

## **CHOSEN**

*By Michael Dickson*

My first adult decision was to change my name. Until that point they had all called me *Vinny*, because that was the sort of name people round my way had. Eddie. Jimmy. Davie. Mikey. I had to distance myself from all of that, so I set myself apart from all of it by giving myself a *proper* name – *my* proper name. So from now on I was going to be called *Vincent*. Why should I care about what they would make of that? Chances are we'll never cross paths again, if I have anything to do with it. *He's getting too big for his boots* or *he's got big ideas* or *he needs to be brought down a peg or two*. Weary words from *little people*. I'm going places they'll never even guess at. Hell, I've *been there already*.

I move. I dictate. I order. I make things happen. I have people around me who make things happen and can call on the favours of many others to help me. The rewards are rich, the loyalty strong and the favours many. I create respect and help people flourish where before they were left to wane.

This is business. This is Vincent.

*Red. Green. Yellow. Indigo. Orange. All coloured wheels around me, turning slowly, moving in a bright haze. The cold that surrounds me is like a welcoming blanket. I am not afraid. I'm not afraid of anything and I never will be again.*

- What do we do with him, Vincent?
- I'm open to suggestions.
- Well, we could get him to make us an offer. He owes us a load but he says it's beyond his means. He's pitched the figures back to the auditors and they have to say that he has a point. The world isn't ready for a new type of firelighter, it seems, no matter how well it works. He says the R and D costs were beyond his imagination. Doesn't say an *awful* lot for his planning, does it?
- Well, let's think about it. How much did he borrow?
- Seven million over five years.
- And we gave him that at base rate?
- More or less.

The office is long and imposing, the way that it's supposed to be. The furniture is obviously reeking of its price and the carpet deadens any sound within, even if it could get as far as the ten foot high doors that sit at the other end of the room from my desk about forty feet away. The guy opposite me is in a pale grey suit, clearly expensive from its cut and the way it sits on his shoulders. Tasteful tie too, none of that dreadful pink and watery blue. This is bolder and sends a message. *Sending a message* is important to us. We want to look like we are serious people. It comes with our business cards and our entertaining and our quiet smiles and dense handshakes. This man talking to me is

my best advisor, a measured head on a set of impressive shoulders and is loyal to the end, whenever that might come.

Two other guys sit on the leather sofa that runs along the east wall. They neither move nor speak. They just listen, like people ought to around us.

- What offer would do?
- Should we cut the principle?
- No, if we do that then he'll be sending his friends round in no time. No, we have to play a cleverer game than that.
- We should, yes. He's using Jackson and Snead, you know.
- Oh don't worry about *them*, please. One more set of mouthpieces won't make the world any better or any worse for us, or for him.

He smiles at my tiny joke.

- We could give him longer?
- We could, yes but that would mean we'd get less out of it, wouldn't it?
- Blood out of a stone, Vincent. You know?
- Yes well, we'll see about that.

I sigh long and broadly.

Standing up I slip my jacket off quietly, letting the silk lining slide off the sleeves of my Ralph Lauren shirt. They make these so beautifully, you can almost forget you're wearing a jacket. I catch it on my right hand and turn it onto a hangar that sits on the rails behind the desk, putting it up and then rounding my desk, leaning onto it slightly as I mull over the options.

- Should we get Morton and Yates onto this? They might have some ideas. They've dealt with this before.
- No no...they'd claim a fee from the recovered funds. Ricky told me that the last scalp they claimed was 15%. Can you imagine that?
- Pretty steep.

I can see him thinking again.

- Can we stand to lose the money?
- Of course we can! The firm can stand to lose that twenty times over and not even *blink*! But it's not the money, it's the *principle* of the loan that worries me.
- Cute.
- Thank you. But don't you see? If we can give someone start-up funding like this which lets them take off then they are going to have to return that gratitude. Now, in *this* case the start-up never really happened, did it? I mean, we have a situation where someone came to us asking for money, giving us all a big story, giving us the figures, the research, the *bona fides* and the promises that we always insisted on, right?
- Yeah of course. I remember the meeting well. Four years ago? The team were all there, and they seemed quite happy about it.
- Martin was nervous.
- Isn't Martin always nervous? He was nervous about Alexanders and that netted us enough to set up, yes? The deal was pretty square. Five years, all in.

- Yes, and he planned on being able to return it all inside two. But it never happened. Now, we have to ask ourselves the biting question – *why not?* Now there are two possible answers to this. The first is that the business failed and the venture capital we herded for him is never going to get repaid simply because it doesn't exist, yes?
- Absolutely, Vincent.
- And the other possibility is that he is actually dishonest and just pocketed the cash and walked away. Now which do you think?
- I dislike the second option, really. I don't deal with dishonest people very well.
- No, neither do I. However, it also occurs to me that there is actually a *third* option.
- What's that?
- That he took the money and – knowing the business would fail – started it up, let it slide along as planned, spent some of it starting up but not making the best job of it, and then letting it slide off into oblivion when he can declare himself busted and take whatever else we have, leaving it in haze of paperwork that the average liquidator would find easy but which everyone else finds almost impossible to follow.
- That's a real possibility we have to consider.
- I know. Now, his figures were good and the whole thing checked out as being reasonable. That means that his plan was good and that our lending was sound and therefore we were fine. But somewhere we lost seven million. And that's not good. And it's a mystery. So how do we solve it?
- Well...we could always ask him, couldn't we?
- You know...we could.

It was about this time that the blood-stained man started shaking his head and moaning wildly through the tape over his mouth. His eyes were bulging, he was awash with sweat and panic and – it has to be said – was not looking his best, being dressed only in his underwear. His wrists and ankles were bound together behind him, each being fastened to the other by a length of rope. He was perfectly helpless.

- Mr Bewes? Can you stop that noise for a second? We have to ask you something. Yes?

His panic doesn't let up. I've no idea what he is trying to say - assuming he is trying to say anything at all – but his muffled keening is putting me off my train of thought. I turn to my associate.

- He's not letting up.
- He'll pass out if he keeps that nonsense up, Vincent.
- I think so.
- Maybe let him breathe a little?
- Maybe.

I lean over him again.

- Mr Bewes...I'm going to let you breathe a little, right. But don't try and shout for help or anything because you know you're alone here with us after all, and it's going to do you no good. Okay?

He doesn't seem to give any indication of knowing what I said. I tut a bit and pull at the corner of the tape, teasing a small part away from his mouth, letting him breathe a little in whooping gulps.

- Yeah, he's going to pass out I think. What's the word again? Breathing too hard?
- Hyperventilate. He's going to hyperventilate.
- Can't you stop that by getting him to breathe into a bag or something? Raising his CO2 intake and making him breathe in less oxygen?
- Well, maybe but we'll soldier on for now.

I turn back to the terror-ridden piece of meat on the floor and address him again.

- Okay Mr Bewes, I *think* you'll find that Filder, Freeman and Bloom have all been more than reasonable with you, yes?

He closes his eyes to steady his nerves, then nods frantically.

- Good. And we have agreed that the money was paid to you in a fair and just manner and that our terms were not only reasonable, but *agreed upon*, yes?

He nods again.

- And that – for *whatever reason* – your otherwise excellent venture failed and you skidded off the rails and down into the doldrums, taking with you what appears to be most of the cash. Is that right?

He doesn't nod. Neither does he shake his head.

- Vincent?
- Lester...I'm *in a meeting*...
- Yes, but Vincent...Mr Bewes appears to have soiled himself.

I stand up and confirm it. He has. Fortunately the sheeting is protecting the Hereke from his effluent, but it's still distasteful. I continue through the mask of a Hermes that I keep in my jacket top pocket. Not that I need it for this, or anything else much. I just want to have a handkerchief, and for the first time in its existence it is being put to an actual *use*.

- Oh *Mr Bewes*. Are you *frightened* of us?

His terrorised sounds seem to become muffled crying. Deep sobs, drawn from the little breath I am affording him. His body shakes oddly, bending and unbending like a penknife being flexed. He looks like an animal giving in to its instincts and reflexes, which I suppose he really is. All a bit different from the time he stood up in front of the meeting and told us how well he was going to do and how confident about the market he was and how his figures couldn't lie. Now he is in danger of knocking himself out. I would give him about ten minutes before he asphyxiates himself. Or hyperventilates. Or both.

He nods. His nodding is a movement of utter submission.

- Well...I can assure you that, despite what some of my associates who brought you here may have done, I'm not going to hurt you anymore. Not today.

His breathing stops, his eyes slit open to check to see if I am bluffing him. The two cheerless faces on the sofa gaze down on him.

- No, I'm not bluffing you, Mr Bewes. Any minute now you can be free to go, just as long as you understand a couple of things. Yes?

He nods frantically. More sobs of relief or fear or...something.

- Good. Now, first thing is that we have to agree on your debt, yes? I'm prepared to lose your initial outlays as they seem to have been genuine. That along with staff wages, building costs, engineering expenses and so on will bring it all down by three million, so the good news is that you're only going to owe us four. We are very reasonable here at Filder, Freeman and Bloom, are we not?

He doesn't signal agreement, but neither does he dispute it.

- So, here is the plan. A couple of my associates – not the ones you met earlier, of course – will take you away to your home and over the next week or so you will raise the money. Failure to do so will of course mean you will lose your deposit, but I am sure you expect that. I don't care how you raise it, but raise it you will. Here at Filder, Freeman and Bloom no one is refused a hearing, but neither is anyone allowed *carte blanche* to take us for fools. Hence the reason for a deposit you can lose.

He looks at me as though he doesn't understand a word of what he is saying. I smile down at him and reach down, even though he is flinching, and turn him around so he is facing the other way. What he sees makes him convulse like current is running through him.

The woman is bound and gagged just like him. So are the two children. All are lying on their sides on the floor, facing him. They make no sounds.

- Your family will stay here as...deposit. And lose them you will.

He's shaking wildly.

- Lester, call Thomas and Billy and get them to take Mr Bewes to his place where he can start the compensation process, will you? I think we have his attention.
- Right away.
- And get the Daves to come up here and take the *deposit* to the *bank*.
- Sure thing, Vincent.

And so it goes on.

