

Note from the Narrator

I want to tell the story of these extraordinary events without drawing attention to myself or implicating myself in any way. I was involved only in the most tangential way, I can assure you – more by association than anything else. These days it is possible to be locked up for even hinting that terrorism can be glorious or for having the wrong friends and courts don't take into account the law of unintended consequences. So it's *sotto voce* for me. To be on the safe side I have to present truth as fiction.

I prefer to write in cafés. I move around. The Head in the Sand café in Camden Town is my current haunt. Every morning the proprietor brings me a glass of rum steeped in hot peppers, a black coffee, two dishes of grilled peanuts and my newspaper. I wear dark glasses with the right, coffin-shaped lens knocked out to make sure, in these lean times, that no-one steals my food. The place is a little down-at-heel but I like the sludge-olive décor and those trendily scuffed wooden floors, bentwood chairs and the menu chalked on a blackboard behind the counter. Who am I? I come from Surinam. My complexion is cinnamon. I am as slim as Barack Obama. My style is that of a graveyard dandy; black hat, black coat and a silver cane – it's possible to dress like this in London without attracting undue attention. Oh ... and I think highly of myself which is always good for one's health. I write in the daytime. At night I play piano in an upstairs bar at Mambo Racine's, a casino, dance hall and brothel in Brewer Street just behind Piccadilly Circus. I play bland intertwining

melodies as background music. The manager makes sure that there is a glass of rum on the piano top and a small wooden box of Cuban cigarillos which I smoke at the back during breaks.

As for the rest of my biography, skip the details and take my word for it. I'm a marvellous person.

The Head in the Sand café is well placed for me. It's at a crossroads. From an early age I have been an observer of the human race. (Nothing is more likely to dry up the heart.) Daily I watch the tame mass of unresisting citizenry, forming itself into a self-regulated slinking creature, shopping with its eye, endlessly acquisitive, nosing through the streets. Recently the sight has made me restless and impatient. Whenever I come to a set of automatically opening doors I want to rush and throw myself through them before they have a chance to open. People need a little exhilaration, don't they? Some excitement outside the warmth of the family circle? Something to induce that endorphin spike; a few meteoric moments in the cause of an idea; some extremism to clear the pethidine from the veins? Some danger? Every narrator worth his salt likes a good war. It's the peaceful existence which is the cause of my terror. I ask myself the question that philosophers must always ask themselves: Will my bum ever forgive me for sitting around all day like this?

I am in two minds. Should I write a sprawling, nineteenth century, bag-of-bones novel with all the energy of vulgarity or stick to the clear austere prose style that takes its key from the dead?

There's such a thing as too much good taste.

It is a photo of my fellow-countrywoman, Ella de Vries – taken before the catastrophe – that prompts me to write. There are few enough of us Surinamese who are famous. I cut the photo from the front cover of a magazine. Taken at night, it shows her standing on the balcony of one of Rio de Janeiro's old colonial palaces. Her head is half turned towards the camera. She is laughing and leaning back against the stone balustrade between two dwarf palm trees. Her black hair is pulled back tightly and shines like the painted hair of a Russian doll. Her face is vital and radiant. Behind her left ear she wears the huge moon like a white carnation.

Before she returned to Surinam for good she would drop into Mambo Racine's when she wanted a break from the formal world of ballet. We became close after exchanging intimate confessions one drunken night. Did she have any skeletons in her cupboard? Of course. A whole cemetery of them. Untold stories rustling and groaning in their coffins. Luckily the dead tell no tales or there would be a lot of bad news.

I first met her in Paramaribo in the eighties. I had gone there to consult my grandfather Papa Bones after becoming involved in yet another of my disreputable incidents.

Papa Bones used to ply his trade in the corner of a rum shop off Gravenstraat. He was a tall gangly black man with a long neck who wore a white Aertex shirt, open at the collar, and whose skin glistened permanently in the heat. His trade was to buy the spirits of the dying. He collected the names from hospitals or homes or street corners and added them to his list. What he did with them no-one knew. He had been known to rub people's names out or add them if there were problems with payment. He was also rumoured to own a copy of *Skrekibuku*, the Shriek Book or the Book of Terror, an ancient book of Dutch creole spells from the seventeenth century. So no-one messed with Papa Bones.

