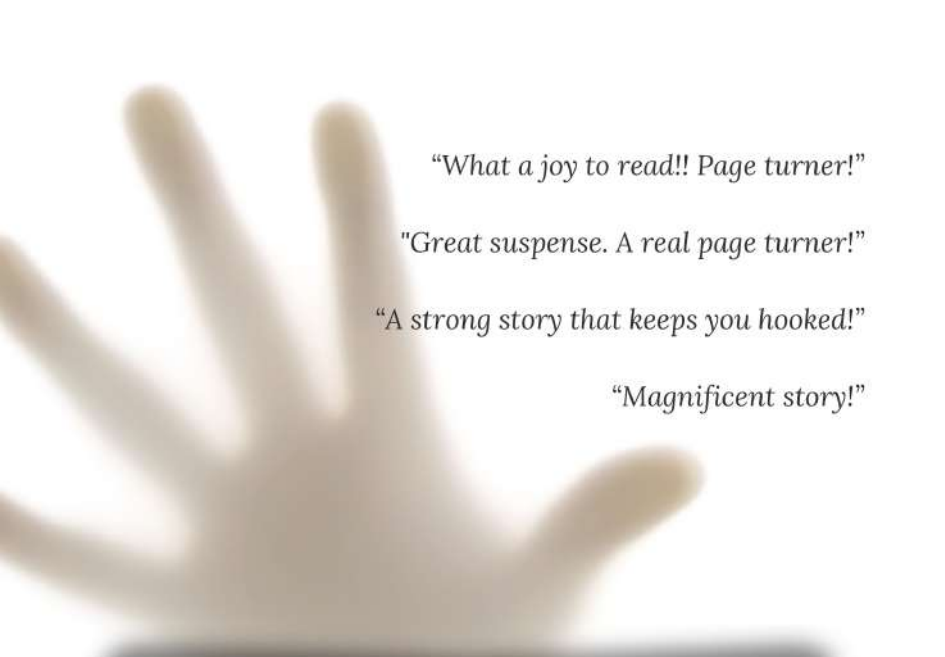


BERTIL SCHAART

NOTHING
AS IT SEEMS

A political thriller





“What a joy to read!! Page turner!”

“Great suspense. A real page turner!”

“A strong story that keeps you hooked!”

“Magnificent story!”

The narcissistic president of a country wakes up and finds himself locked up in a makeshift prison cell. Isolated and confused, he reflects on the bizarre event that led to his kidnapping during a press conference. Using highly advanced digital manipulation and surveillance techniques, he was on the verge of instating a totalitarian regime, wielding supreme power to himself. Now he starts to discover that nothing in his life is as it seems.



Distributed by
The Golden Eagle



Bertil Schaart

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BERTIL SCHAART



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1

Nothing but darkness. It made no difference if I had my eyes open or closed. Confused I tried to interpret my surroundings. Then it dawned upon me again. A big wave of desperation swept me away. What a cowardly way to treat the most admired president this country ever knew!

I was lying flat on my back. I touched the fabric of my clothes and could fortunately conclude I was still wearing my expensive tailor-made three piece suit. Whenever I were to face my captors, whoever they are, this fine silk harness would certainly help to re-establish my status and authority.

My legs felt numb. The wooden bunk bed was too short and appeared to have been hastily assembled from scrap material. I decided to close my eyes again. I could hear my own breath. A breath in. A breath out. Another breath in. It broke the destructive silence around me. I tried to concentrate on the sound of my own body and eventually managed to fall back asleep again.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw some light

coming in from a small high placed window. It was too high for me to reach. Even if I would have been able to get to it, it was too narrow for me to escape from. The crack in the glass nevertheless gave me some faint hope. Nothing is forever.

I stood up and sat on the bed. Perhaps there was something good spending time in forced solitary, a chance to recharge the batteries. Of course it was not my choice to be here, but I could benefit from it nevertheless and make as much of it as I could.

I had no idea anymore how many hours I had been in this cell. There was no pen and paper, just four walls, a toilet and a bunk bed. And there was me. Of course there was me. I was the reason this place existed in the first place. Apparently. If anything, now I had all the time to reflect on all the bizarre things that had happened in the recent past.

2

Elisa quickly straightened her black dress, the one from yesterday, and proceeded to rehearse the powerful catch phrases with me again. I felt confident. I had read all the documents and knew this was the right thing to do. I imagined myself to be a towering lighthouse, strongly standing in this storm, guiding everyone to safety.