*Maybe a bit of background is needed.*

*Little Vinny* grew up in a provincial backwater where few cared and fewer still knew how to. The concrete of the housing project and play areas and walkways and underpasses around was cold and the people colder still. *Little Vinny* was malnourished and maltreated by the people who were nominally his parents and barely ever had anything

to fight back with against a constant time of hunger and pain and fear. I slept on the lower bunk, the upper bunk being piled with my stuff because I had no one to share my bedroom with. *Little Vinny* went to a grey stone school where he managed to get beaten up on most days by boys who were always bigger than he; my earliest memory of that derelict mausoleum to torture was the feel of the wet tarmac hard against my face as I was pressed down against it, being *welcomed to St Colberts* by the committee. I knew from that moment on that my life was out of control, that I was no longer the architect of my own destiny.

I didn't put it in such florid terms of course. I was five. What did I really know about anything? I just knew that life was something you had to run away from. I just held on and hoped someone somewhere would rescue me. Anyone. Please. Just help me.

Everything was geared towards making *Little Vinny* miserable, or so it seemed. Colours were always grey, the air was always cold and the rain was always wet. My family life was really just six people who were only living together because they shared some DNA, but nothing else. If I focus my mind I can picture my mother's face, but my father is a *lost object* to me. He's a concept, not a person. A defeated concept. I had no rational cause to be anywhere near him. Actually, no. Not six. *Five*. Little Jimmy never went near us. That was all inside. Outside it was worse, but you expected that, so really inside was even worse than that. I had no protection. Just guile.

*Little Vinny got laughed at in school.* Little Vinny tried to show the class he could swim. Little Vinny dived in and went straight under. The watery deafness gave way to children braying with laughter as the teacher pulled him out, called him an idiot and sent him off with the non-swimmers. Little Vinny dived straight in and got in over his head.

I swore I had to get out of there, and I did. I stuck through miserable schools a bad diet and poor clothing and learned how to pass exams, though that was partly by learning some fundamentals, giving me enough leverage to know how to cheat properly and vociferously. That was my victory, and that took me to the prospect of college but I had no idea what the product of that would be so I opted for something vocational instead. Some dreary drunkard who gave me *careers advice* at my last school and in a note of despair he said something about *moving into banking*. I didn't listen to that for a second, though. I moved on and out of his office and didn't pay him a backward glance.

You do what you have to do. I drank, I stole, I wept, I ran and I settled on the idea that maybe I was better suited to a better life. How to earn that was to take me down a particularly dark path, but we can maybe talk about that some other time. Right now, let's just assume we made it to the bank.

*Back to the future.*

I was small time for the longest time. Just another cog in a mechanism that didn't really go very far or make any great waves. A part of an outfit that made money for other guys we never knew. The thing that set us apart was that we were a bank, and not some deep-water money lenders out to rake 2400% per annum from people who were in no place to be able to afford it.

I could have been somebody.

I could have been a contender.

Now I deal in dread and despair.

And so it goes on.

One day someone came to me with a business deal. You know, a sort of proposition. Just not the type that the bank needs to find out about – that sort. We run it past a few friendly legal faces and they think we are onto something, but they do suggest we need collateral if we are to meet their figures even halfway. So we secure it but it's not going to meet the shortfall, but such is our silly enthusiasm we just go with it because although the risk is high, so is the yield. There are some shakes of the head and some doubts expressed but we have an idea up our sleeves, that being that even if the collateral fails to cover the loss we can extract the balance in other *less conventional* ways. We get a few faces, ask a few names and find ourselves with three handy specimens who we put on a low end retainer and say that we may ask to call upon them in the most urgent circumstances. They agree, the client knows nothing and we lend out the money. We know where they live. We don't behave like complete idiots.

Seven weeks goes by and the short-term loan is looking like a longer term one now. We call them in to discuss our terms and they seem suddenly pessimistic all of a sudden. My associates seem abruptly nervous, partly because we don't think we can stand the loss and partly because they acquired the bulk of the finance from another source whose recovery methods are even more *less conventional* than our own. Perhaps if we were all as transparent as one another this matter would never have arisen, but there we are. And we seem stuck.

We give them another four weeks and then we start to get word back that two of the clients have skipped the country and the others are raring to go as well. We pay one of them a visit and express our displeasure. He seems terrified enough to admit everything but doesn't admit responsibility. He points us to the other man who we also manage to catch fortunately in his home at four o'clock one cold morning. While he was still coherent he managed to get out a name. One other guy we didn't know about, and who would be able to recompense us because he was the *money man* and we needed to speak to him. Unfortunately we hadn't met to that point, so we had to be introduced properly. So we took the guy along as *collateral* and found ourselves at the door of Rochester House one bitter November afternoon with every intention of recovering all and more that we had lost.

And *that* was how I came to meet Oscar Drabble.

*Little Vinny* used to play in the streets. *Little Vinny* used to be afraid of the big boys. *Little Vinny* used to lie awake in the dark and wonder how he could get his life back. *Little Vinny* used to think up ways of getting revenge on people. *Little Vinny* used to dream about having magical powers. *Little Vinny* used to do all of these things on a nightly basis, and even though *Vincent* pretended he didn't, there was still a *Little Vinny* inside him, wondering how he could get out. *Little Vinny* needed power. *Vincent* has spent his life trying to feed that need.

Oscar and I had a face-to-face that November, which I fully expected to be one-way traffic. It was not. That set me aback a bit, I can tell you.

- You're aware of the extent of the debt, aren't you Mr Drabble?
- Please, call me Oscar. If I hear *Mr Drabble* I start looking about to see if my late father is in the room.

The name suggested someone Jewish, but he wasn't. He was some shade of foreign, but the hue escaped me. He was done up in a white suit, which was pretty striking, but not as striking as his shockingly white hair, and those youthful deep brown eyes that fixed me so hard I felt he was reaching inside me and rummaging around to find what I was made of. I was on the back foot. I knew that our usual methods wouldn't work on this guy anyway.

- Okay then, Oscar. We're in the position of being down by an *awful lot* and we'd appreciate some idea when we are going to see a return on the basis of the agreement we reached when...
- You'll get it back.
- Yes, well Wallace said the same thing and that was quite some time ago now. So far, we have no result. Having paid visits to everyone concerned we ended up with your name as the money broker behind all of this, so you seem to be the logical point to move onto.

Drabble smiled that smile that signalled a complete understanding of us and a total indifference to what I was saying or to the obvious subtext. I *knew* this was a one-trick deal.

- Your logic is unassailable, Mr Filder. You have come to the correct person. I am the only one who can sort out this little...*fiscal dilemma*.

He was sitting back in his desk chair, smiling at us, elbows on the armrests, fingers interlocked, looking utterly at peace with the fact that there were five of us in the room with him.

- Well in that case...what can you do to sort out the dilemma. Our patience is getting a bit worn out, you realise.
- Of course...and so would mine. I came up with the cash to finance part of the deal and suggested to Mr Wallace and his associates that you might be able to come up with the substantial balance. Now, it sadly seems that some people have not made good on their potential, so we are left in the situation we now find ourselves in.
- Well, yes...but the loss is your liability.
- That is correct. I congratulate you on the research you've made.
- Don't think too much of it...it was sort of squealed at us.

Drabble smiles, knowing exactly what we meant. But he didn't look in the least part afraid. *This guy has something protecting him.*

- Well, like I said...we find ourselves in a mutually awkward position.
- Explain?

- This deal has effectively cleaned us out too. I have nothing to pay anyone with.
- And your liability?
- I have assets, but not enough to cover one tenth of the debt.
- So you're the straw man?
- Oh no...far from it. But this didn't all come from my own pockets, you know.

I'm getting nowhere.

- Well...in that case, perhaps we could discuss assets? We don't let our debts lie forever, Oscar.
- And neither you should, Mr Filder.

*Don't say 'call me Vincent'... Don't say 'call me Vincent'...*

- Call me Vincent.

Damn. How did that happen?

- Vincent, I have no financial assets to cover the debt and even both my houses would fetch a pittance. No, I was set up to this as much as anyone.
- Yet you look like a careful man. How did you let this happen?
- I carry insurance.

Odd thing to say.

- If that is the case then can that be liquidated?

Oscar thinks to himself as though this is the first time he has ever thought of it. He taps his lips, mimicking deep thought.

- An interesting idea. But this insurance isn't one that can just be bought out, just like that. It's not actually *insurance* as you might recognise it at all, really.
- No?
- No...it's not a policy with someone or someone underwriting my losses. No, it's more compelling than that.

I'm getting irritated by his shadow dancing here.

- Can you explain?
- I suppose so.

He fixes me directly with those gimlet eyes and reaches inside me again. It is almost palpable. My reaction is close to physical. He asks me a single question, the nature of which is close to what I've been wanting to hear all my life.

- What have you wanted more than anything else in your life, Vincent?

I swallow hard. That's not the sort of question you get asked all that often.

- Success. I want success.
- No. You might think that, but 'success' is far too vague an expression. You need the will to succeed, and I see you have ample quantities of that. But what do you *really* want? Deep down?
- Isn't success enough?

He smiles again, perhaps a little condescendingly, as though my answer was childish.

- You can have nothing and still think of yourself as a success, Vincent. Success is where you pitch it. No. There is something else you want. I think I know what it is.
- Go on?
- I think you want power.

Ouch. Treble word score, Oscar. Bullseye. Free kick in the top right hand corner. You just hit a boundary. 147.

- I...see
- Am I making sense to you, Vincent?
- You've got my interest at least.

He leans forward in the chair, letting the tight leather creak under him.

- How about I give you power in return for your investment?
- What sort of power?
- *Real* power.
- Well...what sort? Political power? Financial power? The power over people's minds? Which?
- All of them. Any of them that you wish.

I can sense Lester behind me is growing impatient. He thinks that this is a con. I am too taken in by this guy, but I need to hear what he is offering. I try to send mental waves of *be patient* to Lester but it's going to be hard.

There is a lengthy pause. I break it suddenly by hearing myself speak.

- Do you have a business card, Oscar?
- Certainly.

He offers me a beautifully embossed card with his name, the title '*Unique Investment Specialist*' and a few phone numbers. I take note of one at the bottom of the card. It feels good in my hand. Firm and positive. There is something here I need, but I don't know how to get to it. I stand up.

- I'll be in touch with you shortly. We have to consider this first.

Oscar seems unsurprised.

- In which case we'll perhaps talk again soon.
- Perhaps we will, Oscar.

We see ourselves out the same way we saw ourselves in. We move in stubborn silence. Lester would be close to apoplexy were he not so utterly baffled. I can smell his concern through his cologne.

- Vincent...
- Not now, Lester. Some time later, but not now.

I make this too definite a phrase to allow any discussion, so there is none. We reach the cars and get in, Lester in the front, me in the back, Dave the Driver taking us back to our offices swiftly. Even *he* senses something is up.

