

BESTSELLER

ALESSANDRO GALLENZI

---

ADVANCE READING COPY

CHAPTERS 1 AND 2



ALMA BOOKS

ALMA BOOKS LTD  
London House  
243–253 Lower Mortlake Road  
Richmond  
Surrey TW9 2LL  
United Kingdom  
[www.almabooks.com](http://www.almabooks.com)

Copyright © Alessandro Gallenzi, 2010

Alessandro Gallenzi asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

This advance reading copy printed in UK by TJ International

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Having books printed at your own cost and selling what was born from your own imagination is to me like eating pieces of your own flesh... I would sooner endure poverty than offend virtue by turning the liberal arts into a trade... Those who seek profit should become merchants – and those who act as booksellers should renounce the name of poets... Please print these letters carefully, on good quality paper – that is the only recompense I want...

*Pietro Aretino to his publisher, 22nd June 1537*

Publication is the auction  
of the mind of man

*Emily Dickinson*



# 1

Jim's destiny was to be a great writer, to write a bestseller. His first novel – little more than a long short story – was written about fifteen years ago, under the encouragement of his creative-writing tutor, a retired university lecturer who had ended up committing suicide a few months later by tying a plastic bag around his head.

Just before the sad event, the man had recommended his student to a notoriously sharkish London literary agent, who had immediately decided to take him on and represent his next work, which they agreed would be a thriller called *Appointment with Death*. Unfortunately, writing under commission to a deadline wasn't the same as dabbling with words for an hour or two in the afternoon, and the thought of the high stakes on the table – and the agent's huge expectations – grounded Jim's flights of inspiration. As a result, *Appointment with Death* was somewhat lame, so that the agent asked one of his henchmen to chop it back, cut it up, sort it out and then put it back together – in other words, to rewrite it from scratch. "You see, Jim," his agent

had said, wrapping him in a huge cloud from his cigarillo, “style is all very well – but we need to get to the nitty-gritty, y’know: less description, more death and a bit of bonking. How many copies do you want to sell? A hundred or a hundred thousand?”

Strangely, for all his wisdom and influence, the agent failed to place the eviscerated script – and so it was on with the second novel, this time a murder mystery set in Paris, *The Woman with Three Faces*. And after five months of painful silence, the agent had called to give him the good news: an American publisher – not one of the biggies, admittedly – had shown interest. Well, the advance wasn’t great, in fact it barely crested four figures, but – everybody needs a springboard, right?

Jim could distinctly remember the day when he had received the black-and-white catalogue of the Pink Hippopotamus Press, with his happy, smiling young face on page twenty-four, where the book was announced for release in the following autumn. He took that catalogue everywhere – to the café, to the library, to the toilet – and looked at page twenty-four for ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Sadly, two weeks later the Pink Hippopotamus Press was declared bankrupt. That was the end of *The Woman with Three Faces*, and his agent stopped returning his calls.

But Jim wasn't overly disheartened: he immediately set himself to write two more works, a science-fiction book with a telepathic robot as the main protagonist, and a historical novel set during the Time of Troubles, *The Warrior of Kiev*. With great hope and enthusiasm, he sent out manuscript after manuscript to agents, publishers and renowned authors, confident that an opportunity would soon arise. But the agents answered in unison that they were not interested in taking on any new authors; the publishers lamented that their programmes were already overstretched and that the work in question did not "fit in" with their lists, and suggested that he should contact an agent; the renowned authors didn't bother to reply.

At this point there was something of a hiatus in Jim's literary career, a pause that coincided with a series of weekly meetings with a Belgian doctor at a private psychiatric hospital. At the end of this difficult period, Jim's primal impulse was still to write – perhaps out of spite, revenge, anger, or maybe just as a sort of cathartic tool. The works written during this time – two free-verse poetry collections, a very short semi-autobiographical romance, a humorous novelty book and an experimental play – bore "all the marks of the author's deep emotional and mental turmoil". At least, that was the judgement of the Belgian doctor, who

was still keeping an eye on Jim at three-month intervals. These books – coming as they did from Jim’s tormented period – were never loosed upon the teetering slush piles of agents and editors, but remained stuffed in a drawer, underneath Jim’s socks and underpants.

It was the run of subsequent novels that rekindled a glimmer of hope in Jim’s faltering career. He felt he was entering upon his mature, creative prime, and that his latest works carried a new authority. And every now and then, in reply to all the manuscripts he sent out, a slightly more authentic letter of rejection would crop up. Jim would extract the titbits of encouragement from these letters and attach all of them, in detail, to every new proposal and submission that he sent out. One day he would get published, he was sure about this.

With his tenth novel, a naturalistic work à la Zola, he adopted a more proactive submission technique, following up the initial proposal with a phone call to editors and editorial directors. In a short time, he became a well-known figure in every publishing house. Although the editors and editorial directors were always busy in some meeting or other, or on a lunch break even at four in the afternoon, sometimes there was a secretary or assistant he could talk to about his publishing history and current situation. Little

by little, he began to exist in the collective mind of the book industry as a well-defined, three-dimensional, slightly unpleasant entity: a kind of blowfly that no one can be bothered to shoo out or swat.

Jim's next novel remained unfinished, and his visits to the Belgian doctor, who issued a total ban on "any kind of artistic-creative-compositional activity", took on their former frequency. It was suggested to him that he should go on a long trip abroad, which he immediately did – though not forgetting to take a notepad and pen with him. The result was a travel book entitled *Grand Tour*, nearly three hundred pages long, which agents and publishers turned down with much more vehemence than any of his previous works.

He really couldn't understand these rejections, so he decided to delve even deeper into the mysterious workings of the creative process. For three months he moved into the British Library on a near-permanent basis, and devoted himself to reading and researching, making his nest at desk 372 of the Rare Books and Music reading room, where there were only a few bookworms and an air of hypnotic stillness. One late afternoon he fell asleep on a quantum-mechanics textbook, and the security guard had to shake him hard to wake him up. Another time he was caught

underlining a passage with his pencil. It was his own book he was defacing, but he very nearly got ejected and banned from the library for life.

After this period of profound study, he began to spend long days in bookshops, browsing hundreds of books in a bid to answer this fundamental question: “What is the difference between a published and an unpublished book?” Is it the quality and originality of its content? Is it the title? The author’s fame? The fact that it is printed and bound? That it is sold and read by other people? Jim came to the conclusion that there’s no difference between the books that get printed and the infinite number of works that remain unpublished. “The only variable is chance,” Jim would argue with himself. “A manuscript landing in front of the right editor at the right time. Sure, it can help to have good contacts among the editorial mafiosi, but a bit of good luck is all it takes.” And yet, despite this fatalistic vision of the publishing world, he would still devour the newspapers’ book-review pages, drop by the library to read books like *The Writer’s Bible* or *How to Grow a Novel*, and scan through the bestsellers’ charts trying to draw some conclusions from them.

On the day the *Evening Standard* reported that the Belgian doctor had been extradited after being accused of

giving teddy bears and cotton socks to five-year-old boys, something happened to Jim. It was as though all the years of experience, the months of studying and the deep-rooted questioning of what makes a successful book came together in a brilliant fusion of creativity. He locked himself in his room and started dashing off words, inspired by a new, unknown feeling of joy. He carried on for weeks on end, hardly pausing, rarely leaving his room.

