# TECHNOFARM

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# 1994

# Chapter 1

## Tuesday 21 June 1994

THE SUBTERRANEAN OFFICES in the great, red Victorian building, where darkness and gloom were built in like a moral prerogative, had once been used to hide the fresh corpses which had been offered to the medical school by the special procurers whose methods and supplies were rarely questioned by the college. They were hungry for cadavers to be butchered by clumsy students trying vainly to slice through the middle lamella of the lumbar fascia without botching up a kidney – or so the story was told to Grant when he first moved in several years before.

He had done what he could to brighten the place up, covering the walls with tapestries and masks from his time in Africa, Buddhist sculptures from his visits to the Far East, Mayan artefacts from trips to South America and other knickknacks from expeditions to the four corners of the globe when he had been on the payroll of the World Health Organisation. But, whatever he did, the dour air of the place, tinged with traces of formaldehyde, always seemed to filter through, staining his precious objects with a rather off-putting yellow so that in the end he took them back to his cramped apartment overlooking the British Museum.

It was a few minutes after he had come back to his office from the lecture. He was looking over a student paper, finding himself bored to tears, not so much from disinterest but from the sloppy workmanship. The paper had clearly been done in a rush, over a midnight bottle of plonk, he suspected – there were even a few reddish stains as evidence. No thought had been put into it, not even an attempt at analysis – just something dashed off in the wee hours of the morning and handed in like a bag of dirty socks.

He put the paper down in disgust. Why should he care? he wondered. And then he realised. He didn't anymore. It suddenly dawned on him – something he had known all the time. He hated teaching.

When he had left his job at the World Health Organisation, he had been suffering from what had been called fatigue. It wasn't an extraordinary diagnosis for someone who had travelled from disaster to disaster, from the latest drug-resistant strain of malaria in Burma to outbreaks of ancient bubonic plague in the highlands of Mexico. He could feel the gradual change coming over him long ago, from a youthful idealist on the front lines of the battle against pandemics to the mature pragmatist balancing the possible with the likely and making do with what he could get. Then came the accident at Seveso which put a mighty dent in his brightly polished armour – though he could have lived with that, since he was still convinced that he had acted properly.

But it was his time in Africa, two gruelling years in Kenya doing a study on the AIDS epidemic, that finally threw him over the brink. What he had witnessed there was, in terms of absolute horror, beyond anything he had ever seen.

Even now it continued to haunt him like an apocalyptic apparition. In his mind he would see that endless highway stretching from Nairobi to Mombassa. Along the road, all the truck stops, tiny villages with lean-to hovels, tin roofs baking in the blazing sun, heating up the stinking rooms like ovens; the ersatz beer halls, with slat wood benches and sticky tables; the tiny huts scattered in the back yards for the truckers. Dirty mattresses on the muddy ground, women with thin, dry lips and open sores on their arms and bony legs, so wasted they could hardly keep their stained skirts above their lanky hips. Every stop along the route had that same rank odour of beer and stale cum – the bodies, lifeless, gaunt, defiled as the land which stretched out flat and dry and grimy as far as he could see.

At the end of the road was the hospital, its wards overflowing with matchstick limbs, crammed into rooms without beds, naked in the damnable heat but too gaunt to sweat, faces with sunken eyes in lifeless heads, no longer black but an ashen shade of grey. They lingered on, half dead, clinging to a sort of zombie life that made living an obscenity.

That was the land he lived in now; not only at night when those terrible images would flood his mind, but sometimes, during lectures or meetings it would happen in an instant, like a black talon ripping through his head. And rather than fading quietly into the dark corners of his brain – as most obsessions do, given time – they seemed to be coming more frequently.

It was also why teaching had become such a burden to him. This morning, for example, when he had first come in and looked around at the students, quietly seated in the semicircular rows that ascended like the balcony of a miniature opera house in dizzying abruptness, he had hardly recognised a single one though this was the final lecture of term. Even as he spoke, he kept glancing, involuntarily, in the direction of a large, bald-headed man taking copious notes who stared at the lectern with grotesque eyes that seemed to bulge from his face. And he couldn't help thinking this person either had a thyroid condition or else was a serious lunatic.

His lecture had ended with his ideas on the general nature of poisons: "The first rule to remember is that everything is a poison. The second rule – seemingly a contradiction of the first – is that nothing is a poison. The third rule is that substances which are poisonous to one organism in the biological continuum are not necessarily poisonous to another. The fourth rule, a corollary of the third, is that substances toxic to one individual of a species are not necessarily toxic to another."

He looked up and noticed the expression of dismay on several youngish faces.

"If this sounds confusing," he went on, "we only have ourselves to blame. For 'poison' is one of those words that science could readily do without. Labelling some substance as a 'poison' is similar to labelling an individual as 'evil'. Whatever we say about that person in the future, the notion of evil remains like a bad taste overriding every other impression we might have had. The same is true with a substance labelled 'poison'. Whatever else it might be, once labelled it forever lingers in the mind.

"In fact, what we have seen is that any substance, any chemical or plant extract, can have either therapeutic or toxic effects on a particular organism. The equation will depend on two things – dosage and an individual's specific constitution at a certain point in time. All we can say with certainty is that the lesser quantity is curative while the greater is injurious. But the exact quantity is always relative.

"Rabbits can tolerate great amounts of atropine. They can be fed for weeks on the roots, berries and leaves of Atropa belladonna. They can also consume quantities of cocaine that would destroy most humans without showing signs of ill effects. Berries from the Deadly Nightshade plant can be eaten with seeming impunity by blackbirds but they are often fatal to pigs and sheep. Spotted Hemlock, disastrous to certain imbibing philosophers, can be easily tolerated by goats. Asperula odorata, on the other hand, can be eaten by humans but are often deadly to geese.

"For belladonna and hemlock, the toxic or therapeutic effects on humans are well-known. But how about other plants that we classify as foods? Take the mainstay of an ordinary stew, for example. How many of us know that the common potato can induce fits in some unlucky soul? Or that turnips can make some people suffer from breathlessness? Or that radishes in your salad can make someone extremely ill from its toxicological effects?