Elisa had been my media manager for several years now, but she was much more than that. She coached me, she trained me. She was the first person I would go to whenever I was faced with a difficult situation. Elisa would listen attentively to me and then magically come up with a fantastic solution I would have never thought of. It was usually so cunning and clever as if she had prepared it in advance. What more could someone in my position wish for?

As she quickly applied some more foundation on my face, I was thinking about last night again. It was so sensual and exciting. Alternating domination and submission. It had aroused all my senses. But it was also very exhausting and apparently had left visible

marks around my eyes. But thanks to Elisa, both the cause and the solution of this, the nation would never notice.

The door to the media room was open and I could already see the first reporters take their seats. Considering the severity of my speech, this could very well have been the lion's den. But there was no need to worry. Elisa had only invited those members of the press who were 'our acquired friends', as she would call them. I never fully understood what she meant by that. With so many things to manage in my life, I did not have the time to find out either. I was assured of being able to deliver well prepared answers to previously agreed questions and that was all what mattered.

As I walked into the room, I greeted the familiar faces. Some returned the greetings with me a faint smile. Almost all seats were taken. The camera crew were doing their final sound and light test. Still a few more minutes before the live broadcast to the people of the nation. The press conference would announce the immediately effective new directive. We knew it would come as a shock to the citizens, but we had to. There was simply no other way. Well, more precisely put, there was no other way anymore. Exactly as we had planned.

3

One more minute before going live. I stepped to the microphone. The camera light blinded me shortly, but my eyes quickly accommodated. A quick glance over my notes reminded me I had nothing to worry. I scraped my voice and looked one more time into the room. Just as I did that, a young woman quickly ran into the room to take the last seat. I had never seen her before. She was far too young to be an experienced reporter. “Where is Jane?” I asked her directly. “She is ill, I am replacing her.” the woman said while still panting. Beads of sweat were noticeable on her forehead, highlighting acne in her face. It must have been a last minute emergency decision. The youngster didn’t seem very professional. Perhaps she was an intern. She will most likely have been briefed by Jane and ask the same questions. At any case, I had nothing to fear from her.

“3.. 2.. 1.. Showtime!”. The excited voice of our press coordinator. I put on the gravest expression on my face and looked into the camera. Elisa was in the back of the room and gave me the thumbs up. We had

practiced many different facial expressions in front of the mirror and this one was clearly the winner. By holding my mouth closed with the corners slightly hanging, I would show seriousness. I slightly lifted my eye lids to show clarity and determination. My forehead was slightly tilted forward, to be able to look straight into the living rooms of the people. By slightly looking down, it also subtly gave me the look of a superior. I felt the anticipation rising in the room.

Elisa must have felt the same. Always in for a tease, she naughtily touted her lips just like she did last night. Flashes of last night shot through my mind again. What a way to reduce my tension! I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Focus now.

“Today is going to be an important day that will still be remembered centuries from now”. The reporter on the front row looked at me and quietly nodded. He knew the script by heart.

4

A plate with food had been delivered via a latch in my cell door. The person who brought my food, whoever he or she was, never made any noise. It was only until the slide opened that I noticed. This time I could grasp the glimpse of two brown shoes, but I wasn't sure. I couldn't even see if they were male or female shoes. The light was again too dim. And then immediately the latch was shut again.

I desperately try to talk to the person. "Why am I here? Please tell me!" I shouted against the door. Silence. "What do you want? Tell me. Anything." I pounded the wooden barrier that kept me imprisoned. It was in vain. "At least tell me what I did wrong!?"

Of course, I knew what I did wrong. I perfectly knew why I was here. But I was certain they didn't know, whoever they were. Only a handful of people knew the full extent of our plan. It was too risky to reveal my secret to these unknown people.

On the white porcelain plate I found a deep soup bowl of the same make. It looked like one we had at

home. Chicken soup. Or more correctly put, hot water with chicken flavor, probably from a sachet of instant soup. Next to the bowl I found a roll of wholegrain bread with a crispy crust. At least, that is what I thought. This piece of bread was as hard as a brick.

An old red apple which already showed small wrinkles completed this meal course. What a way to treat the most important man in the nation! Was this supposed to be breakfast, lunch or dinner? Quite a change with the rich banquets I was used to.

I dipped the bread in the watery substance and fortunately it softened its steel shell. As it soaked up the salty solution, I noticed they had given me a spoon as well. "Such good hosts..." I cynically whispered to myself. There were words stamped in the backside. I held it up to the light in order to read it. "Stainless steel".