I found him sitting in a corner with his usual glass of rum. His eyes were bloodshot. There were three people with him, a couple and their niece. He introduced me. Pa Tem and Tanta Marti were in a merry mood. They were migrating to Amsterdam for a better life. Pa Tem was an affable, bulky creole. He was accompanied by his big ebony-complexioned wife who wore a slightly mad ill-fitting straightened wig. Papa Bones then introduced me to their niece Elissa. They called her Ella. Her skin was the colour of crème de cacao. She was sitting on a high stool in an off-the-shoulder dress printed with allamanda flowers and she wore yellow sling-backs on feet that were disproportionately, almost comically long. She acknowledged me with a smile and a nod. For my part, one look at her brought about an extinction of the mind and all rational thought and induced a buzzing in my ears.

Papa Bones was drunk.

‘Elissa dances with the Ballet Rio.’ He gave her a lascivious once-over and placed his gnarled hand on his crotch. ‘She has come over from Brazil to say goodbye to her uncle and aunt.’

‘Yes. Our Ella can surely dance.’ Tanta Marti beamed with pride as she moved her hips in affirmation of the dancing spirit. Her enormous bottom was articulated in such a way that it seemed to move separately from her top like the understructure of a crinoline. Pa Tem patted his wife’s bottom.

‘We Surinamese ain’t got much.’ He chuckled. ‘But bottoms we got. Bottoms we got in abundance.’

The three of them said their affectionate goodbyes to Papa Bones and made their way out. I watched Elissa go. She left behind her a trace of the scent of fresh lemons. There was a casual artistry in her walk. As soon as they had gone I told Papa Bones about my troubles.

He frowned and shook his head as he poured himself more rum.

‘You must leave. Go to Europe. Don’t go to Holland. Holland has too much connection with us here in Surinam. Our old colonial masters. England is your best bet. There is a place called Mambo Racine’s in London. They have plenty of Surinamese and Guyanese and folk from the Caribbean. Plenty of illegal immigrants.’ Papa Bones’s face cracked open into a broad grin. ‘People who just pitch up in England for a holi-stay. They will give you work.’

Which is how I came to be living in cold-arsed England. But let me return to Camden Town and the café.