“None of us would have the audacity to call potatoes, turnips or radishes ‘poisons’, but that’s exactly what they are to some...”

It was here that he stopped, focusing his eyes on a young woman in the third row who was waving her hand in the air. There was nothing more disturbing to him than losing his train of thought in mid-sentence.

Grant looked at the young woman dressed in black trousers and a black cardigan, her light brown hair pulled severely over her head and tied into an intricate knot.

He raised an eyebrow as a sign of impatience. “Is it urgent Miss...”

“Janet Haskel. Ms Janet Haskel,” the woman, said, putting the emphasis on the titular designation.

“Is it urgent Ms Janet Haskel?” he repeated with a restrained sigh.

“I was wondering about your basic premise,” she said, totally ignoring his question as well as his desire to move on. “If I did believe in evil, I suppose it follows that I would believe in poisons, too. Isn’t that a semantic trap? I mean, doesn’t the concept of ‘poison’ serve a useful purpose both in practice and in theory? That something can either be harmful or a remedy isn’t really the issue. Aspirin can cure your headache or it can kill you. We don’t call it a poison, though, since it’s part of our basic arsenal of drugs. However, we do educate ourselves as to dosage and we make it clear that not following prescribed amounts can lead to disastrous results.

“On the other hand, we do call arsenic a poison because we don’t want to encourage its use by patients even though it can and often is prescribed as a drug, under a different name, of course. I would think that toxicology is a useful branch of science only if we allow ourselves to call things by their proper names and establish definite parameters whereby we can determine cause and effect. That’s what science is all about. The statement ‘everything is relative’ leaves it all up to

God. Frankly, I was hoping for a little more facts and figures. Looking down at my notes, I can find little I can use, except to be careful with radishes and potatoes."

"You have a question, I suppose?" Grant asked patiently, even though he felt his stomach churn.

"Well, I suppose my question is this – as future epidemiologists, how do we make sense of everything you said? I mean, how, for heaven's sake, would we use it?"

Part of him half admired her brashness. And maybe it was a fair question after all, he thought.

"From an epidemiological perspective," he replied, "we would like to know how a certain pollutant in the environment will affect the natural habitat or, more specifically, what its toxic effect will be on humans. Unfortunately, we cannot do this. We can only say that, from past experience a certain toxin released into the environment will be dangerous and probably will cause certain problems, but we can never be sure which individuals will be affected and what will be their reaction.

"For example, in July of 1976, an accident took place in the town of Seveso in Italy. A plant that manufactured trichlorophenol – a chemical used to make antiseptics – released a large amount of dibenzodioxins into the atmosphere contaminating an area of about 700 acres. Within a week, a number of children were hospitalised with chloracne and animals - sheep, dogs, cows, horses - began dying. The soil in an established radial area around the plant was analysed and was found to contain high levels of dioxin..."

Grant stopped for a moment and looked at the young woman who had challenged him. He could see she was concentrating on his words. "As the epidemiologist in charge, Ms Haskel, what would you have done?"

She didn't hesitate. Her response was immediate. "Because of the high levels of dioxin found in the soil, and since dioxin is known to be a teratogen in animals, all the

women who were living in the exposure zones during their first trimester of pregnancy should have been offered therapeutic abortions."

"In fact, that is exactly what was done, Ms Haskel, on the advice of toxicologists who, as I said, had studied the effect of dioxin on animals. Of the 150 women contacted, thirty had abortions performed despite the resistance of the Catholic Church."

The young woman nodded her head in approval.

"However, of the 120 remaining women who gave birth, there were only two who bore children with anomalies – one with an intestinal obstruction, the other with a genital malformation, both of which were corrected by surgery."

"It still was the correct decision," said the woman.

"The advice on therapeutic abortions was given by toxicologists, one of whom was also an epidemiologist brought in to study the situation. It may have been proper advice based on the statistical data he had in hand, but I would be surprised if there wasn't some later doubt, some qualms..."

"Maybe that has more to say about the scientist than the science," Janet Haskel retorted, meeting his eye with a harsh, condemning look. "Without being able to make decisions based on statistical knowledge, what value is epidemiology?"

Grant felt extremely tired and his head hurt the way it did when he was coming down with the flu.

He was about to say something he would have regretted. But looking out at the younger students in the audience, he saw that they were fidgeting in their seats, seemingly embarrassed. So he ended by directing his final statement to them:

"Epidemiologists," he said, "are more like detectives than physicians. And like detectives, they can neither prevent a murder nor bring back the dead. But they can sometimes help to prevent more killings by finding the source of the gun

and who it was that pulled the trigger. And in times like these, as keepers of a very troubled world, we need all the bloody help we can get..."

~

Recollecting the morning's disaster in his subterranean office, his thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a rapping sound. Looking up, he saw a silhouette of a young woman painted in profile on the opaque glass of his office door. He rubbed his eyes, trying to erase the images and then, clearing his throat, he said, loudly – perhaps louder than he had meant – "Come in!"

The door opened. He recognised her at once and it showed on his face. "Ms Haskel. Don't tell me you're still hungry for raw flesh..."

Her hair was down and hung loosely on her shoulders. She looked much less terrifying that way, he thought. In fact, close up, her face had an almost gentle look to it.

"I thought it was a fair question," she said. "It wasn't my purpose to antagonise you."

Grant looked down at the paper he had just been reading – attempting to read, that is – and then back up at her. "It was a fair question," he said. "I don't even mind being antagonised. At least you've given the issue some thought, which, I suspect is more than most of my students do..."

"You don't even know their names!" she blurted out. Then, closing her eyes, she said, "I'm sorry..."

"It's your manner I find a bit off-putting."

She opened her eyes again and looked at him squarely. "My manner? Oh, yes..."

"You're so combative, aren't you?"

"You'd rather have us pliant, I suppose."

"Pliant? No. Polite's more the word. It isn't such a bad trait."

"Except it doesn't get you anywhere." She gave him a questioning look. "What century are you living in?"

He chuckled. “Frankly, I don’t know.”

The corners of her mouth had worked their way into a frown. “I’m sorry I came,” she said, turning on her heels.

Grant stood up. “Wait a minute...”