My eyes were fixated on this piece of cutlery. Like the spoon, I was also spotless. The team had crafted a perfect image of me. I was also the man of steel. Tough. And like the spoon, I fed the nation. With the biggest lies. And they eagerly wanted more. My mind drifted further away.

5

The press conference had proceeded as we anticipated. I delivered one of my best performances. At the end of the speech, I was even able to squeeze out a few tears. We hadn't rehearsed this, but I felt it was very appropriate to add more emotional effect. I had stopped blinking my eyes in the last phrases of my address to the nation. With the help of the camera lights, my eyes easily filled with tears. I couldn't see Elisa, but I knew she would be proud.

The first half hour of questions was entirely according to the play book. I was impressed with the reporters on the front row. They were free to rephrase the questions we had given them the day before. They had done so with such eloquence, it gave the perfect impression of critical questions. In return, I provided them with equally impressive replies. This gentleman's ping pong match continued for a good while, until I noticed Jane's replacement again.

The young woman had had her hand raised for at least ten minutes. She was clearly not used to these kind of settings. The press coordinator had noticed her

immaturity in the field and therefore ignored her on purpose, but now the other reporters had run out of questions. Since the conference went so well, he felt in a good mood and ordered the microphone to be given to the intern.

Had he not done so, my life would probably have been entirely different now. It would have been as we all planned it. Life would have been beautiful. Life would have been safe. But it turned out completely different.

6

“What to do now?” In my previous life, I had an agenda and a team around me. Together, we did so much. And now, I cannot do anything. Four walls. I do not even have a pen and paper to write my thought upon. All I can do is stand up, sit down, lie down and go to the toilet.

I tried to understand what those people were up to. If they wanted to kill me they would have done so immediately. They wouldn't have gone to the trouble of dragging me here in the first place.

It did not have the impression of a military coup either. They would for sure have used me, or my lifeless body, to demonstrate a new ruler has taken over and the old beloved leader is no more.

Perhaps they were out for my money, or the governments money. If that were the case, they would have gotten that for sure by now. Our security agencies were well prepared for such kidnapping situations. In the week following my inauguration, I was invited to their headquarters. The director, a man in his sixties

who looked more like a retiring clerk than an security officer, demonstrated some of their highly advanced technology. He assured me “these toys” would only reach the consumer market in twenty years from now. Then he ran with me through several possible security scenarios, such as ambushes, assassination attempts and the script they currently should be running to get me free.

I just couldn't wrap my head around it and decided to let it go for the time being. The only thing I could do was to wait and in the meantime entertain myself and reflect further on what happened.

7

Just one simple question. Asked in a soft inquiring almost innocent tone of voice. But these words were lethal projectiles shot in my direction and perforated my entire body. That was all that was needed to completely expose and destroy our plans. The junior reporter was not who she claimed she was. She was not replacing anyone and she certainly was not a reporter.

The entire room went quiet, as if a bomb had exploded in the room and everybody was still in shock, not capable yet of understanding what really just happened. The attendees had their eyes wide open and fixated on me. The silence was unbearable. That unknown woman in the back of the room had just exploded the very fabric of this nation with just a couple of words. A shiver went through my spine. This can't be true. Is she bluffing?

As those present slowly regained their senses, the young woman did not move at all. She just sat there and kept staring. Her eyes were deeply prying into me, piercing through every layer of deceit. I was trapped. There was nowhere for me to go.

The live coverage! It shot through my mind. They need to switch off the cameras. As many pairs of eyes were looking in anticipation of my response, I looked at the back of the room, searching for Elisa. She should intervene now. We did not agree to any secret signals. Elisa always felt what I needed when I was on stage, so there was never a need for subtle hand gestures. Not this time. As I desperately scanned the room, I was mimicking a pair of scissors with two fingers. Elisa would get the hint and act upon it immediately.

But she was nowhere to be seen. Vanished without a trace. Had she accidentally left the room too early, not expecting any trouble from the new reporter? I doubted it. I had known Elisa for 5 years now, she would never do that.

8

Only a few people knew of my relationship with Elisa. I always suspected my wife knew as well, but she never asked and I never told her. I assumed she accepted it as part of my job and life was far from normal anyhow. My extra marital relationship was only a small price for Susan to pay. Thanks to me she has a very comfortable life on her own. In my few years of office, she was able to transform from being the wife of the president into a powerful and influential personality on her own. As we were both away from home almost all the time, I had lost my romantic connection with her. If it ever came to a divorce, I knew both she and I would not suffer too much.

