

## CHAPTER THREE: Condensation

*"The things around us are for the most part very stable entities. As a consequence, their specific shapes are regularly seen, so long as chance conditions or intentional camouflage do not interfere . . . In any part of the visual field which is shaped, processes must have particular characteristics which are responsible for the fact. These characteristics are not present in all parts of the field."*

Wolfgang Kohler, *Gestalt Psychology*, p. 110

Mica Brant had once been told by Bernie Stifel that "camouflage and misdirection are more important than all the high tech gadgetry used in espionage. Always remember that." As she awoke to the sound of the alarm clock, in a tiny room at the New Astor Hotel, she could hear the BBC reporting on the continuing economic boom in East and Southeast Asia: the announcer rattled off the previous days successes in the region's stock markets. She got out of bed and went to the bathroom to shower. She thought about the previous evenings' meeting with James Fielder, the political officer at the American consulate, and the man that most foreign intelligence services thought was the C.I.A. station chief in Hong Kong. They thought wrong, but Mica did her best to keep up the ruse. Fielder was C.I.A. That part was not a lie. Indeed, he was very useful, especially for relaying messages from Bernie Stifel to her while she was in Hong Kong. He even occasionally picked up some useful information and was frequently involved in getting dissidents out of mainland China. But mostly he was a diversion.

However, in their meeting the previous evening, in the consulate, Fielder had presented Mica with a thick dossier on an ex-patriot American working in Hong Kong. His name was Sanjay Harris.

Fielder had received the dossier from Langley. The order to recruit Harris was coming directly from headquarters. This meant that he had already been vetted, passed through all the security hoops. And it was clear, someone really wanted him. Bernie always said the Agency should not rely on electronic surveillance, but should have sufficient human assets on the ground to both gather intelligence on post-handover Hong Kong and to be in place should it be necessary to engage in economic warfare (what Bernie liked to call "the invisible hand") against the mainland via Hong Kong. Economic sabotage had long been a favorite tool for pursuing American foreign policy objectives. Effective economic warfare required well placed and intelligent human assets. This was not always easy to realize and the Agency had an active recruitment program. Harris had extensive contacts in both Hong Kong and the mainland. He was fluent in both Cantonese and Mandarin. He had a position with the Hong Kong Trade Development Council. And he had an ongoing relationship with Fadil Hamzeh in the Malaysian ministry of Finance. As a bonus, he was a computer hacker, or so the dossier said. "Expert at bypassing computer security, according to reliable source at MIT." Natives were always preferable to ex-pats. But the first sheet in the dossier was a memo ordering Mica to "do everything necessary to sign Harris as a contract agent. Top Priority." She had enough on her hands, with the Rekker project in full flight: *Simon Says*. But if the top brass wanted this Harris on an Agency leash, she was quite certain she would be able to make it happen. That was her specialty, after all, and by all indications Sanjay Harris was recruitable.

She sat up, feeling some of the effects of jetlag, despite her elaborate measures to overcome the malady. She twisted her neck around, taking out the kinks. She finished the shower and got dressed.

She went down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. She felt that although the New Astor was not the most impressive hotel in Hong Kong, the food was good, especially the pastries. When she entered the restaurant, a blonde haired fellow eating breakfast with his wife and a girl of about eight did not seem able to stop staring at her. He even smiled a mouth full of even white teeth, but Mica ignored him. His wife seemed to be talking to him but the man was quite obviously not paying attention. The eight year old also seemed to speak to him and he did not pay attention to her either. He was mesmerized by Mica Brant. She wondered if she was really that conspicuous or if this guy was just that much of a jerk. She had been in the Agency long enough to be relatively sure it was the latter. As she sat eating her breakfast, surreptitiously looking at the man who was looking at her, she did not notice the young man on the pay phone outside the dining area also watching her, nor did she notice that when she left to hail a taxi on Mody Road the young man, in his jeans and dark blue tee-shirt, was standing in a doorway smoking a cigarette and watching her depart.

That afternoon, Mica Brant walked into an English Victorian style pub, *The Falcon*, and met with an impeccably dressed man in his mid-fifties, with white hair, including a full beard, and wearing wire frame spectacles. The man's name was Anatoly Berensky and he was a career officer with Russian Intelligence, their top dog in Hong Kong.

Berensky watched Mica walk to the table and he stood up as she approached. "It is good to see you, Mica," he said in a deep voice.

"Same here, Boris," she said. She always called him Boris and he tolerated it. He would probably tolerate just about anything from Mica. He lived on the hope that someday she would give him a chance to repeat a night that had happened three years in the past, on a New Years' Eve in Hong Kong. He had the most wonderful memories of her standing, in the shadows cast by the lights of a giant Garfield in neon, all curves and no garments.

"How long will you be in Hong Kong?" He asked, as she slid into her seat.

"Not long," she said.

"I've been here for nine years now," he said, "and I'm ready for a change."

"Liar," she said, shaking her head. "You love it here or you'd have asked for a transfer a long time ago."

He smiled. "I count my blessings and hope that perhaps they have forgotten about me back in Moscow," he said. "If they ever discover how pleasant it is here, they would certainly move me somewhere else."

She smiled. "That just wouldn't do. I'd have to break in a new KGB station chief."

"We're not the KGB anymore. We're Russian Intelligence. A kinder gentler group of spies."

"Now why do I find that a bit hard to believe?"

"Oh well," he took out a cigarette case and opened it. He offered her one of the brown cigarettes and she shook her head. He lit up and began sucking on it. A beige jacketed waiter came by the table. Mica asked for a gin and tonic, Anatoly asked for Stolichnaya vodka. "It won't be long now," he said, "before the Chinese Army is patrolling here."

"I'm sure they'll keep a low profile," she said.

He nodded. He appreciated Mica's lack of hard core paranoia, something he was accustomed to among fellow spooks, whether they were American, Russian, British, Chinese, or whatever. Paranoia was an occupational hazard. Perhaps Mica Brant simply kept hers under wraps or maybe she was just too young to have cultivated it properly. "So what do you have planned for the handover? You must be planning something to welcome the Chinese." He held the foul smelling cigarette in his hand and the smoke wafted towards Mica. "Perhaps something to embarrass Jiang Zemin?"

"Nothing's planned," she said. "In fact, if I were you I think I would buy Hong Kong stocks. I hear that mainland firms are starting to buy shares to pump up the Hong Kong market for the handover."

He nodded and put the cigarette back in between his lips. He took a long drag and blew out smoke into the air. "You did not ask me here to provide portfolio advice," he said.

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I want to make a trade."

His left eyebrow went up. "A trade? Interesting. What exactly do I have that you want, besides the obvious?" He made a gesture towards his own body.

"I could never get enough of you, Boris," she said. He smiled at this bit of flattery. "I need to know what you know about Simon Rekker. I know you've been watching him."

The waiter returned with their drinks, then departed again. "He has a lot of money invested in Russia. We would be stupid not to watch him. What do you need to know?"

"I need to know what he's doing in Hong Kong," she said. "And don't give me any bullshit, Boris. This is coming from Langley."

"Are your bosses worried that Rekker will spoil the handover?" He tasted the vodka and smiled.

"Langley doesn't care about the handover, one way or the other."

"Then why are they worried about Rekker?" He alternated cigarette and vodka.

"You know something, don't you?"

He didn't answer at first, then the grin returned. "You can always read me."

"So?"

"You should simply track his options trades. He's buying puts on every currency in Asia, you know."

"He's betting the Asian currencies are going to be devalued. Why is that?"

He pursed his lips. "And you will give me what?"

"Information on a secret bank account here in Hong Kong that is connected to extremists in Chechnya. The money is financing the purchase of weapons and ammunition for the rebels."

"A bank account connected to the rebels?" The smile returned, even broader this time. "You can do this?"

She nodded.

"Such information would be welcomed in Moscow."

"I realize how important this matter is to Moscow."

"Ah, you can't imagine how happy they would be if I could provide such information."

She nodded. "And I'm sure it would make your work here appreciated all the more."

"I do like it here," he said, "even if it gets boring at times."

"Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, I think I can provide you what you want," he said, lifting his nearly empty vodka glass. "Cheers."

Mica lifted her glass and clinked glasses with Anatoly. It had been Bernie's idea to make the trade. The account was originally established by CIA and used to funnel money to Chechen rebels fighting for independence. There was, however, no longer a good rationale for supporting them. Agency policy was turning against such groups --- and the larger campaign to disrupt Russia's economic health --- in favor of a policy to infiltrate the economic institutions of a more open Russia. And it had become much easier to do this as Russia was rapidly opening to American capital. Any place that was open to American capital was worthy of support, even if the government was run by thugs. Besides, Mica needed confirmation that Anatoly had someone inside Rekker's operation. If *Simon Says* was to be successful without any possibility that the role of the Agency might be exposed, then a potentially hostile agent on the inside would need to be identified and terminated. The economic sabotage triggered by Rekker's machinations must appear to be completely the consequence of those machinations: Rekker's computer model must be made to appear to be more powerful than it really was. As long as the model was exposed as the source of the economic catastrophe, yet at the same time kept secret in its details, then a new economic myth could be manufactured: the all powerful, all knowing Simon Rekker has moved global mountains and

created earthquakes from Seoul to Shanghai to Singapore. The U.S. government would be made to look as helpless in the face of Rekker's machine as other governments. Pressure would be placed on China to float the yuan, exposing that nation to global financial markets and the CIA's elaborate machinery for manipulating those markets. This exposure would give Langley a weapon more easily used against China, but no less powerful, than the high-tech armaments of the U.S. military.

After Mica left Anatoly, she felt an old anxiety return. It happened whenever she was involved in an operation the complexity of which generated potential negative surprises she could hardly plan for. What if Rekker found out that his success was manufactured by the CIA? Would he care how he made his billions? What if China found out? Would the Zhongnanhai leadership retaliate? What would they do?

"Take me to the New Astor," she told the taxi driver and settled back to relax, to let the demon sleep.

Once she was back in her hotel room, Mica started packing away her clothing and other possessions for the trip to the airport and then back to the States, back to Langley and the desk jockeys, back to Bernie and his worries. Now Bernie was a man who really knew how to worry. He relished it the way a fire fighter relishes a fire. In a funny sort of way, Bernie was her hero. He had carved his own autonomous space within the Agency. He took orders from Gilboy and the more ceremonial higher ups, but he always seemed to do things his own way. And it was clear that Bernie had his own opinions about strategies for gathering and using intelligence, among other things. He wasn't a yes man for anybody. Mica liked that, although some might mistake her for a "yes man" for Bernie.

A car from the consulate was dispatched to take Mica to the airport. She had not expected company, but Fielder was already in the rear of the black Mercedes when she got in. He gave her a thick folder that contained information on Simon Rekker. It seemed that the Russian embassy had sent the information over as a "courtesy." Fielder, a thin man with accountant's eyes and glasses to match, dark hair that was fuller than one might expect for his age and profession, talked for most of the trip to Kai Tak. He went on and on about Rekker's Hegemon Holdings. It seemed that Fielder actually had done his research. He knew, for instance, not only about the extensive Saudi royal family investments in Hegemon, but that Saudi Prince Nayan golfed with Rekker and considered him a friend. He also knew that Nayan was good friends with Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah and with several prominent politicians and former politicians (if one is ever a former politician) in the States, including former secretary of state Birch, whose son, the junior senator from Oklahoma, was launching his quest for the presidency.

Mica already knew every fact and rumor that Fielder had to offer and more. But she did not share her own information. She kept her own counsel, as always. The only person she confided in was Bernie, and that was a professional necessity. She never knew what Bernie knew and it was best never to make him suspect you were holding out on him. As long as he trusted you (and Bernie never *really* trusted anyone), then your position was safe. On the other hand, Bernie would never have trusted Fielder. He talked too damn much. You had to know when to speak and when to keep silent. Perhaps Fielder just babbled in her presence and was otherwise more reserved, but as she watched his lips flapping, she doubted that his self-control was any better in other circumstances. He's ultimately a liability, she decided. Upon reaching the airport, she thanked him for accompanying her and said she would put in a good word with Langley.



"Pain is a loud protest against the identification of the subjective with the objective. The pain of love is that that which is in the imagination is not in reality." Feuerbach

I was thinking about this strange role of being the godlike narrator: I can pretty much move in and out of my characters' thoughts at will. I try not to abuse that privilege, in so far as I leave them some modicum of privacy. Certainly there are some thoughts I would be loath to reveal, even if they might shed some light on the characters. If this makes me less entertaining as a narrator, then so be it. Nevertheless, it is clearly an invasion of privacy to get into the thoughts of these characters and I do that quite frequently, particularly with certain characters. Assuming they are not aware of this intrusion and deliberately obfuscating the reality I perceive and then (imperfectly) transmit to you, then I am exposing their inner selves without consent. And I can assure you I have not conversed with them in order to obtain such consent. Like most, if not all, godlike narrators I assume I can do what I will. In other words, I am final arbiter of good taste. Unlike most narrators, however, I don't presume to be God in this universe, just the transmitter of information. In any event, this thought crossed my mind as I was about to go into Jay's head and see his latest dream and so I thought I'd share it with you.

In the dream, Jay was flying a small airplane and his best friend from high school in Chicago, Yodie, was in the passenger's seat. The plane was passing over the South China Sea.

"I keep having this recurring dream," he said. "I guess that's why they call it a recurring dream, because I keep having it." Even in his dreams, Jay found a way to be a wise guy. "I'm walking in a large building that has a secret passageway. The secret passageway is in a different place each time. Oh, I just remembered. The last time I had the dream, the building was some sort of museum. I find the right door to enter the passageway and then I start winding through this maze of corridors. I don't know what I'm trying to find. I don't know where I'm trying to go."

"You never get out?"

"No."

He landed the plane on a narrow strip on a small isolated island. Once they were on the ground, he tucked the plane, which was now the size of a model airplane, under his arm and they walked down a dirt road. On one side of the road was high grass, on the other side banana trees. "Why don't you go to Belize and see your relatives?"

"Why would I do that? It's too hot and I can't stand mosquitoes. Same reasons I don't visit Arkansas."

"Arkansas, the land of opportunity," she said, sounding out his sarcasm.

"I did spend a lot of summers in Punta Gorda," he said, getting a faraway look in his eyes.

"Don't you miss me?"

"Si, claro," he said, looking into her deep brown eyes. She reached over, took his arm in an iron grip.

"Ubafu," she said. "Be careful. You can't trust Shi Dao."

He frowned. "Shi Dao is my uncle."

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, but Shi Dao is not your uncle."

"¿Verdad?" He looked sad. "Oh well. It was a nice illusion while it lasted."

"Illusions never last."

"Does that mean there's no Easter Bunny?"

She shook her head.

"And the Cubs and Red Sox are never gonna meet in the World Series?"

She shrugged.

"I guess I just have to face up to the reality that there's no magic in the world. Una vez sobre un tiempo, creí en milagros."

They came to a small shack of a house. They stopped for a moment. She turned to him and said, "Human beings are just human beings. What we don't know would fill a universe." He smiled, then turned and walked up the three rickety stairs and opened the screen door. It creaked and had a torn screen. She followed him and they were in an enclosed screened porch. He recognized the door. It was an icon from his childhood. It represented the portal to a universe that had long since ceased existing, except in the dream world. In fact, it had burned to the ground. "No quiero," he said. "I won't go in there."

"Why?"

"Mi abuela es muerte. She's not there."

"She wants to see you," Yodie said firmly. "You should respect her wishes."

*The Garifuna believe dead and living can sometimes cohabit the same place.* "No quiero," he said firmly.

"What's wrong with you, Jay? You can't disrespect your grandmother. It's not right."

He held Yodie's bare arms and looked into her eyes. "You don't understand," he said. "I always run away from death. Siempre."

"Maybe you should stop running," she said.

The floor boards of the porch went crooked and the screen was gone. Mosquitoes buzzed in mass. He heard footsteps approaching the door to the house and he turned, flung open the screen door, jumped down the stairs and ran off into the Belizean jungle. Day morphed into night. The sounds of frogs, other animals and insects surrounded him. He heard footsteps behind him. Branches breaking. He ran and ran and ran until he came to a cliff, a rushing river below. He listened for the footsteps but they were gone. He sat down on a rock precariously near the edge. The rock gave way and he slid down the slope, catching hold of a branch and looking at the river below. He saw a body floating down the river, white and bloated. His father. But then he thought perhaps it was not his father. He saw the face, now turned upwards, instead of floating on its belly as before. It was his own face. He felt a wave of fear and panic sweep through his sleeping body. He willed himself back to the edge of the cliff. He clenched his teeth, remembered the airplane, which reappeared under his arm. He ran for the clearing nearby. Jay awoke at 2 A.M. and could not go back to sleep. He decided to get up and work on his trainset.

He sat in front of the table with the trainset, carefully replacing the CPU on the tiny motherboard inside the caboose. He worked under the light of a single floor lamp, the black window panes that looked out on the street stared at him from the opposite side. After completing the upgrade, he carefully restored the connections that joined the caboose to other units, including the precious coal-car harddrive. He then picked up the coin sized video camera that lay on a plastic sheet inside an empty fish tank nearby. He installed it in the engine unit. It was virtually invisible inside the cab. He attached the connections that would link the camera to the CPU and the harddrive.

*The night wind struggles against buses, cars, motor bikes. Hong Kong never sleeps.*

Jay stood before the window pane, watching the first light of dawn gradually pouring over the Hong Kong night. He had switched off the floor lamp and the window pane had returned to transparent, revealing the star lights of life and bureaucracy that always dotted the landscape of Hong Kong nights. He was going to be tired all day (or at least most of it --- there was a chance of a second wind). He would get no more sleep now that the sun was coming. He had work to do. HKTDC. Michael Maxwell and Maxwell's master, Simon Rekker. Rekker had leased an entire floor of the Peninsula Hotel. *You could buy an entire flat in Kowloon for that kind of money.*

Jay had hacked into the local telephone system in hopes of finding something of use in Maxwell's account. He had decrypted Maxwell's phone bill, thanks to the Sunshine program, and printed out a list of mostly useless phone numbers. Except, perhaps, for one number originating in Oregon, U.S.A.

Jay decided that his first instinct was correct. He needed to get into Maxwell's apartment and then into Maxwell's computer. There was a good chance he would find the information he needed there.

He could also use Helen. He had a sneaking suspicion that Maxwell would be considerably more open with Helen than he had been with him. He shook his head. *I'm not getting Helen involved in this.* He actually felt regret at having used her to obtain information on the Hong Kong Monetary Authority. This was unexpected. *Am I developing a conscience? Did I already have one but it was just in hibernation?*

Jay was too harsh on himself. He not only had a conscience --- a concern about possible consequences that might stem from his actions --- but it was growing noisier every day. He had started to emerge from a long tunnel of anger and depression related to the death of his father, sadness at never having known his mother. All he had was a grainy photograph of a woman wearing a blue sweater and a heart shaped pendant. And then there was Yodie. Perhaps she was the most potent source of regret.

*I am sorry for what happened. I should have stayed. I should have protected you.*

*Life is an endless stream of regrets.*

For a long moment, Jay simply stared out the window, the world going brighter. The past in the present. Gunshots ringing in his memory. Fight or flight. *Goodbye Chicago.* In the neoclassical world one could always know the consequences of one's decisions, but that was not so in the world that Jay inhabited. Life is uncertainty. He left the window and returned to his train. He switched on the transformer and the train came to life, rambled around the track, the tiny light of the locomotive showing the way.



"Jay, why do you wish to know so much about me of all the people in the world?" Helen asked, as she turned off the television. Malcolm had fallen asleep on the sofa next to Jay. "I would think you already tired of hearing about my life. I always talk your head off and it is mostly foolishness. I'm just a simple woman, Jay. You try to make me too complicated." She reached to pick up Malcolm and take him to bed.