She turned back around and stared at him angrily.

“Why did you come to my office? Certainly not to apologise...”

“I wanted to tell you I’m dropping out of the course!”

“What for?”

“Financial reasons.”

“Don’t you have a grant?”

She gave him an ironic smile. “Hardly enough to pay my expenses.”

“How about your parents? Can’t they help you out?”

“They don’t have much of an income. Besides, there are two more after me...and I’m the girl.”

“I don’t want you to leave the course,” said Grant. He thought a moment and then wrote something down on a pad next to his telephone. “I’ve got some contacts at World Health,” he said. “Let me find out what kind of funds they have for research assistants...”

“Why?” she asked. “You don’t even like me. And I certainly don’t like you.”

“You’ve got a good mind,” he said. “You’re quick, you’re bright, you’re intelligent. And you’re angry.” He put his hand on her shoulder and looked into her eyes. “I’m not asking you to agree. Just think about it. You’ve got passion. What you need is a little compassion...”

“I could say the same thing about you,” she replied, pulling herself away, “in reverse.”

She stomped out of the office, nearly bumping into the figure who was standing in the doorway.

How long he had been standing there, Grant didn’t know. But he recognised him at once. It was the man he had seen sitting in the lecture hall – the one with the

bulging eyes.

There was a ridiculous smile on his face as he entered Grant's tiny office. The kind of oily smirk that might have been on a sleazy postcard captioned "Nudge, nudge. Wink, wink."

"You didn't see 'Oleana', did you?" he asked.

Grant looked at him quizzically. "I beg your pardon?"

"The play by Mamet. Really should, you know. It might have been written just for you."

"That's why I don't go to the theatre much," Grant responded. "Plays written for me are guaranteed to be boring." Then, narrowing his eyes, he said, "Who are you?"

The man was middle-aged and balding. But his face was pink like a baby's. Or a baboon's backside, Grant thought.

"Ruddle's the name," he said, holding out a curiously tiny hand. "T. S. Ruddle..."

Grant was surprised at the softness of the skin as he reluctantly shook the man's hand. It felt like a piece of refrigerated liver and it gave him the creeps.

Ruddle put down his black leather briefcase on Grant's desk, giving the hide a gentle caress before he opened it up, retrieving a manila folder from its contents. "I enjoyed your lecture," he continued. "Especially the bit about vegetables. I always wondered why turnips made me wheeze. My wife thinks it's self-induced..."

"What can I do for you, Ruddle," Grant asked impatiently, watching in dismay as the fat, little man colonised his desk.

Ruddle's bulging eyes had a bit of a twinkle. "It's not for me, Dr Grant. Oh, Gordon Bennett! Not me! Not at all!"

"It's just a phrase," said Grant, rubbing the back of his neck. "A manner of speaking."

"Oh, right! Of course!" He let out a strange little laugh. "My wife always says how literal I can be. 'Ruddle', she says, 'why are you always so literal?' 'Maybe it's my training,' I tell her. I trained as a chemist, you see. That was right before the war. Precision was the key. If you wanted a good titration,

you had to follow the instruction manual to the letter. You had to be literal. But you're a scientist, Dr Grant. You know what I mean..."

"Listen," said Grant, losing his patience, " I've got quite a bit on my plate today..." He was convinced Ruddle was an insurance salesman.

The smile faded from Ruddle's lips. "Right you are, Dr Grant. I'll get to the point. It seems we need your services..."

"My services? What kind of services? What the blazes are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about past promissory notes. Bills of exchange. Obligations due." His narrow, almost hairless, eyebrows raised in a significant motion as he took out an ageing document from the folder and showed it to Grant. "That is your signature, isn't it? I'm afraid you've been seconded to us, Dr Grant."

He held the document in his hand, recalling a faint memory from the distant past and then looked up at Ruddle, at his hypnotically repellent eyes. His demeanour was no longer one of academic arrogance, but of tired resignation.

"What do you want from me?" he asked.

~

The 4:50 from King's Cross was a mixed assortment of early shift commuters, tourists, student types and other day-trippers catching the best light of a wonderful summer afternoon. The trip north, from London to East Anglia, so dark and bleak in winter, came into its own in the late spring and early summer. Outside, the yellow fields of rape covered the rolling hills like sun-drenched carpets. And where it wasn't gold, everything was moist and green and fertile.

To Grant, journeying by train was the most pleasant and civilised way to travel. There was none of the fuss and bother of traffic-jammed highways and one could sit back, relax and watch the world go by in relative luxury. Certainly the trains were a far cry from the carriages of his youth –

he still remembered with fondness the special smell of the upholstery and the quiet compartments that were so cosy and calm. But even now, even with the downgrading of service, the claw-back of little comforts like cushioned seats and writing tables, he still felt seduced by the special rhythm and the feel of great metal wheels gliding along iron rails.

The seats were nearly all filled as the train had left London. Twenty minutes later, they had reached Stevenage where many of the commuters got off. From there, the train sped on to Royston and, after off-loading more of the men in suits who neatly folded their broadsheets into their attachés, clicking them shut as they left, it proceeded on a leisurely milk run through village towns like Meldreth, Shepreth, Foxton and Whittlesford.

After Royston, those who remained seemed more casual and relaxed than the stiff, pasty-faced, bankers and accountants who used the outskirts of London as their bedrooms and nothing more. Instead of polished briefcases, brightly-coloured knapsacks now predominated. There was a wholesome and organic look about the remaining passengers, Grant thought – much more to his taste than the bloodless, pin-striped regiment who lived their life by mechanical precision and woke each morning to find the day a bland repeat of the one before and the one that would follow.

In the seat across from him, facing his way, was a young couple – a thin young man with a boyish face, thick hair swept back, un-parted, spectacles with circular black frames; and a young woman, dark eyes, long, dark hair, wearing a loose-fitting frock of pink and yellow.

He lay back against the headrest and wondered at the strange chain of circumstances that had brought him here.

The documents Ruddle had left him were of little help. A few extracts from hastily faxed medical records showing nothing more than several cases of some sort of pneumonic

ailment. Too early for lab results on cultures. Nothing else significant except vague references to epidermal markings. Yet the whole thing was being taken seriously enough to have confidentiality stamps of the highest category on almost every page.

