwined blue arrows. A courier service, I reckoned. Or a dry cleaner's.

I got *The Pattern Within* out of my bag and again admired the leafy cover. Then, with a view to creating a bit of excitement for myself, I whipped a red tablecloth from under the feeble lamp and tied it over my eyes. I got to my feet and span theatrically around a couple of times, recreating all the drama of the Edinburgh library. Unfortunately I crashed into the wardrobe, which had been placed ridiculously close to the foot of the bed, and the whole room reverberated to the shimmering of a hundred coat hangers. I froze, waiting for the sound of the hotel manager coming upstairs to find out what exactly this mad Englishman was up to, but luckily this did not materialise. As I listened, a bell tolled in the church tower, which was evidently very close to the back of the hotel. Nine o'clock and all is well. Time for all good *citoyens* to be tucked up for the night.

I sat down on the bed, had to cheat by lifting the cloth from my eyes to find the book, then twirled it around in my hands a bit before opening it. I pulled off my blindfold. I was holding the book upside down, in fact, and for a moment I thought it would be a good idea to try and read the open

pages the wrong way up. Maybe there was a secret message waiting for me. But it was too painful and I gave up, mentally apologising to Frank and Frasier if I had spoiled the mystical workings of literary fate.

I had picked out an important passage, it seemed. A paragraph which explained both the title of the book and the meaning of the cover illustration.

“The patterns of nature are everywhere within us, in our bones, our cells, our skin, our hair, our guts, our wombs, our teeth. And – because there is no divide between body and soul, the physical and the psychological – they are also to be found in our thoughts, abstract creations of a very non-abstract being of flesh and blood. Yes, we create our own thoughts, we are not slaves to the rigid rules of pure instinct, but the *you* who creates those thoughts is made from the patterns of nature. The creator of those thoughts is nature, through you, and those thoughts are themselves part of nature. Our thoughts – our beliefs, our myths, our metaphors, our ideals – are an extension of the patterns of nature beyond the physical confines of leaf-veins, fish-scales or snowflakes. We are nature thinking, nature dreaming, nature willing.”

I felt I would like Anahid Vishnyakova. Although her tone was a bit too New Age for my taste, there was a certain passion in her written words that resonated deep in my...

I was going to think “guts” but changed it at the last moment to “womb” and couldn’t help sniggering out loud at my own joke.

I fizzed open my lonely can of lager and took a mouthful of cheese sandwich. Laughter! Drink! Feasting! It was party time in Saint-Pierre-le-Brion!

## CHAPTER 12

I was woken by the rumbling of a lorry in the street outside. And then another one. A whole series of lorries and vans, in fact. I was about to stir myself to grab my watch when the village bells obligingly tolled eight. Seven in the UK, which is why it seemed so unreasonably early.

When I eventually got out of the hotel I saw what all the fuss was about – it was market day. I could hardly recognise this as the same dead village I had trawled around last night. The whole of the square and the streets around were packed with little stalls, selling everything from pillows to sandals, from earrings to CDs, scented soaps to children's clothes.

Near the bridge was an indoor area, *les halles*, with the food stalls – cheeses, vegetables, sausages, fish, olives, bread and none of this wrapped in plastic as has become the sad tradition in the UK.

There were plenty of people too, of all ages and types, carrying baskets and shopping bags, smiling at each other as they passed, wishing cheery “bonjours” left, right and centre, stopping to kiss friends and family on the cheeks, even amongst the men.

Both cafés were very much open and, indeed, bustling. Old men in caps in earnest conversation. Hippyish young women in long skirts with toddlers running around the tables. A bearded young man with a dog gesticulating and laughing with his mates. Someone strumming a guitar.

I had a good old wander, bought myself a slice of apple tart as a breakfast extension and plonked myself down at a café table that had fortunately been vacated just as I approached. The sun was shining, the greenness of the mountains around was radiant and I felt a great surge of optimism pump through my veins. I was on the right path, that was for sure.

When I'd finished my little coffee, I opened up the map I had found in the village newsagents'. I knew where Anahid Vishnyakova's homestead was and had printed off a road map from the internet. It was only two or three miles out of Saint Pierre, so I'd have no trouble getting there

on foot. But it was always good to have a proper walking map to work from and... yes! That's what I had been hoping for! There was a footpath marked that cut a few corners and took me straight there. Ideal!

If I had been a better map-reader, or even just a little more observant of the general geography of the place, I'd have spotted at once the downside to the footpath's directness. It was straight all right – straight up a mountain! The road had to zig-zag around to creep up the wooded hillside, but there were no such restraints for a path. I liked to think of myself as fit for my age, a bit of an outdoors type, a lover of day-long strolls in the countryside. But there was a world of difference between walking across the South Downs and climbing up out of Saint-Pierre-le-Brion. I was very quickly out of breath and cursing myself for taking on the extra weight of the apple tart. I suppose I should have been cursing myself for the twenty years' worth of little snacks and pints of beers that had made my body such a cumbersome item to drag up a proper mountainside. The terrain was hard-going, as well. No springy Sussex turf here, but hard rock, shale I thought, scattered generously with hundreds of boulders and stones that had crumbled off the mountainside and done their best to make life difficult for the humble rambler.

At least I didn't smoke any more. I don't think I would have managed more than a few hundred yards of this, with that additional handicap.

It was just relentless, the climb. Every time I thought I had reached some sort of summit, it turned out just to be a brief respite and the path leapt on upwards, sometimes in the form of stone steps on the side of the old walls that criss-crossed the hillside, sometimes in the form of dry gritty slopes between brambles and tree roots. At least it wasn't muddy, I supposed, remembering a doomed attempt with Jennifer to climb the north side of the Downs near Pyecombe. It had been like trying to go up an escalator the wrong way. An escalator made of liquid mud.

Here in the Cévennes there wasn't even the reward of a good view at present, with the path remaining surrounded by little Mediterranean oak trees and clumps of pine. Gradually, I suppose, I got used to the steepness – or adapted myself to it, taking regular breaks and not trying to go too fast. I had mentally allowed myself an hour or so for the walk, on the basis of my usual walking speed back home. Obviously this was going to take a lot longer than that, but it didn't really matter. I wasn't expected at any particular time.



Gradually, I began to relax and enjoy myself. I came across a row of cherry trees by the side of the path and helped myself to a few dozen of the delicious, slightly tart, little fruits. All organic, I noted with satisfaction. A bit later I sampled what looked like elongated blackberries growing from a tree, but with nothing like the same taste. I had no idea what they were, but later established that they were mulberries, planted in the area centuries ago because their leaves are favoured by the silk worms used in the main local industry. The high point came when I leant down to do up my shoe lace and saw a tiny speck of red in the undergrowth. It was a wild strawberry and, I soon discovered, it was not alone. They were so tiny that you barely felt their presence in your mouth, yet they boasted a fresh intensity that delighted the tongue.

I was keeping track of where I was on the map and, after we had crossed the winding road for the third time, I veered off to the left towards a settlement labelled Le Mazet. To start with, the track ploughed through some trees, but then came out on to an open piece of scrubland and I finally had the view that my efforts merited. Below, partly obscured by the hillside, was the village of Saint-Pierre. I could make out the bridge and the main square. Houses and villas sprawled up out of the valley on the other side,

petering out into woodlands higher up. Beyond that were layer upon layer of trees on ridges slicing down from the mountains. They were like the great hairy backs of some enormous animal – a wild boar, perhaps, since they were apparently very populous in these parts. And behind these crests, and the mountains behind them, were more mountains, even taller, all majestically green and serene in the spring sunshine. It was the same in every direction. Beauty on a vast scale. I was breathtaken.

I listened also to the magnificent silence, punctuated only by joyful bird-melodies and the occasional barking of a distant dog. I took a deep breath and that, too, tasted good. There was a smell to this beauty, a feel, a vibration.

I felt as if I had stepped outdoors, into the real living world, for the very first time after a life locked in a stuffy room watching images of an unreachable nature on the television. I had hardly known that places like this existed. Everything that I had previously thought of as “countryside” now suddenly seemed like a sad little scrap of fume-choked and litter-tainted wasteland by the side of a motorway.

It was therefore in a mood of exultation that I reached a hand-painted wooden sign announcing

that I had arrived at the Institut Cévennot de la Nature Intérieure. Beneath it was a yellow mailbox bearing the initials ICNI and the name Vishnyakova, along with a couple of other names. This was it, then.

I strode confidently down the drive towards a building a few hundred yards in front of me. I was about to take a diagonal towards the front door, when I noticed another little hand-made sign at the end of the drive. "ICNI", it said, and seemed to be pointing straight into a garage. Most peculiar, I thought, but followed its advice and found that the garage was more of a tunnel through the building and the driveway continued the other side. A further sign pointed me away from the building towards some woods. I kept going, kept going some more and after five minutes began to wonder where on earth I was heading. I took a gulp from my water bottle. I was uncomfortably hot now. Finally, the track plunged downhill and I saw that below was nestling a little collection of buildings which was presumably – hopefully – my final destination.

It was a beautiful old farm, built from local stone. It was so weathered and decayed that it seemed to have become an intrinsic extension of the landscape. Vines grew all over the outside. Abandoned garden tools looked as if they had

taken root in the spare dry soil. There was an antique watering can on a window sill, an old cooker in a bush. An upturned chair with a wicker basket balanced on top. A tiny kitten peered out from the rotting door of an outhouse. Another scampered across in front of me and dashed for cover under an old tarp on the other side of the path. Chaotic and yet perfect, in some strange organic way.

I spotted another amateurish sign. “ICNI Accueil”. So the reception area was up these stone steps. At the top was a massive and ancient oak door with a large round handle. I pulled it open. Behind it was a heavy curtain, almost a carpet, that I had to push aside to enter.

The room inside did not look like any reception area I had ever seen before. It was more like someone’s living room. Someone’s living room from the 16th century. A huge wooden table dominated the space, although its vast surface had been eaten away on three sides by an encroachment from the rest of the room – piles of paper, pots of unidentifiable substances, a small ornate chest made of tarnished silvery metal and a little bell. There were three bookcases, two small windows and on the ceiling half a dozen strange pumpkin-like vegetables hung from iron hooks. In the centre of the room was a large sofa,

draped with two or three rather faded blankets and, next to it, an old-fashioned wood-burning stove. It wasn't in use but it would almost have been justified, because despite the warmth of day outside, it was very cool in this dark and ancient room.

There was no sign of any receptionist, so I stepped across to the table and rang the little bell.

*"J'arrive!"* came a female voice from beyond the doorway at the far side of the lounge.

Seconds later the owner glided into the room. She must have been at least seventy years old, was very small and moved with aristocratic elegance. She was dressed in a silk black and gold waistcoat over an embroidered green dress. The dress barely reached the top of her thighs but underneath she wore a pair of dark purple stockings, thick enough almost to qualify as trousers. Combined with her long silver-white hair, darkly tanned face and gold nose ring, the overall effect was startling and impressive.

"Ah!" she said. "You must be the English gentleman who left a message on my phone the other day. Mister... Harvey, yes?"

“That’s right,” I said. “But call me Jon. Pleased to meet you!” I extended my arm to shake hands.

She took my hand and simply held it for a few seconds, with the lightest of contact.

“*Enchantée, Monsieur Jon.* I am Anahid, as you will have gathered.”

I couldn’t help asking how she had known who I was when she came in.

She looked at me and laughed. “I do love you English people,” she said. “You are so caught up in your own English reality that you have no idea how the rest of the world sees you. The moment I caught sight of you I knew that you could *only* be English. The clothes, yes, of course. The haircut. The pale skin. The body shape – excuse me, no offence Jon...”

“None taken,” I said, but it wasn’t true. I didn’t much like being reminded that I was at least two stone overweight.

“You speak very good English,” I said, keen to change the subject. “Where did you learn?”

“I learnt in London,” she said. “In New Delhi. In Washington, DC. In Canberra. In Pretoria. In

Geneva, even. My father was a diplomat, a Russian diplomat, and my childhood was a very rich and educational experience.”

She suddenly started shuffling some papers around on the table, as if re-arranging her own thoughts.

“Of course, diplomats and their families live a very urban life and a very unsettled life. I have been making up for that ever since, I think, rooting myself in the depths of nature.”

I was impressed by the way she rolled the “r” in “rooting”. Very Russian, very earthy.

I smiled and was thinking about what to say next when she beat me to it.

“And so, Jon, what is it that brings you here all the way from the cradle of industrialism and empire? Are you a journalist? Is that why you want to speak to me? Or are you on a more personal mission?”

“Well,” I begun, a little disconcerted. “I *am* a journalist in fact. Or I was. But that’s not why I’m here. I’m helping a friend of mine track down his son and we think he may be coming your way. He’s a young man, early 20s, tall, fair-

haired, name of Henry Kennedy?”

I passed her the photo.

“Yes,” she said calmly. “He was here yesterday, young Henry. I did wonder if there was any connection between the two of you.”

Henry had been here! I hadn’t wasted my time! I had to speak to him!

I started jabbering: “So he came here? You talked to him? What was he saying? Did he tell you where he’s staying? Where he’s going next?”

“Wait, wait, Jon!” she laughed. “I know you’re excited about this but I can’t answer all of your questions at once! And there’s no hurry because I know for a fact he is at this moment on a plane from Montpellier airport. He booked it here, on my computer. I’ll tell you all about it, but in the meantime wouldn’t you like to sit with me in the garden, in the shade. I can make an infusion if you like?”

After that brief taste of near-victory in my quest, the news that I had again missed Henry was a heavy blow. But I was happy to accept Anahid Vishnyakova’s invitation. There was a lot I wanted to ask her, in any case.



The most important issue for me was where Henry was going next and I tried to breach that question again as soon as Anahid had served me a little cup of a rather insipid herbal tea.

She gently steered us away from it. “All in good time, Jon, all in good time. But I’m dying to hear a little bit more about yourself, first. About your friend in Scotland and how you came to visit me in my little paradise.”

As we spoke, it dawned on me that she was being very subtle here. She was giving the impression of just wanting a civilised chat before we got on to the crude practicalities of my investigation, but in fact something else was going on. She was conducting her own investigation. Of me. She didn’t know anything about me. She had no reason to trust me. She had no idea why I was trying to track down Henry and what I intended to do when I found him. She was protecting Henry from me, in fact, and if I was going to get the information I wanted, I was going to have to win her confidence.

I ended up having a long and enthralling conversation with Anahid under the apple tree in her sprawling, entangled jungle of a garden. She told me all about her cosmopolitan background and how it had fed into her life philosophy. Her

mother had been Armenian, hence the first name. Well, half-Armenian anyway, because Anahid's grandmother had been forced out of her village by the Turkish genocide and ended up having a child by a man she met in Aleppo in the 1920s, who may have been Sudanese or Egyptian. This child, Anahid's mother, had run away from home at 17 and led a chaotic and precarious existence before running into a dashing young Russian diplomat in Istanbul at the end of the Second World War. They were married and became parents almost instantaneously. But the internationalism of Anahid's background did not stop there. Part of her father's family had strong connections to the Baltic, Estonia in particular, and on his mother's side there were Jewish origins which he had done his best to conceal during the growing anti-Semitism of the Stalin years.

“So you see,” she said, “my idea of nature, of our natural identity, was never going to have anything to do any kind of racial theorising. I always knew that I was real, that I was living, that I was an extension of the living world around me, and that I didn't fit into any category. It seemed obvious to me that categories – of so-called race, so-called nationality – are in fact the opposite of nature. They are human attempts to slap their own labels on to nature,

trying to make sense of nature by slicing it up into neat little parcels.”

“There are some national differences, though,” I objected mischievously. “The sort of thing that makes English people so easy to identify, for example...?”

“Culture,” she said. “It’s all about culture. Even your physical appearance comes from your culture, Jon – you come from a country where beer is consumed by the bucketful so it’s hardly surprising that...”

She gestured dismissively towards my midriff. I wasn’t enjoying her little observations.

“In any case,” she carried on, mercifully elaborating no further, “there will always be diversity because diversity is natural. But an underlying unity behind that diversity is also natural.”

I nodded.

“Take trees,” she continued, gesturing all around us. “Did you know that the trees in a forest are all connected with each other, underground?”

“Yes,” I said. “I saw a documentary about it

somewhere. It's the fungus in the soil that links them together, isn't it?"

"That's right. And the trees' roots. Their shared nervous system. An individual tree is a living organism, but so is the forest. And the whole biosphere. Organism within organism within organism. It's all so rich! Anyway, the point is that the trees in the forest interact, work together, even when they are not of the same species. It's not a question of selfish genes, of a battle to survive between different families, but of co-operation between all trees."

"Mutual aid," I said, thinking of Mat and Kropotkin.

"Completely so! And because trees and human beings have grown out of the same natural patterns..."

"The pattern within, as in your book?"

"Of course. Because we are part of the same larger organism, the same earth organism, we function according to the same principles. Nature's belonging is fluid within trees. They know they are all trees and together they form a forest. We know we are all people and together we form communities, societies, the human

species.”

She took off her black and gold waistcoat and placed it carefully on the back of the garden chair and then looked at me rather intensely.

“Tell me, Jon, do you know the German artist Joseph Beuys?”

Why was I surprised, after everything that had happened?

“A bit,” I said. “I’ve read a little about his ideas.”

Not even two pages, mate, I thought to myself.

“Beuys talked a lot about the social organism,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “And about the archetype of the social organism that we’ve lost touch with.”

“So you know!” she exclaimed with some delight. “I’m impressed, Jon! I thought you were maybe just a journalist, interested in the journalist’s level of life if you know what I mean. But no! You have done some reading!”

I smiled wanly. I was feeling something of a fraud.

“This is what I was talking about with Henry,” she said. This was the first time she had mentioned him, here in the garden, and I felt that I had broken through her barrier of suspicion. She had decided she could trust me, on the basis of me regurgitating a line out of a book I had briefly glanced at the day before yesterday.

“Yes?” I replied, not wanting to let the opportunity pass by, despite my sense of embarrassment. “What was his take on it all?”

This was a key point, really. What was Henry’s take on *all* of this? What was it that had sent him jetting off to London, France and now heaven knows where? Was it anger or genuine academic interest?

“His take?” Anahid said. “Like yours, I think. He also knows Beuys and his archetype of the social organism...”

Naturally. He had no doubt opened the same book at the same pages.

“Wasn’t he a bit resistant to the idea of national and racial categories as being false – unnatural?”

She pondered for a moment. “Yes, maybe, a little. But I explained it to him, like I explained it to

you. I talked about myself, about how I was completely part of nature while not fitting inside any little box. He understood this, I think.”

“And Asha? Did he ask you about Asha?”

Anahid nodded. “He did, yes. And I told him. That’s where he’s going now, in fact.”

“He’s going to Asha?” I asked by way of confirmation.

At last! This woman was going to tell me not only where Henry was, but where Asha was! Was it in Armenia, perhaps? Or Russia?

“He’s going to *see* Asha, yes. She’s a person. I know her from the internet. I think she is who Henry is looking for.”

So it was the woman’s name Asha, after all! It was as simple as that?

“And where is she, this Asha?” I asked, heart in mouth. She could be anywhere. Eritrea. Morocco. Bolivia. Papua New Guinea.

“Wait a minute, let me see...” said Anahid with a frown. “It’s a funny name, I’d never heard of the place. It begins with... Ah yes!”