Susan was confident, pretty and outgoing. Always with a sweet disposition, but she was bold and brave when she had to. She had saved my career several times at the beginning of our marriage. Perhaps I had never been grateful enough to her for that, but I also knew she only did that in order not to have her own ambitions jeopardized. We were great business partners for sure.

Elisa was a different kind of woman. In many ways,

Susan was so much more, but Elisa had something mysterious. Her words contained several layers of truth. I found it exciting to mentally undress her of these layers and uncover her truth bit by bit. What did she really mean? What was her ultimate objective? And, who was she really working for?

Obviously she had an agenda on her own, but it was nothing more than an entertaining puzzle for me to find out. She probably was out for financial gain and more influence and power. I did not see any harm in her, she was behaving just like the others. And in the end, I was in power. I was in full control and felt invincible.

Besides, the work she was doing for me was outstanding. Thanks to her, I could rapidly advance to the highest echelon of the party. My predecessor had to step down due to a scandal. His position had already been under fire for a long time. The timing couldn't have come better for me, as if it were orchestrated. Within a few days, while still relatively unknown, I was appointed as the new president.

There was only this one time where I heard her say something that shocked me. In a business conversation, she casually dropped the name of someone of whom I knew she was not in contact with. And she shouldn't have been. When I confronted her, she laughed forcibly and dismissed it as something I misheard. I was

convinced I heard it well, but we quickly proceeded with our usual business conversations.

9

The silence heightened my emotions and desperation. It was important that they did not lock me up alone for too long. For years I had successfully combated my anxiety, safely hidden from everyone, even from Susan. As long as I was with people, I would be able to control it. I needed my environment as it gave me the fertile ground to feed upon. Without it, I would soon crumble and fall into depression.

Suddenly I heard footsteps. There were at least two people coming in my direction. There were in a muffled conversation, but stopped talking as they came closer. I was nervous. Are they coming for me?

I sat on the bed contemplating if I should attempt an escape as soon as they open the door. It probably the best chance I had so far. It is actually the only chance. Without further hesitation, I stood up and tiptoed to the side of the door. I stood my back against the wall and waited.

It was quiet. Where were they? I did not hear anything. I just stood there. Have they left? Then

suddenly light came through. The door the door slowly opened. Without hesitation I tried to open the door. Quickly a hand grabbed my arm and handcuffed it. Before I realized what happened, someone slid a paper bag over my head. They pulled me towards them. No word was spoken. I followed their lead, slowly walking step by step. I tried to look from under the bag, but I could only vaguely see my own shoes and nothing more.

Of course I was scared, but deep inside I felt relief as well as I was no longer left alone. From now, I had at least a chance to regain control of my situation. I counted the steps and tried to remember the direction. After 20 strides, we turned to the right. I heard the sounds of a door being unlocked and opened. We continued for another 36 steps. It must be a large room where I am now. Suddenly two strong hands pushed me down on my shoulders. I thought they were throwing me to the floor but they pushed me into a chair. Then finally, after this long period of silence... a voice. It was the coarse voice of a mature man. It said: "Wait."

10

When Elisa showed me the outline of the speech I had to deliver, I noticed a change in style. It had its useful powerful words, but this time it sounded more threatening and aggressive. I did not think much of it. Our audacious plan was necessary and it was up to me, as the leader of the nation, to enforce the citizens compliance. For months, our teams had worked relentlessly to spread fear and controversy in society. It was the perfect setup for a strong leader to bring peace again.

I was not even aware of all the actions they took. Of course, there was the automated censorship and mass surveillance performed by our technological partners. Then there were the many social media influencers we bribed into spreading our narrative. There was the black ops team that silently made people disappear when deemed too much of a threat to our plan. The highest judges and bankers were on our side too. And of course, the loyal press. They were all in it for their own opportunistic motives. None of them knew the overall plan. It all served the greater good. My greater good.

I found it fascinating how we could work with so many people, while no one was concerned with moral dilemmas. “Mental myopia”, Elisa called it. They simply cannot see beyond than their greed and own personal gains and therefore ambitiously contribute to our plan for total authoritarian power. Since they were helpless, we were actually helping them to live and work together harmoniously in the strictly controlled safe environment we envisioned. And the beautiful part was that this is what the people will have chosen for. Or that is what we will have made them believe.