I pull Oscar's business card out of my wallet again. The bottom number is the one I am after. I text it a swift message. *We must talk again soon – V.*

The answer comes back almost immediately. *I know – O.*

Nothing more is said on the silent journey back to the office. I spend the rest of the day alone, considering options to myself and wondering just what was about to fall into my lap and trying to piece together just why I was feeling uneasy about the whole thing.

He played on my mind all night. Oscar Drabble. Silly name, serious guy. He promises much to me. But what is it that he is really promising me? And what am I winning? And what is he losing? I have doubts. *Little Vinny* comes to the surface. **Do it**, he says. Shut up and **do it**.

I phoned Oscar about three days later. I would have called him right away that night, but I didn't want to seem desperate.

- Good afternoon, Oscar. This is Vincent Filder.
- Good afternoon, Vincent. I had thought you might have called sooner. I assume this is you not wanting to seem desperate, am I right?

*This man is either clever or has some hold on the powers he promised me.*

In the intervening three days I had four associates telling me that I ought to be performing deconstructive surgery on Oscar because of his unwillingness to pay up. I was clear to them all; leave him alone. Lester thought I was going soft on him, that the promises he made weren't worth anything. I wasn't so sure. I wanted this chance for Oscar to make himself shine. The money would be a secondary thing. It might not even matter, in the end.

- I'm keen to talk to you about your proposal.
- I guessed you might. But the telephone isn't the place to do this. Shall we say Maxie's in an hour?

I was at Maxie's Bistro inside fifteen minutes at a table for four, had ordered a club soda and was scanning the menu, having to shush away the over-attentive waitresses who approached. I never came here before but had walked past it a hundred times. The place was filled with lunchtime tourists and people out for a late plate before they traipsed back to the office in a state of disinterest. As a place to discuss something even mildly confidential it would be hard to beat. No one here was interested in very much that anyone else had to say about anything. I guessed you could shout your ideas from a loudhailer and all you would attract would be the waitresses asking you if you wanted a refill.

Oscar swept in on the hour mark exactly, scanning the tables for me. I was not about to jump up and wave at him avidly as though I was a child who had located his lost mother in a crowd, so I sat perfectly still and waited for him to come to me. But he didn't see me. So I jumped up and waved at him avidly as though I was a child who had located his lost mother in a crowd. He saw me at once and came over with surprisingly agility, dodging customers and waiting staff as though he was playing tag with them all. He dumped his coat on one of the spare chairs and shook my hand.

- Sorry if I am a little late. Some business going over in Belize, of all places. Keeps me occupied anyway, but they can get so *protective* over there. You ever had dealings?
- Not Belize, no. We sort of shy away from Central America.
- Oh Belize is nothing like the others – it's a relative *home from home*. But they can get so...
- Protective?
- Yes, that's the exact word. *Protective*. Must be the Mayan blood or something. *Flourishing under the shade* and all that. You know?

The bastard is testing me out. I nod away my ignorance, sagely. He taps the table lightly.

- But anyway...shall we eat? I assume you've been here before?
- Many times, yes. What would you like Oscar? My treat?
- Well...that's very kind of you. I've never been here in my life. I will leave the recommendations up to you.

Great. I failed the first test. I whisk up a waitress, get us a bottle of Montrachet and two crab salads, which I assured him were *quite stunning the last time I had one*.

- To business?
- Yes, let's.

We sip the wine, which is reassuringly sharp. He doesn't even attempt to conceal his voice. He knows this place well enough to know what pitch he can speak at so that volume doesn't matter. Damn him, he is way smarter than I am. He even leans back a bit.

- What sort of power interests you, Vincent?
- Well...one worthy of a seven figure sum we both know about.
- Yes well...you're commendably direct, I suppose. How about I say that I could give you a tap straight into the weaknesses of others so that anyone you know would just...*buckle to your will*.
- Is this some sort of *look into my eyes* thing, you mean?
- Not exactly no. Let me put it this way...do you believe in magic?

I was feeling a bit let down already.

- No, absolutely no.
- Then you'd better start. I didn't either. *Now I do*.

The worm sounds so appealing already that I cannot even tell if there is a hook anywhere near it.

- Tell me?
- There is an organisation which meets frequently. They are serious people with serious positions, not some group of disaffected losers looking for kicks. No, these are the *shoovers and makers*, as they say. The people who make a difference and who seem to get away with almost anything. People for whom *being successful* is a redundant expression in the same way that *eating* is a useless way to define them as they are both something they do by instinct.
- Would I know any of them?
- You'd probably know most of them. Financiers, politicians, a newspaper publisher or two, plus a few lawyers, senior civil servants...we have a huge range of people there. All looking for the same thing.
- Well...it sounds like the way they want power, from what you describe.
- They do.
- But it also sounds like they have it already.
- Power isn't a means to an end, it's an end in itself. And with it comes the wish to have even more. One taste of it and you're never ever going to be able to live without it. All you are ever going to want for is more.
- So...what do they do?
- We'll get to that later...one step at a time. But let's just say for now that we are an ancient organisation working to an ancient prescription. What we offer *works*. It always has.
- Sounds like the Masons...
- Good Lord no, they are *far* too charitable for that. No, we look after ourselves, and those within ourselves, if you see what I mean.

*How can he know that?*

The food arrives. We pause discreetly whilst the waiter fiffs over us and introduces the food in all but name, then disappears into the low frequency hubbub of the room.

- You say 'we'.
- I do.
- You're a part of this.
- I have been for many years, but I cannot remain there any longer. I have to move away and leave.
- So where do I come into this?
- The organisation has a fixed membership size; we cannot go above or below a certain number without affecting our...practices. In fact most people are known by only their number, not by their name. Makes it a bit less personal that way.
- And you are leaving?
- The time would seem apt. Would you like to become number 25 in return for just brushing aside our debt?

The door opens. Will I let it slam shut?

I should consider this carefully. Weigh up the myriad possibilities. Is he having me on? Will he come good on his promise? Will it deliver? Will the firm sustain it? Will my associates think worse of me?

- Done.

Took less than a second. I think fast. I think.

We shake hands on it. Single clasp, single swift jerk. Not a handshake I am used to.

- So how do I get into this organisation? And who are they?
- Well, they call themselves the House of Moiré. They have a collective goal, a ferocious intellect, years of planning ability behind them and all they need is that little push that they have been looking for, for the last two hundred years. And they seem to think it is in their grasp right now.
- Really? So why are you leaving?
- I have to go...move on. But I want you to take my place. Partly it's a gift from me as part payment for a debt, and partly it's something I bequeath to something I recognise inside you. You choose which motivation you like the best.

I choose my next words with caution.

- This *House of Moiré*...
- Yes?
- What if they don't deliver?
- You have my every assurance that they will. You will enjoy power beyond all your hopes.
- Well...to me that would be motivation enough for me to stay and not leave and give up my place, you see?

He smiles as if an intelligent child has just asked its first intelligent question.

- You are correct, of course. But neither do you know my need to move away.
- Are you going to tell me?
- No. I need to be completely discreet...which is also something that The House of Moiré demands. You cannot tell anyone about it. No one. Don't even discuss it with me after this meeting.
- I am good at discretion.
- I wouldn't have offered this to you if you were not.
- How will I know how to progress?
- They will contact you. I will speak to them, resign, and nominate you. They will then contact you and you'll be set to go.
- What else should I know?
- Nothing. Go to the first meeting blind. It's better that way. Oh...do you carry much currency on you?
- Not usually...why? You needing a sub?

Oscar's mouth laughed. His eyes remained on me.

- No, no. You should take some to the first meeting. Maybe five hundred pounds? You'll see why. That's the only steer I will give you, if only because that was where I let myself down the first time I was there.
- And how many times did you meet them?
- We met about twenty five times in the period I was associated with them.
- And what did you get out of it?

He stops smiling. Pauses.

- Once again your directness does you credit.
- This is business, Oscar.

- I'm too well aware of that. Let's just say that I am neither short of money nor property and that I can pretty much bend anyone to my will.
- Does that include me?
- Do you feel like I am bending you?
- I'm not sure...
- Yet you took up my offer of your own will, didn't you?

I think so.

- I think so.
- Then we are now just two passing strangers.

He extended his hand, shook it in a single jerk again, and vanished from the bistro. His food lay untouched. His exit looked less like a departure than it did a getaway. I stand up to follow the figure leaving the doorway, but as I do I see a mother and child at the next table, still waiting for their food to arrive. I quickly lift the intact plates from our table and given them to them both with what I hope is a kindly smile.

- We're not having these. Please, enjoy them...

Then I leave quickly, following the fading trail of Oscar Drabble.

Of course I didn't find him. He had gone – vanished completely. The crowds were not particularly busy for that time of day, but somehow he had just *evaporated*. I mentally kicked myself. Lester would have tailed him and fixed him. I have an unfamiliar sense of stupidity settling over me.

Later that night I look up The House of Moiré on the Internet, but there is nothing there. I am not at all surprised. I look up Moiré (eventually rescuing it from my phonetic assumptions) and find that it was defined as this:

*In physics, mathematics, and art, a moiré pattern is a secondary and visually evident superimposed pattern created, for example, when two identical (usually transparent) patterns on a flat or curved surface (such as closely spaced straight lines drawn radiating from a point or taking the form of a grid) are overlaid while displaced or rotated a small amount from one another.*

Something to do with geometry. Sounds a bit like the Masons to me. I try not to dwell on it and dream only of having the unlimited power to withstand Lester's withering criticism of my handling of the situation.

Business the next day.

The usual six man meeting about this and the other. We're all being terribly serious and focussed, even if my mind is a million miles away, fading in and out of overlaid patterns of lines that reveal a hidden truth when they meet. As analogies go, it's a good one. I am still feeling cheated though.

- What about the Drabble business?

TJ has asked the question. He's our main accountant. He would ask the worst questions, having the least responsibility to answer them. I retort in kind.

- Drabble is in hand.
- *How* is he in hand?
- I am dealing with it. I will get back to you when I have more to give you. For now, we will refer it to later.

I can see Lester staring at the desktop as though he wasn't really there, as though his life had taken such a turn for the worse that he could barely believe it was happening. His eyes flick up to mine and they meet. For a second I see the side of him that has likely been the last thing numerous people have *ever* seen. It is hugely unsettling.

He lowers his eyes. The meeting goes on.

Can't eat or sleep properly now.

Feeling more and more fucked over as the days progress and silence lengthens.