And so it was that at 3.45 that morning – in a nondescript West-London flat swallowed up by rows and rows of terraced houses sheltering their sleeping occupants, in the tomb-like silence of his writer’s dungeon – the last words of his masterpiece had finally blinked on the screen.

\* \* \*

Jim sprang up in his bed as the front door was slammed shut. He looked around for a few seconds, perplexed, then decided to sink his head back into the pillow. It was probably Janet, his landlady, dashing off to a Tibetan yoga class. Or perhaps Tom, her boyfriend, coming back from his night shift at the post office. What time was it, though? He scratched the tip of his nose, eyes still closed, as a tentacular arm stretched towards the candlewick curtains

blacking out the room. Light: there was light outside. He opened one eye and strained to look at his watch, but one of the hands seemed to have fallen off. Then he understood – it was twelve o'clock – and he stretched his jaws in a soundless yawn.

There was an unpleasant smell in the air, something like scrambled eggs. The tentacle gave another little tug at the curtains, letting a white strip of dust into the room. The dim light tentatively explored his figure lying crumpled on a folding bed, the cheap pine furniture huddled in the corners, and the piles of books scattered everywhere – on the floor, on shelves, even under the bed.

Then it all came back to him: his features twisted into a smile that cheese-wired his face in half, and his fists clenched so hard under the duvet that the bed gave off a sinister creaking noise.

“Yes!... Yes!...”

Writing “The End” always gave him an intense joy, but the night before, when he had tapped those words on his computer keyboard, he had the definite feeling that this was the novel that was going to yank him out of obscurity and into a successful writing career.

He got out of bed, yawning, and put his ear to the bedroom door. It sounded like no one was in, so he ventured out

in his usual tracksuit-trousers and pyjama-jacket nightwear. His kitchen cupboard was as empty as his stomach, and when he opened its door that same rotten smell of scrambled eggs assailed his nostrils. He wondered whether he should check out the other cupboards, but he knew that Janet kept a detailed inventory of the food situation down to the last frozen pea, and that Tom did not take kindly to that kind of liberty. There was nothing for it: he had to get down to the corner shop. Since he was going out, he could also drop by at the post office and order the stamps, and maybe pay a little visit to the library and the bookshop.

In front of the bathroom mirror, shaving himself with a razor blade past its best, he grinned at himself and muttered.

“A bestseller, yeah... a chart-topper...”

Afterwards he sauntered about the flat in his underpants for a while, improvising a little jig and whistling *Aida*'s ‘Triumphal March’ as he cavorted into his room. He had not felt this happy, this perky, for months. He tugged at the curtains, allowing light to trickle in, and emerged from his room wearing worn-out jeans, a green mock-alpaca jacket and bright-red trainers.

It was a decent day outside, at least by London standards: mild but overcast. Jim hated the English weather, and was

sick of the city's eternal pall of cloud. He'd much prefer to live in the south of France or on the Costa del Sol, tapping away on a laptop under the shade of a beach umbrella, sipping at some exotic cocktail on the seafront – but London was the place to be for an aspiring writer like him, the place where one could make useful contacts and, above all, the centre of the publishing universe. So he didn't plan to move abroad until he had established his name as a writer, which he hoped would be very soon.

Until then, he had to endure the situation a little longer, renting the dismal little room in Janet and Tom's flat. Shepherds Bush was an up-and-coming area, they'd said – well, maybe so, but Jim knew he didn't belong in a place like Shepherds Bush... His natural habitat was only a few hundred yards away – beyond the huge roundabout which divided the rich and the poor – in the elegant villas of Holland Park and Notting Hill. So many famous writers lived there – and with a bit of luck he'd soon be catapulted into one of those sumptuous, high-ceilinged houses, among the braying grand people, the glossy posse, the chamber-music quartets, the crystal glasses warbling with Cordon Rouge. Janet and Tom had said that they intended to get married soon, in July or August, and wanted him out. They'd been repeating the same old thing for three years

now, but this time it looked as if they were serious, because he had seen them writing invitation cards. God willing, he would be turning his back on the two Irish love birds and Shepherds Bush by the end of the summer.

He put the manuscript in his rucksack, unchained his bicycle from the wrought-iron fence and set off for the Fulham Post Office. On the way, he mulled over which strategy he should use this time for the proposal to publishers and agents.

\* \* \*

Charles Randall, the editorial director of Tetragon Press, had had a dreadful weekend. The head of a small but prestigious independent publishing house that had somehow managed to survive – even if in a state of continuous near-bankruptcy – for thirty years in a fragile shell of literary quality despite the crushing advance of the corporate giants, he had decided to take some work home over the weekend: a handful of submissions to read, a script to be edited and a couple of galleys to be proofed. But once he'd got home, the mere sight of piles and piles of books, papers, catalogues, letters, bills and other rubbish had drained his will to live.

His lank figure had collapsed into a dusty old sofa, also covered with unspecified paper trash, and his gaze had wandered into the void as he looked through thick lenses encrusted with little white dots. He had retraced the entire arc of his existence, and had lingered on a distant, slightly blurred point, from which emerged the image of a young university student with long hair and an unkempt beard, a poet full of dreams and ideals who used to print political flyers and poetry pamphlets with an old hand-cranked cyclostyle. Then the beard disappeared, the hair became shorter and withdrew around the temples, and a pair of black-framed glasses sprang up onto his nose. Now he was sitting behind a desk in a tiny room in the basement of a run-down property in South-East London, surrounded by heaps of paper and books, with an ancient telephone that rattled the furniture when it rang. Newspaper clippings began to float around him: the first reviews, the first interviews. Then a femme fatale with long auburn hair, a volcano of sensuality and passion, entered the scene. And all of a sudden his desk flew into an elegant Mayfair reception room, papers and books disappeared, to be replaced by dozens of hunching, tottering figures who were gossiping whilst sipping wine and champagne in the dim smoky light. Some of those figures lit up momentarily

with a halo of sanctity, showing the faces of famous poets and novelists, Nobel Prize winners, journalists and critics of a generation now forgotten. The auburn-haired woman was then spirited away by a Paris train, and a grey-haired forty-something reappeared in a dark office on the Southbank, submerged by cardboard boxes, books and other clutter, which sedimented around him. After that, a lanky figure began to run from the door of his flat to the station, catching the train at the last minute, arriving at the office, gulping down a cup of instant coffee, and then proofs, manuscripts, coffee, deadlines, phone calls, coffee, meetings, invoices, book covers, coffee – and the same lanky figure put on his coat and ran to the station again, for ten years in a row, until his hairline receded to reveal a shiny bald pate, his remaining hair went hoary, the lenses in his glasses thickened, his clothes got shabbier and mangy.

When he came to on that Friday evening, he found himself holed up in his lower-ground-floor London flat, surrounded and oppressed by the printed word. So he had grabbed a bottle of Cabernet and... had descended into a calamitous bender, waking up on the Monday morning with three-day stubble, his shirt tails flapping over his open flies and his tie lapping his back. One hour behind schedule, he had just enough time to shave and force himself under

a cold shower, then he dashed off to the station with long, desperate strides, his briefcase bulging with books and paperwork.