I was all ears.

“Worthing,” she said. “She lives in a town in England called Worthing.”



## CHAPTER 13

“No, it hasn’t been a waste of time, not at all!” I was telling Callum over the phone back at the hotel in Saint-Pierre-le-Brion. “Yes, I know it *sounds* stupid. You would *think* that it makes little sense to travel all the way from Brighton to the south of France just to find out that Henry is heading for a town 12 miles away from where I live. But the fact is that if I hadn’t come here, I wouldn’t *know* he was going to Worthing... No! No, Callum! I told you! There’s *no way* she would have given me any information over the phone. She didn’t trust me! She took a shine to Henry, I think, and wanted to protect him until she was sure I meant him no harm... Oh come on, Callum! He’s your son. Of course he’s a likeable young chap... What do you..? Oh, for Christ’s sake.”

I really wanted to hang up on the spot but I knew this was my employer I was talking to. I was also about to ask him to buy me a plane

ticket back to England – and preferably not to Luton.

Callum wanted to know exactly how I was planning on tracking Henry down when I got back to Sussex. He wasn't particularly reassured by the fact that Anahid had put me directly in touch with Asha via her computer and we'd already arranged a time and place to meet, the day after tomorrow.

“As a matter of fact Jon,” he said, “I have *severe* doubts about where this is all going. What kind of woman is this, for a start, who wants to meet you on the top of some far-flung fucking hill in the middle of the night?”

I took a deep breath. “Cissbury Ring's not far-flung, Callum, it's right next to Worthing. And it's not the middle of the night, either, she just said moonrise. That's about quarter to nine, we reckon.”

“But why, Jon? Why on a hill and not at a railway station or in a pub?”

“I don't know, do I Callum? Fuck, it was hard enough persuading her to meet me at all! It took all of Anahid's charm to get round her. She'd already gone through the same thing for Henry,

apparently, although I don't know what they ended up arranging, and this Asha was getting a bit funny about this sudden stream of visitors wanting to see her. She didn't want to have anything to do with me. This was the only arrangement she would go along with. She's shy, I think. And a bit... mystic."

I didn't tell Callum that on Asha's social media pages she described herself as The Wild Wise Woman of Worthing and talked an awful lot about earth energies, covens and The Great Goddess. But then there was a lot I hadn't told Callum. He didn't even know about the whole Asha thing, which meant the significance of my latest lead was completely lost to him. From his impatient perspective, I wasn't so much finding Henry as constantly losing him.

"And so what do you expect to come from this mystical moonlight encounter with your latest lady friend, Jon? Another tantalising glimpse of where my son's just been, then another plane ticket off to the sun to go through the whole charade again? I'm fucking disappointed in you, Jon. Get a grip, man! You're one step behind, the whole time! You've got to get *ahead* of the game, pal! Don't just trail after Henry, getting nowhere! Pre-empt his next move! Intercept him! Stop him, for fuck's sake, before it's too late!"

Gritting my teeth, I resisted the temptation to reply in like terms. Instead, I said: "I know Callum, I'm sorry. It must be frustrating for you, I can see that. But I *am* getting somewhere, even if it doesn't seem like it sometimes. We know where Henry's *been*, even if we don't know where's he's *going*, and that's more than we knew at the start, isn't it?"

In the end I calmed him down and he booked me a flight back from Montpellier to Gatwick for the following afternoon.

The fact that I was travelling by plane did not seem to have filtered down into my unconscious, because that night I was back in a train. I was aware that we had been heading west instead of south and that we had swerved back round to the correct direction, but now I realised we were going too far east, so far east in fact that we would soon be going north and risked coming round on ourselves in a great circle, catching up with the back of this very train like a snake swallowing its tail. I had a moment of realization. That's why Henry, if he got to the front of the train before I reached him, would pass on through into the rear carriages. And then I could never catch him up, because I knew it was against the laws of physics for me to turn backwards.

As I stumbled on through the train, catching the occasional glimpse of the back of Henry's head as he disappeared in front of me, I passed a man reading a newspaper. Again he lowered the paper and again it was Callum.

"You're letting him get away!" he bellowed, his face distorted with rage. "You're always a carriage behind and the whole thing's going round in circles!"

"Jon's spent his whole life going round in circles," said another voice. It was Jennifer, who was sitting on the other side of the carriage. They were both laughing at me now. Pointing. Mocking.

"Round and round and round..." they were chanting together, in childish sing-song voices, making circular patterns with their fingers.

"It's not true!" I screamed at the top of my voice and they fell silent, looking at me expectantly. I had to come up with something convincing, but wasn't sure what.

Then it came to me.

"It's not circles, it's spirals!" I declared. "We're going round in spirals and we're going to get to

the heart of the matter.”

“No we’re not, Jon,” said Callum, gesturing towards the window beside him. “We’re going down the fucking plughole!”

I looked outside and saw, to my horror, that we had reached the sea. We were *in* the sea. We were twirling around in a giant whirlpool, waves spraying up around the train and dark green masses of water slapping up against the outside of the window as we were sucked down and down into the depths of the ocean.

I was woken by a tapping on the door.

*“Excusez-moi, Monsieur? Vous allez bien? Il y a un souci, Monsieur?”*

It was the hotel manager. I must have been shouting out in my sleep. I had the impression he would be somewhat relieved to see me on my way in the morning.

On the plane back to Gatwick I had another dip into *The Meaning of Culture*. I had braced myself from some more hard truths about my own character and behaviour – maybe it was about time I confronted these head-on, rather than avoided them from an instinct of self-

preservation. But I was pleasantly surprised that Powys Cowper mostly had positive ideas to impart, about individuality, relationships and our connection to nature. I particularly liked the way that he had no time at all for the fads and trends of the era he was living in – the 1930s – and insisted on extracting what he recognised as the truth from whatever source he found most useful. If a writer was rejected by Powys's contemporaries, this virtually amounted to a recommendation for a man clearly himself at odds with the mainstream thinking of the 20th century.

“It was the wayward opinion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that great man whose excellent supersensual sensationalism is so unpopular to-day, and whose very name is rarely mentioned without a sneer by one of our smart publicists, that the meaning of culture is nothing less than to restore, by means of our imaginative reason, that secret harmony with Nature which beasts and birds possess, but which our civilization has done so much to eradicate from human feeling. As a matter of fact there are many points of striking resemblance between the undertones of Rousseau's culture and those of Goethe's. For the writings of these Nature-lovers the position could be defended that the beginning of all real self-development lies in a certain magical *rapport*,

bringing indescribable happiness, between the solitary ego and ‘all that we behold from this green earth’.”

I thought of my walk to Anahid’s place. It was a shame to be leaving the Cévennes in such a hurry. I had felt the warm breath of that “indescribable happiness” he was talking about, even if the hurried circumstances were not very favourable.

A little later, the author described in detail how one might go about creating this magical *rapport* with nature and enter into a tranquil and rooted state of mind.

“What matters is that in the calmest and most earth-bound manner you should concentrate your thoughts upon the whole rondure of the turning globe as it transports all its living burden through measureless space-time, of which burden, just now, this thistle-head, these ash-roots, this tarnished dock-leaf, together with your own flesh-covered human skeleton, are transitory fragments.

“It is thus not merely the beauty of these little objects – though there may be beauty enough in the silveriness of the thistle, in the metallic lustre of the leaf, and in the yellowness of the



sand – which will arrest your thoughts. You are more than an aesthetic or artistic admirer; you are a lover! What you will come to feel is a singular identity between your own inner being and the inner being of these things. Nor is this sense of identity, thus arrived at by a process of quiet, steady concentration, any fantastic, mythical or even mystical experience. It is the calm recognition of an absolute fact.”

I put down the book and peered past my neighbour towards the little window. I could just see some blue sky beyond the aircraft’s wing. What was I doing here, cocooned in a metal box flying through the air, polluting the atmosphere, when I could be walking through a wood somewhere, basking in the timeless reality of the green life around me? I thought about Anahid’s “natural immersion therapy” and how she seemed so collected, so anchored, so free from anxiety.

“You could badly do with some of that, Jon!” said Jennifer, and I imagined myself free from the confines of the aircraft, drifting peacefully and angelically on the breezes above the vast and idyllic expanses of French countryside.

Refreshed by my daydreams, I fairly glided off the plane at Gatwick’s North Terminal. There

wasn't even much of a queue at the E-gates and I was quickly through the automated barrier.

It was then, however, that my relaxed mood was very rapidly dissolved. Two men with suits, short hair and an air of authority stepped towards me as I headed for the exit.

“Just a moment, please, Sir,” one said. “We'd like a word, please.”

They examined my passport, asked me who I was travelling with and glanced at each other in a disbelieving way when I said I was alone.

They then asked me where I had been and didn't seem too impressed when I told them France. Montpellier didn't seem to count as much of an improvement, either.

“Name and address of the person you were staying with!” one of them snapped in a manner that instantly got my back up.

“It was a hotel,” I said.

“What was the name of the hotel?” he asked, impatiently, pen poised over notebook. I noticed that he had chosen to largely dress himself in brown, which was never a good sign in my

experience.

“I can’t remember,” I replied. This was true, for the moment, but the tone of my response triggered an immediate response from the man’s colleague, mainly clad in grey.

“OK, if you’re not going to co-operate I have to inform you that you are being detained under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000. Step this way, please.”

I knew about this piece of legislation, in principle, from stories we’d run in the *Investigator*. It basically bypassed the usual legal rights and was used by the authorities to intimidate, and extract information from, anyone they didn’t take a shine to. Ethnic minorities, particularly those of the Muslim faith, were particularly targeted, but also left-wing activists.

Brown and Grey were quick to tell me, after they had emptied my pockets and installed me in a small windowless room deep inside the terminal building, that it was a criminal offence not to answer their questions. I could end up going to jail.

“But only questions for the purpose of determining whether I am involved with

terrorism, I believe,” I declared, desperately hoping that I had correctly remembered what a Brighton lawyer had told me in an interview a few years back.

“That’s what we’re doing, Jon,” sighed Grey.  
“That’s what our questions are all about.”

“OK fine,” I said. “I’m happy to help you out by saying that I am not involved in any kind of terrorism at all, my trip to France had nothing to do with terrorism and I have, to the best of my knowledge, no connections with anyone involved in terrorism. Can I go now please?”

“Not connected with terrorists, eh?” said Brown.  
“So what about Fiona Fitzgerald?”

“Fiona Fitzgerald?” I repeated incredulously.  
“Never even heard of her!”

“Mouse to you, perhaps Jon,” said Grey, placing on the table a photograph of me and Mouse sitting in the café in the Brixton park. It seemed to have been taken from outside the building.

“In what way is she a terrorist?” I asked.

“You know what she’s involved with, don’t you Jon? You of all people should know.”

“What do you mean, me of all people?”

“Like to keep a low profile, don’t you Jon? Like to keep out of the limelight, pass yourself off as some kind of journalist.”

Colleague Brown snorted with derision.

“Let me help you out here, Jon,” Grey went on. “Fiona is involved in the Smash the WF! organisation, which we have reason to believe is involved in the preparation of terrorist activity in London on May 1 – tomorrow. We also know that you’re involved with this organisation. In fact Jon...” – here he leant back in his chair and adopted a fake-friendly tone – “you’re quite a leading light in the group, aren’t you? One of the elder statesmen. One of the main organisers, in fact!”

“Not at all!” I said. This was so absurd, it was almost funny.

“If you say so, Jon,” said Grey, glancing at his smirking sidekick. “We’ll let that one go for the moment. So how about you tell us about some of your chums in this organisation you’ve got nothing to do with. Like Fiona.”

“Or Mathijs Jansen,” added Brown. “What do you

know about the ZK network? And the illegal assembly in Utrecht last July?"

"Or Ali Shirani. And his brother in Syria?"

"What about Stuart Newcombe? What's his role in all this?"

"Stuart who?"

"It was in your wallet, Jon," said Brown triumphantly, slapping down the card the photographer had given me in Gilders Street.

"This is ridiculous," I said. "I don't have to answer your questions about any of these people because it's nothing to do with terrorism. Moreover, you know full well that I am not involved in terrorism and you are misusing the legislation to harass me for purely political reasons."

Grey was nodding his head and pouting his lips in quite an unpleasant way. "Nothing to do with terrorism, eh? That's a fact is it Jon? You're familiar with the Terrorism Act 2000 I assume? Let me refresh your memory."

He took a photocopied sheet from the pile in front of him and started reading.

“In this Act ‘terrorism’ means the use or threat of action where the use or threat is designed to influence the government, or an international governmental organisation...”

“Like the World Forum”, added Brown helpfully.

“... or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause.”

“Such as anarchism or anti-capitalism or whatever you choose to call it,” said Brown.

“Action falls within this subsection if it... let’s see, creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public.”

I remembered writing about this when the Act first came in under Blair – the phrasing was deliberately drawn up to include protests. But I wasn’t going to let them get away with it.

“Who’s intimidating anyone?” I asked. “Who’s making any threats? Where’s the serious risk to health and safety?”

“Calling on people to ‘smash’ the World Forum sounds pretty intimidating to me,” said Grey.

“An unauthorised protest in central London on a busy working day sounds like a serious threat to health and safety,” chimed in Brown.

“Why?” I said. “It’s a protest that’s being planned, not a riot. It could end in some kind of conflict but then so could a football match or a rock concert, and you don’t call them ‘terrorism’.”

“Is that right, Jon? Just a protest? Is that why you and Fiona and your mates have been going round Europe rounding up all the trouble-makers you can find to come and join in the fun, eh?”

“That’s not why I was...” I started, then stopped myself. I wasn’t going to tell them anything.

“Want to talk about it now Jon, do we? Want to tell us how it wasn’t you, it was the others?” mocked Grey. “Are you going to tell us that you’re a respectable citizen, Jon? A law-abiding journalist who’d never get involved in anything like a riot, is that your story?”

Brown was smiling broadly.

“Maybe you’re going to tell us you’re too old for that sort of thing, too old to get involved in a lot argy-bargy in the streets? But the funny thing is,



Jon, that there are people your age who do get caught up in that sort of thing. There was a very nasty incident in London the other day, in fact, involving persons of that kind. One of our uniformed colleagues ended up in hospital.”

“Not respectable people like you, of course,” added Brown. “Not people who read books about culture.”

The word “culture” dripped off his tongue like toxic slime.

“*Russian* books, as well,” said Grey in a knowing way.

“They’re not *refined* people like you, at all. They’re nutters. Extremists. People with self-control issues, let us say.”

“There’s one here, look Jon,” said Grey, producing another photo. “He must be about your age.”

There I was, viewed from above, branded coffee mug in hand, arm stretched back as if about to hurl the chinaware at the mounted police in front of me.

I felt like blurting out that I hadn’t thrown it,

that I'd had second thoughts, that I'd stopped myself in time.

"I want to speak to my solicitor," I said instead.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It took me nearly six hours to get out of there. Alison, the Brighton solicitor who'd I'd interviewed about the Schedule 7 incidents in the first place, said it sounded as if they really thought I was a key player in the Smash the WF! mobilisation.

"It's your age," she said. "In their world, there is always a hierarchy. And the people at the top of the hierarchy are the older people, the people who have worked their way up the organisation and now give the orders. They can't believe that a protest can be organised by 20-year-olds and that 50-year-olds just come along to support it. So they've got you down as a ringleader. You're the Mr Big they've been looking for!"

"Big in one sense," I remarked, feeling the pressure of the seatbelt in her car against my ever-expanding waistline.

It had all ended in a stalemate in the end. They certainly held a bit of a trump card with the photo of me – it wouldn't exactly be out of character for the police to invent eye-witness accounts of me actually throwing the mug – but they seemed prepared to hold it in reserve in the meantime, as an incentive for me to “behave myself”. At Alison's suggestion, I had announced that I would not even be going to the London protest, but would stay in Sussex all day.

“I hope you're telling us the truth here Jon,” Grey had said. “If I see you at the front of the mob with a brick in your hand, I'm not going to be a happy bunny.”

Floppy-ears Grey, the Happy Special Branch Bunny. What an image.

I was completely exhausted by the time I got home. It was a good job Alison dropped me off at my door, because I don't think I could have made it up the hill. I couldn't even be bothered helping myself to a little glass of something before I went to bed.

The morning, though, was a different kettle of fish. I'd slept well and fairly sprang out of bed to see what the day was looking like. It was beautiful, every bit as beautiful as May Day is

supposed to be, in our imaginations, but very rarely is. The sea below was shimmering in the sun, little white clouds were drifting across the sky and the Sussex countryside was calling out to me.

I'd made the decision even before I'd finished my toast. Today was a day off. I had no obligations at all until the moonrise rendezvous in Worthing and I would make the most of my freedom. There was no need to call Callum – I could update him on the airport business in due course. I had nothing else to attend to. I'd leave the mobile at home and just disappear.

I rummaged in a drawer for my Ordnance Survey maps and before long I knew what I wanted to do. I'd get the bus inland up to Horsham, then spend the day walking down to Worthing. It was twenty miles or so, but I'd done it before in the past. In a sudden moment of self-doubt, I remembered my current body-shape and the way I'd suffered at St-Pierre-le-Brion. But this wasn't a hike up a foreign mountain. It was the south of England, for heaven's sake! Most of the way you could follow the route of the disused railway line. And there were some good stopping-off points on the way. Beer-flavoured stopping-off points.

I'd made an early start and by 10am I found myself sitting outside a café in Horsham, giving myself a vitalising shot of caffeine before I headed off. I had some history with this West Sussex town. That's where I'd got my first job in journalism, as a trainee reporter. I'd quite liked it there, but after a couple of years started to feel like I was enjoying it too much. It was a comfortable routine, writing up flower shows, parish council meetings and the occasional traffic accident. The other journalists were very pleasant, but there was something about the atmosphere that frightened the young me. I remember chatting in the pub after work with the Father of Chapel, the union shop steward, and he told me he'd been working there for twenty years. Twenty years! In the same office! I'd looked at his lined face, his greying hair and imagined that if I stayed on at this newspaper, before I knew it my life would have passed by and I would be as old as him.

I was in such a hurry to avoid that fate that I'd leapt at the first job that came up, over in Redhill, and that proved a mistake. Then there was the *Investigator* project and the rest was history. But I did sometimes wonder about the life I'd turned my back on in Horsham. Would I have been there still, if I hadn't forced myself to make a move? Was that other life of mine still

going on somewhere, in a parallel universe, if only I could access it? Was there an alternative me, gathering dust at the same desk, living a calm and uncontroversial existence, rather than being detained at Gatwick Airport as a suspected terrorist? Was Jennifer still alive in that other world?

I got up quickly to put a stop to this morbidity and wandered over to The Causeway, the prettiest and most prosperous road in town, to have a look at the offices I'd once worked in. The building was still there – an intriguing edifice topped by a towering pointed gable – but there was no sign of the newspaper. It had long since been converted into luxury flats. The image of my parallel existence faded. I couldn't have stayed there for ever, even if I had wanted to.

As I walked down past St Mary's Church, I wondered about Henry. Where was he now? Maybe he was in Worthing at this very moment, talking to this Asha woman. Or did she only surface in the hours of darkness? Was he staying in London? Had he gone back to the squat? For a moment I wished I had my mobile with me, and internet access, to check for news, but then I reminded myself that I was celebrating May the First by escaping from all of that for a few hours.