"He's okay," Jay said. "I sort like watching him sleep like that. It reminds me of what life is all about." Helen looked at him as if he was a pink elephant crawling up a wall. Jay smiled. "The world is so great when you're a child, everything is magical, big, full of mystery." He shrugged. "He doesn't know what's coming, and that's okay." Jay looked at Helen, who now looked at him as if he had grown wings and might fly any minute. "You're not that simple Helen," he said. "Actually, you're very complicated."

"I've had to put up with a lot of stuff in my life," she said.

He nodded. "Yeah, that's what I said, you're very complex."

When the telephone rang, Helen didn't answer it, waited for the answering machine to click on.

"My mother," Helen said, as the familiar voice demanded that she pick up, then waited, then hung up. "I'll call her back later."

Jay just shrugged.

"Okay, so I'm complicated," she said. "Mostly I think I am angry because it is so hard being a mother and not knowing what kind of future I will have or if I can raise Malcolm right."

"You're a good mother, Helen," he said, reassuringly. "Life is hard for most people."

Helen finally walked back to the sofa and sat down next to Jay, on the opposite side from Malcolm. "I do my best to take care of my Pooh," she said, referring to Malcolm. "He's all I've got."

"What about me? You've got me."

She shook her head. "I don't have you, Jay. When you walk out that door, you don't think about me. I am all alone in this world, except for my baby boy. I am all alone and the space is closing in on me fast...." She paused, noted the concern in his eyes. "Don't worry, I'm okay," she said. "I can take care of myself. And if you really want me to tell you all the things I like and dislike, I can do that. No problem. I know it don't matter because nothing about me really matters, but I can tell you, if you want that." She waited for Jay to say something, but he kept staring at her in silence. "Now you think I'm crazy."

Jay shook his head. "I don't think you're crazy, Helen."

"How come you never tell me that you love me?"

"Come on, Helen, don't be like that. I love you."

"No," she said, firmly. "I don't mean like that." Tears were forming in her eyes. Jay took her face in his hands and kissed her gently.



Frank Hyde squirmed in his chair, but remained silent. He folded and unfolded his hands atop the polished cherry wood table. Jack Degenhardt conversed with a short, bearded Brit near the door. The Brit had just entered the room and it was clear that he and Jack Degenhardt were old pals. In fact, Jack made no attempt to introduce them, nor did the Brit even acknowledge Frank Hyde's presence. *Rude people the British*, Frank thought. There was no one else in the room. Frank was tired and he felt a bit nauseous. He had not enjoyed dinner in the hotel's five-star restaurant. In general he didn't like restaurants and he had never found one outside the U.S. that he felt comfortable in. Memory of the undercooked steak did not sit well on his stomach. *At least they served real food*. He thought about another time in Hong Kong and the attempt by one of Rekker's lieutenants to get him to eat Indian food. He frowned, glancing at Degenhardt and the Brit. He didn't like people with beards. *Must have something to hide*. And he certainly didn't like Degenhardt. He checked his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. *Where's Rekker? I wish I had a Roloids*.

The large window on one side of the conference room looked out over Victoria Harbour. The rain had long since spent itself, but the darkness had a sort of haziness from the lingering moisture in the air. Frank had been in this room twice before, but never at night. Although he wondered about the view of the harbour at night from this window, he did not want to be gazing out at the freighters, junks, and ferries when Rekker walked in. It wouldn't look professional. Frank unfolded his hands and picked up the computer disk he had set on the table. It looked innocent enough. This was misleading. The paper he had read from a file on the disk contained the bare bones of an economic simulation that was a near duplicate of one he had published in the *Review of Financial Econometrics* over eight years ago. He hadn't given that paper much thought of late. It had been a slightly offbeat publication, not consistent with the thrust of most of his research. On top of that it had elicited no published comment whatsoever. Where had Rekker come by the paper on the computer disk? And what exactly did Rekker have in mind by presenting it to him? This couldn't be important enough to have him come all the way across the U.S. and then across the Pacific. What did Rekker have in mind? He could feel his stomach churning. *He wouldn't fly me all the way over here just to tell me . . .*

Frank turned, the silence that had fallen in the room caught his attention. Degenhardt and the Brit had separated and were now turned towards the door. "Bloody hell," Simon Rekker said, walking into the room, flanked by his ever present bodyguard, Alfonso Lauter. "Hong Kong gets more crowded every day. I think every bloody soul on the mainland must have a relative here." Rekker did not look particularly impressive. He wore a relatively plain crepe suit and burgundy tie. He was taller than the Brit but no more than average height. Next to the six foot three Lauter he seemed even smaller. But his eyes were the give-away that this was a man accustomed to wielding power and influencing others. He had a gaze that was laser-like. He fixed that gaze on the Brit and said, "Mikey, you should be pumping Frank for information instead of bull-shitting with Jack. You don't get a chance to meet a secret admirer everyday."

*What does that mean?* Frank's forehead creased as he watched this banter from his vantage point at the

table.

"Sorry," the Brit said, turning a sheepish glance towards Frank Hyde.

"Don't apologize," Rekker said quickly and turned that same gaze on Frank. "Why the hell are you sitting there by yourself, Frank? You look like a school boy waiting for the head master."

Frank stood up, feeling a bit embarrassed. "It's good to see you again, Simon," he said, trying to sound more together than he felt. Between the nausea and being tired, he didn't have much in the way of nerves left.

"The hell it is," Rekker said, smiling. "With what I'm paying you, it should be a lot more than 'good' to see me." Rekker walked over to the table and sat across from Frank. The Brit followed, sitting next to Frank, staring at him the way a prison guard might eye a prisoner. Degenhardt stood near the door with Lauter.

"Michael Maxwell," the Brit said to Hyde, extending his hand. "In case you didn't already know."

*Why should I know you?* Frank turned to the Brit and blinked. Nevertheless, the name did sound familiar. Hyde shook hands with the Brit --- whose grip belied his size. *I don't like beards.*

"What the hell is this?" Rekker frowned. He turned to Jack Degenhardt. "You didn't introduce these two?"

Jack shook his head.

Rekker let out a short laugh. "Hell, Jack, you don't have any manners."

Jack shrugged.

Rekker turned back to Frank and Michael. "I'm a bit surprised. I thought you two would be fast friends by now. Two bloody economists. That should be enough to solve all the world's problems or create a few. Anyway, Mikey works for the IMF. He's a damned bureaucrat."

Michael Maxwell flashed a mischievous smile. Frank glared at him for a moment, then turned quickly back to face Rekker.

"He used to be a Marxist," Rekker added. "As far as I know, he probably still is. In fact, Mikey wrote a fascinating paper when he was a student in the States. Where was it? Some place in California." Rekker smiled, as if remembering something pleasant. "I've always been fond of California: the land of original sin. Anyway, the paper was published in an obscure little social science rag called *Rethinking Marxism*. Full of critiques of this and that. Economics, popular culture, very *post-modern*. Interesting reading. It has taught me a renewed sense of skepticism at grand narratives about social life." He smiled. "You ever read it, Frank?"

Frank swallowed. *Good lord*. Now he remembered who Michael Maxwell was. *Devaluation, Overdetermination and Economic Imperialism* by Michael Maxwell. *Good lord*. Frank felt his stomach muscles tighten.

"Don't worry, Frank, your secrets safe with us." Rekker looked at Michael, who nodded. "I'm paying Michael enough not to care about such trivialities. I've had Mikey working on turning his paper into a

working model for several months, despite his protests that it could not be simplified enough to turn into such a model. It seems, Frank, that we might very well need your help to solve some problems. Mikey still thinks it can't be simplified enough for my computer programmers. But I'm a bit more sanguine. I thought your use of fractal mathematics might be useful. Anyway, what I want to know is whether this model can be pushed the last mile, whether it might have any application to the real world or is it just more of the same old bullshit that you guys like to reproduce?" He grinned. "I hope it's not the latter. I've already paid Mikey a bundle of cash as a consultant."

"I'm not sure I understand," Frank said. "You want me to work with him on an economic model?" He looked at Michael contemptuously, despite feeling exposed over his liberal use of this man's creative work.

"I read your paper, Frank, I think you're the man to do it. What was that paper called?"

"*An Econometric Model of Cascading Devaluations*," Michael said before Frank could answer.

Frank clinched his teeth, but he didn't say anything. Yes, he felt very exposed, and at the same time he wanted to wring the neck of the bearded little Brit who was now grinning at him.

"I love these lefties," Rekker said. "Mikey writes a paper developing an outlandish theory of how financial speculators have taken the place of armies in reproducing imperialism and the dominance of, what did you call it, the *capitalist core*. I like that phrase --- the capitalist core. Anyway, only three years later you write a paper that looks a helluva lot like the one that Mikey used in *his* paper. Oh, but then you used mathematics and Mickey used English. Helluva coincidence. I've heard about this before. It's called *simultaneous invention*. Happens every day. Anyway, what I like about your paper, Frank, was that you constructed a model to show how this cascading devaluation sequence . . . Did I get that right?" He watched Frank nod in agreement. ". . . how that would lead to a collapse in asset values across a series of countries. You even indicated that the chain reaction could be predicted by looking at econometric models of past devaluations. Now I found that bloody interesting. Currency speculators targeting a single country might trigger devaluations across an entire region, if the proper conditions were in place. Boom. Perfectly good assets selling at bargain basement prices. A way to reallocate wealth from weak hands to strong hands. Hell, that's what markets are all about. And Mikey here tells me that you came very close to getting it right, too. He thinks you may have ignored a few important factors, that your translation of his work . . . sorry, your simultaneous invention was a bit naive, that you left out some of his crucial points, but that can be rectified. Mikey thinks you might even be able to simulate the whole damn domino effect, put it into a computer program that would provide a reasonable approximation of how it might all play out." He looked at Michael and added, "Of course, Mikey believes in overdetermination, so he tells me no model can ever capture the beauty of all the interactions, that there's always room for some unexpected factor to screw the whole thing up. No matter. A model just has to give the right signals. If you're only partly right, that could be enough. Besides, I've used a lot of models that are no where near as sophisticated as the one we're talking about and I've done okay. As long as I know which dominos to push, there's always a way to knock them down." He looked back at Frank. "Anyway, I think the two of you working together could solve this thing."

When he had written the paper, Frank had also thought the model interesting and had even hoped it might be the breakthrough article that had eluded him over the years. Something that would put him on the map. He didn't suspect anyone of any importance read or cared about some journal called *Rethinking Marxism*. Rekker was right. It was obscure. It was *postmodern* or something like that. It wasn't *real*

economics. There wasn't a single mathematical equation in the entire paper. Frank suppressed a sigh. He still didn't know why Rekker had brought him to Hong Kong, certainly not to accuse him of plagiarism. Then it hit him like a rock in the face: Rekker intended to put this model to the real world test? That's what he meant by "know which dominos to push . . ." If so, this would make Rekker's previous financial coups seem like child's play, including his now famous (or infamous) and lucrative assault on the French franc. That gambit had netted Rekker several billion dollars. No one knew exactly what the pay off had been. Perhaps just as important to Rekker, it had made his reputation. Now he could make money by simply making his intentions known. But if he planned to trigger the so-called cascading devaluation sequence, he could carefully position himself so that he could make more money than even the Federal Reserve could dream of. *Good lord!* "What are you planning to do?" Frank asked.

Simon Rekker seemed to spring from his chair and went to the expansive window. He looked out at the night and the Harbour and the lights. He pointed to the window. "You see that world out there," he said. "Across that water is the mainland, Kowloon, beyond that the New Territories and the People's Republic of China. On July 1st, this little island, and everything that people call Hong Kong is going to be one with the so-called People's Republic. A lot of people around here," he waved his arms in a circular motion, "are worried sick about what that means. They feel like the British, no, the West is losing something of great value when the so-called communists take over around here. They're all missing the big picture. They've got everything backwards. This is the opportunity of the century. Finally, the entire world can be unified under the banner of global capitalism. Think about it. Russia is on its knees, begging for crumbs, run by a bunch of two-bit thugs who are rewriting Al Capone's playbook. Eastern Europe wants to join the West so badly they're willing to do almost anything if we let them in. I've already invested billions there and expect to own a big chunk of those countries before this seachange runs out. And, hell, I'm getting assets that are worth ten times what I'm paying. The biggest obstacle to the free flow of capital is now the People's Republic of China. China is still stuck in a mercantilist version of capitalism. They want to create their own robber barons and keep us 'big noses' out. One way or the other, they'll lose, just like the Russians. And once the Great Wall gives, hell, perhaps it isn't exactly the end of history, but it will be something the world has never seen. The entire world under one rule, the rule of global capital. And you know what that means. If the world is ruled by global capital, then the ones with the most capital will rule."

"You," Frank said.

Rekker smiled. "Of course. And that means you and Mikey and all the others who have assisted me over time will be in a position to shape the future of this planet in ways few men could ever dream. Isn't that what you've always dreamed about Frank?"

"What do you need me to do?" Frank asked, not quite sure what he should or shouldn't be saying. The whole idea seemed outlandish, even if he had demonstrated in a mathematical model that it was possible to trigger the sort of global cataclysm that Michael Maxwell --- *Mikey* --- had first described in cruder terms. He took some solace in knowing that he had at least improved on the model that Maxwell had constructed. He had, after all, turned it into a genuine economic model.

"Frank," Rekker said, breaking Frank's reverie, "I need you to work with Mikey in implementing this thing. I need everything to be timed right --- I need to know which domino to push first --- and that means you'll have to take those ideas out of the sterility of academic discourse and come up with a very concrete action plan. You and Mikey will have exclusive access to an IBM supercomputer,

programmers, and all the data you want. Hell, I've got better data than the IMF."

Michael's smile reappeared. "I can vouch for that."

"If you want us to develop a working model and properly back-test it, then it will take a good deal of time." Frank was in the middle of the new Spring semester and had not planned to be away for longer than a couple of days.

"You'll have all the time you need. Within reason, of course." Rekker returned to his seat. "I've already made arrangements with your provost to get you an emergency leave of absence and a replacement for your courses. You have the rest of this semester and the summer, if you need it. So forget about all those students just waiting to be bored stiff listening to your lectures."

"You talked to William Gerchman? He's allowing me to leave my courses in the middle of the semester?"

"The answer to your second question is yes. The answer to your first is not personally. One of my associates paid your provost a visit. I thought it needed something a little more intimate than a phone call." Rekker's eyebrows raised and he grinned. "I hear he was quite accommodating: that he was very willing to part with you for the remainder of the academic year."

"I don't understand," Frank was frowning.

"Let us just say that the University will be richly compensated for their loss. Bloody hell, Frank, everybody has their price."

Frank was silent for a moment, imagining Gerschmann selling one of his professors, like some indentured servant, for a few gold coins. "What about your job?" Frank asked Michael.

"No problem," Michael replied. "The IMF is always happy to cooperate with Mr. Rekker." The truth was, his boss did not have any idea that he was working with Simon Rekker. The call that had released him for this project came from Washington, D.C. or so his boss' secretary had said.

"Okay then," Rekker said, "since it seems that you two won't have any problem working together, then lets just say we have a deal. Yes?" Rekker spread his arms out, then added. "Oh, I forgot to mention one other little matter, Frank. You and Mickey will receive one million dollars deposited into your accounts as soon as the necessary paper work is completed and another four million when this little project is done. Does that sound reasonable?"

*What?* Frank felt numb, more nauseous than ever, and, at the same time, excited. *Did he say a million now and four million when it's done?* He nodded to Rekker in agreement.

"There's one catch," Degenhardt added, and Frank's eyebrows went up. "There is one helluvah no-disclosure agreement. You breath a word of this to anyone --- and I do mean anyone --- and you forfeit every penny of that five million and open yourself to a lawsuit from Hell to boot." He looked directly at Frank. "You can't tell your wife, Frank."

Frank found himself still nodding agreement.

"My attorneys insisted that this agreement be rather draconian," Rekker said, smiling. "I'm sure you can understand why. It is important that you realize that any and all work you do for me belongs to me and

only to me."

"You can't publish any papers or share any aspect of your work with anyone else," Degenhardt added.

Again, Frank nodded.



*hate blows a bubble of despair -- e.e. cummings*



The Mercedes limousine moved along Repulse Bay Road. Jack Degenhardt sat with his back to the driver facing Simon Rekker. Degenhardt was wrapping up a telephone call. He replaced the receiver in its cradle and said, "Pavletich is recommending we buy the Russian government bonds. He says investors are overestimating the default risk and the bonds are cheap at these levels."

"Have Dale fire the bloody fool," Rekker said.

"You're kidding, right?"

Rekker shook his head. "Give him a reasonable severance and send him on his way. Obviously Pavletich is useless. I've got enough useless traders as it is. I think we can do fine with one less."

"He says the Russian government won't let the bonds default. He seems to have good information."

"I have better information," Rekker said, shaking his head. "What the bloody hell is wrong with these idiots? Pavletich is aware that we're taking a short position against developing country securities and we've almost cornered the market in put options on currencies across Asia. What the bloody hell does he think Russia is --- if not a developing country? Does he think the Russian mob has some tricks up their sleeves for saving Russian bonds? When we slam Asia, the last wheels on the Russian truck will come off and the whole thing will go in the bloody ditch."

"How is that to our advantage?"

Rekker shrugged. "More cheap assets, Jack. We'll own Asia and Eastern Europe and Russia."

"You sure you want to own Russia. From what I can tell, the place isn't worth a plug nickel."

Rekker grinned. "Maybe so, but you just make sure I don't have to look in Pavletich's face again."

Degenhardt smiled. "Okay, consider Pavletich fired. I'll let Dale know tonight. Anything else?"

Rekker smiled. "Yeah, get one of our other traders to short the Russian bonds *and* the bloody ruble."

Again, Degenhardt nodded. "You really think Maxwell and Hyde can make the model work?"

Rekker smile widened. "Of course," he said. "You don't think I'd go to all this trouble just to play matchmaker to those two, do you? It'll work."

"What about Mike's *overdetermination* shit? What if something unexpected pops up to muck things up?"

"Like what?"

"You know, Simon, this plan of yours is going to piss off an awful lot of governments. If your plan is going to work, don't we need to make sure that the governments of South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, not to mention Russia, don't recognize what's happening and gang up to fight you?"

"Never happen."

"Why not?"

"Bloody hell, Jack, I trust the United States government and, even more so, the U.S. capitalists, like our old friend John Whitehead, to keep these blokes at each other's throats. They won't come together over this or anything else. Nobody trusts the Russians, not even the Russians. The Koreans don't trust the Japanese and the Japanese don't trust anybody. Malaysia is still perceived as a backwater neocolony. No, every one of the countries in this region --- and all of Eastern Europe --- are vulnerable to attack. It's been building up for some time. The only thing this model does is give us a nice neat way to get in first, before Whitehead and his bunch can come in like vultures to pick among the dead meat."

"Aren't you worried that the IMF might muck it up?"

Rekker smiled. "Who the bloody hell do you think the IMF works for, Jack? Why the bloody hell do you think I've got Mikey working for me? I own the IMF. Maybe I don't own it personally, but it works for me, you can be sure about that. Just like I own academia: the whole god-damned system of thinkers and idea engineers. Mikey and Frank are representatives of that system: they work for me, Jack, as sure as the Earth orbits around the Sun. That's what makes capitalism great. With virtually no effort, the entire bloody system works toward a singular purpose: my well being."

"Yours and John Whitehead's," Jack said, smiling, feeling a tad mischievous, knowing that John Whitehead was not always a favorite topic of Simon Rekker. Whitehead's industrial capitalist empire did not always share common interests with Rekker's financial empire.

"Yeah, me and bloody John Whitehead," he said. "How is John anyway? He still think 1960s style conglomerates are the way to go?"

"Whitehead keeps trying to get a spy into our organization. He's desperate to know what you're up to. It's pathetic."

Rekker shook his head. "Don't underestimate John. You don't get to rule the biggest conglomerate in the States without cutting a good many throats."

Jack nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"You guess?"

"I'm not going to let down my guard, Simon."

"Bloody right. You're my samurai, Jack. I need your vigilance."