The minute he stepped into the office, he had to face the ghost-like appearance of Pippa, his new editorial assistant. This “great addition to the team” had been ratified from above... at the time when the *above* was created above him, a few months ago.

“Nick Tinsley has been waiting for half an hour.”

“Brrnnff,” grunted Charles.

“What?”

“Cof-fee!”

Pippa wrinkled her nose, turned round and waddled to the kitchenette, leaving a strange trail of garlic behind her.

“What the heck do these girls eat in the morning?” thought Charles, shaking his head and striding along the corridor towards his little room.

Nick Tinsley, aka the Shark, was waiting for him there, sprawling on a fold-back chair, absorbed in the sports pages of his *FT*. In front of him, on Charles’s desk, lay a fuming mug of black tea.

“A-ha!” The publishing consultant sprang up and stretched out his hand. “Good *moorning*. How are we today?”

“Trnnff,” replied Charles, turning over his hand and

stretching out three fingers in a kind of Masonic greeting gesture.

Nick squeezed the three fingers for a second, then let them slip away and, performing a half-pirouette, sucked in his paunch to let Charles pass between him and the wall.

“Everything all right?” added Nick, folding his newspaper and putting it back into his briefcase, whilst Charles trudged past another fold-back chair and struggled to sit down on the black-leather chair wedged between his desk and the wall.

“Everything in the garden is lovely,” Charles mumbled, letting his case drop heavily on the floor. “Lov-eh-ly,” he repeated, pretending to sort out some heaps of paper scattered on his desk, without deigning to grant the Shark a single glance.

Nick mustered a strained smile. He’d grown inured to this kind of childish strop. Sometimes the directors of a company would be as meek as lambs, sometimes they would stamp their feet on the ground and shout and scream. It was natural. Sure, it wasn’t nice having to announce to fifty people, or even to five people, that they would be losing their jobs within a week. And it wasn’t nice having to sack the founder or the managing director of a company for being surplus to requirements. But that was part of his job. And there was no

task which was too awkward for him. As he loved to repeat: “Shit always goes to the top”. And this, perhaps the highest philosophical concept that he would ever express in his long career as a company butcher, had almost become his motto.

“Well, Charles, have you done your homework?” Nick’s smile had turned into a grimace.

Their eyes finally met, and they stared at each other for a few moments. Charles and Nick were almost the same age, although the former looked at least fifteen years older than the latter. Yet the publishing consultant had a bad habit of talking to Charles with an openly patronizing tone, to emphasize the new hierarchies that had been put in place at Tetragon Press.

“No.”

“What do you mean ‘no’?”

“No. I didn’t have time, I had other things to do,” Charles shifted his gaze onto an old submission, which after a quick glance ended up in the bin under his desk. “Someone has to see the books through to publication... mmm.”

“Look, perhaps I haven’t been clear enough.” Nick straightened up in his chair. “If you don’t start engaging with the new situation, there will be no more publications, all right? From now on, everything must be approved by myself: from expenses to print runs and discounts.”

“What about the titles?” Charles threw in casually, still looking away, and busying himself with pencil and sharpener.

“No, not the titles, for the time being – but the days of Hungarian and Chilean poets are over.”

“Bolivian.”

“You know what I mean. The idea is that we give you a little leeway with the editorial choices, and in return...”

“You give *me*? Oh, so who is giving *me* ‘a little leeway’?... I thought I was still the MD of this company... I won’t let an accountant and... and—”

“Then it’s true,” Nick interrupted him, “it’s true what Roger says – you still haven’t got to grips with how things work here...” and he snorted in irritation, turning his face to the wall for a moment. “It’s very simple: if you want to keep the business afloat, if you want to carry on printing your nice little books, you have to let us do our job. We need cooperation. Is that asking too much? You should consider yourself lucky that with all the debts you’ve accrued you’ve found someone who’s taking on the risk—”

“I am not going to pull Naruszewicz’s book, that’s for sure,” said Charles. “And we are not going to print our books on toilet paper.”

“We’ll discuss this later.”

“No, we’ll discuss nothing.”

“Listen to this: next week we’ll sit around this desk – Roger, you and me – and we’ll go through all the titles for next—”

“Next week I won’t even bother to come to the office, and you’ll have to do everything yourself... You’ll sit here, on this chair, and you’ll start reading the books, editing the texts and proofreading them...” And he slammed four fingers on the only empty space in front of him.

Pippa came in with a cup of coffee, a mock-polite grimace clotting her washed-out face. She left the cup on a book blotched by circular tea stains, and before leaving the room she made a sudden turn and hissed:

“Holly called this morning, she can’t come in... She’s got a migraine...” and making another sharp turn she waddled out of the room.

“Prnnfff,” Charles grumbled, shaking his head.

“What’s that?” said Nick.

Charles gave a shrug.

“What’s wrong with the girls these days? What kind of names are these? Pippa... Holly... Where do you find them?”

The Shark seemed to smile for a moment.

“Right... can we start talking business here? We haven’t made a penny since I walked in.”

Charles stifled a curse.

Nick opened a slim folder labelled TP and pulled out a couple of sheets of paper. “So, for example...” he murmured, with a patient tone of voice. “I understand these are the expenses for last quarter’s titles... mmm... what’s this?” and he pointed to a minute box in a huge spreadsheet he had in front of him.

“What?” said Charles.

“What is *this*?”

“What, that?... I don’t know... What’s that?... What is it?...” Charles showed a sudden interest in the first sheet of paper he could get hold of. “That one is...” – he cast a sidelong glance – “that one is the expense for... second proofs of—”

“*Second* proofs?!” snarled Nick. “Second proofs? Are you joking? This isn’t bloody Random House – we didn’t publish Ruth Rendell or Dan Brown last month, did we?”

“Actually at Random House...”

“This is bad... this is really bad...” and this time it was the Shark who slammed his fist on the desk, making Charles jolt back in apprehension. “You must get it into your head that this is a company, not a charity... At the end of the day what matters is the bottom line, the sales, the costings, the forecasts, the budget, the cash flow, the margins...”

“The page margins?”

“Listen,” Nick continued, after a good long shaking of his head. “Listen... I’m here to help you, all right? Is that clear? Someone else in my place would have kicked you out a long time ago, OK? I am your best friend here, do you understand?”

“Well, Nick...” – he pulled out his glasses and scratched the bridge of his nose – “...it doesn’t work like that, you know? Not here...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for good or for bad I’ve kept this business afloat for thirty years, you know? I’ve seen all sorts of things, I’ve seen a lot of people come and go... and you can’t just turn up here with a business card saying ‘Publishing Consultant’ and expect me to spring to attention... I’ve published more than five hundred books, including a couple of Nobel Prize winners, so I’ve got a little bit of experience myself. It’s easy to come from God knows where and terrorize people with numbers and the spectre of bankruptcy...”