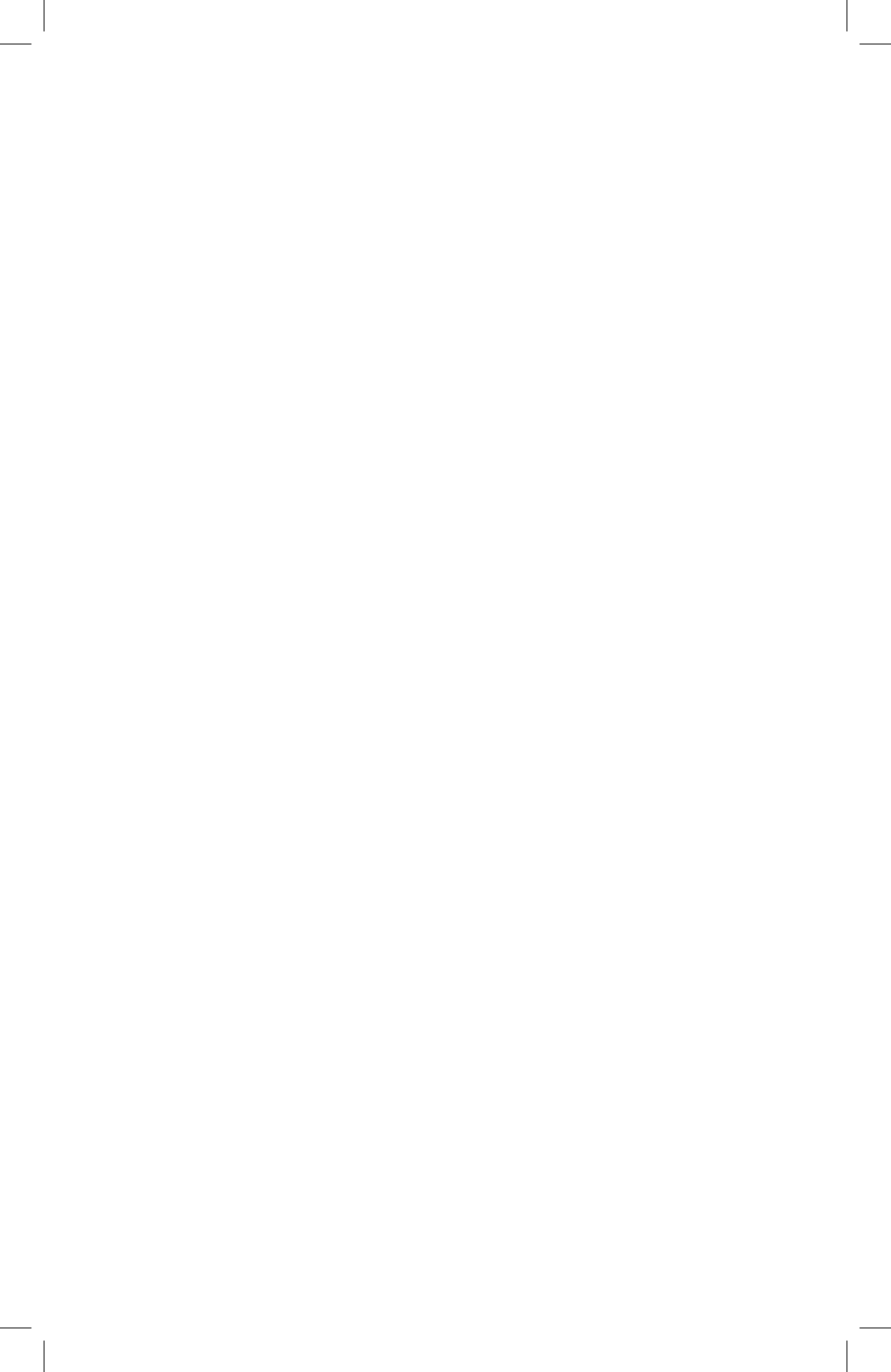
I had just settled down to write and was tossing up which of two visions of the world to adopt for my fiction, the one that celebrates the marvels of reality or the other that doesn’t, when into the café walked Victor Skynnard – a well-meaning man who makes your heart sink whenever he appears. In his usual state of despair and despite the expression on my face indicating I did not wish to be interrupted, he dragged a chair over and started his outburst without even pausing to say good morning.

‘You can’t imagine the government’s ingratitude towards me. I’ve spent months devising a way to pay off the national debt. For

god's sake, it's into the trillions now. You'd think that in the present economic climate they would listen. I had the perfect idea which I offered to them for a reasonable fee. Hair. Hair and nails. They're growing all the time. They grow even after you're dead. Surely someone could harness that power and link it to the national grid. Or take electric cars! Stop income tax and give everyone an electric car. I can't remember the details of the plan now but it would have worked. The Chancellor of the Exchequer didn't so much as acknowledge my letter. Now look at me. Skulking in this café. Can't even afford to pay for my toast. Could you lend me a couple of quid for one of those chocolate muffins?'

He went and hovered by the plastic display cabinet of stale croissants and pastries. I was barely listening. I realised that Victor Skynnard might be the random thread with which I could begin to unravel the whole fabric of the tale. I ordered myself another black coffee and started to write straight away. What is someone to do who has neither a conscience nor a heart? Order breakfast, of course. Then write a book. It's one way of getting up the world's nose.

Baron S.



Part One

'I am drawn to peoples in revolt ... because I myself have
the need to call the whole of society into question.'