What was his mission? he had asked.

To find out if there was any cause for concern. To make sure all information was transmitted directly to the Agency. And to keep a lid on it should anything eventuate. That's all Ruddle would say.

"Ridiculous!" Grant had objected. "You claim there's a suspected environmental hazard, but you won't tell me what you suspect!"

"Information comes to us in various ways," Ruddle had said as he packed up his briefcase with the obsessive care of someone who brushes their dentures after every meal. "Like an elaborate puzzle, sometimes a piece is important because it has been given to you by someone who, for one reason or another, knows nothing else except that it is important."

Why him? he protested. Certainly there were plenty of competent people up there who could be relied upon?

But he had been requested especially by someone on the Cambridge team. Someone he knew, Ruddle had said. A GP named Pauline Quail.

He had phoned her right after Ruddle had left.

"It's good to hear your voice," he said. "I'm surprised you're still in Cambridge."

"How are you, Peter?" she asked. Her voice sounded genuinely concerned. But that was one of her talents, he remembered.

"Fine..." he replied.

There was a brief, awkward silence. Then she said, “Peter, I need your help... it’s a professional problem,” she hastened to add.

“I know. Environmental Health contacted me. What’s going on up there?”

“There’s some curious illnesses I’ve seen in the last few days. They’ve all been preliminarily diagnosed as mycoplasma infections but there’s something about them that concerns me – the suddenness of the reaction, the severity...”

“We’ve been seeing new forms of mycoplasma with reactions like that,” he said.

“Some of my patients are quite ill. And they don’t seem to be responding to treatment...”

“It’s a feature of these new bugs that they tend to be antibiotic resistant...”

“Yes, but there are other things. They all have a peculiar type of skin eruption. I’ve never seen one like that...”

“How many are in hospital?” he asked.

“I’ve sent five to Addenbrooke’s so far...for respiratory insufficiency.”

“What do they say up there?”

“They’re still doing tests. But, I’ve seen several others this morning...”

“Well, it doesn’t sound like there’s much to go on. Until the hospital lab reports come in...”

Suddenly, her voice sounded ominous to him. “Peter, there’s something else...”

“What?”

“Maybe it’s better if we don’t speak over the phone...” she said.

As he listened to that conversation again in his head, he thought of Pauline. He let his mind drift back to half-forgotten days.

The train jolted as it hit a bend in the track. He became aware that the young woman sitting across from him was looking in his direction. She was no more than twenty, he reckoned. Her smile, the unconscious bloom of youth, filled her face with a glowing radiance.

He closed his eyes and saw himself on a Burmese train, outside Rangoon. A sweet odour of orange blossoms and cinnamon filled his nostrils and he sensed the closeness of a warm, soft, fragrant woman. She was dressed in white linens which clung to her figure like silk. Her bare legs were tanned and the blush of her face mirrored the young woman who sat across from him.

They were in a hotel bedroom. Overhead, the propeller blades of the ceiling fan slowly stirred the humid air. The light, strained through the curtain's bamboo slats, fell on their naked bodies in concave stripes, twisting and bending and dancing to their motion.

He felt the cool sheets between their legs as he pressed his lips against hers, remembering the salty, erotic taste of her mouth.

Then everything started to change. All at once he was no longer a participant but staring down at her from above. He saw her colour was turning from flush to pink to grey before his eyes. The noise that emitted from her mouth wasn't desire but a mournful cry for help.

Suddenly his head was filled with a shrill, deafening sound and an explosion of hot red light, of fire...

"Are you all right?" The young man's hand was on his shoulder, gently shaking him. He opened his eyes and tried to orient himself, remembering where he was.

"You fell asleep," said the young man.

Grant got up from his seat. His body felt ungainly and clumsy. "I'm sorry..." he said.

"You must have had a nightmare," the young woman replied with a soft, understanding smile. "It happens to me..."

He made his way to the toilet and locked himself inside. He pressed down the tap, letting the water run into the sink until it flowed cold and then splashed it onto his face.

The train lurched. He felt his legs give way and he grabbed the toilet rail to steady himself. Then and only then did he notice his image in the mirror above the sink. It took a moment before he recognised who it was.

An instant later, he came to his senses. He shook it off as a passing attack, a slight nervous disorder. Nothing more.

At the same time, he felt the train grinding to a stop and he heard the driver's voice intoning over the speaker:

"Cambridge next. All passengers must alight..."

She was waiting for him at the station. When he first saw her standing there among the fresh-faced students rushing to get their bicycles from the tangled forest of rusty metal in the car park, he was struck by how much she had aged and how little. Her figure, still slim, seemed to carry extra weight, if not added poundage. And her eyes no longer had that unquenchable look of innocent adventure. But he thought there was something ageless about her welcoming smile as he made his way through the crush to greet her.

He gave her a kiss on her cheek as she held his hand and squeezed it gently. "It's so good to see you again, Peter," she said. And then, taking him by the arm, she led him outside to a Renault 2 CV, which would have been bright yellow if it hadn't been so dirty.

She opened the passenger door for him and, throwing some packages aside so he would have someplace to sit, she said, "I know a nice place where we can have a drink and talk..."

Brown's was one of those leafy cafés so much in vogue a few years before, spreading itself lightly over a massive area and achieving both a feel of space and intimacy by the use

of ferns and potted plants. He ordered a whisky. She had a glass of Chablis instead of Glenlivet.

They caught up on old times as they drank.

"How is Hans?" he asked her.

"He's going through hard times, I expect just like the rest of the left oppositionists. They had such great hopes for the future, but instead they found themselves overwhelmed by the stampede to the free marketplace." She glanced down at her drink and ran her finger around the rim of the glass. "I haven't seen him for several years. I hear about him through Cicely..."

Then, looking up at Grant, she smiled in the manner of someone briefly recalling a past romance. "What about you, Peter? I heard you had taken a post at the university..."

"After I got back from Africa," he said. "I went through a pretty bad patch. The university job probably saved me from myself. But now it's starting to grow old..."

"Why's that?"