“Look, if I’m here today, it’s not to advance your interests or mine. I’m here because I represent the interests of the majority shareholders, OK? I don’t give a damn if you publish a book by Tom or Dick – or Harry. I don’t give a toss if you win the Nobel Prize or an Olympic medal: all I care about is that at the end of the year I can go to Mr Goosen and tell

him: ‘The company has made such and such profits...’ ‘Who is the editorial director? What books have been published? Which paper was used?’ ‘I don’t know, I don’t give a damn – but here are the profits...’ Do you understand?”

The telephone rang.

A few seconds later Pippa peered through the doorway and announced, raising her eyebrows:

“Craig Mortimer for you.”

“Craig Mortimer?” Charles turned this over in his mind for a moment. The name didn’t ring a bell.

“Oh yes, Craig Mortimer... yes, yes, put him through...” With an apologetic gesture, Charles picked up the phone and selected line one, under Nick’s withering gaze.

“Hello?”

From the other end of the line emerged a confused stammering, and the story of a manuscript sent the previous week...

“Mm-uh, mm-uh...”

“I mean, I know you must be very busy... but, er... I just wanted to check... that you got it... that’s all...”

“Mm-uh...” Charles’s glance landed on a babel-like heap of submissions hidden in the corner of the room, then intercepted the bloodshot eyes of the Shark, who snorted ostentatiously, fished out his *FT* again and opened it.

“The novel... the novel I sent you... no hurry of course, but... when do you think you’ll be able to... I mean... there may be interest from other publishers and...”

“Mm-uh, mm-uh...” Charles looked around again in despair: everywhere paper, paper, paper... Words, words, words... Money, money, money... Numbers, numbers, numbers... The struggle for survival... everyone for himself...

The Shark raised his eyes abruptly and produced a cracking noise as he snapped the newspaper wide open at a new page.

Charles signalled to him with his index finger that he’d be only another minute, just another minute... And as Nick, clenching his teeth, went back to his newspaper, Charles let his index finger fold back down whilst raising the middle finger at the same time, in a gesture of protest which had been used many years ago by the long-haired young man, that young idealist still lodged in some unfathomable recess of his soul.

“Turd,” thought Charles.

“The fun is over, pal... time’s up...” thought the Shark, pretending to read.

\* \* \*

Jim's bicycle screeched to a halt in front of a shabby café on the North End Road. He used to go there a lot, looking for a quiet place to work. The café owners, two sisters from Glasgow, regarded him as something of an odd fish, a philosopher, with his ponytailed head in the clouds and his bright-red shoes. They were used to seeing him hunched in a corner, reading or writing in absolute silence. Every so often they would bung him a cappuccino and a croissant, as if he were a harmless tramp.

“Ah, Jim... long time no see...” said the youngest of the two, Helen, as she saw him come in.

Jim grunted a greeting and went to sit at his usual table, near the shop window.

“What would you like, cappuccino?” asked the other sister, craning her neck from behind the coffee machine.

There was no answer from the philosopher, who was pulling out his manuscript from the rucksack. The two sisters exchanged glances and a few whispered comments, then burst out laughing.

“Chocolate on top?” shouted Helen. No answer. Jim was already rereading the beginning of his novel, and was deaf to the external world, a placid expression of beatitude

stamped on his face. Helen shrugged and walked with her tray towards him. He lifted his eyes from the manuscript only when she was standing right in front of him.

Two years ago – in the spring, it had been a Sunday – Helen and Jim had gone for a walk together. Helen didn't remember whose idea it was, only that it had been one of the most cringingly uncomfortable experiences of her life. They had walked in silence side by side in the park. Jim was wearing a headset, which was connected to an elderly walkman hanging from his belt, and looked off into the distance, smiling to himself. From time to time Helen cast a sidelong glance at him, pouting in dismay.

“What are you listening to?” she finally burst out.

“Er... Radio Four.”

Then rain had come, and they ran at once into a bus shelter. He kept listening to the radio, she started reading *Anna Karenina*. At around two thirty they had parted in front of Victoria Station, and that was the last time they had met outside the North End Road café.

For Jim, the female gender was a mystery. He had, in some ways, a medieval idea of woman. He regarded her as a frivolous, whimsical being, constantly bent on the most trivial aspects of life, such as clothes, perfume, jewellery, the home, children, electrical appliances, laundry... Just think

what a downright curse it would be to spend an entire life with such a mean-spirited enemy of promise, whose only purpose in life is to drag down man's ideals with the deadweight of her pragmatism and reproductive imperative. It would be impossible to write with a woman around. It would be difficult even to read or to have one minute for thinking freely in.

Helen, on the other hand – who described herself on her Guardian Soulmates ad as “attractive, early thirties, hazel eyes, light-brown hair, 5' 6”, into reading, movies, creative writing, restaurants, cooking, going out and staying in with a good DVD and a bottle of Pinot Grigio” – was in full nesting mode. She had recently finished rereading the Huntress' Handbook after spending her third Valentine's Day in a row on her own. One thing was for sure: she didn't want to turn into a bitter, overweight forty-something one-night-stander like her sister Sarah, with whom she shared the studio flat above the café.

“So where have you been all this time?” Helen said, smiling, placing the cappuccino on the table.

“What? Well, I've... I was finishing my novel...”

“Which novel, the one you were writing last year?”

“No, another one, a new one... it's called A Thorn in My Side.”

“What’s it about?”

“Well, you know, it’s impossible to sum it up... it’s a story... a story... how can I put it... it’s the kind of story that is very popular these days, yeah... very commercial. There are already three publishers who are interested,” lied Jim, raising his nose and his voice, “so... let’s keep our fingers crossed...” And he accompanied the words with the appropriate gesture and a half-smile.

“Yeah, fingers crossed,” Helen repeated, as she turned to go back to the counter.

“Helen?” Jim stopped her.

“Yes?”

“Nice of you to ask. And thanks for the cappuccino.”

“Not at all.”

“We should catch up one of these days. Maybe go out for a beer?”

“Sure,” Helen said, with little conviction.

A few seconds later, the philosopher had buried himself again in the first few pages of his novel.

\* \* \*

Later in the day, as he sat on a low wall outside the Fulham Post Office, Jim’s eyes were fixed on his watch. He knew

that his landlord Tom, who was a postman, had already finished work at that time, so they were in no danger of bumping into each other. It would have been slightly embarrassing for Jim to explain his presence there. A few minutes after one o'clock, as he had anticipated, out ambled Gautam, his Indian friend with a secret passion for off-piste photocopying and stamp larceny. Gautam was a bit surprised to see Jim again after many months, but he immediately understood the reason of his visit.

“How many do you need this time round?” he murmured with a wink.

“Seventy,” Jim answered.

“Seventy?” repeated Gautam. From his pocket he pulled out a calculator. “How many pages?”

“Four hundred.”

“Four hundred?”

“Four hundred,” Jim said, nodding. In fact, the page length was closer to five hundred, but he thought he could play a bit with margins and line spacing, and save a few quid. “Printed on one side or on both sides?”

“One side.”

“With or without envelopes?”

“With.”

“SAE enclosed?”

“Yep, second class.”

Gautam tapped on the tiny keypad with nimble fingers, whispering to himself from time to time: “One penny per sheet... four hundred... times seventy, equals... right... plus envelopes, stamps, franking... mmm...” The Indian shook his head.