I even visit libraries – for the first time in years – to see what the House of Moiré has meant to anyone, yet no one has anything to say on the matter. I hit our researchers with the question, but they draw a blank. A friendly in a law enforcement agency cannot get anything for me. A journalist friend who moves in and writes about circles of authority doesn't know anything. Neither does a conspiracy nut job we sometimes use to sow seeds of doubt inside the enemy camps. No one.

The House of Moiré doesn't seem to exist. I have been done over and Oscar Drabble has done it to me.

Business again another day.

The usual six man meeting about this and the other, all being terribly serious and focussed, and my mind is a million miles away, fading in and out images of revenge to play out on Oscar Drabble. I am still feeling cheated.

- What about the Drabble business?

TJ has asked the question again. I try not to give away my irritation.

- TJ, the matter is...

A newspaper is spun through the air across the table and lands in front of me at an angle that still lets me recognise Drabble's photograph. That stopped me breathing for a second, to see that face again. The headline was similarly arresting.

### **POLICE PROBE - MAN SLAIN IN BEACH HORROR**

I scan the page and pick out words and phrases. Phrases like *investment expert*, *hacked to death* and *police are seeking a motivation*. His wallet was found on him, still intact of

its money and credit cards. That is just as well, as the people who hacked him to death also seem to have cut his face up to such an extent that he was unrecognisable.

- So. Is the matter still *in hand*, Vincent?

I pause. I really don't know what to say.

- I really don't know what...
- Well...can I make a suggestion? We go back after the remaining others and squeeze them until they scream. They will have picked off Drabble to save their hides, but they don't know how far we can go. Do they?
- I guess not, Lester.
- You dropped the ball there, Vincent. We'll pick it up again, but you dropped it.
- I did. I'm sorry. We'll get it back.
- Did that have anything to do with you, Vincent?

Oh. A question to make me pause.

- No, absolutely not. This is actually something of a shock.
- Deal with it, will you?
- *I am fucking dealing with it, Lester.*

I didn't mean to shout, but I did.

- This will be the end of us Vincent.
- Well if anyone is going to end this it will be me.

*'The body was found on Tuesday morning with the face hacked off...'*

That sounds too much like something more than a random assault. Fortunately, I am not without resources. I can call on the favours of many others to help me. I have another friendly inside the police who might help. So I ring him. Time served, detective in the local CID who needs the money and who has been known to cough up for the right price. Didn't question his gambling habits and paid him off in the knowledge that it would cost him his job, the return for saving it being that I always have an inroad if I need it. It's not often, but the road exists.

- Jason?
- Yes, hello?
- Vincent Filder here.
- Jesus, Vince...been ages. How have you been?
- Yes I know. I need something quickly. Can you oblige?
- Maybe. What are you after?
- For the usual price, right?
- Of course.
- You working on the case about that guy Drabble who was killed at the beach?
- No, I am not.

Damn. I can hear Jason move away from the background noise.

- You at home, Jason?
- Yeah, fortunately. Sorry, but I am not on that job.
- That's not useful. I am needing some information on the victim.

- A mate of yours? Some kind of investment type, wasn't he?
- An associate.
- What you wanting?
- I need to know when he was killed and any ideas why he was there. Last sightings, that sort of thing.
- Wow. They are playing that one *very* tight right now. I think they have a lot they are not disclosing. That might be really hard to do.
- I'll up the ante, if you need me to.
- I'll see what I can get for you.

I like talking to Jason. No chit-chat and no time-wasting. If only more were like him.

Days pass. More meetings. TJ has less sympathy with my dealing with anything.

- This isn't *The Vincent Show*, you know. We have other responsibilities too. It's not all *black arts and shadows* here. You just have specialisms that we cannot always do without. So...we have some patience, but it's not limitless.
- Sorry TJ. I am dealing with it, though.
- I would just love to know how.
- Give me time. I will get to the bottom of the matter and will get the money. It will take time, but it requires a more delicate touch.

I heard a suppressed laugh from the end of the table.

- I always had you down as the *blunted instrument* of modern investment management, Vincent.

We part huffily.

*Bad memories. Now all gone. Red. Green. Yellow. Indigo. Orange. All coloured wheels around me, turning slowly, moving in a bright haze. The cold that surrounds me is like a welcoming blanket. I am not afraid. I'm not afraid of anything and I never will be again.*

Jason doesn't get back to me for six days. Six days of anxiety. In that time I did manage to speak to what was left of the original proposition, but they had scattered like suddenly illuminated cockroaches. What had been solid now became dust, and it was not a great feeling.

More headlines.

**COPS BAFFLED IN SEASIDE SLAYING**

**SLAIN BEACH MAN WAS TOP MONEY MAKER**

**TOP STOCK WHIZ FOUND SLAIN IN SEASHORE HORROR FIND**

## **BIG BANKER SLASHED IN MYSTERY SEA ATTACK**

## **COPS QUIET ON BEACH MURDER PROBE**

## **CORRUPT TORY COP BOSS COVER UP CARVED BANKER'S CASH CRIMES**

Thursday afternoon. Quiet and sunny. Sitting at home wondering quietly to myself about Oscar and Lester and TJ and how things were going quite strange. I wonder what happened to Mr Bewes in the end? Did he *keep his deposit*?

The phone rings.

- Vincent speaking.
- Mr Filder?
- Yes, this is Vincent Filder.
- Good afternoon Mr Filder. My name is **REDACTED**. I don't believe we have met before?

I don't recognise the name. Why is he calling me at home?

- I don't think so, no. What can I do for you?
- Well, I have an invitation for you to attend a meeting.
- A meeting?
- Yes, we are the House of Moiré. We have an invitation pending for you to take the place of an outgoing member.

I find I am standing up and pacing the room.

- Yes. Yes. Of course. I discussed this with Oscar.
- Yes, well his exit from the House has met with greater speed and finality than anyone else would have guessed. But we meet next Friday. We'd be obliged if you could come along.
- Oh of course. Anything I need to bring with me?
- Well, we'll need your birth certificate and some proof of your address, other than nothing really - that just come as you are. No dress code or anything.
- Yes, I will. Absolutely. Thank you for the invitation, Mr Filder.

Soft chuckle on the end of the line.

- No, *you* are Filder. I am **REDACTED**.

I feel like a moron now.

- Yes...of course. Just the shock of hearing from you. Can I ask you what you...
- You'll have enough explained to you on Friday, Mr Filder. Meeting starts at 8:00pm sharp. We meet at **REDACTED** which is just past the **REDACTED**. You know it?
- Yes, I do. Thank you for the invitation.
- It will be our pleasure. Welcome to the House, Mr Filder. You have my number if you need it.

He's right. It's displayed on my phone quite openly. The line goes down.

I am *ecstatic*.

Two days pass. It's Wednesday. Weekly report with coffee and cake in a small shop off the main High Street. Feels like a throwback fifty years ago. People really do still purple rinse their hair.

- What age are you now, Vinny?

I bristle at the name but I hold my peace. I have to.

- I'm thirty-six, mum. Don't you remember that?
- Of course I do. So when are you getting a proper job?
- I have one! I'm an investment manager. Don't knock it. It's what I do.
- No, your dad would have despaired. Probably turning in his grave right now. He always thought you were born to hang, or worse. I always told him he was wrong about you, but you never know how people turn out. He'd have been upset at you.
- Why? It's not far from what he did?
- Your dad worked in a bank all his life and he had an honest life. I don't know where you get the will or the finance to do anything that you do, Vinny.
- I speculate, mum. You know how it works.
- Yes, and I hear these stories about how your job works and it's pretty ugly.
- We give a boost to those who cannot help themselves out for themselves. We take up the good ideas that no one else will fund, just as long as they are good ideas.
- What was the last one you heard?

I start to wonder. Professionally I feel like I have been a bit out of the loop.

- Well, we had one guy who was making a new type of fuel that you can use commercially and domestically that gave off next to no smoke but which burned really hot.
- What was it made from?
- Recycled paper and compressed something or other...I'm not into the technical stuff.
- So how do you know if it's a good idea or not?
- Well, we have people to do that for us. We then figure out if it even *sounds* like a good idea. Then we have a look at their figures, see why people have rejected their propositions in the past and then work with them to make the idea work.
- And what if it doesn't?
- Then we all lose. So the deal is to never make a bet you'll ever lose.
- Wow...if you knew that then you could just clear out the bookies and not bother with guys making smokeless fuels, Vinny.
- This is more certain than the bookies. And it's 'Vincent', now. No one even calls me 'Vinny'. Sounds like a gangster name, that.
- Maybe some people see you that way.
- Do you disapprove of what I'm doing?
- No, but I don't know your tactics. Greg asked you for help, you referred him sideways and he got leaned on really quickly. Did you have anything to do with that?

- No, nothing.

A lie. Greg was a family friend who wanted to expand a business fast and who needed two million to do it. I deferred it to others in the firm and they gave him the cash on my account. Greg failed – there are only so many large scale restoration services the world can handle – and they went after him, *de rigueur*. I called them off but it got back home. Kind of ruined things around me.

- You ever speak to Marlene?
- We're history now.
- You have a made a mess of things. Haven't you? You look great in your suit there but really, nothing has gone right has it?
- Things are looking up, mum.
- They have to be. So far all you've been doing is looking sideways.
- I have something big lined up. It's going to change everything.
- Oh? Some big money deal you have now?
- Better than that. It's nothing to do with the business. It's a new start.
- I thought you said that what you were doing was what you did?
- This will be an add-on. Trust me on this, you'll see.
- Sounds shady.
- It might, but I think it's better than that.

We pause. Other patrons come and go.

- You know Carole called me again?
- What is *she* wanting now?
- The usual. Always the same damned thing.
- Will she never let go?
- She's nice about it, but so relentless. It's hard for her to let go.
- Turn her down.
- I try to. But she never takes the hint. She's got a hide like a rhino and never seems to understand anything.
- We won't have to worry about her soon, mum.
- Because of this new thing of yours?
- I hope so.
- Now I'm worrying about this new thing.
- You worry too much.
- I worry about *you*, Vinny. And stop telling me to stop calling you that.

A brief silence. She looks away at the green car outside pulling away.

- You knew the man they found on the beach?

I cough.

- No, never did. I did read about it though.
- He was in your business too, wasn't he?
- He was, I think. But like I said, I didn't know him.
- You think you'll end up like him, dead by the beach someplace?
- Why would that happen to me?
- A hunch, Vinny. Just a hunch.

We finish the cakes in silence. I drive her home.