"Simon, don't worry about that," Jack said emphatically and gave him a look that communicated his resolve, "if anyone crosses you, I'll be the one who does the throat cutting."

"We're going to rule the world, Jack."

Jack nodded. And hell if he didn't believe every word of it. It was like a religious experience.

Simon recognized the look on Jack's face and smiled.



Starbucks in Tyson's Corner was central command for Mica Brant, at least it was today. She was meeting Roy Carr, a senior analyst in the Southeast Asia Division of the C.I.A. Carr had made the rare transition from field op during the 1970s and early 1980s to a desk job. He was twelve years older than Mica, but lower on the bureaucratic totem pole. For the past four years he had been trying to satisfy part of his serotonin deficiency and dealing with midlife crisis through an affair with Mica.

"I suppose you already know that I have to return to Hong Kong," she said.

He nodded. "Look, I'm sorry about what I said to you before your last trip. It was stupid."

"I don't go or not go to Hong Kong because of you," she said. "Yeah, it was pretty damn stupid."

"Maybe when you get back we can drive down to Nags Head."

She didn't respond right away, then shook her head. "I'm too busy."

"You didn't used to be too busy for me."

"It has nothing to do with you," she sounded annoyed.

"Well, I guess it really doesn't matter." He seemed to let a balloon full of air out as he sat back.

She frowned. "What does that mean?"

"I asked the director to let me take over as political officer at the Embassy in Djakarta."

"What? You can't be serious, Roy. You want to go back into the field?"

"I'm serious as a heart attack. I'll be in charge of ops."

"You're replacing Harrison?"

"Yeah. Harrison was a screw up. He's on his way to Kenya."

She shook her head. "Kenya? When did this happen?"

"The director made the decision several weeks ago."

She was silent for a moment. "And you put in for the position? You want to go back to Operations?"

"I've never been happy sitting behind a desk all day, you know that."

"No," she said firmly, "I did not know that. You never told me that."

"Well, it's what I want. I'm sick of sitting behind a desk and living in those claustrophobic corridors in Langley, shuffling papers and looking through all those layers of glass at a warped sky."

"Fine." She picked up her coffee cup and looked at it, then took a sip.

"You're mad at me?" He smiled. "You know your temper is almost legendary at Langley."

She looked up. "Fuck you."

"I guess I should have talked to you."

She shrugged. "It's your life, Roy. After Afghanistan I thought you wouldn't want to be in the field under any conditions."

"Yeah, I still remember that mercenary standing over me and saying, in Spanish, that he could get a lot of bacon by killing another pig." Roy laughed nervously. "Funny thing is, I hired that s-o-b. Here I am in the midst of fanatically devout Muslims and I'm nearly snuffed by a hired gun from Paraguay."

"You let down your guard," she looked him straight in the eyes. "You were careless."

"Maybe, but Indonesia's a lot quieter than Afghanistan. Suharto buried the communists years ago and keeps a tight reign on things. I shouldn't have much to worry about. This is a job I can do and you and I, we'll be working for the same boss. Bernie's in charge of everything that happens in Indonesia. I guess you know that he used to be friends with Suharto, back when he was in the field in Djakarta."

"Forget Suharto," she said distainfully. "General Widobro runs the show in Indonesia."

"General keep-em-in-line-with-terror? Could have used him in Kabul."

"I can't believe they're sending you back into the field."

"That doesn't sound like a vote of confidence."

She shook her head. "Things can get pretty messy in the field."

"You can't get much messier than the Golden Crescent. I've done my time. I know what I'm doing."

"You know what you're doing?"

He nodded.

"What ever happened to that Paraguayan mercenary?" She looked at her coffee, not at Roy.

"I don't know. I got transferred out of Afghanistan. They sent some cowboy in to replace me."

She looked at him for a long time, then took another sip of her coffee. "You should have killed him."

"Who? My replacement?"

A young woman at another table cursed loudly after spilling her cappucino.

"Contracted field agents and mercenaries are nothing but dirt. You don't let them forget that." Her lips parted and she hesitated a moment. "You should have terminated that mercenary. Your failure has

become one of those little legends that people whisper about in Operations. Oswald Herman Stroessner is still in Afghanistan and working with the Taliban. He's another one of those Frankenstein monsters we created and forgot to terminate. He went from being pro-American to anti-American without skipping a beat. In fact, he was photographed in the company of al Qaeda members who were seen torturing one of our agents." She paused, letting this sink in before continuing. "Everyone knows where Oswald got his training and who put him on the Agency payroll. That's part of the reason I'm surprised that Langley wants you back in the field."

"I don't feel guilty about Stroessner," Carr said. "I did my job in Afghanistan and I'll do it in Indonesia. I made mistakes and Stroessner was a mistake. But I also helped create a force that destroyed the Soviet Empire. I have no apologies." He was having trouble keeping his voice under control.

"Relax," Mica said, looking around. "You never know when Big Brother is listening."

Roy relaxed the tension in his shoulders and drank his coffee. "Just have a little faith in me, will you?"

She nodded. "Okay, Roy," she said in a soft voice. "You better learn to control that temper of yours or you will screw it up." She smiled and waited to see if Roy would blow another fuse.

He sighed. "I won't screw it up," he said calmly.

Again, she nodded. "That's all I'm saying."



*She pulled with all her might and in the midst of the scream felt her body move backwards and she fell to the floor with a loud thud. As she struggled to her feet the wall appeared completely normal. The Black Hole was gone. She heard her mother calling her name and struggled to her feet. She looked around at her bedroom. Everything was as it should be, except for one thing. She knew she had to hide the half eaten biscuit or her mother would be angry.*



Herman Road had a Ph.D. in psychology and a M.A. in political science, but he had never worked in academia. Road's occupation was creator of political leaders.

Road lived in a modest 5 bedroom house in Norman, Oklahoma, although he also had a beach house in Malibu and a 4 bedroom condo in Manhattan. His latest project was also the reason he had purchased the Norman house. Road had come to Oklahoma originally to serve as campaign manager for George W. Birch, the playboy-cocaine using son of a former secretary of state who had decided to go into the family business by running for the U.S. senate seat of an aging liberal democrat, one of the last from the South.

"We beat Byron Wally because his political instincts had ossified," Road said.

"We won because you made him look like a nigger loving pinko communist faggot," Lance Cane said.

Road seemed to contemplate this for a moment, then asked, "You want a beer or something?"

"Sure," said the chief of staff to Senator Birch, stretching out his long legs and relaxing on the leather sofa.

Herman Road had studied Senator Byron Wally so intensively that he probably knew Wally better than Wally's own children. He used this information as the basis for a smear campaign that craftily mixed fact and fiction so well that it confused Oklahoma voters. In the end, Wally, a former war hero who had lost an arm serving his country was made to look like someone in the back pocket of liberal interest groups, particularly the NAACP, and untrustworthy. Road had used a number of ex-vets, who came out of the campaign much richer than when it started, as the shock troops in the successful campaign to destroy the reputation of Byron Wally. The result was a decisive win by George W. Birch.

Road returned from his kitchen with two chilled bottles of beer and handed one to Cane.

"We may be up against another Byron Wally," Cane said, as Road sat in the matching white leather love-seat. "Senator Sandstone has raised a lot of money from tech companies and is trying to capitalize on his hero status. We've got plenty of dollars coming in from oil, but Sandstone concerns me."

"It doesn't hurt to have plenty of money," Road said. "But money only gets you manpower and into living rooms. You still need to know what to say to them. Anyway, Sandstone was a P.O.W. A lot of people see a former P.O.W. and they think 'Manchurian candidate.' We just need to play that up, but subtly."

Subtlety was not Road's forte. "Anyone else we need to worry about in the primaries?" Cane asked.

"I worry about everybody," Road replied. "But I think if we taint Sandstone, we'll win the nomination."

Cane drank some of his beer. "He co-authored that Left environmental bill with Kennedy. Kennedy is still the Devil incarnate among GOP loyalists. Maybe Senator Birch could make a point to bring this up."

Road shook his head. "Remember, we need to be subtle. Talk to Vince Morris at the Times. He's a good friend." Road smiled. "I'm sure he can find a way to remind the public of this strange friendship."

"Morris," Cane said, nodding his head. "Okay."

"And Bent Dombaugh might be willing to work it into his daily diatribe," Road added. "He could make a point of the different approaches of Senators Birch and Sandstone."

"Senator Birch being for energy independence and mom's apple pie, and Senator Sandstone and his pal, Teddy, want to handcuff the oil companies and keep us dependent on the camel jockey towel heads.

Road laughed and took another swig of beer. "You're good at this. What do you need me for?"

"Well," Cane said, "if not for you, I wouldn't be headed back to D.C. tomorrow as a senate chief of staff."

Road did not argue the point, but rather turned the conversation to the details of the next few weeks of a campaign for the presidency that had not yet been announced. Deep down, Road felt confident they could win the GOP nomination but knew the presidential election would be a serious challenge.

Cane understood this, but as he listened to Road's enthusiasm, he knew the man already had a plan.



Jay awakened in the near darkness of a Hong Kong night, faint sounds of cars and trucks in the distance. He closed his eyes and tried to recapture some of the images from his dreamsleep. Stairs. The stoop of a southside Chicago brownstone. A door. Wooden, scratched. Someone yelling. Outside there was a big white car, a Pontiac. His father was standing near the driver's door. The door was open, but only partly visible from the stoop. *What was he saying?* Jay could not remember. He had seen his father in the Windy City only once, so long ago, so brief, that he was not sure it was a real memory, rather than yet another dream. He would never be able to ask his father or uncle if it had really happened.

Jay got out of bed and made his way to the kitchen. He didn't bother with any lights. Faint light came from the windows. Hong Kong was never pitch dark. His memories of pitch dark were from Arkansas and Belize. In the mountains of Belize, he had once seen a full lunar eclipse create deep darkness.

Deep darkness full eclipse. He opened the refrigerator and its tiny light sent forth a stream of brilliance.

A stream of brilliance. He took an empty glass from the refrigerator and placed it on the counter.

In the dreamsleep, he had seen water, a flood, the land giving way underfoot. He just could not remember enough. He opened a cabinet and found the bottle of Absolut vodka, then closed the refrigerator door.

He leaned against the counter, sipping vodka from the chilled glass, letting it work its magic.

The edges of the world softened. Afterwards, he returned to bed and a new stream of vivid dreams.



*We all dream. Every night - as we dim the light of consciousness - we enter the realm of the dream. In this dream state our imagination runs free with little or no interference from our conscious mind. In the morning, when we awaken and return to consciousness, we may bring with us a recollection of the wanderings of our imagination - we remember the dream.*

*Excerpt from "Jung's Rediscovery of the Dream" in DreamAnalysis.info*



Michael Maxwell and Frank Hyde sat in the back of the stretch Mercedes, courtesy of Simon Rekker. They could see the rest of the world through tinted glass.

"Neoclassical economics is the most powerful tool of *Westernization* being deployed against the rest of the world," Michael Maxwell was saying. "It programs young people to think that the colonial model of proper behavior is the only model of proper behavior, while simultaneously pretending that colonization never happened. It excuses a lot of self-centered behavior and brutality. It absolves the West of the guilt of having screwed the rest of the world."

"That's poppycock," Frank said.

"Is it?"

"Yes."

Michael smiled. "Are you a greed maximizer, Frank?"

*That's why I'm here*, he wanted to say, but just sighed. He was still nauseous and didn't find Michael Maxwell's company to be the utility maximizing choice at present.

"What we have in the world," Michael continued, "is a form of global apartheid." He smiled, as if enjoying his own creativity. "The primary purpose of the economics profession seems to be to serve as the defenders of that global apartheid system. We do it either by working in academia and teaching everyone to think like a colonial or doing what we're doing here in Hong Kong --- working directly for the masters of the system, helping them to rip off the rest of the world, keep themselves rich, and the vast majority of the world dirt poor."

"People are poor because they are lazy," Frank said, his patience wearing thinner with each moment. "Your Third World is made up of a bunch of lazy bums who want everything given to them."

"They're poor, Frank, because of thousands of years of violence and terror and the maintenance of this global system I'm talking about. Take Africa, for example . . ."

"Yeah, take it and throw it in the garbage heap," Frank interrupted. "Now there's an excellent example of your Third World."

"Africa was depopulated by the slave trade and all the violence and terror that went with the slave trade," Michael said, undaunted. "And then there was the long colonial period, with artificial boundaries and hatreds created by the colonial powers. The colonial governments wielded totalitarian power over their populations, breaking down every institution that might have allowed for independent economic, political, and cultural development."

"Africans never had it better than when they were living under colonial rule," Frank said emphatically. "They can't run their own affairs." He smiled. "You know, the real solution is to bring back the colonial era."

"You have some kind of Hollywood image of what colonialism and slavery were like," Michael said. "The terror of the slave trade and the Middle Passage, the totalitarian regimes created under colonialism, those long, dark years devastated Africa. It wasn't simply the loss of life, and that was catastrophic, but it was the destruction of African civilizations."

"African civilization, now that's an oxymoron."

"Africa had complex civilizations long before Europe. The colonialists did not conquer the jungle. They conquered cities and towns and villages. They conquered kingdoms and empires."

Frank shook his head. "More Marxist fantasies," he said.

"It's the truth, Frank. Face it, our governments did more to destroy civilization than we ever did to build it. And to get back to my point, we economists don't talk about the processes by which all those people got screwed. We don't even mention kidnapping and enslavement or violence or even coercion. We act like the world is this perfect place where everybody is equal. We talk about economic agents making decisions in an environment of perfect competition, meaning perfect equality of power and knowledge. There are no lies. There are no death squads or even men with guns. And we presume that every economic agent is a greedy son-of-a-bitch like the slave traders and colonialists were."

Frank shook his head and stared out the window of the limousine. "If you feel so strongly, you shouldn't

be sitting in this car."

Mike nodded. "You're probably right about that, except that you forget --- I know a lot more than I care about. I gave up a long time ago on the idea that I could change the way things work in the world. Yes, people are getting royally screwed every day and the current status quo is dependent on a long history of people being trampled underfoot. Nevertheless, I decided it was better to just take care of number one. That's why I'm here."

Frank turned again and smiled. "Sounds like utility maximization to me."

Mike agreed. "It is. I never said that I wasn't one of those greedy sons-of-a-bitch, did I?"

Frank laughed. "You're sick," he said, shaking his head.

Mike sighed. "Probably."

They didn't talk much for the rest of their trip.

•→NEXT CHAPTER

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# DREAMING IN MALAYSIA

A Web Novel

by

Satya J. Gabriel



## CHAPTER FOUR: Clothes Moths

Mona gazed at the reflection of her naked body in the full length mirror as if it was an alien thing. Why couldn't she look like the women on the covers of the glossy magazines or the "idols" on the Internet? Gazing at her shape she felt some mixture of anger ("You eat too damn much!" "You should exercise more." "What are you doing to me?"), despair ("I'll never be attractive." "I'm disgusting."), and confusion ("Why are you looking at yourself in the mirror?" "Why can't you be satisfied with yourself?" "What is wrong with me?"). Gazing at the mirror, everything seemed to blur. The subatomic particles raced in front of her eyes and her body was indistinguishable from the reflective glass and the other reflections.

*That which does not kill you, makes you stronger.* Mona remembered hearing this when she was at Mount Holyoke College. For some reason it stayed with her, although she had only heard it once, and was not at all sure she believed it. Nevertheless, there were moments when this phrase made her feel better. She looked through her underwear drawer in search of something that would make her feel pretty, even if no one would ever see it. She had a meeting with Ali Jamal this morning and wanted to at least feel desirable. And perhaps feed her inner fantasies of what might be . . . if only she was pretty enough, desirable enough, deserving . . . Mona rode the express bus into the center city, watching the buildings flowing backwards into the past, and dreaming of a different Mona.

Mona, head down, walked past Shukri Chamrong in the corridor that led to Ali Jamal's office. Shukri smiled (he was always a cheerful fellow) when he saw her and tried to make small talk, but she was in a hurry and told him so. At the end of the hall Mona saw Fadil Hamzah emerge from the double doors that led to Ali Jamal's office. He walked right up to her and waved her to the side. "You're supposed to meet with him, I know, but he is going to be delayed," Hamzah said. "Very important that you not disturb him. He'll tell you the rest when you see him. Come with me." Hamzah motioned for her to head back in the

opposite direction. He blocked her from going forward and seemed to leave no option but to obey.

"Ali Jamal told me to meet him at 10 sharp," she protested, but Hamzah was shaking his head, and even took her firmly by the arm and directed her to move down the hallway. As he hustled her away from Ali Jamal's office, she continued to protest, looking over her shoulder at the double doors. "He wants me to report on the new speech for his visit to Manila."

"Don't worry," Hamzah said, shaking his head vigorously. "You will have your chance when he is done. Right now, our finance minister, is in a very important meeting with some very important people and he can't be disturbed. He would have told you himself, but it was rather sudden. I told him I'd take care of you." Hamzah smiled, not an every day event. Mona was not sure she liked it. "Yes, indeed," Hamzah continued. "I have something very important to talk to you about, Mona. Very important, indeed. You'll see. You are one of the most talented people on Ali's staff. No question about this. And I have something that will make better use of your talent." Mona was having trouble keeping up the pace that Hamzah had imposed. She wanted to protest but he gave her no opportunity. "Speech writer?" He frowned. "You?" He shook his head. "Waste of talent. Absolute waste of talent." At that Mona abruptly pulled her arm loose and stopped. She frowned and was about to speak, when that smile returned and Hamzah said, "I know why you left the United States." He paused, seeming to allow this to sink in. She was silent. "I know what happened at Morgan Stanley." He nodded, as if agreeing with something unsaid. "Haji Bilal's daughter," he said. "How would he react if he knew? One really does wonder. It is good that you kept it from him." He frowned. "Nothing to say?" And then he nodded again and smiled again. "Indeed, nothing to say. But I completely understand, Mona. Yes, I do, really. I completely understand. If I were you, and, of course, there is no way I could be you, but if by God's grace I were, then I would be silent, as well." He pointed down the hall, indicating they should proceed to his office. She complied. This time there was no need to use any physical encouragement. And the pace was slower. "I meant what I said about your talent. You are being wasted writing speeches. The nation needs more from talented young women like you."

"How did you find out?" Mona asked, trying to suppress tears. "Who told you?" She could not look him in the eyes. She imagined a phone call, perhaps an anonymous letter. No, she thought, it would not have come to Fadil Hamzah, if a letter came, it would have come to Ali Jamal or her father.

They reached the door to Hamzah's outer office and went inside.

He told his secretary not to interrupt them. Frowning in disapproval, he nodded. They walked into the office and Hamzah motioned for Mona to be seated. He went around his desk and did likewise. "I have no intention of exposing your secrets, Mona," he said, and leaned back in his chair. "Indeed, I plan never to speak of what happened, not even to you, unless you ask me to. Do you want to talk about it?" Mona's eyes had disobeyed her will and she was crying. She shook her head. Hamzah nodded, a look of understanding on his face. "As you know, I, too, lived in the United States for a time. I know that it is difficult in that country to keep one's equilibrium, such an immoral place, so much hypocrisy. But you came home." He nodded his head. "You came home to your nation, to your people, to your father. That means something. It speaks to your desire to make something of your life."

"Are you going to tell my father?" Mona asked.

"I've told you that I will not speak of it, not to anyone but you," he replied. "I am a man of my word, I assure you. You must trust me." He turned away from her and took a book from a bookshelf behind his desk. "Noam Chomsky," he said, looking up. "Have you read him?"

She shook her head. *What has Noam Chomsky to do with anything?*

He looked at the book in his hand, seemingly pleased. "He is an American Jew," he said, and again with the smile. "I met him while I was teaching at M.I.T., where he also teaches. He is a linguist, but he has a keen interest in politics and history. I never quite knew what to think of him. A Jew who was not a Zionist. An American intellectual who refused to lie about his country's role in the world. Very strange. You should read this." He tossed the book onto the desk in front of Mona.