“Payment terms?”

“Cash.”

“Mmm...” And Gautam’s head began to swing one way and the other. “Well, that’ll be... two hundred and eighty... plus the stamps... I’ll need a little bit of time, at least a few days...”

“No problem, I’ll be tinkering with my novel. I’ll need a few days too.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

\* \* \*

The Shark was sitting to attention: shoulders pushed back, stomach held in and buttocks tense as violin strings. In front of higher-ranking sharks, Nick Tinsley could turn into whitebait.

He was sitting in the lounge of one of the most exclusive hotels in central London with the majority shareholders of

Tetragon Press, who had flown in for the meeting. After the customary handshakes and polite grins, Gustaaf Goosen – fifty-seven years of age, two metres of pure Dutch bacon fat, bald pate, greying goatee, Pantagruelian paunch – had sunk into a jet-lag-induced nap. Perched at the top of an international paper manufacturer’s – a company of around two thousand souls which he had clawed into shape through an unstoppable series of acquisitions, buy-outs and double-digit-growth years – he ruled over his empire from the cocoon of a Jumbo Jet, constantly travelling in the opposite direction to the earth’s rotation in order to nibble at the time zones of various countries, and taking a bit of shut-eye at four-hour intervals like a newborn baby. This gave him the illusion that his days were thirty or forty hours long, and that he could be more productive and live longer.

The other majority shareholder, Samson Mulu, a middle-aged Ethiopian with an infinite sense of his own worth and a barely visible moustache above his damp lips, was one of Goosen’s most trusted business partners and his emissary in the Afro-Asiatic regions. Towards the end of the ’90s, taking advantage of a distant cousin’s connection to the clan of the former Emperor Haile Selassie, Mulu had assisted his Dutch partner in the purchase of a

valuable land plot in the country's Free Zone. On this land he had built, under Goosen's instructions, a kind of Taj Mahal of paper manufacturing and printing, an architectural colossus with no precedent on the African savannahs, used predominantly for the printing of tourist guides and postcards. Business rivals hissed that it was nothing but a cover-up for money-laundering activities; others swore that deep among the interminable rows of containers brimming over with books and stationery were stacked AK47s and surface-to-air missiles; still more claimed that some corrupt African UN grandee was keeping that marble monster up and running as part of a complex kickback operation. No one knew for sure, but the aura of mystery surrounding the true scale and nature of Goosen and Mulu's dealings on African soil only increased Nick's admiration for the two men – the more so as his fully loaded invoices were always settled punctually and without a quibble, via a transfer from a Maltese bank into his offshore Jersey account.

As Goosen wheezed in the dim light of the muzak-filled lounge, the Ethiopian was engaged in a couple of calls on his mobile. Nick followed him with interest, munching some nuts as he sipped from a trumpet-shaped glass of beer, waiting for his moment.

“OK... OK... mm-mh... OK... mm-mh... mm-mh... One moment pleeze.” Samson pressed a key and began a heated conversation in Amharic, shouting instructions at some unfortunate minion somewhere. Then he pressed the key again and resumed his sing-song negotiations: “OK... OK... Yes, yes pleeze... mm-mh... mm-mh... thirty million... mm-mh... mm-mh... letter of guarantee... pleeze...” while scrawling indecipherable notes on one of the sheets of paper scattered in front of him.

At the end of his call he looked up slowly and rested his watery, indifferent, sickened gaze on Nick.

“How are you, Nick?” he said in a grieved voice.

Nick thought this was his go-ahead, and wriggled on his chair as he geared up to say his bit, but Samson went back to his mobile phone again, pressing a dozen keys and shouting new orders convulsively.

“Tell me, tell me,” he urged Nick during the first pause. “How did it go with Dr Randall?”

“It was all right... I mean, we’ll have to take it step by step... Today he was in a bad mood and he just wouldn’t listen.”

“I see, he was in a bad mood... Mr Harris, pleeze... Nick, just a second... yes pleeze... OK, OK. And... how did he react to the news?... Yes, I’m holding.”

“The news? Well, like I said it was impossible to talk to him properly today... he arrived late and did nothing but complain about this and that... as usual...”

“I see... yes, I’m still holding... And when do you think...”

“In a couple of weeks, maybe? It’s better not to give any warning, otherwise he might do something stupid – come up with a revenge plan, destroy some important papers or something... And of course we need a publishing programme for next year...”

“I see, the programme...” He hung up and dialled another number. “The programme... and... and where is his...”

“His replacement? He’s sitting at that table over there. Shall I wave him over?”

Samson nodded, then turned away to whisper something into his phone.

The Shark signalled to a young man sitting at the opposite corner of the lounge, who jumped to his feet and trotted towards their table. He had long, flaxen hair, an earring in his left ear and glasses of a vaguely intellectual description. His face might have borne a striking resemblance to Kurt Cobain’s had its symmetry not been spoilt long ago by a head-butt to the nose during a college rugby match. He had tried to dress up smartly for the occasion, but his

orange tie and brown belt hinted at fundamental aesthetic deficiencies.

He exchanged a meaningful look with Nick, who invited him to sit down on the only available chair and eat a few nuts while Samson finished his call.

“One moment, one moment pleeze... Good evening, Mr...” The Ethiopian stretched a drooping hand towards the newcomer.

“Payne-Turner,” chipped in Nick, in support of his protégé.

“Bane-Turner...”

“Payne... Payne...” pointed out Nick.

“Bean...”

“Payne.”

“Bain... One moment pleeze...” Samson continued talking for a few minutes in his mother tongue, chortling noisily from time to time. At the end of the call he raised his blood-shot eyes slowly from his papers and rested them on the well-built individual who sat across the table.

“Mr Bain...”

“Mr Mulu?”

“Mr Bain, what is the most important thing in this job? Did Mr Tinsley explain it to you?”

There was a long pause.

“Confidentiality...” Samson rasped. “Not even the left hand should know that there is a right hand doing something completely different. Is that understood?”

James threw a startled glance at Nick, who replied with a reassuring and discreet wink.

“Another essential thing is always to follow orders, especially...” – and here Samson’s voice turned into a whisper – “...especially if they are coming from Mr Goosen. Is that understood?”

“Sure...”

“Good, Mr Bain, good... Hello? Hello hello hello?... Yes?... Yes, just one moment, I’ll put you on hold... Now, Mr Bain, if someone asked you to—”

Goosen roared himself awake, and silence fell around the table. He propped himself up with some difficulty and grabbed at the documents in front of him. At first he didn’t seem to understand what they were, but then his piercing eyes narrowed in comprehension. For some moments he scanned the figures with ferocious processing power as the other three men watched deferentially.

“Ha!” he snarled at last. “This is completely unacceptable!... The situation is out of control... We must cut the dead wood... start sacking people... Who did this bit of creative accounting? Who did it? If we carry on like this,

the company will go into liquidation by the end of the year...”

Nobody dared speak or move.

“This is a limited company,” Goosen muttered, “not a charity... No loss is no good: I want profits, OK? Pro-fits. Otherwise you all go home. And you’ve kicked out that good-for-nothing at last – what’s his name, Randall?”