Thought after thought bubbled up into my consciousness as I walked across Denne Hill, strangely stripped of trees since the last time I had been this way, and on towards Southwater. This, I realised, was mainly why I'd needed a very long walk. A lot of stuff had been happening over the last week and I hadn't had a proper opportunity to digest it all. Now that there were no immediate events or logistics to attend to, my mind was free to sift through all the random facts, impressions and anxieties that had accumulated over the last few days. It wasn't so much a matter of thinking about the various issues, in a rational sense, as of allowing them to show themselves, of acknowledging and thus absorbing them.

I thought about Henry as his father had described him, screaming out his anger against his political foes, and about the good impression he had evidently made with Anahid in the French mountains. I thought about Joseph Beuys' social organism, Kropotkin's anarchism and Chuang Tzu's innate nature. I thought about the police charging into the crowd on horses, the police following me and Mouse through the back streets of Brixton. I thought about the Leftover Library and its endless storerooms of wisdom under the streets of Edinburgh and I thought of Mat chopping vegetables in the London squat. I



thought of Callum in his suit going off to his office. I thought of the woman's name which had turned into a mysterious and elusive place and then back into a woman.

After a couple of hours I arrived at Partridge Green, where the village pub had just opened for lunchtime. The beer here came direct from the Dark Star brewery a few hundred yards away and went down very well with a bag of peanuts. I didn't linger too long, but refilled my water bottle and was off again.

The Downs were now plainly in view in front of me. In fact, the perspective was a little odd, as the old railway line veered away a little to the east here, leaving our destination appearing on the right-hand side of the path. But, nevertheless, there was no mistaking that I was heading soundly in the right direction, towards the south, towards Cissbury Ring and the moment at which I found out, hopefully, what this whole adventure had been about. Asha. I was finally heading directly for Asha.

On another occasion I would have stopped off for a second pint in Henfield, but I didn't want to overdo the alcohol with an important meeting ahead of me, so I kept going all the way to Steyning.

There was something so calm about this walk. Because the route was the former railway, there weren't the usual twists, turns, stiles and muddy brooks to negotiate. You could forget about navigating and let yourself walk on in a detachment that was almost a trance, interrupted occasionally by the need to avoid an oncoming cyclist.

The birds were in full spring song, the sky remained blue all day and the temperature was just about perfect for a long walk. The immediate, pressing, thoughts that had presented themselves earlier in the day had been carried away by the gentle breeze and had left space for deeper feelings to well up within me. Overall, I was infused with feelings of enormous joy, of sensuous contentment at being here, amidst the fields and oaks and hedgerows, surrounded by the pale green luminosity of annual rebirth, the return of Mother Nature from her winter confinement in the Underworld. When I looked up at the ever-approaching Downs, streaked with the glorious whiteness of flowering May, it was more than a range of chalk hills I was seeing – they represented, for me, an aspiration, a long-term inner goal as well as a short-term practical one. The South Downs were nature's monument to higher consciousness.

Along with this exultation came sadness, a deep sadness. I felt regret that this moment could not last forever, regret that I could not reach out and embrace this landscape, this day, pull it to myself and become merged with it for eternity.

I had always loved Steyning. It was officially a town, not a mere village, because of its importance in Saxon times, but it still retained the charm of a bygone rural England that I had always craved. I had used to say to Jennifer that we should come and live here one day, but she wouldn't hear of it. Too far from civilization, aka Brighton. Too expensive as well, no doubt, since the people who become rich from labouring at the heart of the capitalist Machine like nothing better at the weekends than to hide away from it, pretend that it doesn't exist, and build great private property walls topped by barbed wire and top-of-the-range designer "Keep Out!" signs to stop the rest of us from enjoying what's left of the old world their self-centred greed is destroying.

I tried my best not to notice the ugliness of the pylons and the bypass on the northern outskirts and headed for the church of St Andrew and St Cuthman, to touch Ethelwulf's tombstone in the porch for good luck, then walked up Church Street, in awe, as ever, at the bulging wooden-beamed houses with which it was lined. I turned

into the High Street and pretty much collapsed into a corner of The Chequer Inn.

I had coped pretty well with the all-day hike in the end, mainly because it was on the flat, but I was now suddenly feeling shattered. And it wasn't over yet! The sight of the footpath leading out of Steyning to the south, which was very much an uphill affair, had filled with me with some misgivings. I had even toyed with the thought of getting to the meeting point a different way – I could catch a bus to Shoreham, then the train to Worthing. But I'd still have to walk uphill to get to Cissbury Ring – just from the other side. There was no point. I'd made a decision and now I had to stick with it.

Fortunately, there was plenty of time before moonrise. I bought a bag of chips in the High Street, dosed them with plenty of salt and vinegar, and went and sat in the recreation ground to eat them. Half of Steyning seemed to be here. There were little games of cricket and football going on, kids racing around on bikes, mums and dads sitting and chatting on the grass. It reminded me of when I was young. All those sunny Sundays when nobody seemed to be in a hurry to do anything, maybe simply because there was nothing to do! There were no shops open, no internet, no football matches on the TV.

Time opened up. If you found it “boring” it was because you were waiting for someone else to entertain you, tell you what to do. This was a chance to be free, to do whatever you fancied doing – a chance that would all too quickly be snatched away from you by the demands of modern living.

And then, before I knew it, I was on my way again and looking back down from the chalky path up the Downs. Steyning had become a model village, a lovingly recreated scene of timeless English rural life – the games on the grass, the High Street, the ancient church beyond. I took the ascent slowly, pausing regularly to get my breath, and now I sat down for a while and drank in the trilling of a skylark, invisible in the pale sky above. I gazed out over the Weald that I had spent the day crossing and tried to work out where I had walked.

As I loped slowly across the downland between Steyning and Cissbury, the subtleties of the evening light adding a new magic to a landscape which had been influenced but not annihilated by the human hand, I suddenly remembered that there had been official plans to run a motorway across this very stretch. It seemed unthinkable, but that was what they had done in Brighton, after all, slapping down the A27 dual

carriageway between the back of the city and its countryside. The Worthing plans had been abandoned – for the meantime anyway – but there always seemed to be some new threat in the air, some new emergency that brought the same old stalwart campaigners out of retirement and a new generation of nature-lovers into the fray. Mutley Woods, for instance, had been a massive campaign, with a protest camp that had lasted years. They'd stopped an access road going through the woods, in the end, but hadn't managed to stop a new housing estate from burying the adjacent living fields in dead tarmac and concrete. I wondered what had happened to all those activists. I'd done a lot of stuff on them at the time, for the *Investigator*, but I'd completely lost touch with it all now.

Cissbury Ring is an enormous hill fort, one of the biggest in Europe, built in the third century BCE. This was not long after Chuang Tzu was writing in China about his age of perfect Virtue. Hill fort perhaps isn't even the right term, as someone explained to me once. For Victorian archaeologists, looking through the lens of their own society, giant earthworks like these were clearly designed to keep out military enemies. The mutinous natives, perhaps. But in fact nobody really knows why they were built. Maybe the site was used to store food. Or to hold

religious ceremonies. Or for massive Iron Age football matches. The earthworks weren't even the start of the human story here, in fact. You can still see the remains of flint mines dug by a previous civilization, the Neolithic civilization, thousands of years before the Iron Age landscape designers got to work.

I climbed up to the upper level of ramparts and, although my legs were heavy, decided to make the effort to walk to my meeting-point the long way round, heading anti-clockwise. I had got here a bit early.

The sun was setting gloriously into Hampshire and the pale blue sky was streaked with orange-pink wisps. You could see a stretch of West Sussex coast which was invisible from Brighton – Littlehampton, Bognor Regis, Selsey Bill and even the Isle of Wight.

As I moved round to the south of the Ring, Worthing itself came into view – a great mass of houses, flats and offices. It seemed out of place, somehow, plonked down on the plain between the majesty of the Downs and the mystery of the sea. It was as if someone had taken an ugly urban sprawl from somewhere else in the country – Solihull, perhaps, or Basingstoke – and dumped it here without thinking twice whether

it was really appropriate.

I continued my circle and Shoreham by Sea came into view, then Brighton. And there was the phone mast by the racecourse, just behind my house. I gave myself a little wave, just in case I was in and gazing out from an upstairs window.

To the east of the Ring was a kind of gateway, a gap in the ramparts, and it was by here that Asha had agreed to meet me. I sat down on the springy chalkland turf and took a swig of water. Then I pulled out a jumper, as the warmth of the day was starting to fade. I had brought two with me, in fact, bearing in mind the evening assignation. Plus a light cagoule in case of rain. And a torch for finding my way down the hill in the dark. You could tell I'd been a Scout.

So, I thought as I lay back and watched the sky slowly darken, bathing in the delicate downland scent of grass and thyme and flowers, so I've finally got here! This is the famous encounter with Asha that I have been dreaming of!

Although the trail I was following had led me in the right direction, the sense of it all still eluded me. The thought had crossed my mind that there was perhaps some personal romantic destiny involved here, that Asha would prove to be the



woman who could pull me out of my post-Jennifer complex, but this didn't explain why Henry had been seeking her out as well.

It must be something else. It must be what she was going to tell me. Had she already told Henry? Would he be with her tonight? I realised that this was what I was actually hoping for, deep down. She would appear, exchange a few words with me, and then beckon for young Henry to join us. There would be hugs all round, all would be resolved, and I would head off to Edinburgh with Henry to reunite him with my lifelong friend Callum, his eternally-grateful father.

Eventually, as star after star began piercing the blue-black veil of the evening sky, I checked my watch and found that the moon would soon be rising. I walked towards the gap in the ramparts and scanned the hills to the east for a sign of where it would be appearing and for a while there was nothing. Then, all of a sudden, it looked as if someone had switched on a lamp on the top of the Downs beyond Brighton. A tiny pin-prick of white light beamed out. Then that pin-prick expanded and the rim of what appeared to be a small disc appeared over the horizon. But the disc was not small and as it moved up, the scale of its splendour became

apparent. The magnificent full moon hove itself, little by little, into view, its milky radiance illuminating the landscape and making the sky its own, pushing the stars around back into semi-obscure.

A tremor ran through my whole body. Men and women must have watched the moon rise from this same spot for century upon century. Two thousand years ago, they would have been standing beneath the same earthworks, beside the same gateway. And thousands more years before that, when the folk of the New Stone Age were up here mining for flint, they too would have seen the same moon rise over the same hills. I was seized by a powerful sense of tasting a moment, an experience, that belonged not to the now but to the always.

“Behold mighty Diana!” came a voice to my left and there, above me on the ramparts, I saw the outline of a wild figure, with long hair and billowing skirt, arms raised towards the heavens.

“Behold the Light of the Heart!”— this voice was soft in some respects but with an underlying gravelliness that suggested a woman not like the rest.

“As Diana reflects the primal light of the Sun, so

must we, in our human hearts, reflect the glory of the Divine! The light within us is the Divine light but it can never shine directly through the shadow-casting flaws of our physical being. Let us rid ourselves of ego and impurity in our quest to become a Mirror of Righteousness!

“They know me as Asha! Welcome, stranger!”

Asha had turned towards me now, although I couldn’t make out her face.

“You have sought me out in your search for the true path and I am ready to step forward with you and...”

Asha had literally stepped forward as she spoke, but seemed to catch her foot in a rabbit hole and went flying down the side of the ramparts, thudding on to the grass and tumbling to within a few feet of where I was standing.

“Fuck!” she said in a gruff tone that was less than mystic.

I stepped over to where she lay.

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah,” said Asha, heaving herself up on to her

elbows. “Bugged that up, good and proper, didn’t I? Hello, Jon. You don’t recognise me, do you?”

The voice no longer sounded in the least bit feminine and was, indeed, slightly familiar. I could see in the moonlight that although Asha had long hair, her face was that of a man, with a rather large nose and protruding ears.

“Good God,” I said when the penny had dropped. “Save Mutley Woods! You’re... Steve?”

“Simon,” he said. “You never could remember. You called me Steve in an article once.”

“Did I? I’m really sorry!” It was true. I was mortified. I was always mortified to find out I had messed something up, even if it was a decade ago.

“This Asha idea,” he said, once he’d picked himself up. “It wasn’t meant to be for real life. It was just on the internet. I should have told you before, but I didn’t want to disappoint Anahid – I don’t think she’d keep talking to me if she knew who I really was. You won’t say anything to her, will you?”

I assured him I wouldn’t.

He was brushing the grass off his blouse and skirt.

“I don’t even know why I decided to pretend to be a woman. Stupid bloody idea. I should have thought it through. I think I was maybe trying to channel my wife, Tracey, after she, errmm... departed.”

Him as well? “I’m sorry, mate...” I said, placing a caring hand on the lacy sleeve of his blouse.

“Oh, no!” he said, surprised and pulling away. “She’s not dead or anything. She’s living in Lancing with the bloke from the tattoo parlour.”

At Simon’s suggestion, we climbed back up on to the earthworks to admire the moon and I took the opportunity to raise the all-important question of Henry.

“Have you seen him? Do you know where he is?”

“Yeah, I saw him,” said Simon. “Last night, in fact, on the beach. I was going to put the dress on for him as well, but in the end there were too many people around and I bottled it. I told him straight. But it didn’t matter so much for him, because he’s not a journalist.”

“So what happened? Where is he now?”

He was shaking his head. “I don’t know where he is. We had a good old chat, but he didn’t say anything about that...”

I noticed he was shivering. It must be cold in that flimsy get-up.

“I’d suggest we go and get a pint somewhere, but dressed like that I don’t suppose...?”

“It’s OK,” said Simon. “My proper clothes are in the car.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“So what have you been up to since I last saw you?” I asked Simon when I came back from the bar with two pints of ale and two packets of plain crisps. He looked reasonably normal now, in jeans and jacket and with his hair tied back in a pony tail, although there had always been something a little ungainly, even comic, about his overall appearance. Somehow he looked like a cartoon version of himself. We were down in the centre of Worthing, not far from the station. It wasn’t bad, this little pub.

“That would have been in London, I suppose?” he asked. “2009 I think. Outside the Bank of England.”

Of course. That had been him, predicting the imminent collapse of the capitalist system!

“I found your article online the other day...” he began.

Oh dear, I thought. He shouldn't have done that. For his own sake.

“And, you know, actually I thought that I was right! What I said was exactly true, except that it hasn't happened yet. In fact. But then I'm an Aquarius, so I'm always ahead of my time!”

“Ah – but *how* far ahead, that's the question...” I remarked, thinking that the capitalist system would probably still be going strong in the year 3000, if it hadn't destroyed the planet first.

“Anyway,” he said, stuffing an enormous handful of crisps into his mouth. “It's got nothing to do with me, anyway, all that bollocks he was talking.”

“Who?”

“The bloke you interviewed. Steve from Worthing, whoever he is!”

I was duly embarrassed by my mistake for the second time in an hour.

“As to what I've been up to, it's pretty much the same stuff, with the odd change of name now and then... I started off as Worthing Against Civilization but then I met someone else and we



became Worthing Against Globalisation, for broader appeal. Then it was Worthing Against Imperialist Wars, then Worthing Against Greed and War because we'd met a few local Muslims over the Iraq thing and thought we could keep working together under that kind of label. Then it was Worthing Against Greed, War and Organised Religion because we weren't getting on with them any more. Then it was Save Mutley Woods!, though there was a bit of an overlap there – property development is all part of the Greed concept, really. Then there was West Sussex Anticapitalists for a bit and, oh yeah, the Richard Goring Club.”

“Richard Goring?”

“Yeah, the story is that he was a Victorian radical with very advanced political and philosophical views who lived here in Worthing. He developed the idea of society as a social organism, a living entity. Individuals were part of the greater whole, but not in some kind of helpless obedient way, like worker ants. Instead, they had self-will and free choice because that was the only way the entity as a whole could have self-will and free choice. They were like its tentacles, its antennae, its nerve endings, its thinking-and-doing cells. All our thinking was part of our nature, an extension of the living

nature of the human species, the biosphere and the cosmos, he said. And our consciousness was part of evolution. We had the basic instincts like plants and animals – growing, surviving, reproducing and sticking together for protection. But we also had higher instincts, like identifying with larger entities, realising we were part of larger organisms. The first step is to think in terms of your family, or your immediate community, then of your town or region, your country, but more evolved thinking goes further and takes in the whole of humanity, the whole of life on earth, the whole of the universe. It ends up with a spiritual sense of belonging to everything.”

“I see,” I said, nodding encouragement.

“The trouble was that, according to Goring, these higher instincts were being repressed by modern society. People were being taught to be selfish. Instead of looking out for their neighbours, they were looking out for themselves. Instead of worrying about the future of the human race, they were only interested in the British Empire and saw the rest of the world as savages. Instead of appreciating the idea of a living cosmos, they had this simplified idea of a God father-figure sitting up in Heaven and now even that was going out of fashion and being replaced by a faith

in science. Horizons were being narrowed, vital connections lost. Evolution – the evolution of the higher human instincts – was going into reverse.”

“Interesting. I must look him up.”

“Hmmm...” said Simon dubiously.

I raised my eyebrows as if to ask why this reaction, after he had described Goring’s ideas with such enthusiasm.

“There used to be something on Wikibiografiko,” he said. “But I think they’ve taken it down now.”

“Taken it down? Why?”

“Well... he wasn’t really... we did make up a lot of the...”

“You mean he didn’t exist?”

“Oh no!” objected Simon, with a note of outrage. “He definitely *existed!* His grave’s in Broadwater Cemetery. That’s how it all began, in fact, when my mate was doing some research into the people buried there and realised there were some that we knew nothing at all about, that nobody knew anything at all about, apart from their date

of birth and death. We started to discuss who we would most like someone like Goring to have been and... well, it just took off from there!”

“So you put a totally fictional account of his life on the internet?”

“Yes, but not just that. We did it properly! We found an old photo in a junk shop that we decided was him, we picked a house where he used to live and campaigned for a blue plaque, we wrote a whole book that was supposed to be by him, we did a talk at the library about his life and legacy...”

“But why? What was the point of all that?”

“We thought it would be a way of getting people interested. Build up a bit of a local cult around him, make him *real* a hundred years after his death.”

Simon took a gulp of beer and smiled a bit bashfully.

“It was for a laugh, of course. It was a bit of a prank. We enjoyed pulling a fast one on the Worthing public. But there was a serious side, as well. What we wrote, we meant. We got Richard Goring to say all the things *we* wanted to say.

But we thought it would have more weight coming from him. We *thought*. But we were wrong.”

“So people didn’t fall for it? Did you get caught out?”

“No,” shrugged Simon. “Nobody ever realised at the time. Nobody said anything. That was the whole problem. Typical Worthing. Nobody was in the least bit interested!”

There was a pause.

“*Almost* nobody,” he added and sighed loudly. “There was one lady who was very much into him. Eileen she was called. She was one of the half a dozen people who turned up at the library and the only one to stay to the end of the talk. She couldn’t get enough of Richard Goring. We had to keep ‘discovering’ new letters and articles he’d written to keep her happy. Eileen pretty much took over the blue plaque campaign and used to organise monthly pilgrimages to the grave. Nobody ever came, except us and some neighbour of hers she dragged along. She never found out, fortunately. She ended up being put in an old people’s home near her daughter’s place in Suffolk and we lost touch. She was in tears when she said goodbye to Richard Goring in the

cemetery. I felt fucking terrible.”