She shook her head. "I'm not interested," she said.

He nodded, "Of course you're not interested in this leftwing American intellectuality. Neither am I. But I did find Professor Chomsky strange. And I'm not comfortable with his strangeness. I've known Ali Jamal for many years. Lately, the last few years, he has become somewhat strange."

"I think I should leave now," Mona said.

He shook his head vigorously. "Not yet," he said. "I must apologize for taking so long to get to the point. You see, I need your help with something important, something that makes good use of your intellect, your talents." He stopped abruptly as his secretary entered the room. "I said no interruptions." The tall, skinny young man apologized, then placed a tray with two tiny porcelain cups on the desk and quickly exited the room. Hamzah looked at the cups, then at Mona. "Coffee?"

She shook her head. "I really should go," she said, in a pleading tone of voice.

He held up one hand. "In a moment," he said, picking up one of the cups and touching it to his lips. After sipping the strong coffee, he leaned back and continued, "I have a job for you, Mona. As I said, it is important, vitally so. And you cannot say no. And the reason you cannot say no is not that I plan to use coercion. Indeed, I would do no such thing. The reason you cannot say no is that you love your country and you live to serve Allah, peace be upon him." He told Mona what she was to do. She listened. Her hands were shaking, but she made no effort to cut him short or to leave. She was frozen in her chair, as if in a dream where you want to run but cannot do so. "The West corrupted you," he said, "but Islam will bring you home." He stared into her eyes and she turned away. Sipping at his coffee, Hamzah observed her carefully. He walked around the desk and touched Mona's shoulder. "Your father cares deeply about you. You must not disappoint him." She looked up at this man. His belly pushing out his white shirt. His poorly cared-for teeth. "So'mek nee," he said and smiled. She was scared of him. "Don't worry," he said, removing his hand from her shoulder and returning to his seat on the other side of the desk. "You must be as tired as I am of serving the interests of God-less foreign banks and speculators, men who care only about money. Isn't it time to serve a higher purpose?" He picked up his cup again and after taking a final sip, put down the cup and said, "I'll call Ali and see if he is done with his meeting. Is that all right?" She nodded in agreement. He picked up the phone and asked his secretary to check with Ali Jamal to see if he was ready to meet Mona binti Mohammed. After replacing the receiver of his phone, he smiled yet again. All this smiling from a man who rarely smiled only made goosebumps on Mona's arms. "I think you can go now," he said.

She hesitated. He nodded and she got up from her chair and walked out.

His phone rang after she had departed. It was Ali Jamal. He thanked Fadil once again for his role in arranging the meeting with Louis Farrakhan, titular leader of the Nation of Islam in the United States. Ali Jamal had agreed with Fadil that the American Muslim community might serve as a vehicle for

Malaysian financial institutions expansion into the United States. After all, WTO opened Malaysia to the Americans. It was only fair that Malaysia find a way to use WTO to get into America's financial system. Traditional routes were not likely to be easy to navigate.

And besides, Ali Jamal knew that he needed Fadil Hamzah's complete cooperation to push through the necessary financial reforms. If working with the Nation of Islam was the cost, then it was a rather cheap price, indeed. Fadil had the ear of Prime Minister Abdullah, who was always concerned about losing the support of the religious right. If Fadil supported the reforms, then the rightwing of the ruling party would likely follow suit. Because of the strong support that Ali had from the party chairman, Haji Bilal, the core of the party, the moderates and less religious dinosaurs, would follow along. And the reformers were already on board. Ali Jamal was convinced that the key to Malaysian ascendancy was for the nation to both become a more seductive site in attracting capital flows and to gain more control over capital flows into the richer nations, such as the United States. The American and European bankers had attained near monopoly control over these capital flows within the advanced capitalist nations. Ali Jamal knew that it would take a great deal of creativity to insert Malaysian financial institutions into that matrix. It was quite a surprise to Ali Jamal that Fadil was playing such an active and creative role in this process.



Moonlight drifted through the window, casting shadows. Mona could not sleep. This was not unusual. Often she found herself lying in bed awake or sitting up staring out the window. The more she thought about how much she had to do the next day, and how much she needed to get some sleep, the less sleep she got. Sometimes she would get up and write, other times simply lie in bed thinking.

Her thoughts turned to the various media reports she had heard or read during the past week. Prime Minister Abdullah had endorsed the financial market reforms, although his endorsement had been less enthusiastic than Ali Jamal would have liked. Depending on how one read the endorsement, it was possible to see the prime minister leaving himself a few possible outs, in case the reforms were less than successful. He had even referred to the reforms as "bearing some amount of risk but necessary for *pragmatic* reasons." He indicated that the country had little choice but to carry out the proposed changes in financial institutions and regulations in order to satisfy "foreign investors." He also repeatedly referred to Ali Jamal's "hard work on these reforms." And the other big story in the media was the arrest of two of the top leaders of a leftist labor union. Mona thought about Ali Jamal's concerns about how unions would raise the cost of labor and undermine Malaysia's economic progress. She hoped that the arrest of the labor leaders would give others pause before they joined or supported such organizations. She understood workers as always wanting to get paid more for less work. But if profits are simply total revenues minus the costs of production then this can only come at the expense of enterprise profitability. She thought that workers were foolish to think they could force the firms they worked for to give up more of the value created in the production process without seriously hurting the economy as a whole. As Ali Jamal would put it, why should boards of directors approve new investment in plant, equipment and hiring if the profit rate is under pressure? No, she thought, the workers must learn to spend their wages better and they must work harder, so that they are more productive. Only then can they get more pay and be able to buy more and better quality consumption goods. *You can't get something for nothing.* This thought made her smile. She remembered the one class in Marxism she had taken from Professor Seley at Mount Holyoke College in which he had argued that the capitalists are the ones who get something for nothing. He talked about the workers being *exploited* by the capitalists. She had received an "A" in the

course because she had learned what he wanted on his papers, but she had not been persuaded. She had written in one of those papers that the impediments to worker unity and the growth of organized labor in the United States was threefold: i) the culture of individualism that created in each worker a sense of being on her/his own in the world and not needing the help of other people (the *Marlboro Man Syndrome*, she had called it, and Professor Seley had made a very supportive comment next to that), ii) American racism, which made it difficult to organize work forces that were comprised of different racial groups, and iii) the imperialist benefits of American capitalism that allowed U.S. workers to live better than workers in Third World capitalist countries (because the United States was so powerful and had such a head start that it could extract wealth from the poorer nations to support its rapid accumulation of capital and to allow its workers to consume more goods). Professor Seley had loved her paper so much that he had encouraged her to pursue a Ph.D. in economics. She had gone to work for Morgan Stanley instead. After all, she still believed it was not the workers who produced the wealth of nations, but the people sitting on those boards of directors, the self-same capitalists that he had criticized, no matter what she had written on the paper. She firmly believed that workers should be thankful to the capitalists for creating the jobs that put food on their tables and clothes on their backs. Workers who organized unions and went on strike were like ungrateful children who do not respect their parents.

She was convinced that Ali Jamal would know how to handle organized labor if he became prime minister. She hoped that Fadil Hamzah's plans would not interfere with Ali Jamal's accession to the top political position after Akil Abdullah retired. She felt compelled to cooperate with Fadil Hamzah, mostly out of fear. And she had convinced herself that what he asked of her was relatively benign, even if her conscience told her otherwise.



Sometimes she felt like she could work magic. She was on top of the world. And other times she was not sure she could keep from throwing herself out some high-rise window in Kuala Lumpur. Perhaps the KL Tower. Imagine you are in her imagination as she imagines falling. Seconds would seem like an eternity because it would be.

Her eyes were large ovals and the irises dark brown. She looked into the mirror and saw the reverse image of herself. Sometimes she did not like what she saw. Sometimes she despised herself. She saw someone who was too plump and too plain in the mirror. Unmarried and overweight. Did anyone really care for her? Did Ali Jamal notice her, really? Or was she just another staff member, author of some speeches, occupant of one of the offices downstairs from the finance minister's office. She wanted to be someone else and often played at being someone else. Wasn't her role in Morgan Stanley just that, a role? Everything was play acting. She tried to convince herself that what Fadil Hamzeh asked of her was just another role. After all, who was Mona binti Mohammed, really? Did she have sufficient knowledge or *self* control to demarcate the lines of a consistent set of behaviors, beliefs, fears that might be the basis for demarcating an entity called Mona? Who was this inner self that torments the inner self that is Mona? And who would she be if she allowed herself to be used by a man like Fadil Hamzah? But what choice was there? She did not believe him when he said that he would not tell her father what he learned. And if he did tell her father, she was convinced it would destroy her world totally. She could not live with the consequences and would do *whatever* was necessary to avoid those consequences.

Mona showered and changed her clothes. Meipo had left a note indicating that she would be home late.

Mona shook her head. *Why does Mei always feel like she has to leave a note when she's out late?* Mona shrugged. *It's just a habit.* Mona picked up her watch and put it on. She was late. Her father would be unhappy about that. He'd have some comment to make. It would make her feel uncomfortable. She knew he didn't mean to do it, but, like Meipo, he was a creature of habit.

There was a time when her father's house had seemed like a castle. Although she had been very young when they had moved into the house in 1975, only one year after he had been elected to the House of Representatives, she wondered if she had some primitive and subliminal memory of the more modest house that had been the family home when she was born. As a child she had turned the grounds of this *new* home into her own private universe, populated by all manner of imagined beings. Her father had once told her that she shouldn't "talk to herself" because people would think she was crazy. She had ignored him. After her mother's death and her father's remarriage to her mother's cousin, Izmeen, these childhood fantasies and invisible friends were the only barrier between her consciousness and the vast and distant place called the unconscious where she stored the memories of her step-mother's verbal and physical assaults. She had eventually grown out of *talking to herself* without being admitted to a mental institution. Small victories.

The taxi had to wait at the huge wrought iron gates until one of the two security guards came and pulled the lever to open them. Mona smiled as she looked over familiar greenery and smelled jasmine in the air.

The maid opened the front door and, as usual, expressed absolute delight to see Mona. It was a ritual. Actually Mona was happy to see the woman. Penaarasy was one of the few house servants to survive her step-mother's employment. The diminutive woman walked off across the marble floor to find Mona's father and give him the good news.

The creamy white sun filled entranceway of the house was not as grand as in her childhood imagination but it was impressive nevertheless. She walked past the twin dragons and into the living room. Sheer white curtains moved ever so slightly in the breeze from open windows. Mona went over to Izmeen's newly acquired white and black sofa. Her father's second wife, Izmeen, loved playing interior decorator and this new sofa was purchased in and shipped from Beverly Hills in the USA.

"Your'e late again, Mona," Mohamed bin Haji Bilal said, as he entered the room, a long brown cigarette in one hand. "Remember the saying, 'time is money'."

Mona stood up and greeted her father with a tender embrace, then she gently slapped his shoulder and said, "I had to work." Then she added, "You know you should not be smoking."

He looked at the cigarette and nodded. He put the cigarette out in an ashtray on a table next to the sofa, but Mona knew he would light it up again the moment she was gone. "Old habits," he said. "To be honest, I thought I had thrown away all my cigarettes. I was surprised to find a pack of my favorites in a dresser drawer."

"Nevertheless . . ." she said.

"Yes, yes, nevertheless I shouldn't be smoking," he said, nodding his head and smiling. "Maybe you should come home more often to make sure I don't succumb to such weaknesses."

They both then sat on the sofa.

"I've talked to Ali about your work," he said. "It is quite impressive. You make me very proud. This

country needs more young people like you, Mona, willing to do the hard work necessary to making this country work. If we had more such young people, then the multinationals wouldn't have to import so many managers. Unfortunately, too many young people just want opportunity given to them as a gift. They aren't willing to work for it."

"Don't you think that sometimes the foreigners just prefer to have their own people as managers?"

"Perhaps, sometimes, but it costs them a rather large amount of money to bring managers from their home countries. They end up paying a bigger salary, more benefits, including housing stipends and travel expenses. If they could find qualified Malaysians, I'm sure they would rather hire them than the expensive ex-patriots."

"What do you think is the solution?"

"Education is part of it," he said, then frowned. "That's not enough, I'm afraid. I think our people are still very much enculturated in taking things a bit too easy, in being overly personal about work relationships and not professional enough. A modern capitalist economy requires a sophisticated, highly professional managerial army: people who are trained in organizing workers, loyal to their companies, and will not hesitate to fire anyone who shirks his responsibility."

"I don't think managers in the West are all that loyal to their companies," she said.

His frown returned, but before he could say anything he noticed that Mona was looking down at the floor, her face washed in sudden sadness.

"What is it Mona? Ada baik?"

She shrugged.

"I know when something is wrong. Did something happen between you and Ali?"

She blinked, then shook her head. *What do you mean "did something happen between you and Ali?"*

"Mona?"

She looked up. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

*Can I tell him what I think? Can I tell him what I feel?* She was not even sure she could be completely honest with herself. Something in her nature, her programming, kept the truth just beyond reach. She often tried to provoke her father by saying things that triggered his fears, but she did not want to do this today. She was so confused. "I'm just very busy," she said.

He gave her a look, as if to say *"I know better."* "You need to get married," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm happy the way I am," she said.

"You don't look happy."

"Maybe I'm just tired."

"And?"

"And sometimes I feel like I don't deserve this life. It's depressing."

"What do you mean?"

She shook her head again. *I am not the little girl in your imagination.*

"Mona, everyone in this world feels doubt from time to time, except those who are pathological."

Tears were forming in her eyes. Just beyond reach . . .

"Life is the definition of unfairness. With little hard work, a poor boy from a poor village grows up to become a well-to-do barrister and then a member of parliament. And now you're working for the finance minister. We just have to take advantage of the opportunities that come available. The world is full of lazy bums who sit around waiting for someone else to give them something. You're not like that, Mona. Sure, it helps to be in the right family or classified as a member of the right racial group at the right time or have connections to the right people or have attended the right school. But that is only the open door through which you have to walk. You should take pride in having taken those steps. Don't feel sad about it, Mona."

She shook her head. "That's not what bothers me."

His eyes widened. "Then what does bother you?"

"I don't know."

He sighed. "You must not let self-doubt interfere with your work."

She shook her head once again. "I don't," she said. "I do my work."

He nodded. "Of course you do. I know that. Ali is very effusive in his praise. I'm quite certain that you have his confidence. What then? What weighs so heavily on you?"

A slight smile. ". . . *you have his confidence.*" "*Ali is very effusive in his praise . . .*" Ali. But then the smile disappeared, as she thought about the ugly truth that Fadil knew about her.

"You don't realize how valuable you are to Ali." He reached over and touched her cheek. "You worry too much, Mona," he said. "You are young. You should enjoy life."

She didn't really believe he meant that. "I have so much work and Ali Jamal is such a perfectionist."

"He's not so perfect."

Mona frowned. Her father smiled.

"You know, he had his problems when he was younger. He's grown a good deal over the years."

"Problems?"

"You know, Ali was once a trouble maker when he was at university."

Her frown deepened.

"Don't worry," he said. "We all make our mistakes, especially when we are young and idealistic." He

paused, then added, "Ali was young and idealistic. But look at him today, the very model of what this country needs in its leaders, hard working, pragmatic, and no nonsense." Mona had tears in her eyes. Her father was now the one frowning. He did not understand her reaction. He cursed his dead wife for dying. *Aren't mothers supposed to take care of this sort of psychological confusion in daughters?*

"Where's Hussein and Xarmina?" Mona asked, trying to change the subject, but also wondering where her brother and sister were. They were usually very excited to see their older sister.

"They've gone to the park with their new nanny. Her name is Crystal. She's from the Philippines. Izmeen hired her last week after dismissing both the nanny *and* the cook. I think you will like her, Mona." Mohamed was more than willing to allow a change of subject. He was always a bit uncomfortable trying to play the role of counselor to his oldest daughter.

"I should go and talk with Izmeen," she said, finally, breaking the silence and looking at him with watery eyes.

He nodded. "Yes," he said, "you should do that. She's fumbling around in the bedroom, as usual. But be careful, since she fired the cook, Izmeen has been spending a good deal of time in the kitchen. I think there are still some plum cookies from her latest endeavor. No doubt she'll insist you eat one."

He watched her walk from the room. He sighed once again and thought that he would never understand his eldest daughter.

Mona started to say something but then stood silent, her mouth slightly parted, and her eyes glazed. She had just caught a glimpse of Izmeen drinking from a silver flask. She waited, as Izmeen put the flask into a dresser drawer, carefully arranging it. When Izmeen turned, she seemed momentarily startled.

Mona smiled, pretending that nothing was amiss, and in that moment of exchanged looks there was a communication between them that could not be articulated, even if one of them had been willing to try. Mona knew that she had once again witnessed something secret. It was not the first time that she had become privy to one of Izmeen's secrets and before that of her biological mother's secrets. She seemed doomed to know more than she cared to.

"I didn't hear you come in," Izmeen said.

"I'm sorry," Mona said. "Were you about to change clothes?" Mona glanced at the dresser, pretending to have only just that moment appeared in the doorway, to have not witnessed the flask.

The gambit worked, Izmeen relaxed. "No, I was just putting some things away."

Lies are like clothes moths. They are insidious, nearly invisible, and spread into the fabric of everything. Izmeen walked over to Mona and took her by the arm. "Lets go into the kitchen and talk," she said. "You can have one of my plum cookies. I just made them."

Mona smiled.



Jay worked away at his computer in his 35th floor office overlooking Victoria Harbour. He was writing

a short piece for one of the Hong Kong Trade and Development Center's publications. He was explaining that China's manufacturing economy had been based on the traditional capitalist wage labor relationship long before the current economic reforms and that Hong Kong firms locating in China would find the workforce cooperative and willing to work for much lower wages than in many of the Southeast Asian economies. Jay thought it was funny that people in the West had so many fantasies about a communist China, dreams born of Cold War propaganda. Even he was burdened by this programming, finding that he was surprised at how capitalist was the Chinese economy. Firms were run by managers, just like in Western capitalist enterprises, and the workers had very little say over their day-to-day worklife, much less over the profits their work generated. In other words, there was no communism in China, nor had there been, nor was there likely to be any communism in China, as long as the Chinese Communist Party had anything to say about it. This being the case, Western firms were pouring into China not because it was *becoming* capitalist (it was *already* capitalist) but because it was becoming more open. Openness was the key. This is what reform was all about, allowing the Westerners to join with Chinese state-owned enterprises in exploiting China's cheap workforce. It had nothing to do with any transition from communism to capitalism. As for China's lack of democratic institutions, that was no impediment to capitalism. Capitalism had always thrived in undemocratic environments --- from dictatorships in South and Central America, to apartheid South Africa, to authoritarian regimes in Asia. That was the history of capitalism. In fact, capitalism was, at its core, totalitarian. Every capitalist enterprise was a little totalitarian state within which workers gave up many of their fundamental liberties in order to earn a wage. Jay smiled. He couldn't write this for a HKTDC publication. Not now. Not once the Chinese took over in Hong Kong. So who was he kidding? He sat back and stared at the screen. He swiveled in his chair and picked up the telephone. He called his boss and told him that he was going to need more time to finish his piece. There were a few moments of loud Cantonese from the other end of the line, then silence, then a simple, "Okay." Jay hung up the phone, shook his head, then turned back to the computer. He saved what he had written, then opened a new Word document and started again.

At lunch, Jay rode the subway from Wanchai to the glittering mirrored towers of Central. As usual, lunchtime meant a crowded train and crowded streets. Jay didn't mind. Crowds made everyone invisible. He walked from the MTR to the Foreign Correspondents' Club where he met with Chris Smythe of the *Guardian* for lunch and draft ale.

They talked about the impending handover, as usual. Chris Smythe, a short and jolly looking fellow with bushy eyebrows, was always interested in talking about the Red Chinese. "They'll be in power for a couple of years, then probably start throwing us all in jail," he said.

