



THE CASE

At last my friend Dan thrusts into the bar, as if he's pushed by hot winds. No one seems to follow him. He looks round at other guys making their noise.

'Tongue-slitters!' he says loudly. 'Why do we meet in a torturers' bar?' He sticks out a greyish tongue at them, and slabbers incoherent words: 'Tell them nothing,' he says to me, and laughs: 'They don't know what intelligence can be.'

'They're bankers and such,' I say.

'Well, their liberty's a luxury, waiting for their pensions while their big army does its work,' he says. He turns to me, 'How's your life?'

'It's years since we met – those years have passed and now are silent. I've been spying, on the frontier. The paper that I work for doesn't pay, so there I was in Kičevo, watching the movement.'

He nods, knowing all about Kičevo. He says,

'I saw you talking to that tart, the short one, in the blue aertex combo.'

'She's maybe not quite a tart. Lives round here.'

'That makes no special sense,' says Dan. He chants a little. 'She won't help you break no system down!' Then, 'What we need,' he says confidentially, 'is experts who've read all the books, and run like snakes. The only way. Not caring who's our followers, or who pays.' He squirms around, to classify the drinking guys, especially their shoes, 'That's how you tell.'

It's like touching a bare wire, with him, and then again, again the spurt of hot, and maybe it will only bring you bad.

'I was with the Indians,' he says, into the blue, then back he turns to me, 'They've understood technology, those phones the guys have given them, and then the movies that they're in. They're far ahead. Of course, they're just a block, no one can pronounce their names. Everything's been lost, for

them. They're what we'll be. After the breaking; then we build it up again.'

'You're crazy, Dan,' I say. 'To break it down and build it up? You're into liberalism? Just leave it be.'

'No,' he says, 'I'm really quite indifferent. It's just survival, that is all. There you are, into the jungle, a foul and threatening place, your food is cool and poisonous, and every beetle, every grub, is suffering and all its life will suffer from the screeching of the parrots and its emptying gut, the ghosts behind the trees, the pits that's full of skulls, the suffering of each and all, the moths that eat your eyes, the grass that darts and grows inside your penis – yes, my friend, be sure it's love that sets the whole thing up and makes it spin!'

I say, 'French guys say it's there you feel pure, you contemplate. A friendly margin. No castes, no prize.'

'Well, that just shows crap,' says Dan. 'That's forest. Jungle – the first time, I was scared, then scared all the time. That's why the Indians don't sing when they're inside. It's not their dinner they are looking for – it's avoiding being someone else's snack. The second time I knew more, I was more scared. And on and on, so. Of course, you love it. It's like a woman – once you've had her, she's had you, and then the only change can be – rejection. There's no compromise. With men, it's different – playacting and doing deals. That's not for me.'

'That's against the run of common sense,' I say.

'Fuck common sense,' he says. 'The thing about your jungle's this – you can reject it, not go back. Or else it can reject you, and you fall into a pit, or hoisted up in nets. Forget the cultural stuff, the woman nurturer – that's all a scam. It – she – gives you what's to eat: you take it, steal it, stab it. Tomorrow – there's the hunger, just the same.'

'It's impressive, Dan,' I say, and that's the truth: 'Why'd you go in? Jungles, Indians, all that?'

'They were teaching me,' he says, perhaps a little cautious now, 'Just venturing how to survive. That's all you need to know. The rest is whitewash,' and I say,

'It all seems stereotype to me. The wisdom, the surviving,' and he says,

'It's life, old friend. You can live through it, all of it, and never know it's life. You've lived, you've died. You think it's something taking you from there to here. But *here's* the grave. The road is life. That's the beast you have to wrestle with,' and he leans back upon the bench.

Hohum, I think, and say, 'Well, it does make some sense, but not original or very deep.' Maybe he nods again, he says, 'And then I made some cash, a lot,' and so I say,

‘Then lay some out, upon our tab.’

And so he does, a wad rolled tight, a snotty green that smells of skin.

I say, ‘Dan, I can’t imagine you – sex with men, weighing up accounts,’ and he reads me well, says,

‘You’re right. It’s quite delusional, the whole thing, especially the details. That’s what puts you off. It’s just the women, they are warriors, and they fight wars. The men are only good for skirmishes, and often tears. That warring stuff is for the young guys, really young. For some, a crossroads. But you must plough ahead. Not Indians only – it’s true for everyone. What I mean – it has to start and end small, otherwise it couldn’t be great, magnificent. So, when you are a big shot, you’re on your way to being small.’ He tilts his drink. ‘Look at those Chinese – they’re super-rich guys, but they’re not capitalists, they’re on strings. And all those poor guys, working to live, and then they lift their heads, and there’s riches – but it isn’t Capital. It’s choice – the Party guys. They choose.’

‘I’m sure you’re wrong,’ I say.

‘But you’re not right either. Sitting there,’ he says.

‘There’s reasons why you don’t dance and sing when going out to hunt,’ I say. Dan says,

‘Of course, there’s always reasons. Because the place is full of ghosts, live, dead. They have their special dance. Ghosts. Hunters. It is respect, not fear. This is the age of reasons, after all.’ I say,

‘It’s just I don’t see what kind of life comes from your head. Wherever you are at.’

Dan says, angrily, ‘There’s life. There are no different kinds. Nor different kinds of head. Do, don’t spy.’

I tell him, ‘My paper didn’t pay enough. I’m greedy so I took some more. And anything you write about that place, Kičevo, is true, and false, and no one cares.’

We’ve had enough of each other. I leave, and as I go, I see Dan move over to the lady in the aertex.

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