Thursday morning. First thought: one day to go. Second thought: eyes open to the sound of the phone at my right ear. I move for it in a panic and strike it off the bed where I left it last night. I try to follow the ringing tone as I chase it under the bedside table.

- Hello?
- Vincent? Sorry to call so early. I have what you were after.

I have no idea who it is I am talking to.

- Lester?
- No...this is Jason.

*Jason.* Thank fuck.

- Sorry, Jason. You got me at a bad time there. What time is it?
- Half past six.
- Holy crap...half *six*?
- I cannot really talk any other time today and I knew you'd want this soon.

I ease up and reach for my pen and paper.

- What do you have for me?
- The PM report on your Mr Drabble. A weird one. He only had one testicle, you know.
- Well, that's interesting, but it's not quite what I was after. What have you for me?
- Got a pen?
- Just tell me, Jason.
- Well, it says here that he died from multiple stab wounds to his chest. The odd thing is that he had no lacerations to his arms or sides.
- Why is that odd?
- He had no defensive wounds. It was almost as though he let it happen to himself.

Wow.

- Wow. That's odd.
- It is. There are also post-mortem traumas you should know about.
- Go on?
- It's pretty horrible. You ought to be glad you cannot see the photographs. They essentially *ripped his face off* with what the report signatory said would be something like...well...*teeth*.
- *Teeth?*
- That's what it said. Teeth. *Long striation marks dragged laterally from the top of the face to the chin, removing skin and subcutaneous tissue to an approximate depth of about eighty millimetres, uniformly.* That's a quote. I don't think he meant human teeth either.

Writing this down.

- Why teeth?
- The PM report says that's because of measured gaps between the wounds and stuff I don't really grasp.
- They took off his *face*? That sounds insane.
- Usually if people want to hide the identity of a corpse they smash in the dentistry, cut off the hands and hide the body. This was left at the beach in full view.
- Why?
- No idea. Maybe sending a message? It doesn't sound like carelessness. It sounds more like someone wanted to find him. And it therefore follows that they wanted him to be found in that condition. You knew this guy?
- No, I don't. Didn't. Just as a vague name in a deal we might have brokered. Seems odd he was killed and like *that*.

Pause

- The report also says two other things. One is that – judging by the discolouration to the skin and the swelling to soft tissues – it is likely he had been in the sea for at least a day, maybe two.
- And then washed up?
- No, it seems he was *positioned* where he was found. How weird is that?
- Very weird. Is that what the cops were holding back from the public report?
- Kind of. There is something else, though.

He pauses. I hope he is looking through the paper.

- Well?
- There were post-mortem wounds inflicted on his back. Weird ones. The report describes them as *a group of eleven closely cut straight parallel lines running approximately 4mm apart, cut from each scapula downwards, superimposed with the same pattern shifted to an angle of approximately ten degrees.*

I interrupt.

- I am not getting it. Be briefer. Can you describe the pattern?
- Kind of. There is a sketch on the report. Imagine eleven parallel lines, very close together, then another set just like it, overlaid but at an angle of about a few degrees. That's how it looks.
- Do they look accidental?
- On the contrary. They look very deliberate. A kind of kriss-crossed pattern of fine lines. No way are they an accident. No way. The other odd thing is that they dressed him afterwards. No marks like that on his shirt. The doctor confirms they were post-mortem too.

I pause.

- Can you send me the report?
- Yes, but you really have to be discreet about it.
- I will.
- Usual fee?
- Transferred today.

We hang up.

Something nags at me.

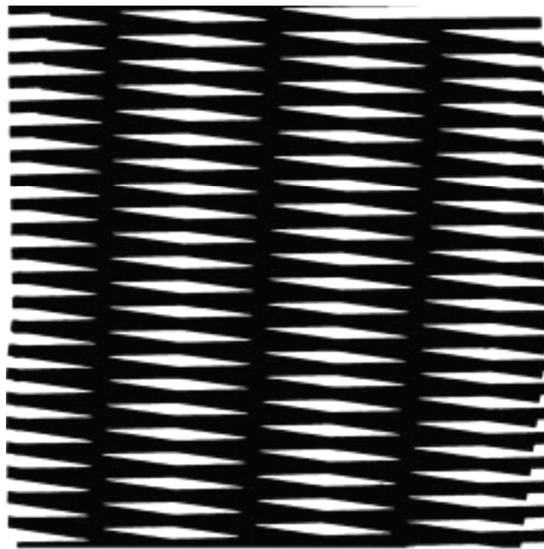
Google is my friend.

**moi·ré** noun \mo-'rā, mwä-\

1. a : an irregular wavy finish on a fabric; a ripple pattern on a stamp
2. a fabric having a wavy watered appearance
3. an independent usually shimmering pattern seen when two geometrically regular patterns (as two sets of parallel lines or two halftone screens) are superimposed especially at an acute angle

Oh no.

Check for images.



Scrabble for that notebook. Find that page.

*Parallel lines, v. close togeth., another just like it, overlaid angled about a few degrees off.*

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. *Little Vinny dived straight in and got in over his head.* Cold sweat.

Read on:

The history of the word *moiré* is complicated. The earliest agreed origin is the Arabic *mukhayyar* (مُخَيَّر in Arabic, which means *chosen*), a cloth made from the wool of the Angora Goat.

*mukhayyar*

Chosen.

Drabble was *chosen*?

Straight to the phone. Calling that number that recently gazed back at me. It barely rings before it is picked up.

- Hello?
- Is that **REDACTED**?
- It is. Is this Mr Filder?
- Yes, it is.
- Are you still fine for our arrangements tomorrow? Any concerns?
- Yes. Well...no. Well...sort of.
- I know some people wonder about us sometimes, and to some it seems like a big step. Are you having doubts?

Well...*duh*.

- Not so much *doubts*. Just uncertainties.
- I'm not sure I *totally* understand the difference, Mr Filder...
- Can I ask you something direct?
- Please do.
- What did you do to Oscar Drabble?

There is a telling pause.

- You'll understand everything tomorrow. I promise.
- I'll understand *what*?
- You'll understand everything tomorrow.

That seems like such a bold promise. I try and compose myself.

- Okay then. But I do have some *influences*. I do know some things about the circumstances of his death and I do realise that there are some things that are not easily explainable. It seemed...*extreme*.
- The House needs men like you, Mr Filder. Don't be put off by the means that we have to employ.
- Why did you cut off Oscar's face?

There is the slightest pause. Barely traceable.

- Whose face?
- Oscar. Oscar Drabble. Why did you dig his face off?
- *We* didn't do any such thing. And there is no such person as Oscar Drabble.

That takes me *completely* aback.

- But I...
- Tomorrow. Eight. Same place as described. I promise you'll understand everything tomorrow.

The conversation has ended. Something is gaining on me.

Friday morning. I take the car past the address we had discussed and have a long look at it. It looks like a municipal town hall that you'd find in almost any town. No signs outside. No signs anywhere. Nothing that gives the game away at all apart from the name above the door. Shoppers walk past it, children play nearby. It doesn't offer anything at all, other than the promise of something I've been looking for all my life. The promise of the comforting blanket of the haze around me.

I spend all day looking at the clock, pressing my clothes, practising my lines (I know I am bound to be asked to chip in to one of those *awful* ice-breakers where you have to describe yourself in a few pithy sentences) and generally compose myself. I am terrified inside. I cannot shake off the thoughts I harboured all night. I never want to see any photographs of the state they left Oscar in. I realise that I may be dealing with something I cannot tame, and may have to become a breathing part of instead. Never much of a joiner, me.

Five o'clock in the afternoon and I'm ready to leave.

The flat is empty around me. I like it better that way now, as much as I miss her. I can achieve my own sense of order and timing, as bizarre as it may be. *Little Vinny* never wanted to be left behind by the friends he never really had. My mother's words echo around me. *You never know how people turn out.*

Eight o'clock. Well, it's actually quarter to eight and I have been circling, parking and re-parking for the last hour, just utterly restless. Money in my pocket as Drabble told me, a small pen and notebook discreetly inside the Brioni. (Some of us have to keep up appearances – I had one of the Daves get it dry cleaned for me). The building has seemed lifeless for a while now, no light on at the door, or any other lights on inside either. Jesus, have I been set up here? Anxiety gives way to a mild form of anger which I know is a symptom of my anticipation. I hate waiting for *anything*. Even *this*.

Ten to eight. Still nothing.

Seven minutes to eight. Silence. Darkness.

At five to eight I get out of the car. I know something is wrong here.

The double doors are open, glass doors behind. No one there. No one at all. *Shit*. I walk into the vestibule and push at the glass door carefully and walk into the darkness. The floor is stone, echoing my footsteps in the dim, gloomy light. I am somewhere I can hardly imagine ever being by day, but now in the filthy light of the evening I can feel like a fish out of water. There is the faintest smell of disinfectant in the air and definite sense of there being a...

- Good evening Sir, perfect timing.

I nearly *shit* myself. A small man in a suit and carrying a clipboard is standing in the space to the left behind the doorway. I try not to cry out, but I give a sort of yelp.

- Hello.

- Are you an invitee or a member, Sir?
- Um...I am not sure. This is my first night here.
- I see. In that case you won't know the password, will you? That makes you an *invitee*.

He looks at the clipboard.

- Sir, do you have the customary perquisite? It's not a formal arrangement, I realise.

I feel so grateful to our departed Oscar right now. Heart still thumping from the fright, though. I reach into my pocket and fetch out the banknotes. He raises his eyebrows. I fear I have committed some appalling *faux pas* by doing so.

- Sir...that is *most generous*. That will ensure you a front row seat, as I am sure you hoped.

Nice one, Oscar.

- Thank you.
- Your name please Sir?
- Filder. Vincent Filder.

He looks down to the bottom of the list.

- You have some proof of identity with you, Sir?

I fish it out and show him the documents. He studies them in silence.

- Am I the first here? It all seems very dark and quiet.

He hands me something. A lanyard with a square Perspex attachment. On it a single number.

## 25

- We don't use names here, Sir. That will be the one and only time you'll be asked to give your name here. From now on you will be referred to as '25' and that is the only way you'll be expected to refer to yourself.
- Wow...very cloak and dagger. I see you don't have a number.
- I don't. I don't need one. This way Sir.

And off he walks, with me walking close behind him through dark corridors. Straight this way, then left, then right. And then...

I enter the room. It's a conference room of a sort, large and square, with bright lights above us and windows looking out over the main street. How did I not see these lights from outside? That's *impossible*.