"Come on, Chris, you know better than that. No one in their right mind would put you in jail. You'd corrupt the place and the next thing anybody knew, the guards would be behind bars and the inmates running the show."

Chris laughed and drank more of his ale. "I s'ppose you know the Reds better than I do," he said. "You speak the friggin' language. It's all gibberish to me."

"How can you be a reporter here without speaking Cantonese *or* Mandarin?"

"In case you hadn't noticed, this is still a British colony," Chris said, emphatically. "The King's English is the language here." Jay sat back, drank his ale and let Chris have the floor. Chris went into a mini-tirade about all the locals who didn't speak English. "But they want a bloody British passport now that their time is running out," he said. Food arrived. Jay had a plate of grilled veggies, which caused Chris to

make a face. Chris had a more pleasant look when he got his fish and chips.

"Everybody doesn't want to leave, Chris."

"The hell they don't," he said, seizing one of the chips like it was found money. "If we let 'em, every damn one of them would be on their way to British shores by the morning." Jay shrugged once again. He was not willing to debate the point. "What'd you think's gonna happen to the Hong Kong economy when the Reds take over?" Chris asked, as the conversation took another turn.

Jay shrugged. "Probably nothing terribly exciting," he said.

"Damn right," Chris said, misunderstanding. "Probably go right down the bloody tubes. Already got my money out of here."

"I guess a lot of people are doing the same thing," Jay said and Chris took that statement as something of some kind of comfort that he knew what he was doing by moving most of the money he had in Hong Kong banks back to England. Jay gradually shifted the conversation to Chris Smythe's last interview with the British governor. "What'd you think, Chris, is he going to pull any rabbits out of his sleeve before the handover?"

"Rabbits?" Chris' eyes were bloodshot, but that was normal. He waved his hand in the air dismissively. "You mean is he going to try and install the Democratic Party into control over the government?"

Jay nodded. "There are rumors," he said.

Chris shook his head. "Bullshit. It's all a load of crap. He isn't gonna do a damn thing to help these poor people. He's making all sorts of promises to the pro-democracy leaders, but at the end of the day, he'll pack his bags and leave the place in the hand of the Reds. All bluster and hot air, that's all it is."

"Is that based on your interview with him or just general contempt?"

Chris shrugged. "He talks out both sides of his mouth. He says he'll do his best to, how's he put it, foster a democratic environment in the last days of colonial rule, but I think it's just a load of crap. Two years and they'll throw us all behind bars. Mark my word. Can't trust the Reds."

Jay nodded. "I hear you, Chris."

"Damn straight you hear me. Better listen good, too. You know what's good for you, you start looking for work somewhere else before the People's Friggin' Liberation Army comes marching across the New Territory."

Jay smiled. "I think they'll probably come by truck and train."

Chris just huffed and drank more ale.



"It's not that big a deal," said Michael Maxwell, as he and Frank Hyde elbowed into the Mad Dog Pub in

Tsim Sha Tsui. Frank attempted once again to explain to Michael that he did not plagiarize the *Rethinking Marxism* article. "I admit that I read your paper," Frank said, "and must have subconsciously been influenced by it, but there was nothing intentional about what I did. I have lots of publications. I don't need to *steal* ideas from anyone."

Before he realized where he was, Hyde was following Maxwell to a bench in the midst of a smoky cloud at the back of the pub. He sat down and frowned. "I'm just trying to let you know what I was thinking," Frank said, feeling a bit frustrated with his younger companion. *Damn Marxists.*

Michael put his hands up, as if to say, "who cares?" "The whole world is going to hell. We're getting rich and I don't give a good damn whether you plagiarized your way to where you are or earned it with hard work and sweat. It makes no difference one way or the other."

"How can you say that?"

Michael just made a face, then turned and waved to a barmaid. "Two beers," he said, holding up two fingers. "Is that acceptable?" Michael looked at Frank, who was momentarily distracted, staring at the barmaid. "You just can't let it go, can you? Look, Frank, I don't know why you do what you do. I really don't really care why you do what you do. I know why I'm here and how much money Rekker is paying me for being here." He shrugged. "Everything else is just not relevant." At the bar, wearing all black, Sanjay Harris was slipping a roll of banknotes to the barmaid, who was smiling and nodding her head.

"I did not *plagiarize* your paper." Frank could see red. He did not have to take this from a damned Marxist. The barmaid placed the beers on the tray held by a young waiter.

Michael smiled and shrugged again. "Carefully planned speculative attacks on the currency of a dependent nation triggers steadily increasing financial fragility in the domestic banking system and capital flight. Capital flight adds to the financial fragility as financial markets weaken and banks suffer a drain on their reserves. The capital flight contributes to deteriorating conditions in the foreign exchange reserves of the Central Bank. Carefully orchestrated reports to the media about potential defaults on hard currency loans results in even greater capital flight, further weakening in security prices, loss of confidence on the part of the rentiers. The process eventually generates explosive cycles of falling currencies, falling domestic demand and income, loan defaults, rising unemployment, falling incomes, and eventually political instability. The entire process can be used to destabilize an entire region if there are certain common elements, such as competition over export markets, a perception in international financial markets that the region constitutes a singular political, economic, and cultural space such that international rentiers make no distinction among different nations within the region." Michael thought for a moment, then nodded, his smile broadening. "Now I know that last point was not in your paper. You completely missed my point that racism is an integral element in the currency crisis. If the so-called Westerners lump everybody in a region into one racial basket, then anything negative about any element in the basket becomes reason to dump the entire basket into the thrash. I guess it's obvious --- given the lack of any reference to racism --- that you did not plagiarize my work. It would be small minded of me to think such a thing."

Frank stared at Michael, who turned his attention to watching a drunken Brit loud mouthing at the table to his right. He felt his stomach tighten.

"Why would a Marxist want to help Simon Rekker?" Frank asked. "Rekker doesn't care about your poor working classes. In fact, whenever he takes control of a company, he takes a lot of pleasure in putting

them out on the street."

"Restructuring. They call it restructuring." Michael turned back to his companion. "And who told you I was a Marxist?"

Frank frowned. "Rekker said you were a Marxist. Besides, it's obvious."

"Obvious?" Michael shook his head. "I don't know that I have any politics." He smiled. "My older brother, Samuel, now he's a Marxist. Gets all fired up about the working classes." Michael smiled devilishly. "You might say he's the black sheep of the family. Anyway, in the end, Samuel's Marxism hasn't proven very profitable. He has to come to me to borrow money because he can't find steady work. Well, that's not completely true. He has a position at the University of Birmingham. But we'll have to wait and see if that keeps his interest. He'll probably decide that it is too reactionary and end up back in the ranks of the unemployed. I think his real aspiration is to be an authentic member of the *lumpenproletariat*. Actually, Samuel would be pretty peeved if he could hear me talking about his beliefs like this. Even more so, Samuel would be pretty peeved if he knew that I was working for Rekker. He has never quite gotten over my working for the IMF. Never stopped him from taking money from me, though."

"You're not a Marxist?" Frank sounded unconvinced, as if being a Marxist was a criminal offense and he had caught Michael trying to escape punishment.

"No, I'm not. I wish I was." Michael lost the smile for a moment. "At least then I would have convictions. As it is, I don't know that I believe in anything."

"What do you mean you don't believe in anything? Everybody believes in something."

Michael shook his head again. "Everyone? I envy you your conviction. You have such strong beliefs that nothing about the world gets through. You just believe what you believe no matter what you see or hear or experience, assuming of course you can see or hear something that contradicts your beliefs."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you and Rekker are very similar in that you have strong convictions. You believe in dark fairy tales and Rekker believes in money. By the way, why are you so willing to work for a man who does not believe in God, at least not the same God you believe in?"

Frank did know that Rekker was an atheist. It was well known. Rekker saw no reason to hide it. He had once told a BBC interviewer that "there is no God, there is only money." Frank turned and looked at the barmaid, not wanting to answer the question or even think about it.

The two beers arrived. "You want anything else?" The young man asked.

Michael looked at Frank with raised eyebrows. "Order anything you like, it's on me."

Frank, who once again turned away from his daydreaming about the barmaid, shook his head.

"That's it, then," Michael said, paying the young blonde-haired man with a Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank note. "Keep the change."

The young man smiled broadly. "Thanks," he said, then headed in the direction of another table.

Michael turned back to Frank. "You Yanks are probably the most dangerous people in the world," he said. "You have such strong beliefs and so little gets through to change those beliefs. You deal with your philosophical angst by drowning in the drivel on Oprah or Jerry Springer. What a country we spawned: World Wide Wrestling and the Moral Majority: Fundamentalists with the bomb."

"Those are just words. Sounds cute, but it doesn't mean anything. If it weren't for Roosevelt sending millions of American boys to fight and die in Europe, Britain would be flying the swastika, instead of the Union Jack. Why can't you people be grateful for what we've done for you?"

Michael smiled. "I'll give you that one, Frank. It would've been a helluva thing if you blokes had sided with the Nazis."

Frank shook his head. "That's idiotic. The United States would never have *sided with the Nazis*, as you put it."

"Why not? Are you, of all people, trying to tell me that the United States had an insurmountable philosophical conflict with what the Nazis stood for? Are you trying to tell me that the United States is completely and utterly opposed to fascism?"

"Of course we are opposed to fascism. Anyone who knows American history would know that."

Michael smiled, again, and nodded. "Interesting."

"What does that mean? Interesting? That's not an argument."

"I'm not trying to get into an argument with you, Frank."

"Well, what do you mean, *interesting*? What are you implying?"

"I would think you would be fond of the Nazis. In fact, I'd think a lot of you yanks would find the Nazis attractive. And, if I recall my history, there's never been a serious shortage of Nazi sympathizers in the States, even during World War II. I can certainly imagine you in that role, Frank."

Frank's brow creased. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, besides the fact that your country has supported a long line of fascists, from Franco to Pinochet, I've been listening to you for the past couple of weeks. You've complained about the Blacks, the wetbacks, the Asians, the Democrats, the civil libertarians, the anti-nuke movement, feminists . . . Did I leave anything out? I will give you this, you never mentioned the Jews, at least not explicitly. When you rail against the *liberal* media, it sounds a lot like you're just using the word liberal as a euphemism for Jewish. Your railings against the *Hollywood elite* has a similar ring to it, as well. And, like good fascists everywhere, you see Marxists or communists behind every political event or organization that has an objective not to your liking. You think the police are handcuffed from doing their job and would love to see a more *enthusiastic* enforcement of the law, the law as interpreted by people like yourself, of course. I really enjoyed our brief conversation about Mark Fuhrmann and the O.J. Simpson affair. I had wondered how it was that so many of you Yanks could completely ignore the one fact that the jury did not ignore --- Fuhrmann, who represented the authorities, was a cold-blooded racist and a proven liar, capable of planting evidence or anything else for that matter. He was the real threat to society."

"First of all I never called anyone a wetback. Second, it's so typical of people like you, whiny little

liberals, to defend a murderer."

"Frank, face it, you're a fascist. You just don't like the word."

"Because I think O.J. Simpson is a murderer?"

"Of course not, lots of liberals think Simpson is a murderer, and well he might be. That wasn't the point. Rodney King, Mark Fuhrmann, the L.A. cops --- that was the point."

"Not to the Brown and Goldman families, and to most Americans. O.J. was the point and only O.J."

"I understand that. And I'm quite certain if the police were genuinely concerned about the welfare of all Americans, doing their jobs without prejudice or evidence planting or the perception thereof, then there'd be no controversy. And, given that, if the blood evidence had been the same, Mr. Simpson would be in prison attire right now. But we're blurring the issues here, as usual. My point was that Mark Fuhrmann, who was ultimately and *perhaps* ironically responsible for getting Simpson acquitted by his own racist attitudes and behavior, is the bigger threat to society. If the jury had convicted Simpson, in spite of Fuhrmann, then it would have done far more damage to the safety and security of common citizens than letting Simpson off the hook, even if he was guilty as sin."

"Damage to the safety and security of criminals."

"Make the trains run on time, even if it is by running over a few innocent bystanders."

"You need to get it through your head that I'm not a fascist. I'm a conservative. And the people you're talking about are hardly innocent bystanders."

"I'm talking about all those U.S. citizens who happen to be of African or Mexican descent or . . . anything but the latest flavor of white personage. You don't understand what it means to be black in the United States or in Britain for that matter, although we've got our own warped classification scheme for the races. Police officers, like Mark Fuhrmann, are nothing more than the second coming of the brown shirts. You give them a badge and it becomes a license to terrorize people they see as different."

"What makes *you* such an expert on minorities? Are you hiding something about your genealogy?"

"I'm no expert. I just know that your attitude is not uncommon and, if I were a *minority* in the United States, it would certainly not make me feel safe to have people like you carrying badges and guns. In fact, I'm not sure it would be much better to have you in control of the hallowed traditions of academe, either."

At first Frank just stared at Michael, then he sort of smiled. "I thought you liberals liked diversity."

"I told you, Frank, I'm not a liberal. I'm not a liberal. I'm not a Marxist."

"You sure sound like one." After a pause, Frank added. "And, like I said before, I never called anyone a *wetback*. I do not use such language." Although he would probably not have admitted it, Frank was now enjoying the conversation. Perhaps it was being in Hong Kong, so far from the center of his everyday life, in a place where no one seemed to take politics seriously (money ruled as sole sovereign in Hong Kong), or perhaps it was that he had so few opportunities to *have at it* with a good liberal like Michael Maxwell. Or maybe it was the sense of power and superiority that came from the way Maxwell looked at Frank as the representative of a powerful body of Americans. It made Frank feel special.

Michael nodded. "No, I guess you didn't use the word *wetback*. You just railed about all the Mexicans and Central Americans *pouring over the U.S. border*."

"That's just a fact. You're just like all the liberals who can't accept a truthful statement. You label everything you don't like politically incorrect and then you complain about the loss of free speech. It's such hypocrisy."

"Hypocrisy?" Michael's smile widened. "Hmmm. Okay. I guess you set me up with that one, eh? Doesn't change anything, though. I still say you're no more a conservative than I am a liberal, Frank. Bill Clinton is a conservative. Has Clinton tried to make fundamental changes in any aspect of life in the United States? You hate Clinton with a passion, precisely because he is a conservative. If ever anyone stood for the status quo, Clinton's the man."

"Don't try to change the subject. This is not about Bill Clinton."

Michael raised his eyebrows. He wondered how one could possibly change such a broad subject matter as the one they were, loosely put, discussing. "I wouldn't dream of it. Look, why don't you tell me where you and the Nazis differ. You've told me that you don't like democracy because you think the masses are too stupid to choose the nation's leaders. You've said, in so many words, that the U.S. would be a better country if the Blacks, Mexicans, and so on, were *out of the picture*. Perhaps you know of a *final solution* for that problem? You referred to *The Bell Curve* as evidence for *Black* inferiority to *White* people, although you also decided to throw in that cursed sons of Ham bullcrap. Well, I guess that's better than referring to *Mein Kampf*." He hesitated for a moment. "Maybe not. Anyway, I'm having trouble seeing where you, in particular, would have had any disagreement with Adolf's crew."

"*The Bell Curve* was a scientific inquiry," Frank said.

"Unless I missed something, that bit of *scientific inquiry* was shown to be dependent on *research* funded by the white supremacist *Pioneer Fund*. Besides, the Nazis considered *Mein Kampf* to be science."

"Maybe it is," Frank said, in a low growl.

"Okay," Michael said, "okay, just wanted to make sure we were being honest with each other. You're not a liberal and I'm not a liberal or a Marxist or a whatever. We're just two guys, sitting in a pub, waiting to get fucking rich." He smiled. "Maybe I'm just a friggin' nihilist on the verge of rolling in it, up to here."

Frank was about to say something when Michael raised his mug. "Let's drink to Simon Rekker. What'd you say?" Michael held his mug out towards Frank. Frank picked his mug up and clinked it into Michael's, although he was not sure why he did this. "The world is too much with us, late and soon," Michael added after the clinking was done. And with that he took a large swig from the glass.

"So you're just doing this for the money?" Frank asked.

"Aren't you?"

Frank didn't answer.

"It's all right to just do things for money. Isn't that what we economists preach? All anybody wants is lots of money and good sex. Actually, if you have the former, you have the latter, eh? Utility is just a euphemism for sex."

Again Frank didn't respond.

"You know, Frank, all money comes from the Devil's work."

"Where did you get that from?"

"Forget it," Michael said quickly. "The last thing I want is to get into theology with a nutcase Christian fundamentalist. Whoops, I'm being redundant."

"Are you trying to insult me?"

Michael shook his head. "No, I'm just rude." He smiled. "Comes with being British."

After a long silence, Frank asked, "What do you think Rekker is going to do? Why does he need this economic model so badly that he'll pay millions of dollars for it?"

Michael wiped beer from his lips with his hand. "He's going to bring fire and brimstone down on all the little people of the world. That's what the bloody hell Simon Rekker is going to do. In the process, he'll probably make a lot more work for my brother Samuel." And with that he laughed.



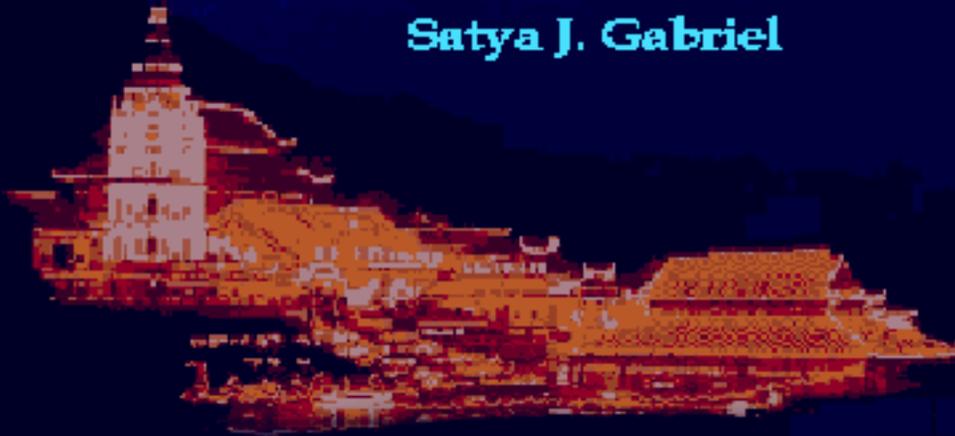
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# DREAMING IN MALAYSIA

A Web Novel

by

Satya J. Gabriel



## CHAPTER FIVE: The Clarity of the Sky

"If we're going to write this many currency option contracts then we'll need to spread them out over all of our off-shore accounts," Dale Fisk, head trader of Simon Rekker's largest hedge Fund, Hegemon Holdings, was speaking by a secure telephone transmission from Manhattan's World Trade Tower No. 1.

"I'll authorize it," Jack Degenhardt said over the satellite phone from the deck of Rekker's yacht.

"I know Simon realizes how much risk is involved in that many options contracts." Fisk sighed.

Jack could not resist smiling at the discomfort he perceived in Dale Fisk. He took a sort of perverse pleasure in other people's unease. "Don't worry about it, Dale. We've got everything under control."

"We're going to be way beyond our margin limits with this one," Fisk said. "And you must realize that we already have maxed out our currency option positions in Hegemon and we haven't done anything to hedge these positions. We're betting the store on a collapse in a wide range of currencies."

"Look, Dale, if this hits, you'll get a bonus that will make that expensive wife of yours very happy."

"If it doesn't," Dale said, and hesitated, "I think you and I may be out peddling our resumes. Can I ask you something, Jack?"

"Sure."

Al Lauter appeared on the deck and immediately glanced in Jack's direction. Right behind him came

Simon Rekker, trailed by a tall, bikini-clad blonde, a Russian model in Hong Kong on an assignment.

"Since we're not hedging this bet," Fisk said, "then is it safe to say that this strategy is, well," he hesitated, "is, ah . . ."

Jack's smile widened and he nodded at Rekker. "Yeah, Dale, I think you're safe in thinking that."