He shrugged. "I'm just not cut out to be a teacher, I suppose..."

"Of course not. You're a field epidemiologist. One of the best I've ever known..."

He cringed slightly and took a drink. "I'm not so sure," he said, putting down his glass. "Not after my experiences in Africa..." He looked at his watch and asked, "What time is the meeting?"

"We have a while yet," she replied.

"When did you and Hans split up?" he asked.

"Two – no, three years ago. But, really, we always had our separate worlds. After Cicely grew up, there was no need for pretence. Besides, he wanted to go back to Germany..."

"And you didn't?"

She laughed. "No. The German mind fascinates me, but in the end I find it incomprehensible. It's too precise. In many ways, I admire them their ability to achieve, to make things

work. But when I'm there, after a while I find myself longing for the sweet disorder which is England. Yet once back home, this country drives me mad!

"Hans felt a duality, himself," she continued."He understood that aspect of the German nature, that rigidity. And he rebelled against it. He looked forward to the rebirth of a new Germany. He had great trust in the youth, in young people like Cicely..."

"How is Cicely?" he asked.

She thought a moment how best to put it. "She has fire in her eyes. She reminds me of Hans when he was young. She works as a freelance journalist. Just as he did..."

"Here or there?"

"Everywhere. She flits in and out, depending on her passion. I never know where she is or where she'll be. When she's on assignment, she simply disappears…"

Grant looked at his watch again.

"Yes, we should go," she said.

He motioned to the waiter and then turned back to her. "Just before I rang off this morning you were saying that something concerned you. Something you didn't want to speak about over the phone..."

"I don't know." She suddenly looked very glum, as if the whole thing might actually be a paranoid fantasy. "But I've been around for a while, Peter. I'm not the type who panics, easily..."

"I realise that," he said, "otherwise I wouldn't be up here now."

She let out a little sigh, as if what she had to say was so tenuous that it might fall apart if she breathed too hard. "When I was going through the records for the umpteenth time, I began to realise that someone in each of the households were related in a very curious way..."

"Not the patients themselves?" Grant asked.

"No. Just someone in the immediate family – the mother, perhaps, or a husband or a brother..." She stopped to take a sip of wine and then, as if trying to visualise something, she rolled the chilled glass against her cheek. "I used to be involved with an organisation, 'Physicians for Peace' – I think I might have sent you some literature..."

"I seem to remember something about that," he nodded, while thinking he probably filed it with the rest of his unwanted mail in the rubbish bin.

"It was an offshoot of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. It originally started out as a way of sensitising people to the madness of atomic war, but it grew into a general critique of the nuclear industry. Now it's broadened even more, taking in a gamut of ecological problems – everything from toxic waste dumps to oil spills."

"A general purpose, one size fits all, do-good operation, I suppose." The look he gave her said everything.

"Crikey!" She let out a frustrated laugh. "What are you going to think of me now?"

"I'll think what I've always thought. That you're a good friend and a good physician who cares a hell of a lot more about her patients than most GPs and is currently under a lot of stress," he replied.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were wet and glistening. It was a different person. Someone he'd never seen before. Her voice was soft but the tone was almost pleading as she spoke: "Peter, I know something is wrong. I feel it."

It wasn't that he knew how to respond. On the one hand, he was struck by her open sincerity. On the other, he cringed at such a clichéd manipulation of logic. He wasn't one who easily fell for weepy protestations. But she wasn't someone who often wept.

He stood up. "Let's go," he said, taking some notes out of his wallet.

“Don’t you dare,” she said, taking money out of her purse at the same time. “You’re my treat!”

~

The small conference room at Addenbrooke’s was simmering. Not from extreme temperature, though the poor ventilation system contributed to the stuffy atmosphere, but from the agitated people inside.

Four men in suits were seated at a round table. From their tired expressions and manner of dress, Grant could tell they were administrators. Standing, clustered in the corners of the room were several knots of people – medical staff and technicians from the look of their outfits – engaged in animated discussions.

The contrast between the people seated at the table and those standing at the fringe was quite stark. It was as if two different nations on one ship were charting a course to opposing harbours.

A short grey man, with a face like a ferret, was making a very loud point and emphasising it with a gesticulating finger as Pauline Quail led Grant through the door. Even from across the room, his bright red cheeks, burning with indignation, made him stand out.

“That’s Bernie Thompson,” Pauline said, pointing to the ferret-faced man as she and Grant entered the conference room. “As you can see, he doesn’t exactly exude patience.”

“You’d better introduce me,” said Grant. His voice was less than enthusiastic.

The intense verbosity seemed to ricochet off the walls as they walked over to the most heated corner.

“You have absolutely no authority to be doing this!” a man with a stethoscope hanging round his neck was arguing loudly. The listening device was bouncing wildly on his chest as he spoke.

“We have every authority!” shouted Thompson. “In a state of emergency we could take over the whole bloody hospital!”

“What emergency?” a woman medic shouted. “What emergency are you talking about? You should have been here last winter! Where the hell were you when we needed extra beds?”

“Excuse me,” Pauline Quail said, pushing herself into the fray. “I hate to interrupt, but I need to speak with you, Bernie...” And saying that, she took him by the arm and guided him from the angry vortex like a vessel being towed from a whirlwind.

If Bernie Thompson was grateful, he didn’t show it. “You were supposed to be here fifteen minutes ago,” he hissed, glancing at his watch.

“I was delayed, Bernie,” she said, moving quickly to the side of the room where Grant was waiting. It was as if the sooner she got there, the quicker she would be released of her charge.

“Bernie Thompson. Peter Grant.” She introduced them succinctly and then stepped back.

“You’re from CDSC?” asked Thompson, shaking hands.

“I work with them on a consultancy basis,” said Grant.

Thompson lowered his voice. “I don’t know what we’ve got ourselves into here. We’ve really stirred up a hornet’s nest...”

“Well then maybe we better calm things down,” said Grant, looking over at the table.

One of the administrators had stood up. He was a tall, angular man with silver streaks in his hair dressed in a well-cut suit that established him as management’s top rung. Pulling out a watch from the pocket of his waistcoat, he said, “Gentlemen and ladies. I think it’s time...”