“We’ll do it on Friday,” said Samson with assurance, stretching a finger to silence his vibrating mobile, which was ready to erupt with a shrill ring. “We need to get the publishing list from him for next year, Nick says.”

“I don’t care about his list. List or no list, just sack him, OK? Fuck him. He’s wasted enough of my money on Hungarian epics and shit like that.”

“No problem. Friday will be his last day,” confirmed Samson, making a series of hieroglyphic notes on his doodle-bespattered diary.

“Good... And who’s this?”

Nick juttet forwards eagerly, his chin almost brushing the rim of his beer glass.

“This, Mr Goosen, is Randall’s replacement... the new editorial director of Tetragon Press... James Payne-Turner...”

“Editorial *director*? Why ‘director’ and not ‘manager’?”

Silence.

“Who authorized this?”

There was another long pause, during which Goosen cast a beady eye on his latest blinking employee, scrutinizing in particular Payne-Turner’s hair, earring and orange tie. Finally, he adjusted his gigantic mass and stood up with a condescending grin branded on his face.

“Good. We’ll meet next month. Nick, Samson... can we talk for a few minutes in private?”

Nick sprang up and, fully satisfied with the result of the interview, nodded reassuringly at James. Samson gathered up his papers chaotically, shouting something into his mobile in an incomprehensible mixture of languages, while James remained sitting at the table on his own, his heartbeat regaining a normal rhythm, his eyes lost on the swaying bottom of a well-furnished waitress.

\* \* \*

After meeting Gautam, Jim went browsing in a bookshop on the ground floor of a big shopping centre. He wandered around the tables covered with piles and piles of novels, plastered with “3 for 2” and “Half Price” stickers on their covers. He fantasized over posters, tried to imagine

what cover his book might have, what kind of publicity campaign...

By now it was two o'clock – but he wasn't peckish. When he was among books or writing, he lost awareness of time and space. He could forget to eat, forget to sleep... it was almost as if he could become an incorporeal being, a pure spirit.

Later in the afternoon, he went to the local library. He was relieved to see that there were very few people. But the *Bookpage* magazine was in use, even if Jim couldn't see anybody reading it. He leafed through the TLS for a long time, and was reduced to reading a short review of a nineteenth-century Romanian poet by the time he at last observed an eccentric-looking man in a striped suit placing *Bookpage* back on the shelf. Jim followed the man with his eyes as he queued up at the borrowing desk. Flaunting a long white beard and Leonardo-style hair, a broad-brimmed hat, thick glasses and a purple-veined nose, he was holding a tall pile of books in his hands, all by the same author. He gave the books and his reader's card to the librarian, then took the books back, turned round and went across to the opposite counter, where he appeared to return the books he had just taken out on loan.

“Some nutter...” Jim said to himself, with a shrug. But

any preoccupation with the outside world dissipated the moment he got his hands on the magazine. He turned to the bestsellers' charts at once and surveyed the whole section, making comments to himself from time to time.

“Jamie Oliver... 25,435 copies sold in a week... Maeve Binchy... 21,273 copies... mmm... Arrow, Hodder, Corgi, Arrow, HarperCollins, Hodder, Hodder, Picador, Orion, Orion, Black Swan... Bantam, Abacus, Hodder, Penguin... mmm... Penguin... Canongate... feisty young independent... mmm...”

He freewheeled around in his daydreams for a long time, even after leaving the library, so that his bicycle seemed to fly him back to the flat.

At home there was the usual muffled silence. He took shelter in his room and turned on his computer. He immediately got on with finalizing the pagination and the typeface of his novel, fiddling with the word-processor's commands for hours. At seven o'clock, his eyes now strained by the effort, he felt he had reached Bodonian levels of typography. Satisfied with his work, he decided to print the final copy that would go out to publishers and agents.

From under the bed emerged a 20 cl mini-bottle of Moët & Chandon, which he had zealously kept from time

immemorial for some great event. Without much difficulty, he silenced the pop of the cork: no one could have heard that faint gassy gulp, nor taken that moment of rarefied happiness from him.



## 2

The telephone was ringing with raucous desperation: dring-driinnng... dring-driinnng... The other phones echoed it with different ringing tones: tarara-tarara... tarara-tarara... tuuuuuuuuu... tuuuu... He picked up receivers one after another, answering as best he could, but his tongue remained anchored to the depths of his mouth: “Hul... hulllll... hulllllllll...” He started throwing his arms about, scattering sheets of paper to the right and to the left as he frantically gestured to Helen’s sister to pick up the other ringing phones. But she was shaking her head: she giggled and let the phones ring on and on for an age, wasting God knows how many good offers from publishers and agents, until she answered at last:

“HarperCollins on line two... Random House on three...”

But he still couldn’t speak, and kept on mumbling, with a paralysed tongue: “Hulllll... hulllllll...”

“Hello?... Hello?...” Gautam was saying down the line, getting no answer.

Jim inched his head up from the pillow and realized that he had a talking mobile phone in his hand.

“What? Who’s that?” he could only say, floundering in the waters of his awakening.

“Gautam... it’s Gautam, hello?... Are you there, Jim?”

Jim jolted up on his bed and looked at his watch. It was twenty-past twelve.

“Yeah...” he mumbled, still half-unconscious.

“Everything’s ready.”

“Ready?”

“Yes, everything’s ready... Bring me the envelopes and labels, it’s D-Day.”

“D-Day?”

“Dispatch Day... but are you there, Jim?”

“I’m coming...”

In the last few days, he had done little but wait for that telephone call. The text of the letter for publishers and agents had been prepared a week ago, in a sudden gush of epistolary inspiration. Then he had spent two whole days double-checking names and address details, calling up whenever possible to make sure the recipients were all still there, because it was six months since he had last thrown himself over the barbed wire of the publishing trenches – and a lot can change in publishing in six months. Then he

had carefully chosen the writing paper and written down each address by hand, to give his submissions a personal touch, as if they were wedding invitations. Finally, he had spent half an hour experimenting with an appropriate signature and even the best pen to be used.

Gautam came out for his lunch break bubbling over with winks and smiles, holding the calculator in his hand and a bunch of sheets under his arm.

“There you go, this is yours... it’s all ready to roll, seventy copies... bam... the Normandy Landings...”

“Here’s the stuff you need,” said Jim, ignoring him. He had pulled out a bunch of signed letters, the self-addressed envelopes and the labels from his rucksack. “What’s the total cost?”

“Four pounds times seventy is two hundred and eighty pounds... let’s say two hundred and fifty – plus two pounds’ postage for each parcel – is three hundred and ninety – plus the second-class SAEs for the rejection letters, heh heh heh, let’s say ten pounds to keep things simple, and the grand total is...” – Gautam’s forefinger hit hard on the equals key – “four hundred pounds exactly... inclusive of labour...”

“Crook,” Jim thought, with a slight twitching of his eyebrows, but he started taking his wallet out.

“No, no... not here,” said Gautam. They withdrew to a more secluded place, at the back of the nearby church, where Gautam watched in surprise as eight fifty-pound notes rained one after the other onto his open palm.

“Whooa... have you won the lottery?”

“No, not yet...” replied Jim, as banknotes and calculator vanished into his friend’s trouser pocket. “Not yet...” he repeated to himself.