I snorted. Yeah. This wasn't an episode to be particularly proud of.

“And your mate?” I asked. “Is he still around?”

“No,” he said quietly. “Mike died five years ago. He had a heart attack while we were out drawing Hitler moustaches on Tory election posters in Durrington. Died before the ambulance even got to the hospital.”

“I'm sorry.”

He downed the rest of his pint. “That's when I switched to the internet,” he said. “Making trouble in Worthing isn't much fun on your own. Same again, Jon?”

While he was at the bar, I looked around the pub. There was a drawing on the wall beside us showing a group of angry people carrying a banner bearing a skull and crossbones. The caption explained that they were the Skeleton Army, a beer-loving bunch of hotheads who had rioted in Worthing in the 1880s against the presence of the teetotal Salvation Army. This couldn't be another one of Simon and Mike's little historical pranks, could it? I didn't dare

ask.

“And what about Henry?” I asked when he came back with the beer. “What happened with Henry last night?”

“Happened? Nothing much. We walked up and down the seafront, sat on the pier...”

“But what did you talk about?”

“We talked about Anahid, about his trip over there. About her ideas...”

“Was he interested?”

“Well yes, of course! He’s very into all of that. That’s why he came to see me, because she thought I might be able to point him further in the right direction.”

“But further in *what* direction?”

He looked at me as if I was a bit dim.

“Further in the direction of Asha.”

I was taken aback for a moment. I had to think this through. First of all Asha was a place, then it was a woman, who turned out not to be a

woman, and now it was apparently back to being a place again.

“And where is Asha?” I asked.

“*Where* is Asha?” he repeated, suddenly feeling the need to rub his right eyebrow rather vigorously. “That’s a good one! That’s what we’d all like to know!”

“OK,” I said, a little peeved at the unhelpfulness of his reply. “*What* is Asha?”

“Oh, you don’t know?”

He was looking at me with such unguarded innocence that I could see he genuinely expected me to know.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know what Asha is, apart from a song title and the pseudonym used by some practical joker on the internet. And an Indian takeaway in Scotland.”

“Well,” said Simon, “Asha is basically an ancient idea of rightness and truth, a sort of sense of order inside the whole universe. It’s the force behind the way the stars move and the seasons change, the planting and harvesting of crops, the ebb and flow of the tides and so on. They saw it



pretty much as what we call ‘good’, while ‘evil’ was anything that got in its way and...”

“Hang on,” I interrupted. “Who’s the ‘they’ we’re talking about here?”

“The Zoroastrians,” said Simon, as if this was a matter of common knowledge.

“Zoroastrians?” I echoed – something was coming back to me. Yes, of course, when I had originally been searching for Asha on Callum’s laptop, that was one of the first results that had come up. An obscure term that couldn’t properly be translated out of a dead language.

“Yes, but it goes deeper than that,” Simon was saying. “The original meaning of the word is part of the core vocabulary of the Indo-European family of languages which goes right back to Sanskrit. Asha means truth but it comes from a root word ‘as’ which meant ‘to be’. In Latin it’s ‘esse’ and we’ve still got it in English. ‘Is’. ‘Essence’. That’s Asha hidden in there! Everything that is real, everything that is true!”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s really interesting. But I don’t...”

I trailed off, unable to explain myself.

“What?”

“I don’t see what this has got to do with Henry,” I said, finally finding the words to sum up what was bothering me. “You see, he’s on some kind of political mission, although we don’t know exactly what kind. Up until now, I’ve seen the political relevance of everything he’s been looking into. Mutual aid, social organisms, nature and so on. But this Asha idea, which was what seemed to start the whole ball rolling, just doesn’t quite fit in. It’s a religious idea, not a political one. Zoroastrians, ancient languages, good versus evil and so on. I just don’t see what it has to do with anything!”

“But Jon!” said Simon, with something akin to pity in his voice. “Asha couldn’t be *more* relevant to everything you mentioned, all the ideas that Henry was pursuing! Asha is nature as an organism, nature as something that orders itself. Asha is the autonomous self-ordering of nature! Of the cosmos, of everything! Do you know anything about Taoism?”

“A tiny bit,” I replied.

“You know that there’s this central idea of a natural flow, the way things are meant to be?”

“The age of perfect Virtue?”

“Well yes, I suppose so,” he said, looking agreeably surprised. “So you know this already, Jon!”

I shook my head. I hadn’t quite put the pieces together yet.

“Asha is that idea of an underlying harmony, an underlying rhythm...”

“An underlying pattern?” I ventured.

He nodded. “Exactly. As Anahid would tell you. And this underlying harmony is the way things are meant to be, all being well, in your age of perfect Virtue if you like. OK?”

“Yep,” I said. “But isn’t that a bit conservative, as an idea? The idea that there is a certain fixed way that things should be, the way they have always been. It seems a fairly rigid concept, particularly when you translate it into political ideas.”

“No, not at all. There isn’t a fixed idea behind Asha any more than there is behind the Tao. That’s the point. It’s not any particular order that they’re describing, but the *sense* of order

behind it, which is always out of sight, as it were. Fluid. Indefinable. What is it they say? ‘The Tao cannot be spoken: what is spoken is not the Tao.’”

“I don’t know,” I said. My knowledge of Taoism was already exhausted. I had only read two pages, after all.

“Of course it’s true that the general idea of natural order, whether you call it Tao or Asha or Dharma, could be transformed into a pretext for social conservatism, caste systems and the like. Look at India. But that can happen to any sound idea. Think what the Roman Empire did with Christ’s teachings. Or what Stalin did with Karl Marx. But if we go back to the real idea of Asha we can see that it’s not that at all. It’s the idea of pure being, pure being as part of nature and the cosmos, and the idea that this pure being, the harmony of this pure being, the *sense* of harmony behind this pure being, is everything that is good. And anything that interferes with this natural harmony is called ‘druj’, which means lies, falsehood, disorder.”

“Disorder?” I asked. “So we’re back to that again? Ancient Persian priests protecting the status quo with the spurious excuse of some heaven-sent natural harmony that’s under threat from

trouble-makers?”

“No, that’s not it!” said Simon, his face screwed up with concentration in a rather ridiculous way. He gulped down some beer as if to refuel his powers of argumentation.

“The point is that the order is *natural*! It’s part of existence. It’s nothing to do with any regime or religion or anything. It’s already there, implicitly. The only thing that can go wrong is that it’s blocked, that people interfere with it. And the way they do that is by trying to replace it with an artificial order, an unnatural order that doesn’t let the real one flourish, the real one guided by Asha.”

I must have been looking blank because Simon redoubled his efforts. I noticed he had begun gesticulating as he spoke.

“Don’t you get it, Jon? It’s the social organism, the pattern within, Kropotkin’s natural solidarity. It’s anarchy, Jon, real anarchy! Not anarchy as chaos and disorder, but anarchy as things working perfectly well without the state, without artifice, without ‘druj’.

“And it goes even further,” he continued, in a state of such excitement that the mouthful of

beer he was trying to swallow ended up mainly over his chin. “Asha isn’t just anarchy, as it works, but it’s the *principle* by which it works. It’s not just practical, it’s theoretical, except that the theory is part of nature as well. It’s the *possibility* of anarchist society, Jon! And that’s another of those words connected to Asha, like ‘is’ and ‘essence’! It’s the idea that something can *be*, can be real and true and authentic, without necessarily being physically present *at the moment*. The fact that we don’t live in a society guided by Asha, we don’t live in an anarchist society, doesn’t mean that that other world is *impossible*. In fact, Asha is more real than the world of druj we see around us, because it’s part of the basic truth of our whole... Shit!”

In excitedly spreading his hands to illustrate the enormous size of “whole”, Simon had managed to knock over his beer glass. It didn’t break, but the contents formed a great lake on the table and the prevailing tide seemed to be heading in my direction. He leapt to his feet, ineptly tried to scoop the ale away from me with a beer mat and then dashed off to get a cloth from the bar.

When he’d cleared up the spill and returned with more beer and a restored sense of calm, I resumed the conversation.

“So did you talk about this with Henry?”

“Of course,” he said. “Of course we did. And I think he understood. He understood just how dangerous this idea is. Asha. Anarchy. Whatever you want to call it.”

“Dangerous?” I asked, “He said that?”

This was a sudden reminder that young Henry’s interest in these ideas was not necessarily as benign as the people he spoke to might have imagined.

Simon was smiling. “Not dangerous to him, to us. Dangerous to *them*!”

“Who’s ‘them’?”

He shrugged. “You know. The state. The corporations. The system.”

Up to this point, I had pretty much followed the sense of Simon’s arguments. But here I had some reservations.

“I can see it’s a powerful idea,” I said. “I understand entirely what you’re saying and I find it very appealing myself, of course. I’ve always considered myself a bit of an anarchist on

the side. But ‘dangerous’? Do you really think that this idea of Asha, in itself, is actually dangerous to the powers-that-be? At the end of the day isn’t it just a harmless daydream, a utopia, an ideal that is safely tucked up inside the woolly minds of people like you and me?”

“No,” said Simon with some certainty. “I talked a lot about this with Henry, too. There’s a third level to Asha that I haven’t really explained to you yet. You see it’s not just natural harmony, or the invisible pattern of order that is behind that harmony. Asha is also about the human appreciation of that pattern, the importance of that pattern, and about the need to act on its behalf.”

“Act?”

“Yes. To act. To *do* something. It’s a sort of early existentialism we’re talking about, here. When Zoroaster – Zarathustra if you prefer – came on the scene a thousand years before Christ, he told the Persians that their world was corrupt and had to be rescued by human action. Natural harmony had to be restored and the responsibility for that lay with human beings. Because society was corrupt, people couldn’t find their inspiration in the laws and dogma of the time, but had to look for it deep inside



themselves, in their natural free will, their inner Asha if you like. And that inner Asha was also the force that gave them the courage to act. The whole point of their lives was to sweep away all the falsity and renew the world, restore it to how it was supposed to be. This was their essence, as good and authentic human beings, their duty and their destiny.”

“And...?” I asked, although I already knew where this was going.

“What could be more dangerous to any corrupt bunch of rulers than a philosophy like that? Firstly it tells people that society works best without authority and state structures interfering with its natural harmony. Secondly it assures them that another world is always possible. And thirdly it tells them they have an ethical and spiritual duty to devote their lives to overturning the system and restoring a free and natural way of life.”

I nodded. I saw what he meant.

“I think Henry was spot on,” continued Simon, “when he said that the Asha idea is the capitalist system’s worst nightmare. And they’d stop at nothing to snuff it out.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The evening in the pub with Simon turned out to be rather enjoyable – he even managed to avoid spilling any more beer – and we parted, after several more pints, on a promise to meet up again before too long, probably in Brighton so I could show him a few of my favourite haunts.

What with all the beer and the long walk, I must have fallen asleep as soon as I got into bed and it was only the next morning that the actual significance of the Worthing encounter dawned on me, along with a pounding headache.

I had completely failed to find Henry! I had trailed after him from Scotland, to London, to France and to West Sussex and had absolutely nothing concrete to show for it. Simon had no idea where he was now, or even where he'd been staying when they met. Why would he? It's not the sort of question you normally ask. So that was it. It was the end of the line. I knew what

Asha was, certainly, but regardless of my dreams that wasn't the actual purpose of what I was doing here. The whole Asha thread had been a coincidence that had happily led me to follow in Henry's footsteps and now the limits of its relevance were all too clear. I had nothing to go on at all! There was no next step! What was I going to tell Callum?

I paced around the kitchen as I waited for the kettle to boil and for the toast to emit the odour that would tell me it was time to extract it, with a knife, from my long-broken toaster. There had to be something I could do.

Such was my desperation that I even went online and checked again, for the umpteenth time, to see if Henry had responded to the various messages I had sent him that first morning up at Callum's. No, of course he hadn't. That would have been too easy.

One thing I could do, I realised once the effects of the coffee began to kick in, was to give Simon a ring. Like me, Henry had got in touch with him via Anahid's social media account, but Simon had promised me last night that he'd check to see if there was any sign of activity from Henry – a comment, a message, a "follow" or whatever, that would give him the excuse to contact him. Now,

given the situation, I wasn't much bothered by such subtleties. I would pass on to Simon all the contact details I had for Henry and ask him to approach him directly. They seemed to have got on, so Henry might reply.

I got Simon out of bed when I rang. But he didn't seem to mind too much and promised to get back to me straight away.

"What on earth's a TERF?" he asked when he rang back a little later.

As I lived in trendy Brighton, rather than staid old Worthing, I was able to tell him straight off: "A Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist," I said. "Why?"

"It's gone mad on social media. There's all these people sending me hate messages, saying I'm a TERF, and I don't know why!"

This was all very strange. The attacks had started overnight and there were now dozens of hostile messages aimed at Asha, many calling for her account to be suspended. Simon assured me that he had never so much as mentioned trans people and couldn't see why anyone would think he had anything against them.

I'd seen some of things he'd written online, when I was with Anahid, and suggested that maybe just the fact that he used phrases like "feminine wisdom" or talked about the power of "the goddess" might have wound people up.

"But it's just ridiculous!" he said. "Here's one. They've quoted from something I wrote ages ago about the moon and childbirth, the tides and breaking waters and so on. Apparently this makes me 'wombcentric scum'."

I tried to explain that there was a current of thinking in which tying femininity too closely to a certain biological physicality was seen as a type of discrimination.

"But, Jon, that's mad! How can I be prejudiced against people without a womb when I haven't got one myself! I'm a bloke, for fuck's sake, not one of these feminist fundamentalists! Should I tell them? Come clean about Asha?"

The situation was complicated, that was for sure, but I told Simon that his critics were not likely to be impressed by the revelation that the person expressing these allegedly transphobic opinions was in fact a man, a heterosexual cis man, pretending online to be a woman for reasons that were not altogether clear.

He promised to send the messages to Henry, but he was obviously very rattled at what was happening and worried about losing the online presence in which he had invested so much of his time and energy. Getting a response from Henry was not going to be his top priority today.

This wasn't good news for me. I had to step up my search for Henry before I spoke to Callum again. If I didn't ring today, he was bound to call me to find out what had happened last night.

I rang Anahid. I'd ask if Henry had been in touch and, if he hadn't, I'd see if she could raise a response.

I knew straight away from the tone of her voice that something was wrong. It was so cold.

"I'm surprised, Mr Harvey, that you have the audacity to contact me after what you have done. I trusted you and that was my mistake. I should have known by now never to trust journalists and never to trust the English, let alone somebody who combines both of these sorry afflictions. I am bitterly disappointed in you, Mr Harvey. Goodbye."

"What? Wait!" I was shouting into the phone. "Anahid! I don't understand..."

But she had hung up and when I tried again she had evidently taken the phone off the hook.

What was she talking about? My head was hurting twice as much now.

I went online, searched for “Anahid Vishnyakova” in the last 24 hours and found out what the problem was.

“Exposed: Russian Nazi’s secret hide-out in French mountains!”

The article seemed to have been posted pretty much simultaneously in a number of places – Global Democracy Newslines, the Transatlantic Values Forum and a few similarly obscure sites – but the source for all of them was FascistAlert.info and it was here that I read the article.

At the top was a photo of Anahid, clearly taken at least ten years ago, laughing in the company of a balding, smartly-dressed man on a flight of concrete steps in some urban environment – not at her place, that was for sure. “Vishnyakova pictured with close friend and notorious Polish anti-semitic Józef Szonert,” declared the caption.

“A notorious Russian fascist is hiding out in the

heart of Western Europe, peddling her message of hate from a top-secret mountaintop stronghold,” the anonymous article began.

I felt sick inside. What was this? A fascist? Message of hate? Secret stronghold? The address was on her website!

“Anahid Vishnyakova, a veteran Nazi sympathiser with links to sinister worldwide far-right networks, hides behinds an apparently harmless institution tucked away in the countryside north of Nîmes.

“But even the name of her ‘Institute of Interior Nature’ betrays an alarming truth – the fanatic 73-year-old is obsessed with classic Nazi ‘blood and soil’ dogma which sees ‘interior nature’ as the key to categorising human beings.

“It was this very same ‘interior nature’ which sent six million Jewish women, men and children to their deaths and which continues to fuel anti-semitism and racism around the world.

“It was this very same ‘interior nature’ which led to disabled people being murdered by Hitler’s regime and today is used as an excuse by the far right to deny human rights to gay and trans communities.



“It comes as no surprise to learn that Vishnyakova is a long-term friend of Polish anti-semitic novelist Józef Szonert, notorious for cowardly attacks on the Jewish diaspora concealed behind terms such as ‘global finance’ and ‘American imperialism’ and whose hatred for the Jewish state saw him lend his support to the so-called ‘Flotilla for Peace’ to Gaza, organised in 2018 by an international conspiracy of Israel-hating anti-semites.

“And in light of all this damning evidence, it comes as no shock to learn that the twisted Vishnyakova is also an admirer of the discredited German artist Joseph Beuys, a member of the Hitler Youth who took part in the infamous Nuremberg Rally of 1936 and flew with the Luftwaffe in the Second World War.

“In her book *The Pattern Within*, she applauds Beuys’ use of the term ‘social organism’ – a concept inherited from Nazi dogma, which saw the totalitarian National Socialist state as a ‘natural’ organism, with Adolf Hitler acting as its brain.

“A French government spokesperson thanked FascistAlert.info for our research and said they were disturbed to learn of Vishnyakova’s activities on French soil: ‘We will tolerate no

form of racism, fascism or anti-semitism in our Republic', he said, pledging that they would be launching an immediate investigation into Vishnyakova's foul organisation, its mountain hide-out base and her residential status in France."

I didn't know where to start with this. How could Anahid's ideas of human nature, a human nature without borders, be presented as some kind of Nazism? And why?

As for Beuys... I checked on the internet. Yes, he was born in 1921, so he was 15 in 1936. Membership of the Hitler Youth was compulsory in Germany by then. And wasn't he...? Yes, he was a founder member of the German Green Party. And he designed an Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial. He was no Nazi, that was for sure. They didn't exhibit Nazis in the Tate Modern!

Did Anahid really think I had written this drivel? Just because I was the last person to visit – the last journalist to visit? Just because we had discussed Beuys and his social organism? What did she imagine? That the search for Henry was a lie? That I had come deliberately to set her up for attack? That I had chosen to ignore her insistence that the idea of different "races" went against everything that nature really was? That

I had sat through her account of her Jewish ancestry knowing that it could have no place in my demolition job? What sort of monster did she take me for?

My hangover had got worse. I felt nauseous. There was a foul stench coming from somewhere. The drains were probably blocked again.

I had to speak to her. I had to let her know that I had nothing to do with this poisonous piece of propaganda, whatever it was all about. Her phone was still disconnected so I sent her an email, expressing quite clearly how distraught I was about the whole thing.

I found myself checking back two or three times, immediately after sending the email, to see if she had replied, or even acknowledged receiving it. All that came through was news of a Trowel Dressing Contest at the garden centre and a Blindfold Scrabble night at the Frog and Princess. This was ridiculous. I dragged myself away from the computer and strode around the house. I could feel the tension within me. That familiar old feeling. The stirrings of what could turn into either rage or panic.