More impossible is what I see within. The room is aged, hardly well-appointed and smells of soot, for some reason. A very large number of people seated in an enormous and seemingly perfectly arranged circle, each in what look like conference seating, with a writing lectern fitted to each chair. Each has a number hanging off the front, all

numbered from 1 up to 80. Everyone has turned to face me and watch me as I walk around the circle, uncertain of myself. They remain in silence. I scan the faces, but know none of them. This is my first day at school all over again. *Keep him inside. Don't let him bubble out now.*

There is a gap between 1 and 80 at the far side away from the door. I guess I have to pass through that to get to the empty seat numbered 25 on the far right.

They all stand up, on a silent cue. They all stand up and clap. Double claps.

**CLAP CLAP**                      **CLAP CLAP**                      **CLAP CLAP**                      **CLAP CLAP**  
**CLAP CLAP**                      **CLAP CLAP**                      **CLAP CLAP**                      **CLAP CLAP**

This goes on, their faces expressionless and joyless. Men and women, clapping without any happy countenance at all. And they are clapping *at me*. Eyes follow me around the room, never wavering. I walk into the circle and hear the clapping all around me, practised and rehearsed as though it was arcane knowledge. I am positively terrified of these people. But still, it feels like a cold hard welcome. I am now moving within the circle, where everyone seems to have an equal presence. *That will ensure you a front row seat, as I am sure you hoped.* Bollocks, Oscar.

I reach chair 25. They do not stop clapping, staring. Do I sit? Join in? Bow? I really don't know. Am I even supposed to know?

**CLAP CLAP**                      **CLAP CLAP**                      **CLAP CLAP**                      **CLAP CLAP**

Then a voice.

- All sit.

And they all sit, myself included. Their eyes are taken off me now. I was a star for a moment, now I am one of the crowd, a feeling for which I am quietly grateful.

- All are welcomed.

They respond to the call.

- *All are chosen. All are grateful.*

Wow. That took me sideways. Feels like a cult; a sect of some type.

I see number 15 is standing up with a clipboard in his hand. He addresses the group.

- Welcome to meeting number 34 at venue 12. So glad to see all eighty of the *chosen and counted* can be with us tonight. We had fears that we may be down by three but fortunately we are not, and we are also fortunate that 25 has joined us to keep up the numbers.

They all seem to mutter some assent. This feels deeply weird.

- Can 46 please address the group and give his report?

46 stands up. An older, heavy guy. Looks like he has spent a lot of his life on the piss.

- Thank you, 15. Well, the news we have so far is that funding is buoyant. We have had several offers of fiscal support from other avenues, including that from the organisation suggested by 57 suggested. They have been very kind and have supplied us with the manpower necessary to restore the venue to the condition we will require.

I look around and see 57, a sharp-dressed and swarthy guy seated between a very intense looking business type and a pretty young woman who looks incongruously young to be there. Most of the people here look at least fifty. Most look like they have not exercised in years. They look like the combined product of bad diets and mild alcoholism. 57 seems me looking and gazes back without expression.

- The venue was of course identified several months ago and was secured by 37 who has seen to it that we will not need to hear from...um...*competitors*.

They all laugh. Their laughter is as unsettling as their expressionless clapping. I look over to 37 and see a matronly woman who reeks of *thou shalt not*.

- The short version is that we now have a venue and need only fix the date.

73 stands up.

- We've taken a broad poll on this one and we have two dates we like.

Thick American accent, some east-coast state, but not hard enough to be New York.

- The first date we have is 22<sup>nd</sup> September and the other is 15<sup>th</sup> October. We are keen on 22<sup>nd</sup> September because it is the Autumnal Equinox and that speaks for itself. We had hoped for the Winter Solstice instead but 21<sup>st</sup> December is close to Christmas and we fear that there will be enough people around to cause us problems. The 15<sup>th</sup> October is suitable for people, but the date itself isn't significant. Can we have a consensus here?

11 stands up. Another young-ish woman, her cosmetics expertly applied to make her appear to be completely *out of bounds*.

- I know the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter favours the Equinox.

She sits.

48 stands. A thin, pale man who seems to need medical help to even get on his feet.

- The 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter concurs.

He sits. His voice was very strong. Resonant. Very at odds with his body. 79 stands up.

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter agrees *in principle* only.

Two others groan in disappointment. 15 stands up as 79 sits.

- Please, chosen members. We have to be civilised about this. We cannot hope to reach a total agreement, so principled agreements are perhaps all we can get.

62 stands.

- 1<sup>st</sup> chapter agrees with the proposal. We also wish 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter would get their house in order. Really, 15...everyone else manages it.

79 stands up again. The German-accented 62 sits. Only one person ever appears to be standing at any one time.

- Can we invoke clause 23 of the group charter? We have personal issues that we cannot mutually address.

21 stands.

- It's too early to invoke clause 23. The second paragraph clearly states that we have to have reached a 50/50 deadlock, and that isn't the case here. We can rule by majority.

35's turn.

- 62 should really remember that it was only relatively recently that we had the same situation with the fifth rehearsal.

62 retorts.

- Yes, but that was a rehearsal and not the event. This is far more important than that.

And so it goes on. This weird collection of people arguing about clauses of their constitution with respect to something they have planned for some date in September at a venue that seems to be only recently decided. It was like listening to a bowling club committee arguing about whether or not they should admit non-members to the players' lounge after the semi-final of the All Comer's Play Offs. It was all so municipal and tortuous. It was a long way from what I was expecting. I was fully expecting something more immediate, something way more tangible. And what am I seeing and hearing? Nothing. Nothing I had to be here for, and certainly nothing that explains why Oscar Drabble was found mutilated close to the incoming tide.

The word *teeth* haunts me.

As they argue I look around the room at the faces of those in the circle. Their faces all have something in common but I cannot place it. They don't seem to have a handle on some source of ultimate power as Drabble seemed to imply. So what was it?

- Number 25?

I wasn't used to being addressed that way, so it took a nudge on my arm from 26 for me to turn to the man addressing me by my allocated number. Number 9 is looking across at me, on his feet.

- 25, do you have anything to add to the discussion?
- I don't know. I am new here and haven't been...um...brought up to speed yet.
- Yes, well you will have a mentor. 75 will brief you.

75 stands up. She's a middle-aged woman with a severe face and an oddly lopsided hair-do that obviously cost a fortune but which sits uneasily above her features. She

stands up and walks up to me, extending her hand and breaking her face into what she assumes is a welcoming smile.

- Come with me, 25. I'll give you the details you need.

I stand up and follow her out of the room back into the dark corridor and down a flight of steps. I hold onto the handrail as I can hardly see anything in front of my face, but she seems to move down the stairs with ease as though she had been down there many times. She turns to the left, opens a door and flicks on the light. We're in a small office with two desks, chairs, some papers on the desk and a poster on the wall that makes it pretty clear we are inside a council office that deals with refuse collection. I don't even ask how we managed to get here.

She sits beside the desk and invites me to take a seat.

- Welcome to the House, 25. Are you feeling welcome?
- Well...75. I feel totally out of my depth, really. I don't know what any of this was about. The *former* 25 invited me here and I got a call to attend. That's all I know, really.
- That's as welcome as they made me. I've no doubt your head is full of questions right now.
- Just a bit.
- In which case I will try and answer them for you. Do you know why we are here?
- I was invited here by the last 25. I got a call from someone who gave me the directions here. That's about it. Osc...25..told me that this organisation would 'tap straight into the weaknesses of others'.
- He's correct, to a degree. We don't necessarily tap into that wellspring; what we do is tap into *despair*. The futility of existence. The knowledge that all we are doing just doesn't matter. The knowledge that morality and ethics and honour are outdated and can only slow us down. If you accept despair, you will accept your future. Does that make sense to you?
- That's pretty heavy...you mean you aren't bound by any scruples?
- None. Take a deep look into your hollow future, 25. Whatever you are doing now will not matter in a year. Or five years. Or thirty minutes. Perhaps. Existence is an ineffectual dream and we grasping that.
- I'm not sure I follow you. Even if I accept that, what good does it do?
- It makes us unbound.
- I'm not getting this...
- Hopelessness is all around us. People walking in a haze of futility. Bring that knowledge to them. Make them aware of it. Make them realise that their very presence on this planet is a waste of everything that makes them what they are, a waste of the air they breathe, a waste of the time they fritter.
- And?
- Make them know it and they will bend.
- Hold on. *How*.
- He will let you know how.
- Who will?
- He will.
- He? Who's 'he'?
- You'll learn soon enough.

I scratch my head.

- I thought this was a chance to get answers.
- I will give you one clear answer. Your predecessor broke ranks. He was dealt with. And don't be shocked or pretend to be shocked. We know about your methods already. We just use the same methods more exuberantly.
- Why did you take his face off?
- Because when we finished with him he was not a chosen person. He had no name and no face. He was nothing. He was despair.
- Incredible...
- You might also be wondering why he didn't defend himself. He didn't put up any fight because like the rest of us, he knew that such a defence in the face of overwhelming power was an act of desolation as well. He knew that he was about to be obliterated. And he was.
- He faced an attacker...and just *accepted it*?
- He wasn't facing *any* attacker. He was facing the *fount of all cause*, and it committed him to oblivion.

I sit in stunned silence. She could pass for an English teacher, yet she is sitting opposite me talking about destroying people as though it was no more effort than combing your hair.

- So what does all this bring you?
- Nothing so far, 25. That is what September 22<sup>nd</sup> is all about. That is when we will bring forth *him* and he will envelope our will. We will have more power then, than you will ever imagine.
- 'He'? Who is this 'he'? You mentioned it before.
- He is the *source* of all of this.
- This is baffling me. You have answers to give me, but you won't give them to me.
- You're not ready for them, yet. But we need you to be ready to accept it.
- Well...show me something tangible. Something to make me believe.
- You'll see soon enough, 25. Soon we will show you a demonstration of what we have achieved even yet, and you'll believe when you see it. Until then we need you to prepare for us.
- By doing what?
- By acting like you accept what we say and by trusting us to deliver.

I pause a moment.

- One question for you, 75. Maybe one you can answer.
- I will try.
- Why was I chosen for this?
- That is something for the last 25 to tell you. We choose those who come after us. He must have seen something in you that meant you were going to be of use to the organisation. I cannot answer the question, sadly.
- All a bit vague.
- We can be extremely specific when we need to be.

I pause again. She seems to be inviting the questions now.

- What is happening on 22<sup>nd</sup> September?

- We all get to meet him at last. You'll see.
- So what can I do to help?