11

The scenery was stunning and while it had been raining the entire week, this Sunday morning treated us with a clear light blue sky and warm rays of sunlight. Susan spotted a deer in the distant forest. As it majestically stood there and kept Susan in a trance, I grabbed the red velvet box from the inside pocket of my jacket. Then I sat down on my knee and held the symbol of love and loyalty on the palm of my hand.

When Susan understood what I was doing, she responded with “Yes I do, Hugo.” Her voice sounded far more businesslike than I wanted and only contained remote hints of the emotion I was expecting. I assured myself Susan would always force herself to be rational rather than emotional. Besides, she said yes to my proposal.

The wedding itself was perfectly executed according to our plan. It had all the ingredients of a fairy tale wedding. The castle, the waiters, the dinner, the dancing. It far exceeded our budget, but Susan told me her uncle gave her a large sum of money so his dear

niece could have the best day of her life. I had never met that uncle and was looking forward to finally meet this generous gentlemen. Unfortunately he wasn't able to be present at our wedding.

During the reception, Susan introduced me to a number of her acquaintances. I had never met or heard of them before. Their names were not on the original list of invitees, but I reckoned Susan had an opportunistic or strategic reason for their attendance.

12

Other authoritarian regimes, current and from the past, get into power by sheer force. I took pride in the fact that what we were doing came closer to art. It was much more subtle and beautiful than the flexing of oppressive muscles of our authoritarian colleagues. They can only sustain their position by the ever increasing and exhausting use of power. It inevitably comes to a point of collapse and chaos.

On the other hand, our plan would continue forever. It was simple and self-sustaining. For years we had worked covertly to slowly and patiently demoralize the citizens. It started with my predecessors who introduced confusing and conflicting laws. They purposefully violated the constitution themselves. They enjoyed jurisdictional immunity thanks to the fact that we owned the legal system. As a result, the people in this nation did no longer know what was right and what was wrong. They were left in utter confusion and felt powerless. They were extremely upset at the injustice they felt, but failed to be able to pinpoint the culprit.

The fabricated confusion had a function. People

naturally want to obey the law. They want to do good. They simply couldn't in this legal muddiness. Therefore, we would come up with a new measure to create 'clarity' and the citizens were happy to trade yet another piece of their freedom for a sense of safety. A new contradicting rule, without any solidly funded base, would be introduced surely thereafter and the same spiel would be repeated.

If you were on our side, you would endorse any measure as your social position depended on it. People were 'free' to choose any opposing side, but that came with the carefully obscured cost of slowly fading out in society. A cunning personal tax system would increase their prices of goods and services. They would only get access to health care providers in another region. Travel would be restricted to predefined and inconvenient time slots. But most powerful of all was the public shaming. Any societal problem would be blamed on the 'free'.

We continuously monitored, influenced and managed the finest details of the moral fiber of society. As the people became increasingly aware, it was always going to be in their benefit to live life on the system side of society. This way, we had structurally established support for our regime, with me as the lauded leader.

Only very few people will ever know the bliss of

getting everything done the way you want. And surprisingly, only a very few people were required to implement our plan. Others, unbeknownst to themselves, would tirelessly carry it out for us. And I was about to have all that.

13

It must have been quite a picture. Me, the president, with a paper bag over his head sitting on a chair. The only word I heard was “Wait!”. What was I waiting for? Waiting for my verdict? Waiting for what is going to happen next? Waiting. Waiting.

I listened very carefully if I heard other noises in the room. Nothing. Maybe I am alone again? I tried to stand up, but two strong hands immediately pushed me back into the chair. I was still being guarded. Silence again.

I tried to calm myself. There was nothing else I could do then to sit patiently and passively. As I forced myself into a more relaxed pose, I became more aware of my other senses.

It is said blind people have improved hearing and smelling. When you are deprived of many of your senses, the senses you still have left are intensified. I couldn't see anything, but I could smell this paper bag had been used before. The smell was unmistakably from a fast food chain. It seemed my hosts were not

very well prepared for my involuntary stay. Of all the possibilities they had, why did they use this McDonald's takeout bag? As if they knew I detested that poignantly penetrating smell of their hamburgers and fries.

14

I can't recall clearly anymore what happened at the press conference. Elisa had disappeared. The impostor reporter just sitting there. Like a deer I was caught in her head lights and couldn't move. Normally I was quick in dealing with difficult questions. I would usually just laugh it away. Or sometimes I would reply with a rhetorical philosophical question that did not make any sense at all. It resembled the mystical wisdom of a sage. Much to my enjoyment, it was most effective in leaving the reporter puzzled and quiet for a good few weeks. Occasionally, I would lie as well. If that backfired and it sometimes did, Elisa and her team would work wonders to have the creases neatly ironed out in the controlled media.