I went out into the back garden, looked up at the sky, let the sun fall on my face and made myself

breathe deeply. I had the nasty feeling all the neighbours would be peering out at me from their upstairs windows, wondering what the hell I was up to, but today I didn't care. I had to get myself back into a functional state of mind.

A sudden rush of cool sea air swept up the hill and into the garden. "Come on Jon, get your act together!" said Jennifer's voice. "You can cope! You're stronger than this! You give in too easily, that's your problem. You let it all get to you and then you're good for nothing. Get back in there and do a bit of that journalistic research you're supposed to be so good at!"

I went back in, since she'd told me to, and looked up Józef Szonert, the man in the photo with Anahid. He seemed to be mainly known for his novels about rural life in 19<sup>th</sup> century Silesia. Politically he seemed to be a Catholic social democrat, notable only for his support for Palestinian solidarity.

I went back to FascistAlert.info and had a look at the rest of their articles. Some of them were really about Nazis – hardline Hitler worshippers in Norway, gun-toting rednecks in the USA, racist football supporter gangs in the UK. But a lot of their targets didn't really seem to fall into that category at all. There were several articles,

for instance, on an Italian rock star whose main offence seemed to be voicing opposition to NATO exercises being carried out near his home. This made him a “fascistic xenophobe”, apparently. There was a very strongly-worded condemnation of a new French political movement that I would have regarded as solidly left-wing, mobilising public anger at the erosion of trade union rights and the threat posed to French consumers and jobs by transatlantic trade treaties. But, according to the site’s nameless authors, this all amounted to “closet nationalism” “red-brown national socialism” and “the new 21<sup>st</sup> century fascism which dare not speak its name”. There was even a mention of Kate Duggan, a radical Brighton stand-up comedian I had seen a number of times over the years. She had committed the serious offences of mocking the US President in public, of calling on her audience to refuse to watch any Hollywood films until the USA promised to start closing down the 800 military bases it maintained across the world, and of describing the CIA as “the planet’s leading purveyor of terrorism”. She was therefore judged to be a “Stalino-fascist” with a “sneering contempt for Western democracy and freedom”.

Anahid still hadn’t replied to my email. I couldn’t get through on the phone.

I wanted to dig a bit more into this ridiculous FascistAlert site – and the others that had uncritically shared its attack on Anahid. But I knew I had to put all this to one side, for the moment. I had something quite important to be getting on with, after all – finding out where the hell young Henry was.

When I was on the *Investigator*, Andy and I used to joke about the “biscuit moment” that occurred in the middle of any decent-sized story. You’d reach a point where, somehow, you just couldn’t advance a paragraph further without a mug of coffee and a biscuit. Or, even better, two biscuits.

I had reached a biscuit moment and I had no biscuits in the house, so inevitably I would have to go and buy some. I set off round the corner to go to the little convenience store down the hill, taking care as ever to avert my eyes from the point in the middle of the road where I had made Jennifer collide with the bus.

Although the sun was shining, there was a cold nip in the air and a bank of dark cloud was rolling in from the Worthing direction. I fairly skipped down to the shop – it’s easy enough downhill! – and, as usual, glanced at the newspapers spread out just inside the door.

For once, something of interest took my eye. Some kind of riot was featured on several front pages. Police in all their gear. A helicopter. I picked one up and saw immediately that it was Gilders Street.

“London cops raid anarchist base – Clashes as anti-WF jobs rounded up.”

Good grief. The squat had been surrounded by the police yesterday morning. They’d smashed in the front entrance with a battering ram and used a helicopter to come in through the roof! I pictured Ali and his mate on their fold-up chairs, the sense of peace that I’d felt up there. And now this!

The other papers had much the same angle, of course. Riots averted. Brave police take on foreign thugs over here to cause trouble. Dirty squatters get their just rewards. London made safe for world leaders.

Someone came into the shop behind me and complained that it had just started to rain. I grabbed the paper that promised the most coverage inside, along with some shortbread biscuits, hurriedly paid for them and then dashed out of the shop and across the road. After that promising start, the dashing turned into

trudging, since it was all uphill and I was definitely feeling the effects of yesterday's long hike in the back of my legs. I stuffed the paper inside my jumper to stop it getting too soggy and steeled myself for a deeply wet, cold and unpleasant five or six minutes. I wasn't disappointed.

While the kettle was boiling, I tried to call Mouse, to see if she was OK. Her phone seemed to be switched off. I called Mat's number as well, but it was the same story.

I put the computer back on and somehow tried to simultaneously read the newspaper and scour the online coverage.

It was in the printed version that I found it first.

“Face of violence: Dutch nutter ‘waved knife’ at boys in blue.”

There was a photo of Mat, holding a knife – the one he had been using for chopping carrots by the look of it. Underneath there was an article explaining that this dangerous anarchist – dangerous *foreign* anarchist! – had been confronted by the police during the raid and had “resisted arrest” by “wielding a knife” at them and now faced “serious charges”. There was no



reference to the fact that he was a catering volunteer at the convergence centre and instead he was said to be “a member of the notorious European ‘Black Commune’ network, called in by UK-based extremists to bolster numbers and street-fighting know-how”.

“Cumin, you morons,” I muttered. “Cumin not Commune.” As for violence and streetfighting... the man was a pacifist! But what did I expect? I had always known what the mainstream media were like in Britain. That’s why I hadn’t spent my life working for them.

In a panel on the same page was a list of 36 people who had been arrested in Gilders Street and at Piccadilly Circus, where the anti-WF march had been due to begin but had been prevented from taking place by the police.

I scanned through. Yep, Mathijs Jansen, of course. Fiona Fitzgerald – they’d arrested Mouse as well! Ali Shirani too.

Online, the mainstream coverage was as bad as in the paper, so I tried to find an alternative angle. Ah yes, here was an article, on *Liberty and Revolt*, published this morning.

“Here at L&R we can only express our outrage at

the Met Police's brutal assault on our comrades in Gilders Street yesterday. Nobody with a drop of libertarian and egalitarian blood in their veins could fail to be appalled and angered at the sight of tooled-up violent state-sociopaths smashing their way into the convergence centre and violently attacking all those inside."

That was better!

"However, it needs to be said that those involved in organising the mobilisation need to accept their share of the blame for this tragic debacle."

What? I was taken aback by this sudden change of tack.

"We at L&R were among many comrades in London and beyond who warned from the start that this kind of set-piece political confrontation, built around the World Forum summit, was doomed to failure on many levels.

"Put succinctly, it plays into the hands of an elitist mentality that we would do well to purge from our ranks. Elitist because it portrays the problems of our society today as being enshrined in an elite of world 'rulers' rather than in the whole complex web of personal and social domination that surrounds us every day. Elitist

also because, deliberately or not, it sets up those opposing the 'capitalist elite' as themselves a kind of elite, an activist elite, presented as leading the struggle against capitalism on our behalf.

“This 'activist' mentality excludes all those without the privilege needed to participate in these artificially constructed theatrical moments of 'conflict'. How could a single mother from Scotland, for example, expect to have the luxury of the best part of a week in London opposing the WF? How could a disabled person be expected to enter the convergence centre, via a narrow staircase, let alone 'reclaim the streets' on the advertised protest? What opportunity was there for an Indian peasant to be in London to take part in the self-proclaimed focus of 'resistance' to the structures of which they, and others like them, are the principal victims?

“By framing the problem in terms of a particular group of people meeting in a particular place at a particular time, Smash the WF! have effectively turned their back on global reality and excluded from the conversation the very people who suffer most at the hands of the 'system' (to use their own dangerously simplified term) they claim to oppose.

“In pushing ahead with their mobilisation in the face of principled opposition from comrades in the UK and beyond, Smash the WF! have made their own bed and must now lie in it.

“We will have no further comment to make on the farcical failure of their so-called ‘day of action’. We consider our collective’s decision not to publicise Smash the WF!’s call-outs in the build-up to the summit to be fully vindicated and we do not propose to give any space to their inevitable complaints about their treatment at the hands of the police, nor to any appeals for court solidarity and so forth. Smash the WF! have, through their reactionary elitism, essentially resigned from the broader libertarian-left community and have no place in our progressive social movement.”

Fucking hell. What was going on here? What a morning! First there was Simon and all that online abuse. Then the article about Anahid. And now the London squat under fire both from the capitalist media and the so-called radical alternative.

I realised I was feeling vaguely guilty. It was as if I had contaminated all these people by having something to do with them. They had all been ticking along fine until I stuck my nose in and

now...

Oh god. The thought slapped me in the face without any warning. It wasn't me, at all, how could it be? It was Henry! That was what he was doing all along! Callum had underestimated his sophistication. He wasn't going to throw petrol bombs at his enemies, or chuck bricks through their windows. He was out to discredit them, destroy them! And he'd pulled it off. One after another, he'd tracked down key players and picked up enough ammunition to shoot their reputations down in flames!

The vision of Henry that had been growing inside me, a vision of an earnest and intelligent young man, excited by the ideological quest of getting to the heart of matters, discovering the truth about the world and life and how it all came together, had now evaporated.

Instead, I saw a liar. A manipulator. A cunning rogue hiding behind his superficial boyish charm, conning people like Mat, Anahid and Simon into trusting him, telling him their deepest thoughts.

Before I had wanted to find Henry to save him, to protect him from himself and from the big bad world. But now I had to find him to stop him spreading any more lies, infecting any more

causes, ruining any more lives.

There was no doubt about it – Henry was the enemy!

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Normally at a moment like this I would have gone for a nice walk to think about things. But it was pouring with rain outside and my leg muscles didn't fancy any more exercise, so this option was doubly discounted.

I walked up and down the stairs. I tried phoning everyone again. I didn't get through. Even Simon was engaged, which was just as well as when I put the phone down I realised I had no idea what I'd wanted to say to him.

The obvious person to be contacting was, of course, Callum. It was *his* son we were talking about, after all. Moreover, it was him that was paying me to track him down. And therein lay the problem – I had failed to do so. And my realisation that Henry was up to no good and had to be stopped would come as no revelation to Callum, even though he would no doubt be reassured that his son's war on the revolutionary

left was being conducted in the realm of rhetoric rather than fisticuffs, razor blades or bombs. I knew exactly how he would react if I phoned him with the current update – and I didn't relish the prospect of hearing him tell me that he was right and I was wrong and that I needed to pull my fucking socks up and do my job.

So what next? What was I supposed to do now?

I looked at the little collection of books on the kitchen table and, without even thinking about it, grabbed a tea towel from under the sink and knotted myself a blindfold. I shuffled the tomes around a little, to disorientate myself, and then pulled one out. Without removing the blindfold, I opened it up randomly and placed my finger on a page. With the other hand, I tugged off the tea towel and looked to see what I had chosen.

It was Chuang Tzu.

“Hold fast to the Tao and there is nothing it cannot do; lose it and there is nothing that can be done.”

Well, yes. That was it! From a rational point of view, I seemed to have reached a dead end and I was frustrated. But I had lost sight of the other way, the way of instinct that had been guiding



me from the very start, with the dream of the train to Asha.

“You hadn’t lost sight of it, Jon,” said Jennifer from somewhere. The wind rattled the rosebush against the kitchen window. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have put the blindfold on and looked for the answer in the books! Trust yourself, Jon! You need to trust yourself!”

OK, I thought. I’ll follow my intuition, go with the flow, follow the Tao. But which way does it want me to go? How do I hear its voice?

I stared at the books in front of me in desperation, as if somehow the guidance I was seeking would leap out of the covers and straight into my brain.

And, miraculously, it did! The books themselves, not even their contents, were the answer. The place where I had found them – or they’d found me! The place that had set me off on what was increasingly looking like a wild goose chase. The place that could set me off on the right path again, find me the right platform for the fast train to Asha. I had to go back to Edinburgh, back to the Leftover Library!

Enthused by this revelation, I closed my eyes and

opened *The Book of Chuang Tzu* on another page, stabbing my finger at a random point.

“Holding to the primal strength and eliminating fear, a lone brave knight can overcome nine armies.”

Oh yes, I liked that. I could certainly see myself as a lone brave knight. And holding to primal strength was what Jennifer had been telling me to do. Eliminating fear. That was me! I was frightened of no-one. Not even Callum. I would ring him straight away, tell him there had been a major breakthrough this end, that I needed to speak to him urgently and in person, and get him to buy me a train ticket back up to Scotland. Those nine armies had better watch out – Sir Jonathan the Solitary-Yet-Courageous was on his way!

I was still in high spirits when my train pulled into Edinburgh Waverley the following lunchtime, even though I’d needed a full dose of ancient Chinese calm to put up with Callum’s sarcastic response to my admittedly rather vague news of a “breakthrough”.

I was even treated to my favourite view of Arthur’s Seat as we crawled into the city. There was no fog this time – but the bright sunshine

was tempered by a strong wind of an iciness that was not apparent from inside the train and had little to do with the month of May as generally experienced in Sussex, let alone the south of France.

I walked briskly towards The Mound and on to George IV Bridge. I was going straight to the Leftover Library. I was hoping – and trusting! – that I would have something worth telling Callum about when he got back from work.

I found the narrow entrance to the passageway straight away and started off down the little steps. Something immediately seemed different, though I was not sure exactly what. Then I realised – the place wasn't as dark as before. Someone had installed little modern lights high up on the walls of the tenements, which were lit up, despite it being daytime, and had alleviated the gloom. Sensible enough, I supposed. However, on the other hand, as I approached the little terrace outside the library I saw that it was no longer benefiting from the miraculous shaft of sunlight from between the buildings, which must have been something of a freak occurrence. Instead, it was illuminated by a row of little blue-white spotlights. There was a nasty smell of scorched plastic, too, presumably something to do with the wiring. The honeysuckle had been

cleared from the railings, which had been given a fresh coat of paint.

A bigger surprise came when I was faced with the front of the library. Gone was the home-made sign – it had been replaced with a up-to-date manufactured kind like those gracing every High Street in the United Kingdom. And they'd added a sort of subtitle, too, in smaller lettering: "Leftover Library. The left is over! Long live the left!"

Most peculiar, I thought. I couldn't imagine why Frank and Frasier had decided to do this.

I pushed open the old door. Instead of the merry jingling of the bell, there was the rasping sound of an electric buzzer.

I poked my head cautiously round the corner and saw at once that everything had changed.

There was no sofa. The book shelves looked strange – neat, ordered, sterile. The musty odour of old books had been replaced with the stench of disinfectant. And there was no sign of Frank and Frasier.

Instead, as I continued inside, a small yet plump blonde woman in her early 30s appeared from

somewhere and placed herself behind a table with a computer on top. That certainly hadn't been there a week and a half ago.

"Can I help you?" she said, in a northern English accent and with a somewhat officious and even slightly irritated tone. What a nuisance! A customer turning up like that, with no warning!

"Err, yes," I said. "I have some books to bring back and I thought I might take out a few more..."

I had brought the books of course. But I hadn't really got a plan beyond seeing Frank and Frasier and benefiting from their advice.

"Are you registered?" asked the woman curtly.

"Registered? No, I was told there was no need for all that, I..."

"That was then," she snapped. "We're under new management now and you have to be registered. You'll need some kind of photo ID and two items proving your current address, such as a utility bill or council tax demand."

"I'm afraid I haven't got anything like that with me at the moment, you see..."

“In that case, I’m afraid you won’t be able to borrow any books today. But I’ll certainly take the returned books from you – thank you!” She fairly grabbed them from me and I felt a sudden sense of loss. I hadn’t actually read any of them properly yet.

“So when did this happen, the change in management?” I asked.

“Last week,” she said. She was leafing through the books she’d taken from me and initially didn’t even look up.

“David!” she suddenly called, towards the back of the library.

Then finally she met my eyes.

“It was about time, to be honest,” she said. “The previous management team had allowed the library to degenerate. There were a number of irregularities.”

“Irregularities?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Procedure, customer care, health and safety. Inappropriate reading choices.”

“Inappropriate? In what way?”

The woman had now been joined by a young man with neatly-combed dark hair, a retro-chic sleeveless sweater and heavy-rimmed glasses. This was presumably David.

“Well,” she said, half turning towards her colleague to solicit his involvement. “There were books here that were, quite frankly, far from being a good match to the progressive ethos of the library.”

“Indeed Susan,” said David. “I think it’s fair to say that there were books on the shelves that should never have been offered to our public.”

I couldn’t quite place his accent. It could have been Irish, but there was a hint of something else there. Canadian, perhaps?

“But what sort of thing?”

“Inappropriate books,” said Susan. “Books that were culturally insensitive, divisive, that perpetuated discriminatory stereotyping...”

“Reactionary books, basically,” said David. “Elitist books. Books that simply have no place in a project dedicated to social emancipation. We

aim to provide a safe space for the enjoyment of appropriate reading matter.”

He gestured at the little heap of books I had just returned, which were now sitting on the computer table.

“Take these books,” he said. “When a customer brought them in this morning, I frankly felt obliged to apologise to him for having made them available. Worse still, it seems these...” he waved his hand dismissively at the volumes... “... these *items* were more or less recommended to him by the previous staff and...”

“Wait,” Susan was saying. “David, no, these are different books. These are the books this gentleman has just brought back. I was going to ask you about them...”

“Oh,” said David with furrowed forehead and looked through them more thoroughly.

“But I don’t understand,” he said at length. “These are the exact same books the guy brought in earlier...”

I understood all too well. It was Henry! The little bastard was back up in Edinburgh. I was back on the trail!



“A reading group,” I said, suddenly inspired. I didn’t want these people to know anything about me or what I was doing. “I’m part of an online reading group. We recently got a new list of books. You can actually access them online, as e-books, but I prefer the old-fashioned hard copies, so I came here. Someone else must have had the same idea, I suppose.”

“Ah yes, it must be that,” said Susan, who seemed happy with this explanation.

David was less convinced, maybe because of his memory of Henry having said the titles had been recommended to him by Frank and Frasier.

He raised his eyebrows. “I have to say, it’s a strange selection! Chinese mysticism, nature obsession, a discredited German artist, superseded theories about culture... What sort of reading group is this, if I may ask?”

I chose not to answer that question. Instead I asked about the books themselves.

“So you won’t be putting these back on the shelves?”

“Well,” said David. “I have had a chance to consult our database since the other guy came in

this morning and...”

“Database?”

“Yeah, well we have access to a database from the International Collective of Progressive Librarians, which is pretty much comprehensive and rates each title in terms of suitability. Suitability for progressive libraries, that is.”

“And these weren’t... suitable?”

“Well, no. They weren’t.”

“And so what will you do with them if they’re not going back on display? Are you going to be putting them in the archives, waiting for the day when progressive attitudes find them of interest again? There’s certainly plenty of room down there from what I’ve heard!”

David and Susan exchanged glances.

“There aren’t any archives any more,” said Susan. “That was one of the major health and safety issues, to be honest. We had to have them bricked up.”

“So what do you do with the books that you don’t want on the shelves here?”

“Rest assured they’ll be disposed of safely,” said David rather smugly and started to gather up the volumes in front of him.

The blood rushed to my head. I stepped forward and grabbed hold of them, forcing his hands out of the way as I did so.

“Excuse me!” shouted David. He looked as if he wanted to call the police.