Jean Genet



Chapter One

Let me introduce you to Victor Skynnard, the mixed-ability parasite, radical socio-irritant and spiritual bomb-thrower who came into the café that day.

After leaving the Head in the Sand café Victor headed straight home and sat in front of the computer in his study. The thin academic and scribbler leaned back and picked up the cheque that his father-in-law had given him, examined it and placed it back on the desk. The cheque was for less than he had hoped.

The house where he lived in Camden Town was part of a terrace of down-at-heel, white-painted houses with steps leading up to the front door and paint flaking off the portico pillars of the porch. Enter almost any such dwelling and you are likely to come across one of those pale utopian spectres from the mausoleum of seventies radicals. Enormous uncurtained windows let in the baleful light of morning. Skynnard's complexion in the pitiless daylight was tallow. His greying hair formed a cobweb of light frizz so pale as to be almost colourless, like a dandelion puff-ball. His forehead, high enough to have been elongated by a distorting mirror, puckered with concentration on nothing in particular. The room was high-ceilinged and draughty. A sepulchral white marble mantelpiece overhung the gaping black square of an empty grate and an old sofa stood in the centre of the room covered with a damson chenille rug. Around the room, on the wooden floor and sofa, enough books were strewn to make you think a library had vomited. In the midst of it all reposed Victor

Skynnard in the full bloom of his obscurity. In a city teeming with venture capitalists, business magnates and hedge-fund managers there he sat, a communist wrong-footed by history. The world had not gone the way he had planned for it.

What is a revolutionary to do when there are no revolutions? How to overthrow the state when nobody else is inclined to do so? Victor continued to wrestle with a complicated mass of ideological problems which most of the world had long given up trying to solve. He picked up the cheque again and stared at it for a while, his pen twitching faintly but uselessly between his fingers like a divining-rod.

‘Oh, what’s the use?’

He groaned and shoved the cheque back in the desk drawer. Then he threw himself full length on the sofa, put his feet up on the arm and grabbed a bag of crisps from the small table at his side. He shut his eyes and munched half-heartedly. The current plan, from his hatchery of bad ideas, was to take the medieval legend of Parzival and rework it into a modern play. Until such time as revolution was in the air again, Victor had decided that theatre was the fashionable powerhouse of radical ideas and creativity. Some years back he had written his PhD on Parzival, tracing the legend through Cuchulain and Adonis all the way back to that radiant stranger Dionysus himself. He would transform the material into a biting comment and social satire on the state of society today. It was settled. He would become a political playwright of great savagery and international renown.

The gods thought otherwise.

However, beneath Victor’s high-domed brain-pan there did exist a rich interior life. Victor settled down to the comfort of one of his daily reveries. He would join the Labour Party. He would join it solely in order to undermine it from within or to resign from it in a blaze of publicity. He imagined himself rising to his feet to address the local members in some room or other – he had no idea where these people met.

‘You stupid, hypocritical and murderous shites,’ he would begin.

‘The Labour Party has embroiled us in tragic wars and drowned us in debt.’ He could see before him the startled faces of the local activists and held up his hand to show that he would brook no interruption. At that moment a potent mixture of real indignation and hatred for the government lifted Victor off the sofa and on to his feet. He put down the packet of crisps and started to pace around the room. He was not sure how he would continue his speech but he had the advantage of infinite rehearsal in these one-sided flights of oratory. When he got stuck he rewound the fantasy back to the beginning. He needed to make sure of his facts. Victor’s memory was an area where the real, the half-remembered and the totally imagined all shuffled around together.

He had not progressed much further than ‘hypocritical and murderous shites’ before the fantasy ground to a halt. He repeated the phrase several times and assured himself that he would work out the rest later, outlining in painstaking detail the follies, past mistakes and hopeless future of the Labour Party. Not that he wanted any of the other parties either. They were all as bad as each other. He saw himself returning to his place at the meeting amidst the awed silence of the audience. Or perhaps cheers would be better. No. He plumped for silence. Gradually, people would rise to their feet and confess to their short-sightedness and their mistaken commitment to whichever policy he happened to be attacking. Somehow, in his imagination, the occasion became confused with the sort of meeting held by Alcoholics Anonymous or the Quakers.