The response wasn’t immediate, but people did start drifting toward the table.

It took a few minutes before the room came to order.

“That’s Netsworth,” Pauline Quail whispered to Grant, as they sat down with Thompson, making their own little contingent at the round table. “He’s Mr Big Wig here...”

Netsworth was one of those natural managers who had the personal presence which established some kind of discipline over chaotic situations without actually doing anything but being there. But today even Netsworth seemed unable to project a sense of calm.

“There seems to be a lot of confusion as to what actually is going on,” Netsworth said, directing his statement to Bernie Thompson. “So maybe we could begin by discussing why a news quarantine was imposed...”

A number of heads around the table nodded in agreement.

“Suggested,” Bernie Thompson put in.

“...suggested,” Netsworth allowed. “But why even suggest a news blackout for something that essentially is a non-event?”

“What we have so far are twelve cases of atypical pneumonia,” the senior consultant, a man named Browder, said.

“Fourteen,” the matron, corrected. “Two more were admitted in the last hour.”

“All right, fourteen,” Browder went on, a little perturbed to have been contradicted by his own staff. “It may be a cause for concern, but how the blazes does it warrant this kind of intrusion?”

“They really are territorial little buggers, aren’t they?” Pauline Quail whispered to Grant.

“Unless, of course, there’s something those jolly little gentlemen at CDSC aren’t telling us.” The younger consultant, a pleasant looking man named Roger Cook, gave Grant a significant glance.

Grant suddenly realised that the other members of staff were staring at him too. He rubbed the top of his head, wondering how he got into this mess. But he had been used

to dealing with impossible situations. So his response was automatic.

"There's nothing that the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre could add to what you already know," said Grant. "It's true that we're taking any cluster of atypical pneumonitis very seriously now. The question of a voluntary embargo on news should be obvious. Scare stories of drug-resistant strains of mycoplasmas and mutant viruses create the kind of panic reactions that flood the surgeries and make it harder to weed out the 'sympathetic' cases from those that are real. Look what happened when the Indian Bubonic plague scare hit the headlines. Every Asian with a cough was suspect. At the outset, at least, until we can verify that there is no correctable environmental factor at work, we find it's best to keep a low profile."

Grant looked squarely at Netsworth. "However, we're here strictly on an advisory basis. No one's trying to tell you how to run your hospital."

"With all due respect, it still sounds to me as if you're being somewhat less than forthright," said Cook, the younger of the two consultants.

"I think we'll have to take the gentleman at his word," said Netsworth, somewhat mollified by Grant's approach. He looked over at an elderly man with a spotty complexion whose nose had the telltale signs of overindulgence. "Morton, what do we have from the lab?"

Morton Franks was the chief pathologist. He was due for retirement and was just coasting through his final months. "Nothing yet," he said in a bored tone of voice. "The early cultures show some possibility of mycoplasmas in several patients, but they could be false reads..."

There were so many mycoplasmas floating around hospital labs that it was easy to pick up false readings. This was why early cultures were never the best.

"I'll bet my boots it's not a mycoplasma," said Pauline Quail.

"Have we ruled out Legionella?" asked Browder looking over at the pathologist. He was referring to the bacteria that caused Legionnaire's Disease.

"We can't rule out anything this early," said Franks.

"I think we'll be able to rule that out quite fast once the epidemiological survey gets started," said Grant.

"So we're agreed about the quarantine? And an isolation ward?" Netsworth asked.

"Temporarily," said Browder, with a mannered disdain. "I think we'll see this blow over in a day or so."

"I'd like to point out that there's some difference between us," said Cook. His face appeared tense and angry. "From the patients I've examined, I believe we should be taking this very seriously indeed! The X-rays I've seen conform much more to a severe pulmonary oedema than to atypical pneumonia. That and the very peculiar exanthema lead me to suspect a possible toxic-allergic syndrome."

"What's your response to that, Carl?" Netsworth asked, turning to Browder.

"I'll wait for the lab reports," Browder mumbled. There was clearly no love lost between the two consultants.

"Have you tested for eosinophilia?" asked Grant, looking at the younger consultant.

"It's on order," Cook replied. "When can you get us your epidemiological data?"

"Set a meeting for tomorrow afternoon," said Grant. "I'll give you a report on my findings."

"Where are you staying?" Bernie Thompson asked Grant as they headed out of the conference room. "If you don't have a place, we could see about hospital quarters."

"I've got plenty of room in my house," Pauline said. She was walking between the two men. "You'd be a lot more

comfortable there. You're also welcome to use my car – though you might find things more accessible on bicycle."

"Then I'll be off," said Thompson, "We'll meet at my office at nine." He left, mumbling, "Don't expect you'll find there's much to it."

"I just want to look in on a patient," Pauline said to Grant when Thompson had departed. "Why don't you come along?"

The open wards stretching out from the central corridor were antiseptic clean but the colour scheme and the plainness of the architecture made everything seem dreary. Only the occasional vase of flowers or the cheery clothes of a carefree visitor gave hope to the notion that somewhere outside those halls might be a world brighter than this.

It was one of Pauline's gripes. "I'm not saying everything has to be brilliant orange or there should be great smiling faces painted on the walls to elevate the mood. But that infernal shade of green!" Pauline shook her head. "Why do hospitals have to look so much like hospitals?"

"At least this one has beds and cleans the blood off the floor," Grant replied, following her down a corridor that jutted left and then seemed to go on forever. He felt that compared to what he saw on his travels, the English didn't know how lucky they were.

"I hope you can say that next year," she answered back.

Addenbrooke's had a fine reputation and, regardless of Pauline's critique, he was struck by its apparent efficiency. He sensed it in the demeanour of the staff, especially the nurses and orderlies, who didn't have that haggard, almost desperate look so often seen among institutional employees who felt themselves aboard a floundering boat, bailing out just enough water to keep it afloat.

A sign over the doorway indicated the children's ward was off to the right, down an adjoining corridor. However, Pauline

continued straight along till she reached another set of doors marked 'Infectious Wards – Restricted Access'.

"She's being kept in isolation until the lab results come in," Pauline explained.