\* \* \*

There was an oppressive atmosphere at the Tetragon Press offices that morning. The gloomy London pall, together with the usual climate of depression that envelops the world of books, had combined to create a kind of greenhouse effect of dissatisfaction within the cramped walls of the small publishing house. Holly was still suffering from migraine, and was dawdling over a useless letter to some individual who kept on posting his CV, looking for non-existent editorial openings. Pippa was very busy playing furtive solitaire – and what’s more, without much joy. And a world-weary Charles was sitting in his small room, sucking on his smouldering pipe in blatant contravention of the smoking ban, watching the nearby urban horizon through the window while a loquacious translator – a skeletal man

with tartar-ridden teeth and welder's goggles for glasses – tried to persuade him to publish a collection of poems by an obscure Hungarian writer of the early twentieth century, who had committed suicide at the age of twenty-three.

“I've devoted fifteen years of my life to this poetry.”

“Grrnff.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The name...” said Charles, laying his pipe on the desk and sighing.

“Excuse me?”

“The translation is good, but the name... the name's a problem – it will be difficult to market. Compared to that, pronouncing Laszlo Krasznahorkai or Deszo Kosztolany is as easy as pie. Why is it that all the authors I'm asked to publish are unpronounceable? Zoshchenko, Gombrowicz, Krzhizhanovsky, Pszczisziszewszki... Look at the French instead,” Charles added, becoming briefly animated. “Proust, Gide, Sartre, Balzac, Dumas...”

The translator gave a smile full of uncertain bonhomie and tartar.

“I've spoken with the Director of the Hungarian Foundation – she said that she could help us get a subsidy or a grant for the publication of the book. And if the grant falls through...”

“Grnf.”

“...and if the grant falls through, I would be willing – how can I put it – I would be happy to help, with my own savings... You don’t get rich with this sort of thing, it’s a well-known fact... I’m not doing this for money, it’s a labour of love... fifteen years...”

“Stop it, stop it, stop it!” cried a shrill voice inside Charles’s head. “Why?... why are people so desperate to get into print? Everybody wants to publish a book, everybody wants to change the world with a sheaf of printed papers...”

The entryphone croaked, and Charles heard Pippa shuffle along the corridor and answer it in her usual snappy tone.

“...and we could submit the book to all the major translation prizes. I believe that a book like this, even though it’s not by a very famous author...”

Charles pulled out a stapled document from a tower of papers, and passed it to the translator, who gave it a bewildered look.

“Brnf.”

“Pardon?”

“The contract.”

The translator looked at it, trying to hide a mounting excitement.

“No advance and no royalties. We’ll publish it at our expense. This poet ought to be better known in this country. If there’s a grant from the Hungarian Foundation, we get all the money. Here’s a pen.”

“Can I have a look at this at home?” asked the translator, trying to speed-read the pages crammed with clauses and sub-clauses.

The door opened without any notice, revealing the figure of the Shark, followed by a tall, short-haired young man who had the look of a door-to-door salesman.

“Hey, Charles.”

“What’s this? We didn’t have an appointment today, did we?”

“Surprise surprise.”

“I’m busy now. Can you come back later?”

“Sorry, we’ve got to talk now, can’t be put off.”

“But can’t you see I’m busy? Don’t they teach good manners any more? Without even calling or knocking at the door? And who’s this?” asked Charles, pointing at the young man peering at him from behind Nick’s shoulders.

“Your replacement, James Payne-Turner.”

“My what?”

“Your replacement. You’re fired.”

There was a very long pause. The translator, who had followed the ping-pong exchange attentively, drew the contract closer to his bag with a barely perceptible movement.

Charles burst into wild laughter. Behind James's shoulders appeared Pippa and Holly.

"Ha ha ha... how funny! Now get out."

"This isn't a joke, Charles... game's up."

"Go away!... Out!... Out of my office, immediately!"

"Charles..."

"I said *out!* This is *my* office, this is *my* publishing house!"

The Shark gave him a letter signed by Gustaaf Goosen himself.

Charles cast a quick glance at the letter and threw it on his desk.

"This doesn't mean anything. I am not leaving."

"Yes you are."

"No I am not."

"Oh yes, you are."

"Oh no, I am not."

"Excuse me," chipped in the translator. "If it's OK, I'd better be on my way, as we've already discussed our contract and there's no..."

"What contract?" asked Nick, firing a petrifying glance

first at the translator and then at Charles. “What contract?”

“Well, this... I mean...” And the translator passed the stapled sheets to Nick, who leafed through them briskly.

“What’s this!?” he finally exclaimed, pointing at a long sequence of unpronounceable syllables.

“The author’s name...” the translator answered timidly.

“Is he from Poland? Serbia? Montenegro?”

“He’s Hungarian,” said the translator, venturing a yellowish half-smile.

“Hungarian? Hungarian?” And he turned his stare on Charles. “Didn’t we say that the days of Hungarian and Chilean poets were over?”

“Bo-li-vian!”

Nick crumpled the contract into a ball and threw it in the bin. “Enough with this crap.”

“I’ll... go...” the translator said with a reedy voice, and he zigzagged out of the room.

“If you don’t mind...” the Shark said to Pippa and Holly, who were watching wide-eyed in the doorway, and he slammed the door behind him.

“I am not leaving.”

“Charles...”

“I-am-not-leav-ing!”

“Charles...”

“I’ll chain myself to the desk. I am the founder of this company. You cannot take it away from me like this.”

“Let’s try to make this as painless as possible...” Nick said in a soft, persuasive tone, as James kept nodding in silence. “It’s in everybody’s interest to sort this out without making too much fuss.”

“Who gave you permission to throw that contract in the bin and kick out the translator?”

“Charles...”

“How can you humiliate people like that? I’m going to sue you, you can be sure about that.”

“Charles, Charles... try to calm down and see things from an objective point of view. The red warning light has been on for years. This company guzzles like a Ferrari and performs like a 2CV... We need a new... a new... thrust...”

“Prnrf... Spare me your plebeian metaphors.”

“We need new blood, new ideas... Times have changed and we need more...”

“More ignorance, that’s what you want. Ignorance and brazen cheek.”

“We need a less old-fashioned approach, a more modern...”

“You can save your breath, I am NOT leaving. This is my

life. You can't kill a person like this, in cold blood. People are sent to jail for this kind of thing.”

“Look, this is the final offer from the two majority shareholders. Take it or leave it. If you want to make a fuss, then I should warn you that Mr Goosen and Mr Mulu have a very good legal team and you'll end up with nothing.”

Charles threw a desperate glance at the letter Nick had handed him.

“I'm not interested in making money. It's the emotional value that—”

“Yeah, we all know you don't care about making money. Or losing other people's. This is why it's time for you to retire.”

Charles collapsed into the chair. “If it's a matter of money, I can invest my own savings in the company.”

“It's not *simply* a matter of money.”

“Keep me as an editor at large.”

“No.”

“As a consultant with a reduced salary.”

“No.”

“As a consultant with no salary.”

“No.”

“I see.”

Charles scrutinized the letter more closely, lifting his glasses to bring the numbers and the terms into focus.