Having single-handedly destroyed his local branch of the Labour Party, Victor got to his feet and went down to the kitchen to look for a plum. He took one from the bowl of fruit on the dark wooden kitchen table and returned to his study to stare with morose irresolution out of the window. There had been a downpour earlier and a ghost rain hung in the air. A few orange leaves from last winter lay like sodden cornflakes against the railings of the small park opposite. He watched a squirrel move across the wet grass with the jerky arthritic movements of an old 16 mm film. Victor frowned. He was in debt. The bills had been mounting up since the collapse

of his last venture which was to set up a desktop publishing house on the internet called Dot Communism. It was the most recent in the motorway pile-up of his hopes. It occurred to him that should capitalism collapse it might sweep him away with it, dependent as he was on his well-heeled father-in-law.

Just then his wife Mavis, a thin woman whose every variety of smile managed to express anguish, popped her head round the door.

‘How’s it going?’ she cringed slightly as she enquired.

‘Fine.’ He continued staring out of the window as if she had interrupted him at a crucial point of creation. Mavis waited for a few respectful moments and then discretely withdrew.

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As soon as Mavis left the room Victor turned away from the window and went to study his father-in-law’s cheque once more as if the amount might have increased. It had not. For a few minutes the master-builder of imaginary solutions was stumped. He spent a while hoping that Vera Scobie, his close friend and a woman for whom he had much affection, would die suddenly leaving him a shed-load of money. Vera was his political mentor, advisor and co-activist.

Since his youth Victor had moved in and out of various political groupings, all of them radical in one way or another. Rumour had it that in the seventies he had been a member of that mysterious cadre in Bradford which everyone had heard about but nobody could find and which always produced the most astute revolutionary analyses of current events. At a time of strikes, mass unrest, police raids and urban bombings their manifestos were published in a highly prized but irregularly produced newsletter. In fact, Victor had never been a member of that group, but had assiduously promoted it and had greatly admired it without really knowing anything about it – although he had been quietly gratified once when a young woman, a complete stranger, accosted him, assuming he was one of the founding editors, and screamed accusations at him that the same newsletter had ruined her life.

After flitting from one revolutionary group to another, he finally ended up becoming associated with an obscure caucus affiliated to some Situationists who lived in Woking.

This particular splinter group was best known for insulting everybody. They got furious at the least little thing. They expelled everybody – it was all in tune with some idea of keeping themselves politically as pure as crystal. They hoped to build a society which would be a shining example of this crystal ideology – although, naturally, they would be the first to put the boot in to any such edifice. One of them was an architect – a utopian architect, you understand – he never built anything, obviously. That would have been entirely against the ethos of the group. He only made plans. He was expelled though, in the end, because a friend of his built something. Anyway, nobody could keep up with the level of purity demanded by the group. In the end there were only three of them left. They were against work. No-one was allowed to work because it contributed to the capitalist economy. They were supposed to live on their wits. The girlfriend of the leader did earn some money. She did horoscopes for horses and greyhounds and sold them to racing magazines so punters could see whether or not the animal was having a lucky day. The remaining three quarrelled with everybody at the drop of a hat. Victor was used as a sort of dogsbody. He himself was expelled after he had been unable to come around to the leader's flat and help him mend a fuse.

'I was printing the pamphlets,' apologised Victor.

The leader screamed at him, 'You think I can't recognise people like you who would betray us at the decisive moment?'

But despite the vagaries, fluctuating fortunes and now near extinction of the political left, Victor had never quite been able to rid himself of the simple idea that capitalism was unjust. The great capital cities of the western world, London, Paris, New York, seemed to him like illuminated ships leaving harbour, the more fortunate immigrants clinging to the sides for the journey as the spangled vessels departed leaving untold millions behind in the darkness. And at times when he was sitting on his own in front of his computer,

he was troubled by the change that had taken place in the world since the days of his youth. A system which he believed to be the cause of much suffering seemed now to be accepted as the only way of conducting economic and political affairs and it was spreading everywhere. The revolutionary ideas of his own youth were to the current generation a puzzling and ghostly manifestation of some long lost period of history. Capitalism was widely taken to be as natural as the air that people breathed and it saddened him that people mistook it for freedom.