“Careful Jon!” said Jennifer. I paused and became aware of the whirring of a ventilation fan behind me.

“Sorry,” I said, realising I should defuse the situation a little. “Sorry, but I’ve changed my mind. I think I’ll hang on to these for a while.”

I stuffed them back into my bag and headed for the front door.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll bring them back next time. When I come to register!”

This would have been the perfect moment to have flounced out of the building, but suddenly I recalled the other time I’d been here. That last-minute hesitation, that final search for a clue that had led me to the Smash the WF! flyer. I

looked around. The leaflet table was gone. I couldn't even see any posters on the walls. Except... except for this one!

“Literature and the Values of Democracy. A talk by David Bloodworth of the Edinburgh Collective of Progressive Librarians.”

“I'm afraid you've missed that one,” said David's voice behind me. “It was last night.”

I checked the date. He was right, obviously. But there had to be a clue here somewhere! My instinct told me there had to be a clue!

“Lothian Festival of Democratic Values”. It was written at the bottom of the poster. Maybe it was still going on. Maybe Henry was going to be there. I had to keep hoping, keep the faith. I had nothing else to go on.

A desperate thought leapt into my mind and I turned back towards David and Susan.

“The previous team here at the library, Frank and Frasier. I don't suppose you'd know how I could get hold of them, do you?”

They shook their heads in unison, like a pair of robots.

“No,” said Susan. “We have no information on that. They no longer have any connection with the library.”

“Right,” I said, and as I slammed the front door shut behind me I imagined Frank and Frasier walled up in the storerooms beyond the back of the building, no longer connected with the library and hammering furiously on the dank stone walls begging to be allowed once more to see the light of day and share their knowledge with the outside world.

I’d confessed to Callum that I still had his spare keys and we’d agreed that I’d let myself in and wait for him to get back from the *edinSpire* offices. I was amused, on opening the front door, to see that the pile of post on the floor included an envelope decorated with the same ugly blue-arrow logo as the key fob in my hand. A bill from the courier service. Or the dry cleaner’s.

The laptop was where I had left it and before I did anything else I checked to see if I had any emails – from Anahid, Simon or Mat. Or even Henry, perhaps – although it now seemed rather unlikely he would ever be getting back to me! There was nothing, apart from the usual rubbish. Vicars and Tarts at the garden centre and Liquid Compost at the Frog and Princess.

I searched for the Lothian Festival of Democratic Values. It came up straight away and I found myself looking at a pdf listing the programme. Most of the events seemed to have taken place already, I noticed, scrolling through.

Some woman from *The Guardian* had come up to talk about maintaining standards of journalism in the face of increasing public distrust of the media.

Two academics had staged a marathon five-hour interactive workshop explaining how the latest technological breakthroughs could widen involvement in the democratic processes.

A well-known playwright had spoken about the role of community theatre initiatives in conveying progressive Western values to areas with a high concentration of ethnic minorities.

A senior diplomat from the US Consulate in Edinburgh had delivered a lecture explaining how America had helped make the world a better place by pushing international agreements on arms control.

I certainly hadn't missed anything of interest there!

My phone rang from my bag near the door. Probably Callum, checking if I'd got here yet.

I hurriedly pulled it out of the side pocket and managed to catch him before it switched to answerphone.

But no, it was Simon, down in Worthing, sounding a little over-excited.

"Sorry, what?" I said, having failed to grasp any of what he was trying to tell me.

"It's Goring. Richard Goring. They've started on him now!"

"What do you mean? Who's 'they' anyway?"

It wasn't a "they" so much as a "he", I was thinking, although I hadn't had the chance to tell Simon about the Henry realisation.

"The people behind this! Whoever it is that has been having a go at me online! They've worked out my connection to the Richard Goring Society – well, it's not too difficult, really – and they've been saying stuff about him, to get at me."

"What sort of stuff?"

“Listen, I’ll read you a bit. ‘Why are you so keen to promote that Victorian misogynist and rapist Richard Goring? With all your expertise on his life and works, I can’t believe you didn’t know that in 1889 he was arrested for raping and murdering a fisherman’s daughter in Tarring and some people here even thought he was the actual Jack the Ripper. He was notorious in the town for ill-treating his wife, consorting with prostitutes and forcing himself on vulnerable women. By the time of his death he was shunned by pretty much everyone in Worthing. But for scum like you he’s some kind of hero?! You’re as warped as he is!’”

“But...” I said, trying to get my head around all this. “... is it true?”

“For fuck’s sake Jon, no of course it’s not true! Nothing about Richard Goring is true, apart from when he was born and when he died. There’s nothing about him anywhere – I should know, I looked hard enough.”

Yes. I’d been a bit slow there. But I intended to make up for it.

“So Simon,” I said. “You’re upset because this person is inventing their own made-up version of Richard Goring’s life, rather than going along



with the one you and Mike cooked up?”

He grunted. I could imagine his face contorted into a strange grimace.

“Well, yes, I suppose so. You could say they’re playing me at my own game, but the point is that they’re still at it. They’re serious! And we think we know who’s behind it all!”

“We?”

“Me and Anahid. We’ve been in touch, swapping notes. We did some sniffing around about the site that ran the article on her. And we looked through the profiles of the people that have been slagging me off – people they’re connected with, links they share. There’s one name that keeps coming up time and time again – the Transatlantic Alliance for Freedom.”

“Never heard of them!” I said and tapped the name one-handed into the search box.

When their home page sprang into view I nearly dropped my phone in surprise. There, next to the name of the organisation, was the now-familiar blue arrow logo from Callum’s key fob.

I told Simon I would ring him back and dashed

out to the hallway, leaping like an agile young gazelle over my rucksack, which I had left slumped in the doorway to the lounge.

It had been many years since I had steamed open somebody else's post – a certain letter addressed to my father on the subject of unexplained absences from school would have been the last occasion, I reckoned – but the technique happily still worked in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The envelope eased open and inside was a single sheet of paper headed with the same logo and the name in full, the Transatlantic Alliance for Freedom.

“Dear Member,” it began.

Blimey! Callum was a member of the outfit that Simon and Anahid thought was targeting them? My head was spinning.

“We are pleased to report that there are still a few places left for the TAF presentation on contemporary threats to democracy, originally reserved for Executive Associates only.

“This event, of course, remains a private meeting, even though we consider it a key part of our Lothian Festival of Democratic Values.”

Our? They were the organisers of the festival?

I literally ran back to the lounge, trying to continue reading the letter as I went. Unfortunately, this meant I didn't spot my rucksack in the doorway and I went flying across the room and ended up sprawled on the rug, my head just inches from the hard rim of the coffee table.

I stayed completely still for a moment, double-checking that I was alive and intact, if a little shaky.

I picked up the letter from where it had fluttered and then went back to the laptop. Yep, there it was at the bottom of the pdf on my screen. "Hosted by the Transatlantic Alliance for Freedom in partnership with the Caledonian Cultural Forum, the Lothian 2100 Initiative..."

Weren't they the people that had funded Callum's magazine?

"... British Council for the Advancement of Culture, the European Arts Commission and..."

I gasped out loud.

"... our sister organization, The Kitson Institute

for Democracy.”

That was KID. The organisation that Henry was working for. The organisation that had sent him off to research left-wing groups in the interests of broadening his horizons. And they were involved with smearing Anahid and Simon?

Ah. Hold on. Maybe that was the connection! Maybe *Henry* was the connection. He worked for KID, which was linked with TAF, so perhaps his own online interventions were showing up just that. It wasn't these groups that were up to something dodgy, it was just one particular intern.

I turned back to the letter. Where was I?

“This event, of course, remains a private meeting, blah blah blah...”

“There will be no media or unauthorised persons present, in order to preserve the confidentiality of this important discussion. If you wish to reserve a place for yourself and one named guest, please contact Sheila, our event secretary, as soon as possible.”

Underneath there was a summary of the theme of the presentation.

“In today’s unstable political climate, Western norms are coming under threat as never before. On the economic level, small-minded protectionism is menacing the prosperity guaranteed by international trading agreements. On the political level, populist xenophobia risks spilling out into resentment against the larger global liberal consensus and the democracy it enshrines and protects. And on the cultural level, too, there are disturbing signs of a rejection of the fundamental transatlantic values we all cherish. Experts from TAF and the Kitson Institute of Democracy report on an alarming new wave of extremist ideology, which combines a visceral hatred of Western democracy and technological advancement with obscure, irrational and often mystic beliefs centred around the dangerously reactionary concept of ‘organic’ society, of a utopian ‘Asha’ in whose name the protective framework of international order is to be swept violently away. How can these ideas be countered? What narratives can be built to protect our world from their furious and destructive insanity?”

Asha! They’d mentioned Asha! That was why Henry had been searching for it on the internet in the first place! It was nothing to do with the Indian takeaway. It was his homework project. So had that been his job – to follow a trail of

people promoting certain ideas? And the smears campaign? Judging from what I had just read, with its talk of countering ideas and promoting narratives, that wasn't young Henry acting on his own right-wing initiative. The whole organisation was involved, which was a much better fit with the level of disinformation that had been unleashed.

I eased back onto the sofa for a moment. I had to get this straight. There was still so much I didn't understand! The whole disappearance phenomenon was looking increasingly strange. Callum was a member of TAF, for Christ's sake! He knew what they were all about. He knew Henry was working for KID and that KID was more or less the same thing as TAF. So why had Henry had to break off all connections with his father for this particular operation? Did he think Callum wouldn't approve of smearing people, perhaps? Or was he simply sworn to secrecy by his employers?

And these experts who were giving the talk – was Henry one of them? Was that why he was back in Edinburgh?

I hadn't liked Henry when I'd thought he was a lone-wolf right-winger using his job for his own purposes. Now that I knew the nature of the

people he was working for, I liked him even less. He had shifted from dangerous hothead to cold, calculating robot.

I looked back at the letter to check the date of the meeting. May 3. That was tonight! In about four hours' time, in fact.

Obviously I had to go to the meeting. I rang Sheila at TAF on Callum's landline, spoke in my best Callum voice and asked for seats for him and a guest at that evening's event.

"Name, please!" she said.

"Sorry?"

"The name of your guest, please, Mr Kennedy."

"Oh. It's Goring. Richard Goring."

Damn. Why had I said that? It was the first name that had leapt into my head, but they knew all about Richard Goring! As far as TAF was concerned I was a notorious Sussex rapist and murderer who must now be round about 170 years old. Or, even worse from their point of view, someone who knew who Richard Goring really was. Should have been? Could have been? Wasn't.

The next thing I had to do was get out of the flat and remove all evidence of my having been there. I emptied the kettle, wiped around the sink, smoothed out the crumpled rug, put Henry's letter in my bag and was about to let myself out, when an urgent thought occurred.

Did I have time? Probably. And I desperately wanted to know this thing.

The laptop went back on and I went straight to TAF's site and typed the words I was looking for into its convenient in-house search function.

Three results came up and I opened the first one. It was the report of a Progressive Politics conference staged last year by TAF at somewhere called Geras Manor in Northamptonshire. There was a long list of participants from a range of think-tanks, NGOs, middle-of-the-road campaign groups and official organisations, such as the European Commission and NATO. There were also a number of journalists present, including – there it was! – Callum Kennedy, Chief Editorial Executive of *edinSpire*. Also listed was a certain Ornella Mueller from *Liberty and Revolt*, the ultra-radical comrades who had condemned the Smash the WF! mobilisation for its “reactionary elitism”.



I didn't need to look at the other two links. I had what I wanted.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I walked back into town across the Meadows and found myself heading for Princes Street Gardens, the city-centre park which nestles under the Castle Rock and lies between Edinburgh's principal consumer-zone and the railway line heading west out of Waverley.

There was a stout middle-aged man in a kilt playing the bagpipes beside the neo-Gothic Scott Monument. It may have just been a performance for the tourists, but the raw strength and soul of this ancient, primal, instrument never failed to send pulses of electricity through my body.

I sat down on a nearby park bench, immediately attracting the attention of a couple of squirrels, and called Simon to update him on what I had found. Well, some of it. I didn't say anything about Callum's involvement with TAF, because I hadn't worked through the implications. And I didn't tell Simon about the meeting I was going

to. That could wait.

I was relieved to hear from him that Anahid had realised I wasn't responsible for the article attacking her. But he added that she was "totally furious" about what had happened. I wondered if he was exaggerating – I couldn't really imagine any provocation disturbing the deep calm of her home amidst the forests and peaks of Occitania.

I had envisaged staying in the gardens until it was time for the event, but I hadn't reckoned with the coldness of the North Sea breeze and soon found myself in a cosy little bar off St Andrew Square, not too far from the TAF offices in George Street.

I sat down in an alcove next to a stained glass window with a nice peaty single malt and pulled a book out of my rucksack. I might as well take advantage of the fact that I had kept hold of them and help myself to a bit more of their content.

It was Joseph Beuys. I looked at the photo of his face on the cover. The character assassination had done its work, even on me. I couldn't keep out of my mind the image of him as an adolescent Nazi, saluting the Fuhrer alongside thousands of other ferocious Aryan youths, even

though I knew this said nothing about what he had made of his adult life. I opened up a page by chance, in the usual manner.

“Freedom is something positive after all, a concept of production, not something arbitrary. It isn’t, let’s say, a relief from responsibility. On the contrary, the concept of freedom burdens human beings with full responsibility. It is human beings who must now act out of their own freedom and responsibility.”

Freedom as responsibility. Wasn’t that what Simon had been talking about in the pub the other night? The responsibility to clear away falsity and restore Asha?

I pondered over this. I had always had a strong sense of responsibility, it seemed to me. I felt whether something was right or wrong and I tried to act on that. I didn’t necessarily always succeed, but I made the effort. Or rather, I didn’t need to make an effort! That was closer to the truth. It was doing what came naturally to me. If I had to force myself to do something that I felt deep down wasn’t quite right, for some pragmatic reason, *that* would involve making an effort. So that was Beuys’ freedom. The freedom to do things your own way, according to your own inclinations, which actually turns out to be the

same thing as doing the right thing. If you are guided by a sense of right and wrong, of social good. If you accept the responsibility of allowing yourself to be that way.

As I thought about all this, a peculiar sensation came over me. I felt as if I had become partly separated from myself, as if I was observing myself from the outside. It wasn't one of those out-of-body experiences you hear about – I was still very much sitting at the little pub table, one hand on my glass of whisky and the other holding open the book. But, at the same time, I was looking down on myself, judging myself from a short distance.

I saw how, for me, it was not as simple as allowing myself to act according to my own inclinations, however much I might like the idea. I saw how my sense of responsibility could be very evident on an abstract level – with my journalism or my political opinions – but tended to be overwhelmed at moments of personal, physical, psychological crisis by what was pretty much its direct opposite. I would become defensive to the point of being aggressive, drowning out the hurt and fear inside by lashing out with words and gestures that caused hurt and fear in others, then hiding from myself the truth of how I had been. I would tell myself that

it was that person's fault, not mine, that I had simply overstepped the mark a little, that I had no underlying problem.

As I gazed down on this sorry solitary individual with his bald patch, slumped posture and obligatory alcoholic crutch, I realised that he could never taste real freedom, real inner freedom, without accepting the ultimate responsibility – the responsibility for his own words, his own actions, his own real, everyday life. And that wasn't just retrospective responsibility. It was all too easy to regret something already done, to apologise for something already said, and move on to the next unfortunate outburst. This person, this middle-aged clown bumbling towards the end of his chaotic and irrelevant existence, had to accept responsibility in the now, at this very moment, in every single moment that he experienced, one after another after another. He had to accept the responsibility of being *present*.

I merged back into myself, sat up straight and emptied my glass. I was ready to head for this meeting but, as a glance at the old brass clock behind the bar told me, it wasn't nearly time yet. It was cold outside so I might as well stay here. In the circumstances, I felt I had a certain moral responsibility to sample another single malt and

I generously allowed myself the freedom to do so.

In the event, I managed to get slightly lost coming out of the bar and arrived at the venue at almost the last minute. As soon as I saw the little queue of people filtering into the front entrance of the imposing neo-classical building, I realised that I was going to stand out like a sore thumb in my old jacket and jeans. I hadn't thought of this, although there wasn't much I could have done about it anyway. In any case, it wasn't just the suits, ties, woollen coats, fashionable dresses and nauseating perfumes of the attendees that set them apart from me. There was something about their faces, the way they held themselves, that seemed entirely alien. Take that chap over there. He was probably the same age as me. He was balding, like me, and also had grey hair. We even shared the same fairly portly build. But if I had stolen his clothes and tried to pretend to be him, nobody would have fallen for it for a minute. There was something intangible about him that said chief executive. President. Family patriarch. Head honcho in every situation he found himself in. He was solid. Unassailable. He oozed power. I glanced at a woman to my side. She was younger than me, there was no doubt. But I felt like a child next to her. And she was the unapproachable, unknowable headmistress.

What was it, exactly? The way she moved? The way she talked? Or was it all in the eyes? I tried to conduct a quick ocular survey. It was difficult to say for sure. They weren't all as dead-gazed as the headmistress. There was the odd twinkle here and there. A sense of humour. Evident warmth for the person they were talking to. But, somehow, behind that surface there was something cold, hostile, a little inhuman...

I told myself to snap out of it. I was projecting on to them exactly what I expected to find.

At the door, I introduced myself as Callum Kennedy's guest Richard Goring and explained that he was running a little late and would be along shortly. All was fine – my name was on the list and the large gentleman who searched my rucksack found nothing suspicious in my spare underwear, my reading matter or, fortunately, in my reporters' notepad, which I was hoping to surreptitiously start using once the talk had begun, despite the ban on journalists. I was even given a little plastic-covered name badge to pin to my shabby jacket.

The hall was full – there must have been a hundred people there – and I slipped in to the first empty seat I came across. At the front was a busy little huddle which presumably included the



speakers. From what I could make out, they didn't seem to include Henry. I turned round and tried to scan the rest of the faces in the audience, but couldn't see much beyond the solid couple behind me, who seemed immensely offended that I had so much as dared to look in their general direction.

I felt a bit ill, now. Maybe it was nerves, but there was also something unbreathable in the air. The stifling smell of air conditioning, of plastic, of carpet glue, of after-shave, cleaning fluids and static electricity.

Shortly, three people – two men and one woman – broke away from the huddle and headed towards the speakers' table on the low stage.

The woman, who seemed to hail from California, was chairing the meeting and, as she made her introductory announcements, I surreptitiously slipped my notebook out of my bag and poised my biro ready for action.

"2 spkrs," I noted, in my own very special mix of shorthand and longhand. "Brian Heath, TAF + Jamie Harris. KID. 3 yr probe. Working w US State Dept, MIT, EU."

Heath stood up to speak. A fair-haired young

man, with a light beard and glasses. He could have been a postgrad maths student. Or a computer programmer. I thought he probably came from Texas, or somewhere like that.

His special subject was environmentalism. He started off paying lip service to the importance of balancing economic growth with sustainable practices, of ensuring the well-being of human and animal communities, so on and so forth. Responsible environmental organisations acted as crucial watchdogs that reminded the authorities and industry of their responsibilities. While TAF did not always agree with their positions, they recognised the role they played, etcetera, etcetera.