Dale Fisk started smiling and Jack could almost see it. "Okay, Jack, I'll take care of everything here."

Jack clicked off the satellite phone and walked over to Rekker and his guest. "That was Dale," he said to Simon, although his eyes kept drifting in the direction of the model. Jack had seen her on numerous magazine covers and in a calendar. He liked the three dimensional version, even sans the air brushing.

Rekker leaned on the railing and looked out at the waters of the South China Sea. "Is he nervous?" Jack nodded. "Good," Simon smiled. "I like my traders nervous." Simon looked at the model, who smiled.

Degenhardt looked at her, as well, only his smile was slightly more mischievous.



The ninth floor of a relatively nondescript building in Tsim Sha Tsui served as the workspace for Frank Hyde, Michael Maxwell and a small army of computer programmers. While Hong Kong island was the lower Manhattan of this soon-to-be-former crown colony, TST was some sort of combination Bronx and Midtown. The day that Hyde and Maxwell, with a considerable amount of help from the programmers (each working on separate "modules" of the program), had finally developed a working model there was also a horrible fire in TST that engulfed one of the old buildings, not far from the areas frequented by legions of tourists, killing over 18 young women who were working in a sweatshop. The exit doors had been blocked by heavy boxes of equipment.

Frank Hyde could hear the sound of the sirens, but thought nothing of it. He listened more closely to a brief conversation between two of the programmers, who were taking a break by standing next to the soda machine (that required no money) and drinking coca-colas as if the more they drank the longer they would live. One of the programmers was from China and claimed to have fled to Hong Kong after his wife disappeared after going to the Guangzhou police for help. In the incredible story the man told, his wife had gone to the police after her luggage was stolen at the Guangzhou rail station. She had over \$5,000 U.S. on her possession when she went to the police, money that had been raised from family members in Wuhan to finance this couple's business plans, a company that would market a software program that allowed users to instantly translate Chinese characters into English. The man believed the Guangzhou police had taken the money and done away with his wife. When he went to the police, he said, they had threatened to arrest him for being in Guangzhou illegally and so he had decided to get out of China once and for all. Frank felt sorry for the young man and wished that Michael Maxwell was also listening in on the conversation. *He might learn something about the true nature of communism.* One of the programmers noticed Frank and the conversation abruptly came to an end. Frank moved closer to Michael Maxwell, who was trying to see what was happening outside by peering out one of the large windows.

"I guess we've got something to show Rekker," Michael Maxwell said, the siren fading. All he could see from the window was the normal street traffic, even though the fire was less than three blocks away.

"Programming in the use of several different derivative instruments should solve the problem of making sure the initial crisis wave is powerful enough to trigger defaults." Michael sat down at a computer terminal and started punching in some numbers. "You think this trick with the derivatives will act as a sufficient trigger?"

Hyde shrugged. "If the target country has large current account deficits financed with short term foreign portfolio investment and dollar loans," he said, "derivatives that add additional dollar-denominated obligations should trigger the wave."

"That's what I thought," Michael said. "But I think it would work only if the dollar loans were used for unproductive investment."

Hyde nodded. "Commercial and residential property construction is unproductive."

"How do we program that into the model?"

"It's already there," Hyde said, frowning. "I put it in yesterday. Look at the fourth module. It contains non-linear equations related to the interaction of project rates of return and dollar interest obligations as exchange rates fluctuate."

Michael smiled. "You must know my original paper better than I do," he said. "I had almost forgotten about that footnote on Thailand: all those borrowed dollars flowing into the boom in commercial and residential property construction, with little chance to generate the necessary hard currency cash flows needed to pay off the debts and replenish foreign exchange reserves. It's amazing how long Thailand has been on the edge of a financial cliff."

Hyde decided to ignore what he considered yet another thinly veiled suggestion that he had plagiarized Michael's paper. "Thailand's debt to foreign banks exceeds seventy billion U.S. dollars," he said.

"Speculation in the property market is completely out of control," Michael said. "It's a time bomb."

"That's hyperbole."

"Maybe and maybe not."

"This is completely ridiculous," Hyde said, shaking his head. "How could Rekker possibly get Thai bankers into the sort of derivatives contracts that would be required to make this work the way we've outlined it?"

"Rekker can be very persuasive."

"Then you think he can pull it off?"

"Come on, Frank, you know my opinion on this. Even if Rekker does everything right, he can't possibly predict the final outcome."

"Overdetermination?"

"Right."

"Is that how you sleep at night?"

"What do you mean?"

Hyde smiled. "Your conscience," he said. "You're helping a capitalist make billions of dollars, while putting who knows how many of your precious working classes out into the street."

"You mean members of the working class, Frank. And they're not my working class members, either. You really are thick-headed, Frank."

Hyde shook his head. "You're quite a work," he said. "You try to make yourself feel clean by pretending to not care about anything. You're just a hypocrite."

"Well, I don't feel guilty about this," Michael said.

Frank just looked at Michael without responding.



Helen Fung had picked up her five year old son, Malcolm, at school and the two rode the double decker bus to the Kowloon apartment complex where her mother and father lived. It was an old building, with narrow passageways, dim lighting, and an elevator that one rode with some risk. Her parents lived in a cramped apartment smaller than the one that she and Malcolm lived in at South horizons. She had offered to help her parents get into South Horizons but it was her mother that said an emphatic No. She did not want to leave her friends or familiar turf for the periphery of civilization, which is how she saw Ap Lei Chau, the island where her daughter lived. Helen took Malcolm into the apartment after her father opened the door. Her mother was never very grandmotherly towards Malcolm. Helen was sure that it was because her mother looked at Malcolm and only saw his father. She hoped that someday grandmotherly instincts would arise and Malcolm would be fawned over the way other grandchildren were. But when she saw the look on Malcolm's face as she prepared to leave him there for the evening, she felt guilt. This was not a place where he was loved. She exchanged courtesies with her parents, who turned to their usual topic, her police inspector brother, Martin, the dutiful son. She quickly cut the conversation short, kissed Malcolm goodbye, swallowed her guilt, and departed.



The board of directors of Siam Overseas Bank filed into the meeting room and took their leather seats. The Bank's chief operating officer, Chatu Yees walked into the room after the others were seated and took his place at the head of the table. He sat back in his seat and surveyed the room. "I've called this meeting to address a serious crisis that requires immediate attention," Yees said. He had their full attention as he explained that Siam Overseas Bank did not have sufficient hard currency reserves to meet obligations related to derivative contracts. The contracts required the bank to make dollar payments to several foreign banks and private investors in an amount almost twice the total amount the bank had available. The directors looked like men facing a firing squad as Yees informed them of his plan to save the bank by making new derivative contracts that would be sold to the internationally known financier, Simon Rekker.



Herman Road arrived at National Airport in D.C. about five minutes early. He would normally be met at the airport by a member of Senator Birch's staff, maybe even Lance Cane, the senator's chief of staff, but not this time. Road had not even notified the Senator or his staff that he would be in town. After disembarking he went immediately to short-term parking and located a black Mazda 626 with the license plate DCX-1968. He took out a set of keys, remotely unlocked the passenger door and climbed inside.

He was cruising down the Capital Beltway when a cellphone that had been resting in a cradle between the driver and passenger seat started ringing. Road picked up the phone and thumbed the connect key. "Yes," he said, and waited. He received instructions to go to an office building in Tyson's Corner. He acknowledged the instructions and disconnected.

He was greeted in the lobby of the building by a stone faced guard, who escorted him to an elevator.

Road was on his way to a meeting that could make or break Senator Birch's quest for the presidency. It was not a decisive meeting, in the sense that it guaranteed Birch would win, but it did open doors that Birch needed open if he was to win. It was the equalizer, so to speak, in any ultimate face-to-face with the sitting vice president and would probably go a long way to stopping their chief opponent in the primary, Senator Sandstone of Colorado. He stepped out of the elevator and made his way to room 666.

The door opened and Road was greeted by Bernie Stifel, who ushered him in and closed the door. Stifel pointed to a small walnut table where two chairs awaited them. "I appreciate your making time to meet on such short notice. When Winthrop Birch contacted me, I knew that we needed to meet right away."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you," Road said, taking one of the chairs.

And so began one of the most unexpected, if not strangest, meetings of Herman Road's life. Road was accustomed to manipulating people, but he was not accustomed to being manipulated, particularly as openly as Bernie Stifel's performance that morning. Stifel told Road quite bluntly that "I'm going to use you for my own purposes, Mr. Road." Stifel explained that, in exchange for invaluable intelligence on his opponents, Republicans and the vice president, Herman Road would become a soldier for Bernie Stifel.

"What is it you expect from me, exactly?" Road finally asked.

"Your loyalty, of course," Bernie Stifel replied and smiled.

"I'm afraid I don't know what that means."

Stifel explained that he planned to use Road in a secret campaign to "fix" U.S. intelligence from within. The one thing that Road had expected Stifel to request was never placed on the table. Stifel never gave any indication that he wanted Road to guarantee that a president Birch would appoint Stifel to anything.

"Why don't we just appoint you as director of the C.I.A.?" Road asked, bluntly. Stifel had replied just as bluntly that he didn't want any more "Goddamned titles." Instead, he wanted Road's promise that he would do as instructed without questions. "That's a small price for the White House," Stifel had said.



*Jean Renoir once said, "The real hell of life is that everyone has his reasons."* Jay was sitting on the sofa in Helen's living room, holding a bowl of noodles. He was daydreaming about Chicago, the last time he saw Yodie, his "friend" Louis' betrayal, the sound of a bullet whistling past his right ear.

"You gonna stay with me again tonight?" Helen asked for a second time, seeing the distraction in his face. Jay frowned, looking up from his reverie and seeing the expectation on her face. He didn't know the answer to her question. *There's this girl staying in my bedroom,* he wanted to say.

Helen had been standing over him for some time, but he had only barely, subconsciously noticed.

"Where's Malcolm?" He asked, after stuffing a chaos of nodles into his mouth.

She explained, for a second time!, that Malcolm had gone to school with a neighbor kid and his mother. "Jay, sometimes I think you don't listen to a word I say." She frowned, "Why are you eating that?"

Jay looked at the noodles and he shook his head. "You want to go get a newspaper?" This question made Helen frown. She reminded him that she needed to get to work, that she was already late, and asked if he planned on going to HKTDC any time soon. He nodded. "Yeah," he said and sighed. "Guess I better."

*This relationship is a big mistake.* "Do what you want," Helen said, and started to leave.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?" His question stopped her and she turned, frowning.

"My cousin, Tong, is coming here to visit me this evening," she said. Jay understood the implications.

"Tong? The cousin who moved to Nanjing and who thinks all Westerners are monkeys?"

She blinked and he could see that the question caught her off guard. "Who told you that?" It was true enough. Tong not only called all Westerners monkeys, but included the Japanese in that description.

"You told me," he replied. "You also told me that Tong welcomed the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, that he hates the Brits with a passion, and that you didn't have anything to do with him."

She thought about this for a moment. It was all true. "He is my cousin," she said.

Jay smiled. He knew that Tong, now a manager in a joint venture between a Taiwanese firm and a firm owned by the city of Xiamen, was to return to Hong Kong as an administator in the S.A.R. government.

"I just assumed you wouldn't want to meet Tong."

Jay shook his head. "No interest."

"Okay," she said. Jay was just not going to make this easy. In that moment, watching Jay enjoying the moment of discomfort, she realized once again how much she liked him. "Well, what *you* want to do?"

Jay put the noodles on the coffee table, got up, walked over to Helen, and kissed her. "I'm sorry I've been distracted," he said, looking into her eyes. "You mind being late for work?"



Udo was Nigerian. Well, in actual fact, he was more British than Nigerian, having spent most of his childhood and adult life in Britain. Nevertheless, he always told people that he was Nigerian. His father, born in Lagos, was a retired professor of political science whose last position was at the University of Leeds. His mother, born in a Yoruba village, had worked for years in the office of admissions at an elite private school. Udo had been a token minority at the school and later graduated from Cambridge with a doctorate in philosophy. He was now one of Samuel's colleagues in the Philosophy Department at the University of Birmingham. He had what many considered a friendship with Samuel, but Samuel considered it more a casual acquaintance than anything else.

Once the end of year exams had been read, reviewed, disputes between instructors and secondary readers resolved, and grades finally submitted, Samuel had finalized his travel plans. It was then that Udo came to bid him farewell and nose around a bit regarding Angela's flight. It occurred to Samuel that Udo had a habit of stopping over whenever there was something of consequence that might feed the gossip mill. They had exchanged pleasantries and Samuel had hinted that he had too much to do to chat, but Udo had, nevertheless, followed Samuel into the bedroom where the process of packing was well underway.

"You know I've noticed that being alone isn't something that requires the absence of other people," Udo had said, as Samuel rolled socks and packed them into the large suitcase laid open on the bed. "It was my impression that you were alone before Angie went on her merry way."

"I'm not going to argue with you on that point," Samuel said.

"I think I first noticed that there was a bit of distance between the two of you at one of the Dean of Faculty parties." Udo noticed the photograph of Samuel and Angela sitting prominently on the chest of drawers near the bed.

"You never said anything," Samuel looked up from his packing. He was now folding tee-shirts.

"Nevertheless, I did notice. It's not really the sort of thing that one wants to say to a friend, is it? We're all very much alone in this life, Samuel, wouldn't you say?"

"Alienation," Samuel replied. "I think it's called alienation."

"Yes, perhaps," Udo nodded. "Alienation. Yes, indeed, Samuel. It is about alienation. I read your paper on Marx's theory of alienation, you'll recall. I'm not sure I agree with Marx, though. The idea that the way to transcend alienation is to be found in the realm of economics strikes me as a bit naive. I don't care if you create communal work places and guarantee producers the rights to the fruits of their labor, at the end of the day they'll still feel alienated. Alienation comes from the fact that we are each of us born into these shells with nothing more than a fleeting glimpse into what it would be like to be organically greater than one. And it is precisely the pursuit of an escape from alienation of this sort that is the reason we spend so much energy in love making and all the rituals around love making."

"Is that so?" Samuel was frowning.

"Yes, of course. You know, two people trying to transcend the loneliness of being locked inside this isolated shell of being is the very alpha and omega of love making. People try all sorts of things to overcome the isolation: writing stories, raising children, getting married, having lots of friends, watching the tele, but in the end making love is the only real way to transcend the loneliness and it is never more than a short period of bliss. Afterwards, the loneliness, the alienation, returns."

"That's very pessimistic," Samuel was trying to decide which extra pair of shoes to take along. He didn't want to overpack and so had decided to take only a single extra pair.

"Oh, I don't know that I'm being pessimistic. I'd prefer to think of it as being realistic."

"It's reductionist," Samuel added. "I'm sure that there are many ways to overcome alienation other than sex. I would bet you that some people find singing as liberating, in the way you mean, as sex."

"I'm not talking about sex," Udo insisted. "I'm talking about *love making*--- which is a spiritual process --- and I don't believe there is any other activity that allows the total elimination of this isolation we live with as individual human beings, not singing or anything else. Love making is *sui generis*."

"Is that why you have so many affairs? I didn't realize you were on a spiritual mission."

Udo was taken aback, but only momentarily. He knew that his various relationships were less than a secret. His wife, Martha, knew about them. "Well, you know, a man needs his rice," Udo said with a mischievous grin.

"One would think that you'd have enough rice at home," Samuel chose a pair of black shoes and carefully packed them into the suitcase, then looked up at Udo, waiting for him to return the serve.

"Ah, but you know there are many kinds of rice and one needs to explore the many tastes. It's part of this endless quest to overcome . . . alienation. Yes, yes, I do believe it could be described as a spiritual journey." Samuel shook his head, but Udo continued. "You know, loneliness, alienation, this inability to sustain our feeling of being greater than the singular person that we are, all this is the root of most of the problems we face. Perhaps the most serious problem that humanity faces is overcoming alienation before it drives us over the edge and into some nuclear abyss."

"I see, you're saving the world from nuclear abyss."

"Don't get me wrong, Samuel, my friend, I respect women."

"You have a funny way of demonstrating this respect."

"I think I am simply following a long tradition."

"Whose tradition? I don't think there is anything in Yoruba tradition that supports your current lifestyle."

"Look, Samuel," Udo said, crossing his arms, not wanting to get into a discussion of Yoruba tradition, recognizing that he might not be on completely solid ground in such a debate, "how can men escape alienation, except through this constant search for love? Women are biologically equipped to have children, and by doing so to at least for a period of time genuinely transcend the loneliness of being a singularity. Men can experience this transcendence only during their brief stay in the womb."

Samuel opened a dresser drawer and took out underwear. "Udo, that's a lot of poppycock." He put the underwear into the suitcase. "And I don't think you quite get the point that Marx was making about alienation. He fully recognized the sensuous nature of human beings and that this sensuality is multi-dimensional, not simply the sort of physical bonding you have in mind, but also the sensuality of creating new products with one's own hands and using one's creative talents on the raw material available. There's also the sensuality of working alongside other human beings, working with them as sisters and brothers, not bosses or exploiters, of joining one's hands to those of others and creating

collectively products that meet real human needs. That is also a way to transcend alienation."

Udo shook his head. "Well, I don't know that making pottery is ever going to be a substitute for what I have in mind. But you have it your way. You get your rice one way and I'll get mine as I see best."

Samuel smiled warily. He was happy for even this rather limp concession. "Good enough," Samuel said.

Udo smiled. "You shouldn't let Angie get you down." Samuel stopped what he was doing, crammed his hands into his pockets and just stared at Udo, who continued. "You should find yourself a nice Chinese girl and bring her back with you. That would really show Angie what a mistake she's made."

Once again Samuel found himself shaking his head. He sighed. "I've got a lot to do, Udo. I don't have time for this conversation."

"Sure you do," Udo insisted. "I'm not about to let you wallow in self-pity all by yourself."

Not when I can do it with you to keep me company. "No, seriously, I need to get things in order and I can't do it with you chewing at my ear."

Udo nodded. "All right then, but you call me before you leave."

"Yes," Samuel lied. "I'll be sure to do just that."

After Udo had departed, he laid out his tickets, his passport, his wallet, and his keys on top of the dresser. He opened another drawer and began taking out shirts and laying them on the bed next to the suitcase. He also took a manila folder from the small desk in the bedroom. It contained the latest outline of his book. He had the entire manuscript on a floppy disk. Although he did not own a notebook computer or be assured of access to a computer in China, he had saved it on the floppy in hopes of completing the text during his stay at Nanjing University, which is where he would go after a brief stay in Hong Kong. In any event, his brother Michael would be able to print out the manuscript for him once he was in Hong Kong and, if necessary, mail it to him in China. He had intended to make a list to make sure he did not forget anything, including the floppy disk. However, he forgot to make the list and the floppy disk was in the top drawer of another chest. As it was, he would forget to pack it, which wouldn't be all that consequential since he would not have that much opportunity to write anyway. But he didn't know that, not yet he didn't.

Now that the flat was silent, Samuel once again felt the absence of Angela. He thought that perhaps Udo was correct about one thing --- he was wallowing in self-pity. It was an easy substance to wallow in. The telephone in the bedroom rang and Samuel answered it. He sat down on the bed next to the suitcase.

It was his Aunt Mildred on the other end. He exchanged pleasantries and informed her of his travel plans, in particular that he would be leaving for Hong Kong that evening from Heathrow.

"Don't worry about the apartment," she said. "I'll take care of things while you're away, check the mail and all that."

"And take care of the bills?"

"Yes, of course, just as I said. Trust me, Sam, and relax, will you?"

"Thank you, Aunt Mildred."

"What shall I do if Angie comes back?"

He did not have an answer to that question.

"Well," she said, "don't worry about that." Then after another moment. "You should change the locks. Wouldn't want her burgling the place."

"I'm sure she wouldn't take anything that isn't rightfully hers."

"How can you be a professor and yet so naive?"

"Anyway," he said, "she left her keys."

"Sam?"