“That’s chicken feed.”

“What?”

“I mean, I’ve worked here for thirty years to get such a pittance? If I really am to leave, I expect at least three times as much.”

The Shark snorted, losing his patience.

“Charles, you really are pushing it. This is an extremely generous offer, considering that the company has been unprofitable from just about day one.”

“Yes, OK, but the reputation, the name, must have a value!”

“Well, you can stuff the name and the rep—”

The founder of Tetragon Press snapped around and swept his arm across his desk, from one end to the other, sending to the floor most of the books and papers that had been lying there from time immemorial.

“Rrrrrgh...”

“Whooaaahh...” Nick warned, while James Payne-Turner took a step forwards, as though he might intervene physically.

“This won’t be the last you’ll hear from me...” Charles said finally, his voice trembling, his hands shaking, as he picked up his pipe from the floor.

\* \* \*

Jim was pedalling homewards with hardly any feeling left in his legs. It seemed as though the pedals were pedalling his legs, not the other way round. Even the rest of his body, including his long ponytail, was pervaded by the same sense of limpness. He had written the book: now he had sent it out and could only sit in a corner and wait. He felt like a pitted olive.

Once he got home, he laid down on his bed. He spent a few hours examining the ceiling, letting himself be meekly swallowed up by the slaving mouth of night. From time to time some fragments or unconnected words emerged from his lips – the erratic spasms of a galvanized dead frog:

“That’s good... that’s also good... maybe the ending...”

And that was his last half-conscious glimmer of thought until he awoke with a growl in the middle of the night, at the end of some scary dream. He was still wearing his clothes, and an icy shudder ran first down his spine and then through his arms. The darkness was total, the silence was tomb-like, and his body was motionless – it dawned on him that he might be a thinking corpse. Was this what death was like? A gloomy solitary place, a limbo which is not illuminated by the glow of earthly – or posthumous

– fame? He tried asking the darkness around him, holding his breath and swallowing bitter spittle, but there was no answer. In the end, the shouts of a gang of boozers going past outside, throwing empty bottles around, dragged him back into the land of the living and the losers. But a certain anxiety had crept into him, and he struggled to go back to sleep.

The following day the sun didn't seem to rise at all. The room was still dark when, around one in the afternoon, he woke up with a splitting headache. He peeped out of his room, with a vague hope that Janet and Tom might be away. And in the kitchen he found a brief message explaining that the two love birds had gone off on a sponging mission to see their friend Daphne in Dorset. They would be back on Sunday night. Jim closed his eyes for a moment in relief, nursing his temples with his fingertips. At the bottom of the message there was a detailed PS in which Janet reminded him about opening the windows of both the kitchen and his room, taking out the rubbish bag, watering the basil pot and, above all, being careful not to flood the bathroom floor if he decided to shower.

In front of him were hours of liberty, during which he could finally breathe freely, read, relax and devote a little time to himself. But the problem was that the limpness

which had pervaded him the day before was still running through each particle of his body – a kind of murderous nausea which turned everything he looked at into a repulsive sight. So, without washing his face, combing his hair or shaving, without eating his usual buttered slice of bread with marmite, he decided it was best to get out of the flat.

The sky was like a smooth concrete slab, even though an icy drop, from time to time, rained down from some hidden chink. Perhaps, if there was any meteorological justice in the world, it was pouring down in Dorset now. The people who walked past him on the Uxbridge Road seemed to have emerged from the set of a horror movie: grim faces eroded by hunger, toothless mouths, bald heads, double-decker necks, washed-out tattoos, gangly zombies in shorts tottering around with cans of Fosters in their hands, human carcasses wrapped in shrouds of rags, lying in street corners waiting for the great sweeper.

Leaving the BBC and White City on his left and the filthy Green on his right, past the Tube station and across the huge roundabout, Jim walked under the trees lining Holland Park Avenue. Then up to the top of Notting Hill, where he met hordes of tourists flocking to Portobello market. And then on and up again, first coasting Kensington Gardens and then Hyde Park, until he reached Speaker's Corner,

where knots of people loitered around the usual oddballs. He momentarily saw his own ghost standing on one of those stools and reciting his novel in a loud clear voice – a misunderstood genius crying out to deaf ears, pelted down with rotten eggs and tomatoes hurled by the pitiless hands of the ignorant masses. But the ghost jumped off the stool of its own accord and Jim, passing by Marble Arch with his head lowered, crossed the street and joined the nameless crowds walking up and down Oxford Street.

There thronged a different human brood from the one he had left behind at Shepherds Bush. It was an overflowing of health and energy, an uncontrollable explosion of vitality, youth, sex and credit cards; a triumph of designer clothes and accessories, branded shoes and watches, fashionable hairdos. It was the land of consumerism, of the mass-market stores, the big chains, the multinationals, the land of endless possibility and excess. It was in this seething frenzy, Jim knew, that all successful products were seeded, including best-selling books. From there, they would then spread out and colonize the rest of the capitalist universe. People seemed happy, their well-being bubbling over merrily in public: they queued up in front of the cashiers to buy the latest gadgets, paying promptly and without haggling. The more expensive the purchase, the happier they seemed.

It was this monstrous mass that fed on pulp fiction and all the latest bestsellers, allowing a happy few writers to live lives of unfettered luxury. But how could *he* speak to that mass, how could *he* appeal to it? Jim had the presentiment that, after all, all those nameless people walking past him really couldn't give a hoot about what he had to say to them. His murderous nausea grabbed him by the throat again, whilst his feet were beginning to ache.

As he walked past the long window of a shopfront, he caught his own bobbing reflection out of the corner of his eye and stopped dead. He saw a famished figure in front of him, with a dead man's shadows under the eyes and chiaroscuroed cheekbones. He felt old, he felt uncool. He looked at the way he was dressed: he had been wearing the same jeans, jacket and trainers for the last ten years. He didn't even have an iPod. In pursuing the hollow dream of success, he had lost touch with reality. While his contemporaries had been busy enjoying themselves and making the most of their youthful years, he had wasted the best period of his life. He walked on in self-disgust.

He ended up spending the whole afternoon on a bench in Trafalgar Square, watching the pigeons pecking away at any sort of food or excrement, under an intermittent drizzle which made no ripples in the fountains' water.

When he got home, all he did was take his shoes off and slip into bed, hoping that the night would soon be over and that a better day would follow.

But the following morning, as he woke up in the clothes he had been wearing for two days, a terrible sense of apathy swept over him, and he barely managed to drag his carcass in front of the television, where he spent eight hours watching cricket. When night approached, he retired in good order to his den and sank into a dreamless sleep, which not even Janet's giggles and Tom's guffaws on their return from Dorset could interrupt.



ALESSANDRO GALLENZI IS THE FOUNDER OF HESPERUS Press, Alma Books and Oneworld Classics, and the successor of John Calder at the helm of Calder Publications. As well as being a literary publisher with almost ten years of experience, he is a translator, a poet, a playwright and a novelist. His collection of poetry, *Modern Bestiary – Ars Poetastrica*, was published in 2005 to critical acclaim. He lives in Richmond with his wife and two children.

[www.almabooks.com](http://www.almabooks.com)