The upshot was that Victor became anguished by the loss of any ideal by which he could live. He was confused by the pony-tailed hedge-fund managers and punk investment bankers who were hang-gliding to work; the global head-hunters with aviator dark glasses and red braces who sang gangsta-rap lyrics in their lunch breaks and exchanged high-fives with street gangs as they roller-bladed into the City. Whenever these people flaunted the Orwellian slogan 'Hey, business IS socialism', somehow he did not believe it to be true. He was politically lonely. Politically forlorn. There was no party to which he could attach his name. And so he worked away on his own in that chilly Camden room refusing to settle for existing evils and working out how to replace them with new ones of his own design.

It was at times like this that Victor turned to his mentor. One of the few people with whom Victor shared a political framework was the actress Vera Scobie. Considerably older than him, she was his most illustrious contact in the world of theatre, a celebrity whose political activism was known throughout the country. He had met Vera when he was a student at Cambridge, a contemporary of her son Mark, whom he had come across once or twice before latching quickly on to his mother. Vera had taken Victor under her wing and encouraged his political development and forays into playwriting. Despite the generational difference they became staunch allies. She had even appeared in one of his plays. One factor in particular bound them together.

Some years earlier, in the late eighties, Vera had divulged to him a great personal secret. It happened during an intense period

of rehearsal. She had invited Victor to her house in Kent for the weekend so that they could work on the text together. When he arrived, the cleaner told him that Vera was in bed suffering from a migraine. The cleaner was clearly worried although, in fact, like many actresses Vera was as strong as a horse.

Upstairs, Victor found her in bed. The bed-head was piled with cream lace-edged pillows that matched the duvet. Dried flowers, a half-drunk glass of wine, scripts and a pen were on the bedside table. Her glasses were on her nose. Victor looked at the famous face resting against the pillows. She had good bone structure and paper-fine skin over which stretched a crazy paving of lines. She leaned back against the pillows and patted the bed for him to be seated.

‘Victor. I’m sorry about this. I’ve had a terrible shock.’ She reached for a tissue and blew her nose. ‘I’m very upset about something. Come in and sit down. I think I can trust you.’ Her husky gut-bucket voice had a catch in it. ‘I’m sure I can. After all, you were a member of that famous Bradford group in the seventies that was so wonderful, weren’t you.’ She took his hand. ‘You must never tell anyone about this.’ She took a gulp of last night’s unfinished wine.

Vera’s first marriage had been to a high-flying left-wing barrister who went on to become the Attorney-General. They had one son, Mark. In the seventies Mark Scobie became involved with the revolutionary politics of the times and had been active in a clandestine group of saboteurs and urban bombers in Britain. Although Vera held up her son as a paragon of revolutionary virtue, Victor gained the impression that she was secretly rather afraid of him. The urban guerrilla group operated in England and was linked to, amongst others, the Brigade Rosse in Milan. In August 1971, when the international police hunt for these bombers was at its height, an unexpected visitor from the intelligence services turned up at the Attorney-General’s office and asked to see him as a matter of urgency. The short, squarely-built young man with a pink complexion had just started his career in intelligence. He was clearly uncomfortable.

'I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir ...' The caller went on to introduce himself and explain his presence.

'My name is John Buckley from the Secret Intelligence Services. This is embarrassing for all of us ... and very embarrassing for me to have to tell you. But here's the situation. Special Branch and MI6 have been working with our Italian counterparts for some time. There is about to be a series of coordinated arrests for recent terrorist attacks in Britain and Italy. One of the people at the top of the arrest-list is your son Mark.'