She thinks for a while, then smiles at me. That unnerving smile of predator observing prey.

- Just be yourself.

We sit in silence for a while. Just thinking to myself. Trying to make something out of this.

- Why *Moiré* in particular?

She seems to almost laugh in recognition.

- It's a symbol, rather than a name. An emblem, a sort of glyph. It also sounds less unappealing than anything else, so we can still enjoy some of the favourable tax status afforded to charities in this country. We're not in it for a profit, after all. And what does the name matter? The real name is older than all of us combined?
- Real name?

She shifts, suddenly uncomfortable. The change in her face is remarkable.

- Perhaps I shouldn't have said anything.
- No, please...go on. I was brought here, remember.
- You were *invited*.
- Yes, and I followed the invitation, but I didn't walk in of my own accord. So tell me. What are you?

She takes a deep breath and tries to say the words as though they mean nothing, but her eyes betray her facade.

- We are the Sect of Pare'cee.
- The what?
- The Sect of Pare'cee. Sometimes we are known as the Sect of Paircy or even just Secpaircy. We have other names. But that is the one we have settled into. Like I said, it threatens less to call ourselves something else.
- *Secpaircy*?

Her eyes flash in a tiny panic.

- Please...don't tell me you've heard of us?

I am amazed she asked.

- No, I've never ever heard of you. Why the strange look?
- Just a passing thing. Forget it. Come on, let's get back. They will have the tea and baking out now.
- *Baking*?
- Yes, we have a sort of contest every meeting. So far 12 is leading the field, but he has his competitors.

This place gets stranger by the minute.

And that word nags at me now too. *Secpaircy. Pare'cee. Sect of Paircy. The Paircy.*

It stays with me all night.

Phone ringing in my ear. I am face down on my sofa, the TV still playing, the wine still open, the microwaved meal lying untouched – a testament to the bakery fare we were served up last night.

The phone still rings. This is getting to be a habit. Courtesy calls for Mr Filder.

- Hello?
- Morning, Vincent.

A familiar voice.

- Lester. Yes. I was just...
- Yes we know, we had a tail on you last night. We followed you and your Denis Wheatley friends to the old town hall last night and sat about and waited and took some registration numbers, and we gently shook down a couple of chauffeurs too.
- You did *what*?
- We're not being too careful any more, Vincent. We think you are getting out of your depth.
- *Jesus*, Lester...
- One or other, not both. How the hell do you know these people? Do you know one is the UK head of the pharmaceutical company that poisoned those kids in Malaysia with that dodgy milk formula?
- Lester...Lester...what the hell were you doing?
- A question we are going to put to you, soon enough Vincent. You're getting involved in some stuff here because of Drabble and that's not going to be good enough for us. We need the finances, not the mumbo jumbo. Sect Pharisee? Or Pair Seas? What the actual fuck?

I sit up straight, now fully awake.

- How did you hear...
- Dave did the dry cleaning. We dropped a line in your jacket.
- How dare you...how *dare* you?
- We dare, Vincent. And we've been busy while you've been sleeping your Weird Party off.
- Doing what...apart from nosing at me, that is.
- Well listen up and listen well. Bewes has gone to the police. His business partner suggested this a couple of days ago.
- Shit. He has?
- He has. And a good job it was too. Of course we tailed him and his partner too, and guess what. His partner showed up at your bunfight last night.

Oooohh shit.

- Who is he?
- Some kraut named Kellerstadt.

That has to be the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter guy who complained about the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Has to be.

- What did you do?
- Nothing yet, but we have a number on them both. I think Bewes and your Drabble are linked in more ways than just the German. We need to go after them both, and this time we won't be fucking about. You're out of the loop, Vincent. Frank and Benny are going to have to take charge on this one.

Frank and Benny. Clever guys, but a front for muscle. This cannot be good.

- You might not think much of those people last night, but they are resourceful.
- We are too. More than they are, if we have the element of surprise. Like waiting in their houses for them to come home.
- Bewes will be on the defensive.

Lester laughs.

- Bewes moved out last week. He thinks we have lost him, but we know where he is. We are moving in, Vincent. For your sake it would be best to take a low profile. Just stay out of sight and away from the office. And try to get your head together, man.
- Okay. But you have to hit them hard.
- We will.

I pause.

- Lester?
- Yes?
- Hand on heart...are they setting me up here? What do you think?
- We're certain. We'll be in touch.

And that was the last time I spoke to my friend Lester Fairclough.

The next time the phone rang in the early morning I was more or less waiting for it. This was two days after I last spoke to Lester, two days during which time I moved into a hotel in the next city eastwards and spent my time reading books and researching my new colleagues. There was nothing about them. Nothing. Google was not my friend.

Until of course I thought to look up BEWES and KELLERSTADT together and found they were both mentioned as directors of Cloud Textiles Limited, a company whose name sounded a million light years away from anything Bewes was ever involved in. His background was in industrial chemistry and fuel systems. A textile firm? How odd. But there he was, on the board of directors along with a Dietrich Kellerstadt. Has to be them. Has to be. I checked the bona fides Bewes gave us, and the dates of birth matched. I checked the other directors and found there were two others, but my guess was that they were straw men, since they led to dead ends as well. I checked their setup capital and found it was £1000. Wow. Then I checked their parent company and found they were part of a much larger organisation named International Revelations. Never heard of them. But there they were. Holdings in ten countries, and Kellerstadt was there again on the board.

I called them but I found they had an answering service only, which was *very* strange. E-mails went unanswered. Faxes were never replied to. It was like they were a black box, absorbing all around them and reflecting nothing.

I made a plan of attack.

1. Trace Bewes and find out just what he has been up to. The bona fides must have been weak.
2. Find and locate Kellerstadt, perhaps even just peg him at the next meeting.
3. Get down to London and personally knock on the door of International Revelations (what a bizarre name) and find out what the hell they are. Even speak to the people who host their almost blank web site with nothing but contact details on it.
4. Research all the other directors of International Revelations and see if any are known to me.
5. Try and get a list of all the people at Moiré/Secpaircy, by name. They need to be researched too,
6. And try and find out what is going to happen with them on 22<sup>nd</sup> September.

It all looked good until the phone rang at 4:00am that day.

- Filder?
- Yes, who is...?
- Get in your car and drive to the beach front at **REDACTED** where we will meet you. You know who this is, don't you?

Foreign accent. Not German. More Spanish.

- Is this Moiré business?
- Got it in one, Mr Filder. We need people like you. Get there as soon as you can. 75 told you that you'd see a demonstration of what we can do. This is your time to see it. Please hurry.

I didn't need telling twice.

I got there just in time to find the bodies propped up against the sea wall, all four of them leaning there like they were sunbathing there, except there was no sun and they were all fully dressed and all of them soaking wet. I should have been more shocked, but I wasn't. TJ, Lester and the Daves all sitting there together, their bodies hacked to pieces, but their faces intact. One of the Daves had lost an arm, but it had been thoughtfully rearranged back onto him so it didn't look totally out of place. Strangely...there were no marks on their faces.

Unfortunately for me I was still sitting there in a state of incredulous despair when the cops turned up and took me along with them. They might have asked me something while I was there but I was in no mood to talk to them.

- So do you know anything about this incident, Vincent?
- No.
- Come on, how did you get to the scene of a quadruple murder of four of your colleagues at four in the morning? Out walking the dog?
- He doesn't look like the dog-walking type.
- Come on Vincent, say something and help us to help you.
- I'm not saying anything about that.

One of them studies his notes.

- Does Filder, Freeman and Bloom do anything other than manage investments?

I look up at him.

- What does *that* mean?
- What it says. Does Filder, Freeman and Bloom do anything other than manage investments?
- We are investment specialists. We broker deals. That's all.
- I see. So what was your connection with the late Oscar Drabble, who was also found dead at the same spot your other colleagues were found at?
- He was the money man behind a deal.
- Did it go well?
- It was *going*, well or otherwise.
- And you had no ill-will towards Oscar, did you?
- No, none at all.
- I see.

A slight pause.

- Would it surprise you to know we've read the minutes of your meetings?
- No, but I'd like to know how you got them.
- We'll get to that in time. Until then, here are a few extracts; tell me if they are familiar to you. You: "Drabble is in hand." TJ: "How is he in hand?" You: "I am dealing with it. I will get back to you when I have more to give you. For now, we will refer it to later." Or there is this one. Lester: "This will be the end of us Vincent." You: "Well if anyone is going to end this it will be me." Recognise these conversations?
- I do, but what do they prove?
- Well it shows you're not exactly well-disposed to Drabble, doesn't it? And that you were intending to 'end it', however you may wish to do so.

They carry on punching at me gently, but they never land a blow. Then they drop my notebook on the table, face open showing my sketch of the moiré pattern Jason described to me. I suddenly feel cold all over. The page of my notes of Jason's conversation is *missing*.

- Any reason why you have this drawing?
- No. None.

They exchange looks.

- You know this was found on Drabble, don't you?

- I'm sure I don't.
- And it was also found on your colleagues too. Where does *that* put you?

We dance around some more. They are getting closer. Then the interview is suspended.

Two hours later, a man comes to the cell door.

- Filder?
- That's me.
- You're free to go.

I am almost speechless with surprise.

- How come?
- No idea. But you're free. And there is someone here to get you.

I don't pause to wonder any more. I leave the cell, pick up my stuff from the charge bar and am shown out to the waiting area where 75 is sitting. She stands up as I approach.

- This is just the beginning.

I say nothing.

- I'll drive.

We leave in a trail of her perfume.

Sit tight. Say nothing. We will come for you.

So I do, still in the same hotel, still waiting for something to happen. The day draws nearer.

Then it is upon me.

21<sup>st</sup> September. A call.

- You have the arrangements for tomorrow?
- Yes, I do.
- Good. Be there promptly and don't bring any form of identification *at all*. Is that clear?
- Yes, it is.
- We will supply the clothes that you will need for the event. Remember the password, and use it when asked.
- I will.
- We will transport you there and drop you off, then we will leave you. The rest is up to fate.
- We're chosen aren't we?
- Some more than most, 25.

The conversation ends.

The following night I felt the hotel and waited for the transport to get me. I felt curiously elated as we drove down the coast, almost like we were going to a picnic or a trip to the beach. The sky is starless. The equinox is upon us.