Entering the area, she went immediately to the nurses' station and chatted briefly with the young woman on duty. She was given two gauze masks, one of which she gave to Grant. Then, tying the flimsy mask over her nose and mouth she walked over to the room pointed out by the nurse.

She gave a quick, perfunctory tap at the door before opening it. Grant, tying his mask on, followed her inside and closed the door behind him.

The dimmer switch connected to the overhead light had been turned halfway, so that the bed with the plastic canopy, set in the middle of the room, was mercifully free from the overlit glare other wards had to suffer.

The first thing that struck him was the almost reverential stillness which centred all attention on the shallow, rasping sounds emanating from the bed. It was only when his eyes adjusted to the diminished light that he saw the couple sitting quietly at the side.

There was always something curiously surreal about the wearing of veils, Grant thought to himself. With the lower half of the face swathed in gauze, the focus of expression was the eyes. And, even if the eyes weren't the gateway to the soul, they said a lot about the heart. In the case of the two figures sitting there so still, they spoke of misery.

The couple stood up as Pauline came over to them. She hugged the woman and took the man's hand as warmly and easily as she had taken Grant's when she had met him at the railway station.

They spoke in whispers.

"How is she?"

"She seems to be resting easily now."

“Has the consultant been by to see her recently?” Pauline glanced at the chart. “Ah, yes. I see he has...”

She introduced Grant to Eduardo and Maria Rojas, telling them he was a specialist in communicable diseases.

“Isn’t there some antibiotic that can help her?” Eduardo asked Grant. “In Chile they would have tried many antibiotics by now.” His voice was beseeching, yet dignified. He had the forceful impatience of a man fighting for his daughter’s well-being but, at the same time, realising he would gain nothing by antagonising those who held the child’s life in their hands.

Grant replied that they were still awaiting the lab report and that he was there only as an advisor. However, if it wasn’t a bacterial infection then antibiotics wouldn’t work.

“But you will be able to do something, won’t you doctor?” Maria asked. Her enormous eyes were great, moist pools of desperate supplication. Unlike her husband, she would make no pretence about pleading for her daughter as a woman, as a mother or as a Catholic who would willingly give her soul back to the Church; whatever it took to save her child.

It was at times like these that Grant remembered why he gave up practising medicine. He was ill-disposed to play the role of God especially when it was thrust on him by those who asked nothing more than to give them back their child’s life.

Pauline, on the other hand, was secure in her role as healer. She knew her limitations. But as a woman, she had no qualms about sharing pain and sorrow and could do so without the threat to her professional standing often felt by her male counterparts.

“Believe me, Maria,” said Pauline, looking at the grief-stricken woman with honest sympathy, “we’ll do all we can. I asked Dr. Grant to come along so we could have his opinion. But it takes time to do the tests and we need to find the source of Felicia’s illness before we can effectively treat it.”

While Pauline was speaking, Grant had gone up to the child’s bed and looked through the plastic oxygen tent at the

girl who lay there so still. It was like seeing a figure shrouded in fog. The details were blurred and softened as if envisioned through a hazy lens – like a figure in a dream.

He lifted up the plastic tent and took the child's arm. It was limp and quite warm to the touch. He examined the skin which was blotchy and rough.

"Has your daughter ever suffered from psoriasis?" he asked, turning to the parents. "Does she often get rashes on her body on her arms?"

"Sometimes but not rough and flaky like that," said the father.

Feeling her pulse, he observed her colouring, the glazed look of her eyes and the shallowness of her breath. Then he let the side of the tent back down.

"She will be OK, doctor?" asked Maria, pressing once more for confirmation that everything would turn out well in the end.

"She's very ill," said Grant, "but the consultants here are some of the finest in the country."

Maria looked with alarm toward Dr. Quail. "What does he mean?" she asked in a fearful tone of voice.

"Felicia is very ill – you can see that yourself – but she's receiving the best care available." Pauline gave Maria another hug. "Trust us," she whispered in her ear. "We won't let her down."

It was a quiet, tree-lined street of Edwardian houses tucked in a little cul-de-sac off Chesterton Road. Each house, except for one, had a manicured garden. The one exception had a tangle of woody shrubs and wild plants that set it apart from its more genteel neighbours – like an ageing bohemian, sorely in need of a haircut.

"Home," she said, looking at him with a sad, sweet smile.

She got out.

He followed her as she opened the metal gate, rusty at the hinges, through the jungle of untamed shrubs and up the uneven path of paving stones which had begun to buckle from the menagerie of roots that had worked their way underneath them.

Standing next to her by the door as she fished through her purse for her key, he sensed the unpleasant odour of mildew.

"I'm always misplacing it," she said with a tinge of embarrassment. And then, smiling coyly like an errant school child, she breathed a sigh of relief. "I've found it!"

Pushing open the door, they walked into a dark hallway. She felt around for the light switch and, finding it, turned on the overhead bulb. The lighted hallway, rather bleak up till then, now appeared inviting and warm. The walls were papered with a pleasant, unobtrusive flowery design and were covered with pictures in various sized frames – original watercolours, it seemed to him, of landscapes that looked to be of the North, most likely Scotland. Perhaps the Western Isles, he thought.

She led him to the first room branching off the hall.

"This was Hans's study. I think you'll find it comfortable," she said.

It looked satisfactory enough, with a divan at one end and a desk set by the front window. The walls were lined with sagging shelves, heavily laden with books. And leafy plants were everywhere between the books, on the desk and covering the side tables which were thick with ceramic pots containing colourful and exotic species he would have been at pains to identify.

Leaving his valise by the divan, he followed her into the hall, passing the stairs which went to the upper floor, and down its length to the room at the back which turned out to be the kitchen.

The kitchen was a long, galley affair with French doors at the far side. There was a small dining table which

looked out onto a pleasant rear garden. On the table, the raw components of a salad lay lifeless on a long wooden cutting board – a tomato, a piece of celery and a carrot. The luxuriously curly leaves of some expensive lettuce lay temptingly on a brightly coloured plate of Italian design. Standing by, ready to be mixed, was a bottle of extra-virgin olive oil and some Balsamic vinegar.