But not this time. I could utter nothing more than "ehhh. Well...". Seconds seemed ages. Suddenly the young woman took her eyes of me. I was released for now. She grabbed her phone and looked at the screen. She immediately stood up and left the room. Then, via the main door, several masked men in army gear rushed inside and ran toward me. This was not the kind of rescue team I was expecting. And it wasn't. The first

soldier grabbed me from behind. The second one put some cloth on my nose and mouth. A strong chemical odor. And from there... ..I can't remember well. My legs became fluid and couldn't support me anymore. The lights became blurry. I heard faint noises in slow motion. And then... nothing.

15

Finally... footsteps. They are getting nearer. The agonizing waiting was ending. Was this going to be my moment of truth? Would I finally hear who was keeping me imprisoned? I re-positioned myself on the chair and sat up straight. A technique Elisa had taught me. It shows confidence and poise, two traits I certainly wasn't in possession of at that moment. However, even if the possibilities of any negotiation with my unknown captors were very bleak, I wanted to do anything I could think of to improve my situation.

By the sound of the walking shoes I concluded only one person was coming in my direction. Was this their leader? I felt someone was looking at me.

“Hugo...”. A shiver went through my spine. My goodness! I recognized this voice. I hadn't heard it for a long time, but I could not be mistaken. It sounded agitated, angry and aggressive, quite different from how I remembered. But I definitely knew to whom these vocal chords belonged to. It was the last person I expected to hear in this bizarre setting. And yet, she unmistakably was standing very close to me.

16

I could not think of any response and thought it would be better to keep my mouth shut. I was embracing myself for more nasty surprises to come.

“Remove the bag.” My eyes had to get used to the light, but I was looking straight at a pair of high heels. As I moved upwards, I saw the red silk skirt she always wore. And yes, the familiar white blouse, with the top button loose, revealing the large cleavage that had seduced me so many times in the past. This is how I remembered Susan. But her face was different. She had a bewildered look. Her hair had gray streaks. Her fiery red eyes spat vile in my direction.

“Who is she?” she fulminated. It was so strange to see her. She had never raised her voice against me. Here was the person whom I had been married to for years. I thought I knew her behavior quite well. Perhaps that is why I got bored with her. But this was a different woman altogether.

“Hello, my name is Pia Fraus”. This was how the young reporter introduced herself there in the back of the press conference room. Her curly half long brown hair danced and bounced on her shoulder when she spoke. Her body and posture gave the impression of a weak woman, but her determined face showed a thirst for blood I had never seen before.

Pia Fraus. In the brief pause between her first sentence and the second, I contemplated on her unusual name. Was she from Germany? Still, I had heard that name a long time ago. Then suddenly I recalled where I had heard it before! It was during my law studies. That wasn't a real name at all. That was an expression in Latin. Pia Fraus literally means a well-intentioned deceit. A fraud contrived and executed to accomplish some good end. She had just confirmed she was not who she was pretending to be.

“Mister President”. Another brief moment of silence followed, a very long second she took deliberately to attract all the attention in the room to her. I instinctively felt something was wrong. I braced myself to be on the

receiving side of criticism. Normally I wouldn't worry about such questioning, but this time I knew I had to keep all my senses razor sharp.

18

“Who is she?” shouted Susan again. I immediately realized Susan had found out about my secret affair with Elisa. I was always afraid this moment would come one day, but I never expected it to be in these abnormal circumstances. Which wife in an already burned-out relationship kidnaps her own husband to interrogate him about an affair? Couldn’t we just talk about this like adults? And the timing was so wrong. The nation must have been in utter state of rebellion and here was Susan prioritizing a futility. We both knew our marriage had stranded a long time ago and now just served to provide us with perks and privileges. This was a matter for two divorce lawyers who should arrive at a settlement. Any settlement. I didn’t care.

I did not dare to look her into the eyes. I let my neck hang loose and focused on the concrete floor. “It was Elisa.”, I confessed. I knew Susan had met Elisa several times, but they never talked to each other. In Susan’s perception, Elisa should have just been someone I worked with, just like the others at the time. Clearly, I had not been careful enough recently. The preparation for the Plan had taken so much of my attention already.