How much do you need to know about that night? I was swept along by the ritual as much as anyone. The walk to the dark seafront and the dangerous step up to the skeletal remains of the disused pier. The sound of our footsteps on the wet planks of the walkway outward until we approached the looming spectre of the long-dead theatre and the smell of the seawater and the seaweed and the faint cries of night birds around us, watching and waiting. The water under our feet as it plays in and around the old Victorian wrought ironwork, always getting further and further away as we get closer and closer to the entrance. That creak of the door as we file in, with the wet, musty smell hitting us right away and almost as hard as the smell of the perfumed smoke set up to disguise that reek. Dust and plaster everywhere. Lit torches dimly illuminating the arena. The dais lit up more brightly.

The processes we went through, all of us undressing in the half light and throwing our clothes into boxes and pulling on the numbered gowns we were given, all of us remembering our places inside. The excitement. Such excitement like I've never felt. Anticipation, or maybe something else. 75 was close to me, just in front. Under the hoods of our robes we exchanged a nod of appreciation. I was saying '*I am glad I am here*'. She was saying '*this is what it is all about*'.

Then the beat started up. And we all joined with the voice and the chant and the clapping. That clapping again.

**CLAP CLAP                      CLAP CLAP                      CLAP CLAP                      CLAP CLAP**

Never ending. The hole in the floor in front of us ominously glowing, even though we knew there was nothing under it except the resentful waters.

**CLAP CLAP                      CLAP CLAP                      CLAP CLAP                      CLAP CLAP**

On and on it went. The beat. The chanting. The words.

No one even seemed to flinch as the girl was pulled up onto the dais and ripped open in front of us. *It was part of the animals we were.*

At a stroke, we all exulted. And as we did, there seemed to be a monstrous build-up of energy among us and between us and through us. Something I just cannot express, but it was *there*...and it rose from the room, emerging from the pit in front of us and it seemed to absorb us. All of us.

What was right was going wrong. Hugely wrong. All that excitement and anticipation was now turning to dust. For what came out of that cavernous fissure wasn't a *thing*...it was darkness. It was darkness reaching out for the darkness and touching it and reaching into it and it overtook it...and with that, it took all of us as well.

I couldn't face it. I couldn't face the fear.

I was *Little Vinny* again.

I wet myself.

I wet myself and I started to cry.

The noise. *That noise*. The sudden heat from...I don't know where. And that black, black light filling the room with its emptiness. All around me the screams of the devoted who had suddenly come to terms with the fact that their jealous and desolate power cares as little for them as they care for anyone else. Eighty sociopathic hollow people finally realising that what they wanted most in the world was about to destroy them completely and forever; no going back, no negotiations, no warnings, no appeals.

To guarantee their safety and privacy they had of course chained the doors closed. Some turned back to the doors to flee and in their panic made a mess of the chains, twisting them into impenetrable tangles from which no escape was ever going to be possible. Others just stood and stared at their nemesis, surrendering to something so much greater than they ever would be that any attempt to placate or escape would be worse than pointless. It must have occurred to them *right at that moment* what real despair meant. *They were facing their complete and utter annihilation*.

The room was finally dark, completely black, without the slightest hint of light or hope within it. I closed my eyes, because I knew I'd never see anything ever again. Was it a prayer? Was a word of hope? Was it capitulation? I wouldn't know, because right then there was a massive dull THUD from somewhere around us. I've felt an earth tremor before, and this was just like it. Something huge and resounding and sudden yet sharp and powerful. All around us. Even the screaming died for a second – until the entire theatre was pushed up and started to stand on end, tipping everyone within down towards the pit like a child emptying the crumbs from a bag of crisps into his mouth.

That's all we were. Crumbs.

And ahead lay the mouth. A swirling black pattern of something I dare not even try to describe lying under the gaping wound of the pit, dense black light *reaching up* around us and bodies upon bodies just sliding in, among the debris of falling plaster, wooden flooring and bending, creaking, protesting Victorian iron girders, all sliding into the same chasm as the rest of us. The black light covering everything, emitting a paralysing nothingness as it sucked us in, casting brilliant white shadows behind us. And within those shadows sudden flickers of humanity in peril. What I most remember was 75, her eyes pleading at me (though I am not sure she *saw me*) as she slid down the floor's upward angle and was crushed by falling brickwork before she hit the waters beneath. Another man from the meeting falling into the pit and being decapitated by a jutting beam below him. Screams of people clinging to whatever they could before they succumbed to the upward angle of the collapsing building. Dozens of them screaming, falling and becoming silent.

What about me? *Little Vinny* was hiding. As the collapse began he ran and behind a pillar which, as the building started to invert, became a crossbeam in which he sat,

watching those below him becoming silently extinct. He just held on and hoped someone somewhere would rescue him. Anyone. Please. Just help me.

I swore I heard the last silent scream vanish below me when the building suddenly lurched and the pillar broke, sending me *down down down* straight into the blackness before me. As I fell I just hoped it would be quick.

But somehow I missed all the wreckage. Perhaps it had all sunk or was sinking. Perhaps it had been taken by the hard tide. All I knew was I hit the paralytically freezing black water almost vertically and felt myself being pulled *down down down*, faster than gravity would ever allow.

Oh Jesus Christ. I am being taken.

Down

Down

Down

Down

Down

Down

D

O

W

N

And I arrived. A grip so far ignored due to my fear was released. So cold I couldn't feel anything now. Surely I must be dead. I wasn't breathing. I couldn't.

I opened my eyes. Red. Green. Yellow. Indigo. Orange. All coloured wheels around me, turning slowly, moving in a bright haze. The cold that surrounds me is like a welcoming blanket. They coalesce to a darkened grey that *moves*.

And looked into the darkness and saw that vortex in front of me, right up against me. A spiral that radiated gloom and horror and the vacuum of its existence, within which lay two very human eyes. And they were looking at me. Into me. Through me. Beyond me. The eyes move towards me, slowly. Increasing in size. Looming. And I cannot move. Two eyes, both of them fixed on me, and both shedding nothing but the most morose kind of desperation I have ever felt. I could have felt pity were it not for the fact that they lay somewhere beyond pity.

It came closer. I couldn't move. The shape changed. Spreading. Opening. A flash of teeth, and I spun in the water and felt it hit my back with impact that knocked the wind, life and will out of me. In the stillness behind me, dropping silently...bodies. Dozens of bodies. Parts of bodies. Cowlings. Robes. Bricks. Wood. Metal. All suspended in the water as though they were held there for a split second, dropping silently and slowly as the lights went out and I gave in to the conquering sweetness of death.

It didn't come.

I opened my eyes to find myself naked and wet and colder than I have ever been, on the shingled beach, face down, coughing up the hideous taste and corrosive of seawater. How and when and why and where? No idea. I lay there, assuming that somehow the hereafter wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Many minutes passed before I was turned over by very human hands and covered in a silver blanket before being lifted onto a stretcher. My stinging eyes opened to see a policewoman helping two people in yellow jackets to move me.

- Angels wear uniforms?

She smiled, assuming she knew what I was deliriously talking about. She didn't.

Three days pass in a hospital, being kept on a drip and being interviewed by people I didn't know or recognise. Some of my (at the time) hysterical remarks have kept for posterity, but all that changed on the second night I was there. After the nurses had left me to sleep and I was left in the darkness of my mind.

I saw him again. Not in a dream or in a reverie, but I saw him as clearly as I see anything around me now. Still that amorphous black whirlpool. Those eyes. But somehow now I am not afraid. I am not afraid because he spoke to me, the voice without form, substance or inflection. Just words.

- I need people like you.
- Why?
- Because of them all, only you know what it is like to be this alone.

I swallowed hard.

- I do?
- They didn't know. You do. Of them all, *I chose you.*
- What will I do?
- Anything. *Anything.*

And then Pairy left me. I haven't seen him since. And Little Vinny died in my arms.

The mark on my back from the blow it gave me was the same as the others, only it let me live through my branding. And that gave me empty *hope*. It let me move upwards and take over my business and then take over others. It let me move among circles I had never been in before. It let me make deals I hadn't expected to make and operate with a confidence I had never expressed before. Like a spreading ink in the waters around me I absorbed and controlled. I moved. I dictated. I ordered. I made things happen. I had people around me who made things happen and called on the favours of many others to help me. The rewards were rich, the loyalty was strong and the favours were many. I created respect and helped people flourish where before they were left to wane.

My position gained swift attention. I was gathered up willingly by a major player who in turn gave me unlimited access to their power base and let me make decisions of an almost miraculous nature. One of them even thought I was getting my advice from somewhere else that I'd never divulge. Advice? Never. It was *much* better than that.

Onwards and upwards, and so it goes on.

Everything I do or have done...just *worked*. It's all there, on public record. Don't dispute it. It happened. We all know it. Take-overs, mergers, bids, shrewd investments, all paid off like a gambler's dream. Nothing went badly, everything went well.

I couldn't make a mistake. *I couldn't.*

Ten years pass in a haze. By the age of forty-five I find myself controlling funds and capital and investment that I'd never have imagined. Everything I touched turned to GOLD. I was the chosen one, so they told me. *I turned them around*. So it was with a tearful adieu that they let me leave to be a part of the biggest player in the country, and one of the biggest in the continent. So big we had governments waiting to see what we would say before they made their own pronouncements on anything. Among my closest confidantes I counted the people at the top of their industries, governments and institutions. One nod from me was enough to make people listen. This was better than *ruling*; this was dictating. None of that need for the will of the people for me – I was doing this by skill and by skill alone.

Then we started to acquire others, and fast. My choices were perfect, my instincts miraculous and my acquisition skills so great that I was earning bonuses that could have bought a nation. Or an army. Or anything. But none of that interested me. Not one bit. *Who needs a nation when you can have the world?*

I was edging towards the big one. The really, really big one. And I was so good that no one ever tried to stop me. Some told me I was being foolish, but their words didn't matter. So what that they were falling? So what that they had probably been speared by our own efforts? So what that we were acting in a kind calumny by agreeing to rescue them and float them back upon the waters again? In love and war, all is fair. In business at this level, the idea of fair *doesn't exist*. Within three months, despite the protests all around, we did it. I sealed the deal and we brought them home.

I made it happen.

So why am I writing this? So you know it was no accident. I made it happen. I brought that house of cards down about our ears. What you heard about in the news was true, but it wasn't anything to do with me *dropping the ball*, or making one bad mistake after a career of properly *great* ones. No, it was more calculated than that. Once you get to that stage you know that even your touch could bring them around again.

So we took them upon ourselves and within a year, we had taken *everything* down. We took a world and turned it upside down into a collapse so great we made governments wilt and nations melt.

You want despair? *I will show you the colour of despair.*