Then he moved on to the substance of his talk. Unfortunately, there was always a fringe of green protesters who took things too far, who refused to play by the rules. He talked about “eco-terrorists” in the USA and “hardcore” environmentalists in Europe, such as 1990s road protesters in the UK, a mobilisation against a high-speed rail line in Italy, a protest camp against an airport in France, another against mining in Germany. More recently, the “worst” instance of these campaigns was the anti-fracking movement in the UK. The dangers of these extremists’ illegal direct action were well

known, he said, as was the “Luddite” ideology that inspired them. But lately things had taken a turn for the worse. These groups were starting to develop a common ideology, aided by the exchange of news and views made possible by the internet. They were borrowing ideas from campaigners on the other side of the world and incorporating them into their own rhetoric. They were increasingly identifying the enemy not just as their local government, or business, but as something they termed “the industrial capitalist system”. Up against this, they were piecing together their own counter-position. They had taken the idea of “sacred land” from indigenous struggles in North America, Australia and elsewhere and were applying it to their own sites. The use of direct action was turning into an *ideology* of direct action, an anarchist contempt for the rule of law and the due democratic process. French and German groups had fed into the mix the idea of “degrowth”, which rejected the very fundamentals of our society – the idea of progress, economic growth and increased prosperity for humankind.

I wrote down a complete quote at this point. “Let’s be clear, these people are negationists. They are guilty of progress denial. And I would suggest that this brand of negationism should be treated as seriously as the other one of which we

are all too well aware. Because that's where it ends, ultimately. It all ends at the same place. The destruction of civilization. The deaths of millions of men, women and children in the name of fanaticism."

There was a great burst of applause across the room at this point. Having established his moral high ground, Heath went on to spell out the particular form this Eco-Terrorist Apocalypse would take, which seemed to involve mainly a drop in the profits of "important wealth-creating institutions", faced with increased grassroots resistance to their projects and falling levels of consumption as the "poison" of anti-growth views contaminated the population.

His conclusion? More research was badly needed. More funding for more research, to pay people like him, was badly needed. More awareness among lawmakers of the level of the menace was badly needed. Here in Scotland, Jim Murphy of the Labour Party had courageously led the way in combating the new populist threats to democracy, but "The Centre" as an international whole needed to take the initiative in halting the drift towards extremism of all kinds. More "counter-disinformation" to thwart enemy propaganda was urgently required.

I put down my pen and moved my fingers around a bit as the applause again rang out. I had found his views highly disagreeable, but had been too busy writing them down to be emotionally affected.

The same was not true of the second speaker, Jamie Harris of KID, a tall, aloof-looking man in his late forties with a mop of greying dark hair.

Looking back at my notes of his talk, I see that they quickly degenerate into a series of scrawls, exclamation marks and angry notes to myself. “WTF!” “BOLLOX” and, even, “cunt!” But much of what he says remains ingrained in my mind.

The central plank of his thesis, if you can call it that, was that there was something very bad in the world called Nature Mysticism. This had been invented in the 1920s by Adolf Hitler and his friends and was the ideological justification for their murderous activities. Because the Nazis had sometimes used words like “nature”, “organic” or “*Ganzheit*” – wholeness – everyone who had subsequently used the same terms was either an actual Nazi or hovering, in Harris’s favourite term, on the edge of a “slippery slope” towards Nazism.

Harris was winding me up with every sentence

he uttered. I knew that it wasn't just what he was saying, it was the way he was saying it, it was who he was. I think I'm enough of an internationalist not to allow myself to be prejudiced against someone on account of their accent. Whether they were from Melbourne or Mumbai, Jaffa or Jakarta, I reckon I would be able to address the content of what they were saying without being distracted by the sounds with which they were saying it.

But, as an Englishman of humble origin, the one accent I cannot tolerate is that of the ruling class of my own country. Harris was delivering his lecture in the sneering, superior tones of a public school product, of a proud member of that privately-educated elite whose absolute lifelong sense of entitlement blinds them even to the existence of people and ideas outside their closeted, comfortable world of privilege.

He was talking about anarchism now, that "simple-minded Utopian drivel" that imagined it could ever be possible to do away with the safeguards of advanced modern society without unleashing the forces of barbarity and chaos.

I could see where this was going. Empty-headed and naïve anarchists might imagine themselves to represent the opposite of fascism, he said, and

often indeed termed themselves anti-fascist, but in fact “their irresponsible contempt for democracy, their embrace of populist rhetoric, their appeal to the masses’ lowest instincts...” – it was hard to listen to this Eton toff spitting his disdain for the plebs – “... has much in common with the hatred peddled by National Socialists in Germany between the wars and all that it brought with it.”

In fact, Harris declared triumphantly, anarchism represented nothing less than, wait for it, “the slippery slope to the nihilistic brutality of fascism”.

Earnest and enthusiastic applause from the Executive Associates, members and guests of the Transatlantic Alliance for Freedom. Apart from one, obviously, who was doing his best not to stand up and scream abuse at the speaker. Was he really trying to say that anarchism and fascism were the same thing?

But Harris hadn’t finished there. Oh no. He now made the link between anarchism’s fascistic brutality and its embrace of the sinister and equally fascistic Nature Mysticism which he had addressed at the beginning of his presentation.

The key figure here was the infamous Russian

propagandist Peter Kropotkin.

“*Prince* Kropotkin, in fact, so hardly a downtrodden and exploited horny hand of the soil, ladies and gentlemen!” he smarmed, eliciting great guffaws of appreciation from behind me.

I so much wanted to rush the stage and smash his face in.

Stay calm, I told myself. Take responsibility. Be in the moment.

Kropotkin had developed the evolutionary theory of “mutual aid”, which, according to a contemporary Dutch author by the name of Mathijs Z. Jansen – here Harris placed comic emphasis on the Z in Mat’s name, raising a gratifying titter from the audience – amounted to a law of “natural solidarity”, which ruled that humans and animals alike could live together in a condition of idealistic anarchy, harmoniously and peacefully.

“Now you may well think, ladies and gentlemen, that this vision, for all its impracticality, at least has the merit of being pleasant,” said Harris.

What was he up to?



“You may well may come away with the view that this Mathijs Z. Jansen...” Unbelievably, he did the Z thing again. And unbelievably, it got another laugh.

“... is basically a decent chap. His heart’s in the right place, so to speak, even if his brain has taken a very long stroll in la-la land!”

Ha, ha, ha. They were loving this.

“I myself was of the same opinion until, unfortunately...”

Harris whipped a piece of paper from the inside pocket of his dinner jacket.

“... I came, quite by chance, across this news item in yesterday’s *Times*.”

He took a pair of reading glasses from the desk in front of him and proceeded to theatrically pretend to read the article.

“It seems that this very same Mathijs Jansen is a member of the Black Commune terror organisation that has been causing chaos in London this week, that he was hiding out in an extremist squat that had to be cleared by the authorities and that he was arrested for

attacking a British police officer with a large knife!”

There were gasps of shock around the hall. The comedy warm-up was over. This was the hard sell.

I don't know how I held myself back from saying or doing something, from disrupting this grotesque performance in some way. But I knew that was not what I was there for. I had to be cultured like Powys, and not simply a madman. I had to take on Beuys' responsibility. I had to hold on to my primal strength and be Chuang Tzu's lone brave knight.

On and on he went, this wretched distorter of the truth. It was an obvious leap from Kropotkin's organic anarchism to Anahid's patterns of nature within – a leap that Henry Kennedy had helped Harris make, perhaps?

Inevitably, he rehashed the smears against Anahid and Beuys, all of this tying together very neatly to support his central doublethink contention that black = white, that anarchism = fascism.

He said the mystical element of extremist ideology was cropping up again in its new 21<sup>st</sup>

century incarnation. Certain eccentrics on the fringe of the movement, people who subscribed to a so-called “organic radicalism”, were starting to dig up the archaic Zoroastrian concept of Asha and present it as a kind of abstract cosmic glue that invisibly held the world together and guaranteed that their daydream utopian society would really work. In “their simple little minds”, Asha was the magic spell that would make sure that smashing to pieces everything we held dear today would not, in fact, result in a descent to ignorance, violence and sordid barbarity.

“Anarchists, or fascists as we might equally well term them on the basis of what we have discovered, are very fond of claiming that this imaginary society of theirs somehow already exists, in the form of a potential, a reality-in-waiting, which will miraculously spring into place once they have reduced our current civilization to rubble. ‘Another world is possible,’ they tell us.

“Well, I’ve got some news for them, that I’d like to share with you this evening. Their childish anarchist world is, in fact, *impossible!* Why? Because all the concepts they’ve constructed to make it sound viable are nothing but empty fantasies. Ladies and gentlemen, it’s time to be blunt. There’s no such thing as ‘mutual aid!’

There's no such thing as 'natural solidarity'!  
There's no such thing as a 'social organism'!  
There's no such place as Utopia! There's no such  
place as Asha!"

The audience were applauding, some even cheering, and half of me hovered a few feet over my chair, watching the rest of myself stay present.

The chair was asking for questions and my hand was up like a shot.

She pointed me out and an assistant brought over a microphone for me to speak into. Already I had reaped the benefit of having kept my mouth shut this far.

"I would like to..." I began.

"Sorry Sir, could you give us your name please?"

"Err..."

Oh fuck, what was it? I resisted the temptation to look down at my name badge.

"Goring!" I declared after an agonising second or two, with perhaps over-obvious relief. "My name is Richard Goring. What I would like to ask Mr

Harris is how he would answer critics who might say that KID, and TAF for that matter, are not the objective observers of the radical political scene that they say they are. These critics might suggest, for instance, that the democratic values you and your colleagues claim to uphold are nothing but a front for certain specific geopolitical and commercial interests and that in apparently countering what you call the disinformation put out by your opponents...”

The chair was looking worried and turned towards Harris. She evidently wanted to cut me off but Harris gestured to show that I should be allowed to finish. He was self-confident enough to cope with any kind of challenge.

“... you are in fact creating disinformation yourselves, smears if you like, aimed at disrupting the free expression of opinion and participation in the social discussion that you claim to defend and...”

The chair had heard enough “Thank you, yes, I think you’ve made your...”

“... how would you answer critics who said that KID and TAF are nothing more than a kind of neoliberal thought police, tasked with tracking down and destroying anyone who dares stand up

to US global corporate domination...”

The last bit was probably heard by nobody apart from my neighbours, because the microphone had been wrestled away from me. Also, boos and angry mutterings were echoing around the hall.

“No, no,” Harris was telling the chair. “I’m happy to answer that, there’s no problem.”

“Thank you, Mr.. umm...”

The chair whispered something.

“Mr Goring. Thank you for asking a question which in so many ways helpfully confirms the substance of what I was addressing in my talk...”

People were laughing. I was clearly a complete nutter, that was the joke.

“I’m not sure quite where I might find these critics of yours, Mr Goring, unless they are hiding somewhere in this very room...”

He made a comical mime of scouring the room for critics, being careful not to look in my direction. Which was the point. More chuckling.

“I’m sure they exist,” he said. “But just not here.

In a parallel world perhaps. In the land of Asha?"

Chortle, chortle.

"As for your question, asking me what I would say to such critics, the answer, in short, is nothing."

He paused for dramatic effect.

"Because if there's one thing that life's taught me it's that it's a complete waste of time talking to conspiracy theorists!"

Now he was having to talk over the audience's applause.

"They just won't listen," he was saying, placing his hands beside his ears. "It's part of their condition. They refuse to hear anything that doesn't fit in with their paranoid delusions!"

I had noticed that the security staff had moved close to me and were watching me warily. They were ready to move if I tried to speak again, but for the moment the tension provoked by my question had been broken, the jolly consensus restored and the chair was ready to carry on with the show.

The chair had evidently spotted someone she recognised, somebody safe. She was smiling broadly and telling the microphone bearer where to go next.

“That young man at the back,” she was saying.

I didn’t turn round. I didn’t want to see their smug ugly faces.

“Could you tell us your name?” she said. “And what you do, perhaps?”

“Yes, sure, Claire,” said the voice of an educated young Scotsman. They did know each other, then.

“My name’s Henry Kennedy and I’ve been working on a research project for the Kitson Institute of Democracy.”

I turned round so fast my neck nearly snapped and then I had to half-stand to see past the couple behind. They looked like they wanted to kill me.

Yes, there he was! It was Henry, all right. He was immediately recognisable as a stretched-out, thicker-built, squarer-jawed version of the lad I’d played football with all those years ago. And now



he was with this lot! Sickening.

“I’ve actually been involved in a lot of the ground research that Mr Harris has been referring to this evening,” he was saying.

Yeah, too fucking right you have, mate.

“I have to say I was a little surprised that some of the information I have gathered made it into the presentation, as it’s very recent and... I hadn’t intended for it to go public at this stage.”

They were looking a bit perturbed on the platform.

“But what I’d like to say with regard to the first question is that from my experience working with KID since I left university...”

Oh right. He was joining in the lynching.

“... I have increasingly come to the conclusion that it is indeed the case that KID’s aims are profoundly hostile to anything that might genuinely be termed democracy and that its work is aimed solely at protecting the interests of the United States of America and the network of businesses, financial institutions and...”

Pandemonium in the room! I felt like whooping for joy!

The microphone had been ripped away from Henry – Henry the Hero! – and a phalanx of bulky men in suits were surrounding him. I leapt fully to my feet, barged past anyone in my way to reach the scrum and almost immediately found myself being dragged back by one of the security men. Someone had taken a tumble. A chair went crashing. The sound system screeched feedback. A woman was screaming. It was the headmistress! She wasn't so cold and composed now! As the security guard span me round and propelled me towards the door, I saw Harris, Heath and Claire the Chair scurrying towards a side entrance. Everyone was streaming out. The meeting was over. Another evening was possible!

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“But what I still don’t understand,” I was saying to Henry as we crossed the Meadows, “is what you meant about them using the results of your research before you were ready to go public.”

We were moving at a fair pace because it was starting to rain. And also, perhaps, because we wanted to put as much distance as possible between us and the Transatlantic Association for Freedom. I’d been relieved that Henry had ended up on the pavement outside with me, rather than being whisked away in a blacked-out limo for the next direct flight to Guantanamo Bay. And delighted that he’d agreed to sit down in a pub somewhere and explain to me exactly what had been going on.

“So I hadn’t actually told them about anything I’ve been doing for the last few weeks. I never handed in a report. I was never going to hand in a report!”

“But you were still working for them, when you met Mat in London, when you were in France, in Worthing?”

“Aye, officially I was working for them. I’d never said I wasn’t, put it that way. But in my head I’d gone beyond that. I’d seen through what they were doing. I was on my own mission to get to the truth of it all.”

I had been half a pace ahead of the young man – maybe I was in more of a hurry than him to get to the pub. But now I stopped still and faced him.

“So how did they know, Henry? How did they know all about everyone you met if you didn’t tell them anything about it?”

Henry took his smartphone out of his coat pocket.

“That was stupid of me,” he said. “You just get to depend on the thing. But now the time has certainly come.”

He leant down and dropped it through the grating of a drain at the side of the path.

“Do you mean,” I asked, as we started moving again, “that KID or TAD have the capacity to

track your phone and listen to your conversations?”

“Not them as such,” he said. “But some very close friends of theirs, that’s for sure!”

I remembered my meeting with Mouse in Brixton and removed the battery from my own phone.

As we walked, Henry explained to me that he had started off in good faith, intending to look into the world of radical political ideology for his KID project, and thus reporting back to them.

But the more he heard, and read, the more he had realised that these were ideas that appealed to him, that he was discovering a vision of the world that seemed more true to him than the bureaucratic “Centrism” of KID.

“It happened rather fast, though, Henry,” I said. “Surely you can’t have changed your mind virtually overnight on the basis of a handful of conversations and few pages from some books?”

“Yes, it was quite fast I suppose,” he said. “And I’ve wondered about that myself. I think, in truth, those ideas were already inside me and waiting to be... activated. Sometimes you hear something being said and you just *know* that it’s

right, that this was what you yourself had always thought but you'd just not got round to expressing. So in a way it wasn't fast, it was slow. These ideas have taken the whole of my life to take shape inside me, but they were waiting for the right moment, the right conditions, to hatch out of their shell."

He slowed down and looked at me with great earnestness. What clarity, what light, we can sometimes glimpse in the clean fresh eyes of young human being! I must have been like that once, before my windows on the world became jaded and polluted by the impurity of existence.

"It may not seem very rational, I know," Henry told me. "Nothing that I've done seems very rational. But I'm not that sort of person. I like to follow my instincts."

I thought about that, as we headed up towards a bar in Newington, close to where Henry was staying in a little B&B. And I wondered if that was why Callum had thought of me, in the first place, to hunt down Henry. He knew the lad operated by instinct rather than reason, so who better to find him than someone whose mind worked the same way.

The whole Callum angle had still to be

addressed, and I finally broached the matter once we were inside the bar with pints in hand.

“So why did you do that disappearing act on your father?” I asked. “Why couldn’t you have told him what you were doing, if, at that stage anyway, it was just part of your work for KID?”

Henry shook his head.

“Disappearing act? What do you mean? He threw me out!”

“What?”

“We had a huge row. He told me to pack my bag and go. Anywhere I liked! So I did. I don’t know what he’s been telling you, but he made it very clear he wanted no more to do with me, even if he seemed to...”

He had trailed off.

“Seemed to what?”

“Well, even if he seemed to have changed his mind. He started sending me messages and then you suddenly got in touch, out of the blue. I knew he’d put you up to it, of course –it wasn’t very subtle!”

“True,” I conceded. “But what did you think I was trying to do?”

“Spy on me, I suppose! Find out where I’d gone, what I was planning to do next! That was pretty much it, anyway, wasn’t it?”

“Well,” I said. “Sort of...”

There was something here I ought to mention, but it was a bit of an awkward topic.

“Your father was worried about what you might get up to, with your research on these left-wing groups. He was worried about how you might react.”

“Aye, I know that! He was scared that I’d fall into their evil clutches!”

I was confused.

“No, it wasn’t that. He was... He had been a bit spooked by your reaction to some of the radical stuff you’d been reading. You know, banging on the walls and all that.”

“Banging on the walls? I’ve not the slightest idea what you’re talking about!”



“Didn’t you find some of the left-wing ideas, the anarchist ideas, you were reading about, rather irritating? Didn’t you even tell your father that you couldn’t stand hearing all about their nonsense and that you wanted out of KID?”

Henry gasped. “Is that what he told you? The bastard! Aye, I told him I wanted out of KID, but it was because I’d started to see what they were up to. I liked what I was reading, on anarchism and the like, and I was beginning to feel I was on the wrong side of the barricades, as it were. That was what set him off! He said I was a fool to put my career in jeopardy. He said I was a complete madman, switching from one extreme to the other, that I’d already caused him a great deal of embarrassment and pain and that he wasn’t going to stand by and watch me do the same thing all over again, in the opposite direction.”

My thoughts were in turmoil. Could this be right? Callum was one of my best, oldest, friends after all. I needed to reassure myself that he hadn’t been telling me a complete pack of lies.

“So it’s true what he told me about the business at your school, all this fascist stuff? You were really involved in that?”

Henry sighed and seemed to physically wilt.

“Aye, I was and I’ll never live that down, so long as I live. But it was years ago now. More than five years ago! It’s all in the past. He threw me out of the flat for being an anarchist, not a fascist!”