The Attorney-General said nothing but rose to his feet and walked towards the window. Buckley waited for the Attorney-General to absorb the shock before he continued:

'It would be very awkward for the government if the son of such a highly placed official as yourself were to be arrested for trying to overthrow his own father and ... the state. To use a tabloid expression, sir – this is a tip-off. I am asked to advise you that your son Mark should leave Europe immediately. On no account can you allow him to warn any of his contacts and comrades otherwise all deals are off. Nor will he be able to return to England in the foreseeable future. I'm really sorry to be the bearer of such news. It must be very distressing for you.'

Vera Scobie was extremely practical in a crisis. As soon as she was told the facts she picked up the phone and arranged a one-way ticket to Australia where she had friends. She then contacted Mark in Milan. After a furious conversation with his father, Mark agreed to leave. The following day he was on a plane to Sydney.

'And I had to play Medea that night at the Apollo,' Vera continued. 'Can you imagine?' She put her hands up in an expressive gesture to cover her eyes then placed them palms down on the coverlet. The hands were delicate and wrinkled. She threw Victor an angry look. 'Frankly I agreed with everything they were doing anyway. He was right to attack the establishment. He was a revolutionary.' She sighed. 'But we didn't want him serving a long jail sentence. What would be the point in that?' A look of regret passed over Vera's face followed quickly by a look of determined common sense. 'Of course he wanted

to warn the others. But his father spoke to him and managed to make him see reason. He had one friend in particular – you might know him. Hector Rossi. A lovely boy. I adored him. Long flowing hair. Passionate. Serious. Absolutely committed. Unfortunately, Hector spent a long time in jail in Milan because of it all. I always felt bad about that. It's all water under the bridge now. Hector is back living somewhere in Kent, I believe. But Mark still has to stay away. It's so unfair.' She shook her head. 'It left such a hole in my life. I've just heard that Mark has been hospitalized in Perth with peritonitis. And I can't be there with him. I feel terrible. I've only managed to get over to Australia twice in the last ten years. There is still a warrant out for him over here, I believe. I didn't want to burden you with this but I had to speak to someone.'

Vera's eyes moistened with tears. Victor was something of a weed in the battlefield of political honour. He listened in alarm, his raised eyebrows winching up his forehead to give him the air of a startled peahen. However, then and there he swore every sort of solemn oath that he would keep the secret. Vera rapidly pulled herself together and they settled down to work on the text. When he left the house the next day Vera seemed to have recovered her spirits. She saw him off waving a pair of scissors at him as she clipped the dog roses framing the door of her house in Tenterden. He walked down the path to the garden gate. Since the death of her attorney-general husband she had shared her life with a radical journalist twenty years her junior, but he was away in South America covering the story of a coup.

'I've just heard from Alex,' she called after him. 'The president of wherever he is has been shot. I hope he's all right. He's so brave to be there.' She stood in the doorway waving goodbye. 'Thank you for everything, my good friend. Victor you must keep writing your wonderful plays. And not a word about our secret. I've told Mark what a staunch comrade you are.'

That had all been several years ago. Now, as Victor studied his father-in-law's cheque he thought of asking Vera for a loan but decided against it. She could turn quite vague and irritable at times.

Unable to make up his mind what to do Victor retreated into

another of his heroic daydreams. This time he found himself conducting a citizen's arrest on the foreign secretary in the full glare of lights and television cameras outside the Foreign Office. He was arresting him for war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. The minister's Special Branch minders stood in his way. Victor explained in a loud voice that he had a legal right to do what he was doing and that the Special Branch must step aside. Step aside they did, bowing to the law. At that point the prime minister appeared and Victor took the opportunity to arrest him too. With a startled minister on each arm he tried to lead them away to the nearest police station. The fantasy faltered a bit at this stage and Victor had to start it again until he reached his favourite point where the minders stepped aside and the small crowd cheered him on. He revisited that point in his daydream several times.

After a while the apocalyptic dreamer fell fast asleep where he sat on the sofa. During his sleep he was betrayed by his subconscious and dreamt that he was taking Prince William and Prince Harry on holiday and looking for somewhere to buy them fish and chips.