Perhaps someone saw us together at the reception of the hotel.

Slowly I lifted my head to look at Susan. I would soon find out how my wife knew I had not been loyal to her.

“Elisa!?” Susan furiously raised her arms above her head. She was desperate. Did she still have so many feelings for me? I could understand the confusion or frustration. In many perspectives, Elisa was not an upgrade to Susan. She did not have the stunning physique of Susan. Elisa also lacked the sweetness and attentiveness. Susan was the light of life. Or, at least that was who she used to be. Elisa had nothing of that at all. But she did have a mystical spell of attraction over her, something I just couldn’t explain other than that it aroused me intensely, both sexually and intellectually.

19

Susan spat in my face. “You sad, miserable piece of ...” Susan stopped herself, although I saw it cost her a lot of effort. I sank further into the chair and was feeling more guilty by the second. Perhaps I had always only considered the affair from my perspective. I did not expect her outburst and it pained me to see her in such agony. She smothered a big sigh. With that, she had recharged her fury and continued her avalanche.

“Are you blind? I don’t care about Elisa! I don’t care about your pathetic adventures with her! Let me tell you something that might surprise you: I knew her before you had even met her. It was me who set you up with her. She is working for me. Yes, I am paying her!”.

At that point, the world around me started spinning. What had Susan just said? I just looked at her, still in bewilderment and couldn’t utter a reply. Elisa, working for Susan?

A thought rushed through my mind. If that were the case, where did that put me? I did not have time to contemplate as my wife continued her rampage. Susan

fumed, wildly shook her head and charged at me again.

“Do you understand at all what is happening? The entire country is in revolution! We trained you so well. And then you screw up!”

20

When I was young, I never saw myself as a leader. I usually let the others in the group decide what to do and where to play. I diligently followed the instructions of the teachers. Although my grades were above average, they were far from impressive. I tried my best, but I just wasn't good enough. It frustrated me deeply. It seemed the classmates who scored high grades were not even putting in much effort. I found that unfair. For a while I spread lies by accusing them of cheating. I regarded my action as fully justifiable, as it would bring more equality into the class room, and therefore, raise my intellectual status. But no one believed me. It frustrated me to the point of anger. Yes, of course, it was a lie. But what if it wasn't? They would not have listened to me either.

It wasn't until university that I became interested in finding out how to influence others. I read the classic works from the experts from the past, such as Dale Carnegie, Gustav le Bon and Edward Bernays. I also became member of a debating club and followed some classes in Writing and Rhetoric. I became not only apt in applying the techniques, I also was quick to detect

the tactics of my opponents. I would win debating contests by mastering the technicalities, never by my own conviction or passion. It always felt very mechanic to me. I was simply executing what I was told. And perhaps that was the very and only reason why they scouted me for their mysterious organization.

21

I was lost for words. What was Susan talking about? They trained me? Who is they? What is happening? Susan turned around to grab something from her briefcase.

As my eyes got used to the light in the room, I looked behind her. The woolly carpet was off white and looked quite new. I noticed the mint green flowery wall paper. There was a familiar looking Bordeaux colored sofa and above it hang a large wedding picture. It featured a man in a tuxedo with a black felt top hat and a beautiful woman in a lavender colored long dress, holding a bouquet of red roses in between them. A shiver went through my spine as it dawned on me. I knew that couple very well. The bride was Susan, and the groom was none other than me. I am in my own living room!

The move into this mansion coincided with my inauguration as president. Since I have been working around the clock and have spent very little time in our abode. The first few weeks Susan would call me to discuss what furniture would suit our house best. I did

not have any opinion and frankly, I did not have any interest either. I was too busy with preparing the big plan. I gave her carte blanche: “You know what fits best, Susan. Money is not an issue, go for it!”. I followed it with a quick “Love you” before I hang up.

“We are impressed with your debating skills.” An elderly man had approached me after the final debating contest. I was very upset as I had just lost against my opponent. The winner was able to involve the crowd, drawing them passionately into the picture he was creating with his softly spoken words. Although it pained me, I had to admit he was the rightful person to have his name engraved into the university’s debating cup.

The old man had a wrinkled face and was leaning on his walking cane, but his military styled short gray hair revealed he was far from being a frail old grandfather. He grabbed my hand firmly and shook it. As I was still processing my loss, the man briefly turned his face toward the winner and then back to me. “Never mind him. You are the real winner this afternoon.” “Why is that?” I responded befuddled. He looked deep into my eyes. “Because it is you and not him who I am inviting to the Club”, he grimaced.