"Yes, Aunt Mildred?"

"You were always faithful to Angie?"

"Always." He was frowning, surprised by the question. He had, in fact, been faithful, which was hardly true for Angie. Angie had a wild streak and a secret life. Not always secret. He knew about the Guatemalan student. He had confronted her about what's his name. She had told him the name, twice, and yet he still could not remember. Forgetfulness. He had thought that he was understanding about the whole thing. He had not thrown into the sort of tirade that was so common for men *and* women when faced with the infidelity of those with whom they have chosen to end the alienation. And he suspected numerous others, including a professor of English Literature with whom he had a passing acquaintance and who he had once observed speaking to Angie on the commons. It had not looked like a casual conversation. It did not help that the professor in question was known as a wanna-be Casanova.

"Why?" An even more surprising question.

"Because that's what you're supposed to do," he said, the frown deepening.

"Do you love her?"

He thought about it for a long moment. "I don't know." To say no seemed somehow inappropriate.

"Then you make sure you have a good trip to Hong Kong," she said, her voice sounding upbeat. "And you tell Michael we miss him."

"Aunt Mildred?"

"Yes, Sam."

"I know that I am a bloody mess," he said.

"Sam, we're all a bloody mess, in some way or other. You just take care of yourself."

"Thank you."



Ali Jamal welcomed an old friend into his office. As Ezam Aziz sat across from his desk, Ali Jamal buzzed his secretary and asked her to hold his calls. "You still look fit enough to play fullback, Ezam. A few of us still play on occasion at National University, very casually, of course. You should join us."

"I may look fit, but my knees would never make it," Ezam Aziz said, as they both sat. "We've changed a great deal from our days at university. Here I am a humble college professor and you now the finance minister. Who could have imagined it?"

Ali Jamal smiled. "Everything changes, old friend. What can we do?"

"They called you an Islamic radical back in our days at university," Ezam Aziz said.

"Sometimes they called me much worse things than that," Ali Jamal's smile widened. "We were both willing to put our lives on the line for a truly democratic Malaysia, yes?"

Ezam Aziz nodded. "Some would say we were young and foolish."

"True enough." After a few more moments of small talk, Ali Jamal asked, "What is this about, Ezam?"

Ezam Aziz sighed. "Surely you know of what has happened to my uncle." Ali Jamal did, indeed, know that Sayyed Aziz had been arrested four months ago by Internal Security on charges of sedition, and reportedly subjected to torture to coerce a confession that he was plotting to overthrow the government.

Ali Jamal straightened in his chair and looked into his old friend's eyes. He had suspected that this was the motive for Ezam Aziz coming. It had to be difficult for him, given the acrimonious way their friendship had ended. After a pause, he asked, "What can I do?"

Ezam Aziz frowned at this open-ended question. "You are second to the prime minister. I would think you would be in a position to get my uncle released. The charges against him are completely unfounded. He has been kept naked in solitary confinement in a air conditioned room. I ask you, on the basis of all the years we worked side by side to make this country a better place for all Malays, for all Muslims, to use your good offices to secure my uncle's freedom. If you do this, I will be forever in your debt."

After a difficult silence, Ali Jamal said, "If I help your uncle and he becomes involved in terrorism . . ."

"I promise you that my uncle is no more a threat to the national security than either you or I," Ezam Aziz interrupted, leaning forward. "I don't think he can survive this treatment. He is very sick."

"I suppose I could talk to the home affairs minister."

"Please, do what you can."

Ali Jamal nodded. He stood and Ezam Aziz followed suit. Ali Jamal walked from behind the desk and he embraced his former friend. "Remain strong, my friend," he said.

Ezam Aziz thanked Ali Jamal and, with tears forming in his eyes, turned and departed. Ali Jamal sighed, shook his head, and tried to calculate the benefits and costs of helping Ezam Aziz and his uncle.



*In caring for others and serving heaven, there is nothing like using restraint. Tao Te Ching*



The room was dark, except for the computer screen. Michael, who was trying to be quiet so as not to wake his girlfriend, who was sleeping in the adjacent bedroom, stared hard at the screen. He checked the message one final time before using one utility program to encrypt it and then a second utility program to hide the executable file in a bitmap image of Garfield the Cat. He took a deep breath and hit enter. Done. There was no way to reverse course now. He had violated his agreement with Simon Rekker.



*The clarity of the sky prevents its falling. Tao Te Ching*



It was Saturday morning. Meipo had gone shopping with one of her cousins, Cee. Mona found herself sitting around the apartment worrying about the files she had copied from Ali Jamal's office, as per instructions from Fadil Hamzah, related to the sale of a bankrupt firm, KL Wireless. What other tasks would Hamzeh ask her to do? She ate a breakfast standing barefoot in the kitchen munching on steamed buns and drinking mango juice poured from one of those containers that keeps everything vacuum sealed and fresh. After eating, she wandered through the apartment, making her way back to the bedroom.

Mona looked at her books, arrayed neatly on glass shelves. Books from her days at Mount Holyoke College, the happiest and most carefree days of her years to date. She often found herself musing on those years and the dreams she had dreamed then. Nevermind that she was no more certain then, than now, of where she was going. But at least when she was at college, it was expected that you would be an empty boat. Now she needed to take hold of the oars and direct her course, but she still had no idea of which direction to take. She reached for the copy of Wolfgang Kohler's *Gestalt Psychology*. She hadn't touched this book since Mount Holyoke. She had bought it used and now the pages were quickly yellowing in the Malaysian humidity. She opened it at random and read the following:

*On the other hand, it is not difficult to explain why visual units at least tend to correspond to physical objects. The things around us are either made by man, or they are products of nature. Objects of the first class are fabricated for our practical purposes. Naturally, we give them forms and surfaces which make them likely to be seen and recognized as units . . .*

She found herself daydreaming about Ali Jamal. She worried if the man she had betrayed found her visually pleasing. She worried if the man she secretly "loved" would discover her betrayal? What then? She sighed and closed the book and put it back on the shelf. She decided it was time for her to do as Meipo and Cee had done. It was time to go shopping.



The private dining room on the eighth floor of the Mercantile Bank in Tyson's Corner was venue for the breakfast meeting between John Whitehead and Senator George Washington Birch. Years before

Whitehead had sponsored Birch's membership on the prestigious *Trilateral Commission* and, before that, had helped to finance the failed Presidential bid of Birch's father, former Secretary of State (and former head of the NSA) Wintrop Birch, who was now a member of the board of directors of Grand United, the mega-conglomerate controlled by Whitehead.

Birch was in a good mood. He had cosponsored recent legislation that removed most of the Glass-Steagal restraints on banks. Whitehead's family had interests in two of the top three U.S. money center banks. Thus, he was in no way neutral about the Glass-Steagal legislation or the impending repeal of the remaining provisions of that depression-era legislation. The broadening of the markets available to commercial banks to include investment banking and insurance activities would, no doubt, only foster the general trend towards bank consolidation, a trend that also benefited firms like Grand United (giving Whitehead a dual interest in the demise of Glass-Steagal). The gradual disappearance of smaller banks would only concentrate more capital into the hands of the money center banks and make that capital available to firms like Grand United, rather than "wasting it" on small and medium sized firms (the types of firms that had been more likely to get loans from the old fashioned, more decentralized banking system and which were also more likely to generate innovation and job growth than behemoths like Grand United).

"Your father would have made a good president," Whitehead said, as the waiter placed a plate of ham and eggs in front of Senator Birch. Whitehead picked up his spoon and started on his Irish oatmeal. "I could say the same about your grandfather, from everything I've heard about him. From one bonesman to another, you come from good political stock. You ever consider running for president, George?"

"You must be joking," Birch said in his best carpet bagger sleepy Oklahoma drawl. "I'm just a junior senator from Oklahoma. I haven't even been in Washington long enough for folks to know who I am."

"Don't bullshit me, George. I was being rhetorical. I know you're thinking about running."

"There's a saying in Oklahoma, 'Don't piss in my boot and tell me it's raining.' I guess you and I both know there's not a cloud in the sky." Whitehead smiled. "You're right, I've talked to some folks about the possibility of making a run," Birch continued, the drawl weakening. "My dad thinks I might have a shot at it. I have to trust his judgment on this." He smiled. "He says I have the evangelicals sewn up."

"Everybody knows you're a born again, George." Whitehead took another spoonful of oatmeal before continuing. "Reverend Abraham's followers are in the millions. They take their religion very seriously and they don't make much distinction between religion and politics. Your father never won them over and that's why he never got the White House. You, on the other hand, are their best hope of political salvation." Whitehead took his napkin to the corner of his mouth, then continued. "They know that the good reverend is never getting elected, no matter how much God wants him in the White House. That is why they will support you. This means thousands of volunteers, lots of little checks that add up, church meetings, pressure on local newspapers and radio stations, a veritable army of God seeking to get you elected. Add to that your little brother, Ned, sitting in the Texas governor's mansion working to deliver the biggest block of delegates and electoral votes between California and New York and you have a major advantage over any other candidate." Whitehead sat back and gave Birch a straight look. "Yes, George, I think you've got a real shot at succeeding where your father failed."

Birch smiled. No reason to play coy with John Whitehead. "Well," he said, "I'd be lying if I didn't say that I like the sound of that. But the election is still a good ways down the road."

"Not really," Whitehead picked up his glass of orange juice. "You need to start raising money now, not just because of the costs of a national campaign, but because of the ritual of letting people like me know that you're serious, that you will be their man in the White House, not another pain in the neck."

Birch nodded. "I understand that," he said. "I assure you, John, if I do run, and I'm certainly more likely to after our conversation, then I will seek your counsel frequently and I'd do the same thing if elected, just as I've done during my brief time in the senate, just as my father did when he was in government."

"Make sure you talk to your dad about this conversation and say hello for me."

"I'll do that," Birch seemed to be wracking his brain, then asked, "You really think I could win?"

"I think you have a good chance, especially if Teddy Fraser gets into the race." Theodore Fraser was a popular environmentalist lawyer who had a strong following among young progressive activists, the *Greens*. He had spent most of his adult life fighting for environmental causes, suing big oil companies and other corporations, including Grand United. He had been generally nonpartisan in his criticism of both political parties and was, therefore, a natural leader for a third party movement. But third party movements in the US political system were almost invariably spoilers, generally tipping elections toward that party whose platform was least similar to that of the third party. It was a contradictory role for such parties, but one that could easily be exploited, if the right egos were involved. Teddy Fraser had a big ego, honed over a career in which he had been successful more than a few times in his David versus Goliath battles. "I'm willing to see to it that Fraser is well funded if he runs."

"Teddy Fraser? He's fought us tooth and nail on just about every piece of energy and environmental legislation since I've been in Congress. You really think he'd be foolish enough to help the Republican Party get the White House back?"

Whitehead smiled and nodded. "He wouldn't see it that way, of course. He's on a mission from God. He wants to show all us corporate demons that the American people really want a kinder, gentler form of capitalism, one that doesn't destroy the ozone layer, dump oil on their beaches, and poison their water supply. He thinks that running for president is the best way to send us that message. But, of course, he won't do it unless he has enough money to get that message across."

"And you'll see to that."

"Not directly, of course, but I think you can be assured that Teddy Fraser will get his campaign war chest. He'll be in a strong position to steal the Democratic Party's thunder."

"And their young foot soldiers."

"Exactly. He'll rally his true believers and by default they'll give *you* the White House."

Birch's smile widened. "Well, damn, I guess I'd better get my boys back in D.C. and in Oklahoma City working."

"I think that would be a good idea." Whitehead watched as Birch forked more of his ham and eggs.



The sky was a hazy blue and peaceful in the afternoon as Mohamed bin Haji Bilal and Ali Jamal sat at a small metal table on the third floor balcony of Ali Jamal's white stone and concrete house looking out over the green railing at the landscaped garden.

"I would recommend you stay out of this matter with Sayyed Aziz," Mohamed said, then sipped tea from a porcelain cup. "The last thing you want to do is give the impression that you are siding with these radical Islamists, especially given your past history."

Ali Jamal blinked, then nodded his agreement. "Then you would suggest that I not even talk to Razak?"

"If you talk to Razak, then he would certainly inform Abdullah of your interest in these radicals."

Ali Jamal saw the stern warning not only in Mohamed's words but also in his expression, in his eyes. He accepted the warning and pledged to let the matter drop, then thanked Mohamed for his wise counsel.

Although it was late on Saturday, Mohamed returned to his office after his visit to Ali Jamal's home.

He contacted Kamal Razak, Minister of Home Affairs, and informed him of Ezam Aziz's visit to the finance minister. He suggested something be done to silence Ezam Aziz before word of any of this reached the prime minister. "Abdullah would not be amused," he had warned.

Mohamed knew full well that this phone call would result in the arrest of Professor Aziz. He had not hesitated for a moment, nor had he any pangs of guilt. He believed that Ezam Aziz had been foolish to try and involve Ali Jamal in the arrest of Sayyed Aziz, an anti-government radical Islamist.

The next day Mohamed would play a round of golf with a group of party elders, including a cousin of the head of the ISA, who passed along the message that Dr. Ezam Aziz had been taken into preventive detention, pending charges. "What's this all about?" The cousin had asked this just before selecting a nine iron. Mohamed had explained that it was just some housekeeping. Those were his words. It was just some housekeeping.

Ali Jamal spent part of Sunday at the National Zoo with his niece, Mariam, and her three young children. He was in good spirits. He did not think about Ezam Aziz or Ezam's uncle or yet know about the arrest.

"Let's see the birds, shall we?" He had asked the children, ages three, five, and eight.

Giggling they followed their uncle and mother towards the aviary.

Ali Jamal smiled. "I can see a wonderful future for our children," he said to Mariam. "We have made so much progress, and there is so much further we can go."

Mariam had a great deal of respect for her uncle. She knew that he was in line to become prime minister when Datuk Seri Dr Abdullah Akil retired. She looked into her uncle's eyes and smiled.



Senator George Washington Birch used to be part owner of a race track. It was one of many failed bids at achieving success, independent of his father's money and connections. His biggest failure had been in the oil business in Oklahoma: lots of dry wells and money gone. The Saudis, old friends of his dad, had saved him on that debacle. Prince Nayan had personally put up a small fortune to help Birch get rid of the huge pile of debts that threatened to forever end George W.'s dreams of being the man his daddy wanted him to be. But how he missed that race track. The horses tearing around the track, kicking up dirt. The cheers. It always brought a smile to his face. Nothing else like it, not even politics.

"I better go get dressed or we'll be late," Linda Birch said, getting up from the sofa.

Senator Birch was watching TV and Jerry Springer had just come on. "What time is it?"

"What time does Jerry Springer come on?"

"Oh," He said and smiled. As she walked away, he yawned and stretched.

As Jerry Springer's audience whooped and booed, Linda Birch found her attempt to prepare interrupted by the telephone. It was Herman Road. In her slip, she padded out and told her husband to get the phone.

Senator Birch muted the TV and picked up the phone. Road informed the Senator that the \$10,000 a plate dinner would include a special guest. "Your father is in town and wants to make an appearance," Road said. Silence. "I know you don't want to share the limelight, but I think we can spin this positively."

"What's wrong with dad being there?" Birch asked, pretending not to care.

"Well, there's not gonna be any television cameras allowed, so you don't have to worry about those annoying father-son photos in tomorrow's paper." Road went on to explain that a number of friends of Daddy Birch been added to those paying the \$50,000 required to sit in the front row of tables.

"As long as dad doesn't expect to speak," Birch said, glancing at Springer, "then so much the merrier."

"Okay, then I'm going down to the hotel and help Cane get things set up."

After he hung up the phone, Birch picked up the remote and turned on the sound to Jerry Springer.

Later that evening, Senator George W. Birch gave a speech in front of a near sell-out audience that was officially raising funds for an "exploratory" committee. Everyone knew it was more than exploratory.

"What do you think?" Lance Cane asked Herman Road as the Senator spoke.

"Needs work," Road replied. "He needs to be machoed up a bit."

"What?"

"If we are going to win this election, we need Birch to be the Marlboro Man."

"How are we going to do that?"

Road smiled. "Smoke and mirrors."

Nevertheless, the audience was already sold. They didn't need the Marlboro Man. They got exactly what they paid for and would continue paying for: a candidate who was bought and paid for. Most of those present had objectives that required a compliant executive branch and Birch promised to give them this.

"I think he can get the red neck vote," John Whitehead said. He was seated at one of the front row tables with four other CEOs. They deferred to Whitehead. "If he can pull in a majority of white male voters, I don't see why he can't win the election. I like what Herman Road is doing. The man has a plan."

"Tax cuts," Al Bolton, CEO of GadgetMart chimed in. "He can get the suburban vote with tax cuts."

The others nodded agreement. "And I certainly wouldn't complain," another CEO said.

"I think this is going to be a great election," Bolton added. More nods of agreement.

Whitehead had already spoken at length with Road, Cane, and the Senator. He knew that the strategy had been laid out. Senator Birch would use a mix of moderate rhetoric, similar to his father's famous call for a *conservatism that cares* and targeted attacks on "liberalism," which meant that he would set up his race for the White House as a crusade against providing federal support for redistributing resources and jobs to women and minorities and away from good, hard working white men. Most white male voters felt like they had become second class citizens, so it was easy to tap into their anger. If they thought you were on their side, then they would just stop listening to your opponent and become stone solid supporters, the kind politicians would die for, at least figuratively speaking.

Birch would also pay lip service to pro-lifers, although he had no intention of ending abortion. It was just too important an issue for Republicans. And then there were all the locally important groups, like the anti-Cuba Cuban Mafia in Dade County, who could help Birch win Florida.

But the bottom line was that Birch was planning to serve a very narrow transnational constituency, particularly the oil companies and military industrialists. This wasn't going to be part of the campaign, but it was the backbone of his candidacy. A Birch presidency would be Christmas for those companies. It would also be Christmas for the media conglomerates. Road knew that getting the media on Birch's side was critical and no better way than by making their corporate parents happy campers.

"And I just want you to know," the Senator finished, "I'm going to fight for you every day I'm in office."

As the applause erupted, Senator Birch, right on cue, stepped down from the podium and embraced his father, Winthrop Birch, who had not been informed of this maneuver but was all smiles.

"I'll do everything I can to get you in the White House, son," the elder Birch whispered as they hugged.

"Thanks, dad," Senator Birch said. "I just want to make you proud." And this was true.

Later that same week a major magazine that was part of the Grand United conglomerate put Senator Birch on the cover and did a flattering story on why he was the GOP front runner.

And on the radio, Bent Dombaugh launched into a scathing attack on the "liberal" vice president who he claimed was "a professional politician and prima dona" who "was a puppet of liberal special interests."



Mica was reading David Shambaugh's 1991 text, *The Beautiful Imperialist*, but finding it increasingly difficult because of the smell of Marco's cooking wafting up the stairs and through the open bedroom door. Finally, she closed the book and slid out of the bed, dressed and went downstairs.

Marco Fasulo was a middle aged, career foreign service diplomat who had originally met Mica at the U.S. Embassy in Djakarta. He was working temporarily in D.C., acting as a liason with the C.I.A. He turned from the stove, spatula in hand, and kissed Mica as she came to see what he was cooking.

"Shitake mushrooms for breakfast?" She asked. "I thought I smelled bacon."

"Yes on both counts," he said. "I'm making you my special omelet."

In addition to shitake mushrooms cooked in bacon grease and butter, seasoned with black pepper, salt, basil and parsley, Marco also added provolone cheese and green pepper. Food to die for. They ate at a small table in the kitchen and talked about a wide range of things, including Marco's latest dream: to leave the foreign service and work for the C.I.A. in operations. Mica assured him that it was not a good idea, but Marco was always a dreamer. This had attracted her to him. She found his discussions of geopolitics all the more interesting because he was such a dreamer. It gave her a different perspective. Marco believed that they were living in one of those rare transitional periods in human history when all the most fundamental structural aspects of global political and economic relations were undergoing radical change. He seemed excited by this prospect, living in such a transitional globe. Mica, on the other hand, found it a disconcerting idea and rejected it out of hand. Nevertheless, it was an interesting way of seeing things.