Henry’s apparently lightning-quick conversion from far-right to far-left was beginning to make sense now. It hadn’t been like that – it had been coming for a while. Callum had spun me a fake story. Why? Because he needed to motivate me. The disappearance thing to get me on the emotional level. The panic about an extreme-right attack on the left to instil a sense of urgency. If he’d told me the truth, that Henry was putting his career at risk by going anarchist, he knew that I’d have simply wished him the best of luck and left him to it. But why had Callum wanted me to find Henry? Why chuck him out on to the streets and then change his mind and try to pull him back again?

“I know he thinks he’s doing what’s best for me,” said Henry, as if he had been following my inner discussion. “Which is more than I can say for my mother, unfortunately... I even know he loves me, in his own way...”

I was impressed. This was an unusual insight for a young man of his age.

“... and I think that’s why he must have asked you to find me. He wanted you to get to me before KID realised what I was becoming. He was trying to buy some time. He realised that by throwing me out, he’d simply thrown me into the arms of the people he was trying to protect me from. He sent me messages asking me to come back, talk things through, reconsider my options. He even suggested I talk to KID about switching directions, investigating the alt-right instead of the left, so I could stay true to my moral convictions.”

Henry shook his head sadly.

“He just doesn’t get it. For him, life is all about earning money, climbing the ladder, hobnobbing with the movers and shakers... Can I ask you something, Jon?”

Of course he could.

“You’ve known my father for a lot longer than I have. You knew him when he was my age. Would you say that he has ever *believed* in anything, other than himself and his own life?”

I thought about all the conversations I’d had with Callum over the years, all the jokes we’d shared, the things we’d done together. I pictured

him at 20 years old, at 30, at 40 and as he was today and the more I tried to hold his face in my mind the more it seemed to dissolve away into nothing. Who was he, this man who, it now transpired, had told me outrageous lies to get me to help steer his son away from the path of his deepest convictions? Did I even really know him? Was there even anything of any real substance there to know?

“No, Henry, I don’t think he has.”

I spent a good couple of hours chatting with Henry. It was still a bit odd to see him sitting there, in the flesh, after all this time trailing after a phantom Henry, a Henry with constantly shifting character and intention.

The real item was surprisingly straight-forward, in fact, and very open about the evolution in his personal philosophy, even though it was clearly painful for him at times.

What I liked above all was that he took it all seriously. It was important for him to try to understand the meaning behind our existence and to try to get to grips with what it was we should be doing with our lives. He had a conscience that pushed him on to search for answers and a stubbornness that meant he

would never be prepared to accept somebody else's version of what was good or bad, right or wrong. If he had come to the wrong conclusions in the past, he'd had the honesty and courage to change his mind and carry on searching. He was open enough to expose himself to all kinds of ideas, from all kinds of sources, but ultimately the judgement on whether these ideas were valid or not came from within Henry himself.

He told me that from something like the age of 14 he'd been seized with the conviction that there was something fundamentally wrong with the society in which he found himself living. People seemed to stagnate in a numbed acceptance of the pointlessness of their existences, of the daily and weekly rhythms of work and leisure, of the banality of the TV culture on which they were raised. He found himself hating it, wanting to hit out against it, declaring his own personal war on it.

"But why look to the far right for that, Henry?" I asked him. "What was it that took you off in that direction, for Christ's sake?"

He shrugged and ran his thumb to and fro across the rim of the pub table. "Partly, I suppose, it was because I didn't like the left. Or the left that I'd come across, anyway. They seemed just as

phoney as everyone else. Worse even, because they were self-righteous with it. And their rebellion was all just a posture. It wasn't real, they didn't feel it. I mean, the most left-wing guy in my year at school – he used to wear a little Lenin badge on his blazer – was also from the richest family. He was just playing a game, playing at being a revolutionary before knuckling down to a career in PR or advertising or something. And then there were the so-called lefty types my father would invite over, middle-class poets and artists who thought they were some kind of avant-garde elite. They were like those new people at the Leftover Library that we were discussing, Jon. Just false, that's all. Totally false."

I nodded. "There are a too few many of those around, that's for sure. But was that really enough to push you into the arms of the far right?"

"It wasn't just that, no," said Henry. "I've given it a lot of thought in the meantime, and I think I was basically looking for something authentic, in the face of all the hypocrisy and pretence in this world. The alt-right offered me that – it seemed to be talking a more honest language. And the idea of nationalism appealed, because it seemed to be talking about who we were, deep down, and

about the importance of that belonging and that power from within. Now I can see that it was the idea of self-determination that was appealing to me, but it took me a while to separate the two, to realise that the labels we stick on people are part of the same falseness that I was trying to rebel against. If you strip it all down, clear away all the rubbish about nationality and race and religion and so on, you find that real self-determination is anarchism. And the moment you start to look at the world from an anarchist perspective, everything changes, everything falls into place, the whole picture becomes clear. So I found my way to the left, in the end, even if I took a funny roundabout sort of route to get there.”

Henry went back to his B&B, after we'd promised to speak again very soon.

I was heading to Callum's flat, for what was inevitably going to be something of a confrontation. I had to tell him I knew. And he would have to come clean. I wasn't looking forward to this, but it was important none the less. A necessary moment in our lives.

As I was pulling the front door key from my pocket on the last turn of the communal stairs, I noticed there was something stuck on the outside

of the door. What was this?

It was a little white envelope, with my name on. I pulled it off and simultaneously went to open the door. The key wouldn't go in. I tried again, twisting it around for a better approach, but still no luck. He had changed the lock on me!

He wasn't getting away with it that easily! I rang the bell. Knocked on the door. Rang again. Called his landline. Called his mobile. Shouted through the letter box. There was the sound of a door opening on the landing above and face appeared in the stairwell. I was disturbing the neighbours.

"Fuck you, Callum!" I muttered and realised I still had the envelope in my hand. I tore it open and inside were four £50 notes and a couple of sheets of paper.

The first of these was almost blank, apart from two hand-written words – "Sorry Jon."

The second was the print-out of a train ticket to London, leaving at 5.40am tomorrow. A first-class rail ticket. That was a nice touch, I had to say, although I suspected it was motivated less by a concern for my comfort during the trip home than by the desire to make a point. Something about our respective places in the world, I felt.



Something about the fact that he could afford to make a little gesture like that, and I couldn't.

So he knew. Inevitably, I supposed. It had been his guest and his son who had caused havoc at the TAF event. They would have been in touch. And it wouldn't have taken much of a stretch of the imagination to picture Henry and me swapping notes, untangling Callum's little knot of fibs.

I trailed back down the stairs. So I had nowhere to stay the night now. The £200 would pay for a hotel room, of course, but it seemed such a waste since I was catching the 5.40 train in the morning...

I preferred the idea of staying up. Finding a few late-night bars, little clubs even. I would ask around. It always used to be possible to keep going for hours and hours in Edinburgh. And if I found myself out on the streets at 4am, I would only have an hour and half left to wait at Waverley.

I smiled at myself. He knew me too well, that bastard Henry. I wondered if that was what he'd had in mind when he'd booked me on the first train of the day.

The timing worked well, in the end, and I even had time to shave and brush my teeth before taking my first class place. I wanted to appear reasonably respectable, even if I undoubtedly stank of alcohol.

It was an excellent seat, with plenty of leg room and on the left-hand side of the train, meaning I could enjoy the views of the coast on the way down. Somewhat predictably, though, I fell asleep somewhere near Musselburgh and surfaced again to find myself in Newcastle. There was a great crowd of people on the platform, jostling to get in, and I braced myself for their arrival. But I was in first class and they weren't allowed in here. This was very strange. I had never travelled first class before – not legitimately anyway. There were two young women balanced precariously on one small suitcase in the area just through the sliding doors. I caught the eye of the elderly lady sitting opposite me, engrossed in *The Daily Telegraph*. There were seats available in here.

“Shall we invite them in?” I asked.

She looked at me as though I had just suggested a quick round of strip poker.

“They're not allowed,” she snapped, and then

added: “In any case, what’s the point of paying to go first class if you let everyone else in with you?”

I stared at her, slightly dumbly, imagining that for a moment she was one of the guests at the TAF talk last night, that she’d recognised me and was going to report all this back to Jamie Harris. This would be a great addition to his next speech – the revolutionary left-wing trouble-maker who had infiltrated his Edinburgh presentation had later been spotted slinking back to London with a first-class train ticket. Maybe this had all been pre-arranged by that devious bloody Henry!

I chuckled out loud to myself, prompting the woman to rustle furiously with her newspaper in irritation, and then I drifted back off again.

I managed to transfer on to the Brighton service at St Pancras without fully waking up and eventually hauled myself up Muesli Mountain, as they used to call the Hanover incline, and into bed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The young estate agent waved a cheery goodbye and drove off to work his professional charm on another hapless punter.

I wandered round to the back of the house for another look at the crack in the wall he had been talking about. I'd always known the place wasn't going to fetch an enormous price – that's how we'd been able to afford it in the first place, after all. But it would be enough for me.

Six weeks had passed since I had got back from my adventures and summer had really arrived now. Swifts were circling in the warm breeze, the sea was an inviting shade of blue and the luscious Downs were calling out to me, inviting to me to come for a long dreamy walk, as they were doing almost every day at the moment.

I could taste their greenness on the summer breeze that was caressing the garden.

“So you’re selling up?” said Jennifer.

I wanted to say I was sorry, but she knew that and got there first.

“There’s no need to apologise, Jon,” she said. “You’re doing the right thing. There’s no point staying here on my account. I’m dead, after all!”

I could feel tears beginning to form.

“Don’t cry, Jon,” she said. “It’s what I want as well. You don’t think I fancy hanging around here for ever, do you? I’m pleased for you. You’ve finally sorted yourself out. You don’t need me any more! Did you notice, at the dreadful meeting in Edinburgh, when you felt like rushing the stage, that I didn’t even say anything to you. I didn’t have to! You did it all by yourself, Jon, and I’m so proud of you.”

I half-closed my eyes. A beam of sunlight sparkled in the moisture between my lashes.

“You won’t be seeing me any more,” said Jennifer. “You won’t be seeing me any more, or hearing my voice, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be there. I’ll always be there, Jon. Remember that. Always.”

Who was she, this woman? Who had she been? Who was she now? Part of her could be accounted for, the practical and everyday part, the part that had passed. But there had always been something else, something that went beyond mere mortality. It was this aspect that had drawn me to her and this aspect that had stayed with me since her death.

“Goodbye Jennifer!” I sobbed under my breath.

Later that day, I went down to the *Investigator* offices. Andy had a mischievous glint in his eye when he opened the door and when I got inside I saw why. There, in the corner where I used to sit when I first started, was a young man tapping away, as I had once done, on a typewriter!

“Hello Henry!” I said. “Getting to grips with the latest technology?”

He turned round with a boyish grin all over his face.

“This is so cool!” he said. “I think I could really work with this! The only problem is, I’ve still not found the delete button!”

I wandered over, chuckling, to see what he was typing.

“EXPOSED: SHADOWY GROUPS THAT SMEAR THE LEFT. Whistleblower Henry Kennedy lifts the lid on neoliberal propaganda in an exclusive special report for *The South Coast Investigator*.”

“Not bad,” I said, “although I expect your editor will want to put a pun in the headline, if past form is anything to go by.”

“There has to be something we could do with KID,” said Andy.

“Got to be kidding?” suggested Henry brightly. “Kids’ stuff? Kidnap?”

“Kidology!” I blurted.

“Hey...” said Andy, picking up a pen to note it down. “You could be on to something there, dude. Not looking for a job in the alternative media, are you?”

I had come out of my early retirement to help put this project together. We were devoting the entirety of one issue to exposing KID, TAF, *Liberty and Revolt*, the whole caboodle. We were going to double the print run and get loads of them sent out all over the country, into social centres and lefty bookshops. It was shaping up to

be big.

“I got Anahid’s piece this morning,” said Andy. “We’ve already got Simon’s stuff, obviously, and Mat’s going to be doing us an extra bit on the way he was deported, how the excuses they used were all tied in with the smear campaign. Then there’s your report on the Scottish meeting and, of course, Henry’s account, which fortunately is already written and subbed in that new-fangled digital format. All we’re missing is Mouse’s thing on how they sabotaged the WF mobilisation. Have you heard from her?”

“No,” I said. “Not for a day or two. But she’s always late. It’s an article of faith with her. You’ll have to kick her arse. Tell her the deadline is five o’clock tonight and that way you might get something by the end of the week.”

Andy glanced over at Henry, who was still playing with the typewriter. He was fascinated by the way the keys jammed together on their way towards the paper if you tried to write too quickly.

“Can I have a quick word, man?” Andy whispered, gesturing towards the door.

We went into the garden. I knew what this was



about.

“More Henry emails?” I asked.

He nodded. “Phone calls, even. All sorts of people are coming out of the woodwork.”

“I hope you’re keeping a note of who they are,” I said. “That could be the material for a very interesting follow-up! So is it just the same old stuff? The story of Henry’s schooldays as revealed to TAF by his loving father, all with his best interests at heart, of course.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but...”

“What?”

“Well, you know dude, it’s pretty heavy when you think about it. That Henry was an actual bloody Nazi, in something they called the SS...”

“But it wasn’t the *actual* SS, was it? And he was a schoolboy. What’s he supposed to do about it now? Commit harakiri? Keep shamefully silent for the rest of his life? He’s got a story to tell, Andy. And there’s more to come from him. He told me yesterday he wants to stay on in Brighton, especially if he gets that place in the housing co-op. Maybe he could carry on here,

learn the ropes. You need to line up a replacement from the next generation for when you get to retirement age, mate!”

He smiled. “I dunno, man. We’ll see how it pans out. But we’re taking a lot of shit over him being here, that’s for sure.”

“Wait until the KID special hits the streets,” I said. “That’ll wipe the smile off a few smart-arse faces, I can tell you.”

I took a stroll down to the seafront. It was uncomfortably busy. When you lived in Brighton you spent half the year complaining that it was too cold to go on the beach and other half steering clear of the beach because there were too many people down there. I headed east, past the pier and, gradually, away from the crowds, so that I could think.

First of all I thought about the story I hadn’t mentioned to Andy. A Canadian blogger had broken it and it had been mentioned in a little online bulletin that I subscribed to. New evidence had come to light about the extent of CIA cultural colonisation, the way that ever since the Cold War they had been using literature, art, music and the media as tools to secretly manipulate attitudes in Europe towards the USA

and its activities. If NATO was the military occupation, and the Marshall Plan the economic one, this was the Americans' cultural occupation. A lot of this had been known for years, of course, to those who had bothered looking for the information. *Encounter* magazine in London, *Preuves* in Paris, *Cuardenos* in Spain and *Tempo Presente* in Italy had long been exposed as CIA fronts, via their Congress for Cultural Freedom. The Cold War had ended, but the need for pro-capitalist, pro-US propaganda had never gone away and now a new generation of titles had been outed thanks to an unidentified whistleblower. On the new list was a certain well-connected and influential Scottish cultural review, by the name of *edinSpire*.

It would have been the perfect fit for our special reports, of course, but somehow I just couldn't bring myself to draw it to Andy's attention. There was the small matter of Henry working in the office, of course, but more than that there was Callum... I would surely never speak to him or meet him again, but I just couldn't rid myself of that last ounce of loyalty for a man who I had considered a friend for so many years. I wondered if Henry had also seen the report and was having similar qualms regarding his now firmly-estranged father. If so, we were both in the same morally leaky boat, waiting to see if

Andy stumbled across the information and ready to respond with surprise should he ever bring it up. I certainly wouldn't stand in the way of a story in the *Investigator*, but it didn't seem right to actually instigate one.

Secondly, I thought about what I would be doing with myself, once I had got the house sold.

I might rent a little flat somewhere in Brighton – Chesham Street, perhaps, in honour of Kropotkin! I could imagine myself pottering around here for a while, writing a little perhaps. And reading, of course. I had really got into reading in a big way over the last month and half. To start with I had properly digested all the books from the Leftover Library, from cover to cover. I considered them *my* books now, amongst my most prized possessions. If I ever took them back to the new-look library they would only end up being thrown in a skip – or burned, maybe, in some gruesome neoliberal heresy-hunting ritual! In any case, I didn't suppose I would ever be going to Edinburgh again. I had nowhere to stay there any more.

I was also determined to head back to the Cévennes before too long. I fancied trying out a bit of natural immersion therapy and maybe even penning some instinctive poetry. I thought

I'd go back to Nîmes and see if I couldn't find a woman with a swan-like neck to blow cigarette smoke in my face, since Jennifer wasn't around to stop me.

Generally, the idea of heading south appealed to me. Maybe it came from all those years of staring out to sea in Brighton, dreaming of what lay beyond that watery horizon. I'd go further south than Nîmes, even. I'd hit the Mediterranean coast, cross over to North Africa in a little fishing boat. I'd probably pass some migrants coming the other way, fleeing war and poverty and seeking out a peaceful life in the heart of the parasite civilization that had sucked the lifeblood out of their homelands. But I wouldn't care. I would stride out across the Sahara in search of universal Asha, in search of the wisdom that lay lost and buried beneath the baking sands. I would cross mountains and plunge into steaming rainforests, living off leaves and fruit and grubs. I would merge myself with the African nature goddess who had given birth to our species a million years ago. She would welcome me home, to the ancestral home of every single human being. My sweat would evaporate into her hot breath, my blood would be carried away by her armies of mosquitoes and one day my dying words would be lost amidst the shrieking of her birds, the whooping of her monkeys and the

hungry growling of the lions she sent to devour my flesh. There, finally, I would be reunited with Jennifer, once my specific form had, like hers, been dissolved by the inevitable.

I came out of my reverie with a start. Something had stopped me. Something was reminding me that Asha was not just nature, not just our belonging to nature, our yearning for nature. It was our *understanding* that we belonged to nature, that we were nothing but nature. It was our understanding that this belonging was *important*, and our understanding that this understanding was *itself* important. Asha was the human understanding of nature's harmony and also the human need to act in the interests of that harmony. Asha was the morality that arose from our embrace of nature, the morality that, in fact, *was* nature, in human form. Asha was nature's freedom to act in the protection of its own harmony, nature's freedom to act through human thought and deed. And Asha was the human responsibility to accept that role.

If I was looking for Asha, I would have to accept her responsibility. A responsibility to live and not just to die. To do and not just to dream. A responsibility to be present. In myself. In this world. In the flow. In every move I made and in every word I spoke.

Again I thought of heading south to France, but this time it wasn't so much the beguiling woman in the café that called to me, but the more significant rumblings of general sense of exciting potential.

That night I dreamed again of the railway station, of the vast and confusing railway station. Again I was rushing from one departure board to the next, not knowing which platform to make for. The problem was that they showed no destinations, only times and platform numbers. The spaces where the place names should have been were all blank.

I ran on to a platform where a train was waiting to depart. There was a guard beside it, flag in hand and whistle at the ready. He was wearing a hi-vis yellow jacket.

"Excuse me!" I called breathlessly.

"*Oui, Monsieur?*" he replied.

"Where is this train going, please? I need to know where this train is going!"

"Ah, *Monsieur,*" he said, moving towards the nearest carriage, opening the door and beckoning me to climb on board.

PAUL CUDENEC

“There is only one way to find out!”



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PAUL CUDENEC

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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