The tomato was one of the most luscious he had ever seen. Deep red and meaty, it reminded him of a French Pomme d'Amour rather than something found wasting away in a British supermarket.

"I was thinking of having something simple tonight," she said, looking wistfully at the vegetables. She glanced over at him.

"I'm not sure I'm hungry. But I could do with a drink," he suggested.

"Good idea!" She sounded relieved at not having to deal with food quite yet.

They left the kitchen for the adjoining room.

It was a cosy space with many more plants this time of the fern variety – a small piano, some well-used furniture topped with Madras throw-covers, probably from an Oxfam catalogue, freestanding shelves holding books (but, unlike the scientific tomes in the study, these seemed to be novels, biographies and books about faraway places).

She went over to the shelving unit at the side of the fireplace and turned on the stereo. Selecting a tape from a pile, she placed it in the playback unit and pressed a button. What came out of the speakers was the seductive, melancholy sound of Billie Holiday's 'Lady Sings the Blues'.

The music had a strange effect, transporting him someplace in his mind – someplace hazy, he wasn't sure where. He suddenly felt disoriented and slightly dizzy. He made his way to the sofa and sat down.

"Are you all right?" she asked, giving him a look of concern.

“Just a bit queasy. I’ve been running all day...”

It was as if an image was trying to push its way into his consciousness as he sat there, listening to the melancholy song. It had a curious sense of both the foreign and familiar, like piecing together a picture puzzle and recognising bits without yet visualising the whole.

She poured a drink from a dusty bottle atop the oak sideboard and brought it over to him. “I can change the tape if you find it disturbing,” she said.

“No.” He shook his head as he took the drink from her hand. “Thanks...”

Sipping the amber liquid, he felt his body warm to its glow. It tasted rich and sweet and suddenly his head filled with the phantom odour of fresh ground coffee and strong black tobacco. “Calvados,” he said, looking up at her. “Calvados and Billie Holiday. It reminds me of a very special evening a long time ago.”

She smiled at his recollection. “I haven’t forgotten either,” she said, looking around, searching for a cigarette. And then, finding a pack, she took one out with a slightly trembling hand.

“You don’t smoke any more, do you?” she asked, lighting up. She pulled a chair opposite to where he was sitting on the couch, sat down and put the pack of cigarettes on the low table that stood between them.

Reaching over, he took one for himself. “Only occasionally,” he said.

“I’m sorry for tempting you.” She gave him a conspiratorial smile. “I know it’s a nasty habit but I guess I’m still something of an anarchist...”

“You always were,” he replied. “A very caring one though.” The cigarette tasted good. That and the whisky had seemed to soothe his senses.

Taking a long drag on the mild narcotic, she slowly let the pale smoke drift from her thin but delicately formed lips. “I’m really surprised they sent you,” she said.

He knew what she meant. “I am as well.”

“I suggested you, of course. But they never listen to anything I say...” She laughed as if she, herself, understood why they wouldn’t.

“It’s rather low priority, I guess. Maybe nobody else was available...”

She glanced down, considering what to say. In the end, she simply looked at him and said, “I’m frightened.”

Her eyes were a mix of wonderful colours, he thought. They were gentle and innocent. He had dreamed of those eyes. It was hard to remember that he had once felt betrayed by her. Or, more precisely, betrayed by her youth. Perhaps they both were. So long ago. Anyway, it was water under the bridge now.

He reached over and took her hand. It was still surprisingly soft and warm to his touch. “This is England,” he said. “Not Africa. Things aren’t totally out of control.”

“Not yet, perhaps...”

“What is it?” He looked at her, searchingly, trying to make out what she was really saying.

“I wish I knew.” She drew her hand away, stubbed out her cigarette and immediately lit up another. “If I were my own patient, I’d have diagnosed something vague, like free-floating anxiety. I’d have popped myself a valium and that would have been that. Except...”

“Except?”

“I don’t like tranquillisers. I don’t like being tranquillised.”

“You never did. Though tranquillity has its place. It’s not to be sneered at.”

“This is different. I want to be alert.”

“But what are you frightened of?” he asked again.

"Remember when I told you that I thought something was curious about the patients I had diagnosed with respiratory insufficiency?" She sighed. Her expression asked him please not to think of her as a fool.

"Yes..."

"You said I was under stress. But I've been working with people who've been predicting something like this was going to happen..."

Grant stubbed out his cigarette, feeling the downside the harshness in his lungs, the weakness in his chest. "We haven't found out what this is yet," he said.

"Of course." She tried to smile. "Maybe I have been acting ridiculous. Cambridge can be very provincial. If you stay here long enough, it gets incestuous."

She got up and went over to fetch the bottle. "Care for another drink?" she offered, toting it back.

He held out his thumb and forefinger, indicating how much to fill the glass. "What do you think of that young consultant – what's his name? – the one who spoke up at the meeting..."

"Roger Cook? He's OK. You can work with him. He doesn't seem to be power-tripping his way through life like most consultants – not like the Browders..."

"He and Browder seem to differ on the X-ray readings. Cook was convinced he saw pulmonary oedema..."

"Which confirms that it's not a mycoplasma..."

"Not necessarily," said Grant. "I've seen all kinds of curious responses to viruses and bacteria. But I'd agree that if the X-ray shows oedema, a toxic-allergic reaction is very likely." He thought a moment. Then he asked, "How about the other patients? The ones admitted from other surgeries? Do you know them?"

"I recognised a few names. Yes."

"But not everyone."

She shook her head.

"And as you said, Cambridge is a small town."

"I said it could be incestuous. I don't think you can call it small."

"I'd like to start going over the records tonight," said Grant, getting up and stretching his limbs. "It's going to be one hell of a job."

"I'll set you up in the study," she said. "Of course we've done our own initial assessments. There's nothing obvious. No commonality that hits you in the face. The addresses are all over the place. Various ages, class distinctions, jobs, states of health. Nobody was travelling..."

"Nothing but the vague relationships you've noted."

They were walking down the hallway, walking toward the study. "It sounds so silly when you say it," she replied.

He put his arm on her shoulder, as they stood outside the study door. "There probably is a relationship," he said. "But it might not mean exactly what you think."

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