It was part of the mission of the C.I.A. to stymie certain types of change. By any means necessary. And, besides, if the world changed too much it could interfere with her retirement plans. Mica did not want the world to change too much before she could get that seaside property on the coast of Oregon.

"It is highly unlikely that anything our government does to block the rise of China will succeed, short of nuclear war, of course," Marco said. "They have time on their side. And one-fourth of the world's population. Not to mention an old and proud culture. And the fact that we've pissed off a good portion of the inhabitants of this planet at some time or other. Like the Roman Empire, we can slow the transition, but I don't see how we can stop it." He noticed Mica's empty glass. "More orange juice? Coffee?"

She looked at the small orange juice glass, its exterior wet with condensation. "Coffee," she said.

Marco got cups from the cupboard and poured coffee from the coffee machine. It was hot and ready. "If we were smart, we'd be trying to mend fences, create a friendlier impression."

"What are you saying, Marco, that we need to act more like Sweden?"

"That is precisely what I'm saying. We won't be the big bad wolf in the brave new world."

She smiled as he handed her the cup of steaming java. "Smells good," she said and he smiled back. "If we have to," she said, thoughtfully, "we can just nuke 'em."

Marco laughed. It was the ultimate American braggadocio bluff. They both knew it. At the end of the day American leaders were far more impotent than the nuclear arsenal made them seem. Or maybe not.



Mohamed passed Crystal in the hallway as she was on her way to see that Hussein and Xarmina were dressed and ready for school. Their eyes met. She wanted to tell him something. He could see it in her eyes. *We are all born innocent and find our way to sin. I could find myself in your eyes.* In Crystal he perceived innocence, someone untainted by corruption. Nevertheless, he knew how cruel the world could be. His first wife, who was also pure of heart, had nevertheless died a painful death. Izmeen had been there through the entire ordeal. He would always feel grateful for this and only the most vile and evil act imaginable could erase this gratitude. This is why he decided that, no matter what his feelings towards Crystal, he would not act on them. He would suppress this part of himself, unlike many of his peers who were far too quick to take advantage of their Philippino domestic workers, whose need for income to help family would often override their desire to avoid sexual abuse. Mohammed watched Crystal hurry away and smiled. He picked up his attache case and walked into the living room, where Izmeen was waiting for him.

Mohamed took from Izmeen the plum cookies wrapped in wax paper and left for the long ride to his office, reminding Izmeen that he would be home late. He had asked her earlier to accompany him to some event at the British Embassy, which was in the same section of KL as his daughter's apartment, and she had declined rather vociferously. She wanted nothing to do with the British or so she had said. The real reason she did not want to go with Mohamed was that she was taking this sterling opportunity to entertain a guest at the house: Rizal Sulaiman. The young man had graciously accepted her invitation to "visit." He had accepted such an invitation on at least three other occasions over the past year, always at times when Mohamed was indisposed. Before he stepped out the door, Izmeen warned Mohamed not to "drop in" on Mona, knowing full well that such a warning would push him into visiting her. "She likes her privacy," Izmeen had said. He waved to the driver standing next to the late model Mercedes to let him know that he was coming. "Will you change your mind?" he asked, trying one more time to entice her into joining him later. She shook her head. "I hope the traffic isn't too bad," she told him as he walked away from the door. "I hate your having to sit and breath all those diesel fumes. After the cancer, you should be careful about such things."

She closed the door before he could turn and wave. She went to their bedroom and opened the drawer where she kept her lingerie. At the bottom of the soft cotton and silk clothes she located the silver flask. She took it from the drawer, opened the top carefully and drank the sweet smelling liquid. She closed her eyes and sighed. This was almost enough, almost. She took another drink and closed the top, making sure it was tight. She put the flask back underneath the clothes.

Izmeen had married Mohamed thinking that her life would somehow become special: a dream life or so it had seemed from a distance. She had done precisely what her family had wanted her to do. She married a successful politician and barrister, ruling party chairman, close friend of Akil Abdullah, a man who could certainly be prime minister himself someday. *Why could not Mohamed become prime minister?* She had money and influence. Because of the money she had things and could travel to her hearts content, but somehow it just was not enough, not what she had expected. Even her occasional flirtations and affairs were not enough to distract her from the hollowness of it all. And she felt no guilt for having realized her ambitions through the demise of her cousin: life is endless competition. She lost no sleep over the past. But her dreams were ethereal, hard to put into solid form, and perhaps all the harder to ever achieve. The truth be told: Izmeen did not know what she wanted or what would soothe the perpetual itch in her soul. The itch made her mad. She became silently angry and lashed out at those who were close to her. But her lashes were also quiet. Cookies were her whip. This left her somewhat disaffected, perhaps permanently so, although nothing about humans can ever be said to be permanent,

except death, the sweet, delicious death she feared and yet offered as a gift to others.

Maybe it was the paucity of time together. That's what a Western-style psychologist might surmise. She hardly saw him anymore, except when he came home tired or on those few occasions of family events, such as the dinner for Mona. But hadn't she pushed him to do more, to "plant more seeds" for his own continued political success? Yes, she had and she wanted him to do this, for sure. After his surgery (she was as surprised as he that he did not die), he had lost some of his ambition and so she had to work all the harder to get him to do these social events and the constant politicking. She would not let him ruin their lives by his inability to deal with having knocked on the door of the great eternal. She shook her head. Like all men, he was ultimately a weak child. She would have to supply the ambition. After all, what else is there in life but to grasp for success, to gain more money and power, power and money --- to impress all those who were one's peers, to impress relatives, maybe even to help them when they deserved help. And to find a young man who could keep her passions satisfied, even if only for a brief stream of moments. This was what it was all about. This was what life was all about. What else could there be? Perhaps, she thought, the sweet taste of mourning: the sympathies of family and friends.

She opened the drawer again. "Just one more," she muttered to herself and dug down to get the flask out again. "Just one more and then I can get some work done."



In one corner of a green air conditioned room, a naked Ezam Aziz shivered, trying desperately to hold himself tightly enough to avoid some of the stinging cold air. He did not know what time it was. The bright lights were always on. When he could take it no longer and drifted into sleep, loud American music would be blasted from the two ceiling speakers.

When the interrogator returned, Ezam looked at him through puffy sour eyes and the blur from tears. The questions started up again. The nonsensical questions. What did he know of a secret plot to assassinate the prime minister? Had he recruited students to his cause? Who was funding the Islamist movement?

"I don't know," he repeated, over and over again. "I don't know what you are talking about." His lips, the color gone, dry and cracked, moved again and again, but this man did not seem to hear his words.

"If you cooperate, perhaps we can get you released," the man had promised.

Ezam was ready to cooperate, if only he understood how. And then in a moment of clarity, as if the inner anger had someone reignited, despite the cold, he realized what he must do.

"We know that your uncle is not the mastermind behind the plot to overthrow the prime minister."

Ezam Aziz shook his head violently. "No, no, he is not," he said. And then he told them a story.



It had now been a little over three weeks since he had come to the conclusion that he could not stand Hong Kong one moment longer, that he could not stand the Chinese or the food or the Indian tailors or the hawkers of copy watches one moment longer, that he could not stand Michael Maxwell one moment longer, yet here he was, still in Hong Kong, still working with Michael Maxwell, still eating the food,

and involuntarily rubbing shoulders with the Chinese and being accosted by the Indian tailors and the hawkers of copy watches. But he felt somewhat assured by the fact that he now had a confirmed Swiss bank account in escrow with one million U.S. dollars. This brought some relief to the discomfort, a great deal of relief from it, to be sure. And the knowledge that this account would soon swell by another four million U.S. dollars took him just a bit beyond mere relief, bordering on something akin to joy. What would he do with five million dollars? He did not know what he would do, had been unable to plan, afraid, perhaps, to accept that he would be, now was already, a millionaire. What did it mean? This was a question, a very serious question, but he did not have answers, yet. He had fantasized as a kid about being rich. For some reason, he found this amusing and it brought a smile to his face. He had forgotten about those fantasies. He had been a quiet kid, obedient, close to his grandfather (who had been probably the wealthiest member of his family, having accumulated a valuable amount of real estate in Idaho), a bit on the nerdy side. He married young, became a father young, and now had five children, all girls. He was unhappy about that. He wanted a son to carry on the family name, as they say. But if this was what God had wanted of him, then who was he to complain. He had done his best to raise them as good, God-fearing people, cut from the same cloth as himself. And now he could provide for them in a manner that was far beyond anything they had ever experienced before. He frowned at this thought. He did not want to spoil them. That, he thought, was probably the root of liberalism, spoiled children. He would have to keep vigilant, despite the money. He missed his wife, although he called her almost every night. Judith was a good wife, just as religious as he, even if she was, to some extent, influenced by the feminist malarkey that permeates the television and just about everything else. Devil's work, he thought. He keeps busy.

Frank Hyde met Michael Maxwell at Ocean Center. It was crowded, lots of tourists, but mostly Chinese. Not very comfortable for Frank. Michael, who was dressed very casually and carrying a book pack over one shoulder, said that they would have to take a boat out to the island where Simon Rekker was waiting at dock on his 166 foot yacht. Frank protested but to no avail. "Rekker insists we meet him there," Michael said. "We've finished the model," Frank had said. "What more do we need to do?" "Rekker likes to entertain on his yacht," Michael replied. "Maybe he wants to celebrate."

The boat they were about to board --- *the Quiet Heart* --- was no yacht. It looked more like a garbage skow. Frank did not like boats of any kind. He was a poor swimmer, at best, and preferred dry land. But Degenhardt had contacted them and said that Rekker wanted this meeting, so perhaps Michael was right and Rekker wanted to celebrate before setting his plan into motion. The boat was docked alongside the ramp outside Ocean Center, a privileged resting place. An old wooden vessel, its paint aging and its frame resting uneasily, even heavily, in the water, it seemed too flimsy for travel in Hong Kong's waters, or so Frank thought. To Frank, it looked for all the world like an overgrown toy and, at the same time, like a tree house that someone had attached to a boat. The ship's "captain" was an elderly Chinese man named Gao. Gao could sense Frank's uneasiness and smiled a yellowish smile as the man climbed down into the vessel. "Don't worry," Gao said to Frank, "this boat is very solid." He sort of laughed and went to his seat at the controls. Michael motioned for Frank to follow him down to the bench seats at the stern.

"Don't we need life jackets?" Frank asked.

"What for?" Michael asked, perplexed. "Look, Frank, the water is so polluted if the ship went down, you'd be lucky to drown. If you survived, you'd probably die of cancer."

Frank wasn't sure whether to take Maxwell seriously or not. He decided this was a bunch of baloney and

ignored it, although if you looked carefully at the water there was a great amount of visual support for Michael's hyperbole.

The engines started a loud coughing and rattling and rumbling as Captain Gao got the vessel started. The floors vibrated. Captain Gao looked back at Frank and smiled another toothy smile, then started steering the *Quiet Heart* away from the platform. Frank frowned, thinking this entire exercise must be to annoy him, if not frighten him.

"What does Rekker want now?" Frank asked Michael, not yet willing to go quietly on the *Quiet Heart*, and insisting on a better answer than he had previously received. He had to nearly shout to be heard above the roar.

Michael shook his head. "I have no idea.," he said, equally unwilling (or unable) to give more of a response than he had already given. "I guess he's paying us enough that he doesn't have to tell us ahead of time."

Frank thought about that for a moment. He agreed with this comment, although he did not say so. In any event, he believed that Michael intended no greater elaboration.

"I realized a long time ago," Michael added, "that Rekker has his own way of doing things. He's eccentric, but probably no more so than any run-of-the-mill billionaire. He's just accustomed to buying unquestioned loyalty."

"Five million dollars buys a lot of loyalty," Frank agreed.

"Well, I'm sure that the confidentiality agreement we signed is a bit of an extra incentive to *loyalty*. If we talk about any of this, we lose every penny of the five million. I suppose he doesn't trust us." Michael smiled.

"I don't trust him, either." Frank wasn't sure why he was admitting this to Michael Maxwell. After all, he did not trust Michael any more than he trusted Rekker.

"I'm certain Rekker knows that," Michael said.

Frank sighed. "I just don't see why he needed this meeting or why we need to meet on some island. We've run computer simulations of every possible scenario. We've talked to Rekker enough that he probably knows as much as we do about the model. What more could he possibly need?"

"I'm certain he will let us know."

"It's very inconvenient. I was planning to call my wife."

Michael nodded. "Inconvenient? Yes. For both of us."

"What do you mean?"

"My brother Samuel is coming into Kai Tak in about," he checked his watch, "two hours and I won't be there to meet him. I asked a friend of mine to meet him instead, someone Samuel has never met. I'm afraid this will only confirm to Samuel that his brother is lacking in certain critical emotional commitments. He once told me that in so many words."

"Why did he say that?"

"Lots of reasons. At the time, I think it was because I had just, rather callously, pointed out that while I was the flesh and blood son of our parents, he was not. I don't even remember what we were arguing about."

Frank frowned.

"Samuel is adopted," Michael said, answering the unasked question. "We're actually very close in age and are probably closer than a lot of brothers, but Samuel always had more to deal with than I, being adopted and all." Michael seemed to remember something suddenly, and opened the book pack. He pulled out a copy of a paperback book and opened it to the first page. He removed a photograph and handed it to Frank.

Frank looked at the photo, at first with a passive expression, then a startled look, then, as if regaining control of himself, with a frown. "This is Samuel." He pointed to the photograph of the dark skinned man standing next to Michael in the photo taken in Trafalgar Square. "Your brother?"

Michael smiled again. "Yeah, he's taller than me, about your height. I guess you can tell that we're not blood relatives."

"He's black?"

Michael feigned surprise. "Good God, do you think so? Samuel will be so surprised to hear that."

Frank closed his mouth and handed the photo back to Michael. He frowned again, thinking maybe he was being had. "Is this a joke?"

Michael put the photo back in the paperback, which was a collection of e.e. cummings poems. He looked at the book. "Samuel sent this to me. He thinks I need to read more poetry. He's constantly sending me the stuff. To be honest, I don't get most of the stuff he sends me, especially this fellow Cummings. I suppose that, in addition to being a Marxist, Samuel is something of a romantic. I'm convinced that it is one of the things that drives him to frequent depressions."

Frank shook his head. "I don't get it."

Michael shrugged. "Well, I guess the connection between being a romantic and depression isn't very obvious. But there were some very famous romantic poets who were . . ."

"I don't mean that."

"What then?"

"When you say he is your brother, you mean in the Biblical sense? He is not literally your brother. You have no biological link to this person."

Michael thought Frank might be blowing a gasket or two. *Is he worried that I might be a negro in disguise?* "As I said, Samuel's adopted."

"How is it possible? How could your parents . . . I just don't get it. Was it difficult for them to find a white child?"

"Oh, that. No. They wanted to adopt Samuel. They were always very clear on that point." He replaced the book in the book pack, zipped it quickly, and added, "I guess you might say that my parents are liberals,

although I suspect that would be a gross oversimplification." He looked away at the water, the flotsam and jetsam, the sun glistening on waves. "It was always tough for Samuel though." He looked back at Frank. "I guess you wouldn't understand that."

Frank's eyes narrowed. "No, I guess not. I would think it would have been very good for *Samuel*." He put a bit too much stress on Samuel. " He should have felt privileged."

Michael smiled once more. "My parents were quite well heeled, no doubt about that. But that did not protect Samuel from the slings and arrows or the confusion or the sense of always being an outsider, an untouchable. Despite what you might think, Frank, being labeled and treated as an outsider, a member of a concocted race of inferiors, is a daily hell, especially for a little boy whose parents and brother are members of the concocted race of superiors and who lives his everyday life in the world of those superiors, surrounded by them in every conceivable environment."

"What do you mean concocted race?"

"All this crap about race is a product of very sick imaginations," Michael said, firmly. "It doesn't take a genius to understand that there is no real biological basis for racial categories."

"Any fool can see the difference between a black person and a white person."

"Only because those fools have been trained to see that difference. Skin pigmentation is like the metaphorical needle in a haystack, one tiny genetic factor in a sea of genetic factors. It is quite possible that your genetic make-up is closer to Samuel's than it is to mine. That's true for most so-called white people and so-called black people. They often have more in common, genetically, across this constructed racial boundary than within it. What you see as an apparent and significant difference between you and Samuel is an illusion." Michael looked at Frank, wanting to see some sign he had gotten through, feeling as if he had something at stake in whether the older man changed, if only slightly, from his normal bigotry/rigidity.

"That makes no sense," Frank said with an air of finality, dispelling any illusion that such a change had occurred. He looked in the direction of Captain Gao. "You mean to tell me that guy is no different from you and me? A Chinese guy and a white guy are genetically the same?" Frank harrumphed his disdain for this idea. "That's like saying a cat is just a dog with whiskers."

Michael sighed. "I'm not a geneticist, so I can't give you the scientific explanation, although I've read a good deal on the subject, and it certainly does *make sense*. I read somewhere that the amount of genetic diversity on the African continent is greater than the amount of genetic diversity in the rest of the human population combined. If you randomly select three people, two born on the African continent and one born in Europe, the odds are that one of the Africans will share more genetic traits with the European than he or she will with the other African. There is no *Black* race, Frank, any more than there is a *White* one. The idea of a "black" race is a biological fiction of the first magnitude, a convenient social construct that serves social purposes. We're all members of one race, the Human Race, *Homo Sapien Sapiens*. Many of Samuel's problems, particularly his never ending sense of alienation, are a product of people's attitudes, not a product of biology."

Frank shook his head. "It's an old argument: nature versus nurture. I've heard it many times. Environment is supposed to determine everything, right? That's why the statistical differences between white and black people. You really are a liberal. The next thing you'll be telling me is that black people are poor and

prone to criminal behavior because of the terrible way they were treated in slavery. I've heard it all before. Slavery ended a long time ago and none of the black people alive today were alive during slavery. They have no excuse for their plight but their own indolence. If it isn't genetic, then it sure isn't my fault or the fault of any white person."

Michael shook his head. "Hopeless."

"Answer me this, if things were so horrible for Samuel living with white parents, then why did they adopt him?"

"Horrible is a bit of an exaggeration. Samuel has had some amount of joy, I assure you. And I'm certainly lucky to have him as a brother. As for the difficulties he encountered, my parents could not have foreseen it. Indeed, to this day they do not know what Samuel has had to go through. You are not alone in being ignorant, Frank. The *world* is full of ignorance and cruelty. People create all these artificial barriers, barriers created in their imagination, and the consequences can be devastating. Samuel is culturally not much different from me. He sounds like me. He knows the world I know. We went to all the same schools. In every way, except one, Samuel is just as *white* as I am. But in the imagination of people like you and people much more *liberal* than you, Samuel is *black* and that makes him something strange, something special, something unlike us. *The Other*. In every school we attended, he was constantly reminded that he was *black*. Never mind that he did not know what to do with this knowledge. He could not *be black*. He could only be Samuel. Funny thing is, Frank, Samuel has much more in common with me than you do and yet you think of us as members of the same white club. That's why you are so comfortable talking to me."

*What makes you think I'm comfortable talking to you?* Frank thought it, but decided not to say it. *What was the point?* He shrugged. "If that's what you think."

"I don't know what to think," Michael said, sounding a bit exasperated. "All I know is that with the money I'm making on this deal with Rekker I'll be able to distance myself from a lot of the crap. I might not be able to escape a world full of ignorance, but I will be able to pay for civility and the . . . illusion that things are better and people are better than they are. That's good enough for me."

"And what would your brother say about that?"

Michael shrugged. He knew what his brother would say, but he was now tired of the conversation, this particular conversation. He had expressed his thoughts and it had been deftly deflected by Frank, as always. This was growing tiresome, like the dirty waves scraping along the sides of the *Quiet Heart*.



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