“Susan, please calm down. What are you talking about?” She did not respond and looked at the papers in her hand. I realized I had to step up my game now. Susan was hysterical. I did not understand anything of what she accused me of. Now I needed to overrule her and get back in control. After all, I was still her husband.

“Stop it now Susan. Calm down and listen to me!” As I stood up from the chair, she swung her arm and lashed the back of her hand right into my face. The ruby diamond of her wedding ring had cut open my face. I tried to defend myself after the fact and pulled my fists to my head, one higher than the other. It was something I had seen boxers do. It could have looked impressive, but I was immediately pushed back into the chair by the same unknown hands. This time they would remain firmly on my shoulders. I had forgotten there was someone else in the room who was guarding me.

“I am going to ask you one more time. Who is Pia Fraus?”. She had stepped towards me and her face was just a few nose lengths away from me. The last time our

lips were so close together was already several years ago. I felt a small warm stream of blood finding its way via my cheek to my chin.

“I have no idea who she is! Honestly!” She slapped me hard in the face again, this time on the other side. A few blood drops swung into the air and flew right onto her skirt where they immediately disappeared.

She turned around and grabbed the papers again. It looked like she needed reading glasses as she had to adjust the distance of the document before reading it out loud.

“Dear Pia, yes please come and attend the conference. If my security staff refuses you access, you can simply show them this e-mail. Sincerely, Hugo”

I had never before heard the existence of *The Club*. The old man spoke with softly but firmly: “Young man, here is an invitation for tonight to the most exclusive society you will come across in your life. You will only get one chance to attend and that chance is now. I promise you you will not regret it. It will positively impact the rest of your life. Make sure you are there. Here are the details”. He placed a small card in my hand and then shook my hand. He grabbed my hand in the most unusual way. In his grip, he placed his index finger and middle finger close to his thumb, resulting in a gap with the other two fingers, which he placed around my wrist on the other side. He gave me a final look and then turned around and walked off. I put the address card in the pocket of my suit and returned to talk to the other contenders. I tried to mingle into the going conversation, but my mind kept wandering off. Who was this man? Should I go to some secret meeting where I do not know anyone?

That evening, the taxi had dropped me off in an empty street and I found myself standing in front of a large dark oak door. There was no light coming through

the windows and I couldn't see a sign on the door either. The quietness completed the eerie atmosphere.

As I reached out to ring the door bell, I heard the sound of several locks. The door slowly opened and I was welcomed by the old man, without his cane this time. "Glad you came. And right on time. I was expecting you. My name is Frederick." Again he shook my hand in that same unusual way and a custom of which I only much later would learn the meaning of.

“I never wrote that e-mail! That is absolutely false. I do not know who she is! What is going on here?” I uttered. Susan was quiet but I could see she did not believe me. What was going to happen to me? I saw she despised me, she hated me. This was not the Susan I married. It looked like she was possessed.

“I do not know what you are up to, but let me make this extremely clear to you. You started this mess, I am going to make you clean it up. You are going to exactly as we tell you and you better stick to every little detail of it, or else...” My eyes were wide open. I did not have the faintest idea what she was talking about, but I knew this was not going to end well for me.

“Susan!” a voice coming from the kitchen shouted and interrupted the person who used to be my wife. “We have to leave now! Our location is compromised.” The voice. I wasn’t sure, but it sounded familiar. Was it my press coordinator? “They found us and are coming for us right now! We have very little time!” Susan was desperate. It was clear everything she had worked for for so long collapsed and I did not have the faintest idea

what it was. Her eyes rolled. She took a deep breath and whispered “Okay. Let’s go.”

“What about him?” I wasn’t until I heard this deep male voice next to me that I dared to turn my head and look who my guard was. A short man, muscular man. Bald and a tattoo on his right arm. A face that had not smiled for decades. Although he wasn’t wearing his usual outfit, I immediately recognized him. This was Bertrand, the guy we hired to do maintenance in and around the house soon after we moved in. I always wondered why he spoke so eloquently. Now I knew he also was not who he pretended to be.

Susan already made her way into the hall way. She turned around and gave me a final look. “He is a bloody liability. Finish him off. We don’t need him anymore”.

I was shocked. This was the end. My end. This was going to be my final hour. Bertrand had grabbed me from behind. With his strong arms, he put me into a head lock. I tried to move and twist my neck to escape, but it was in vain. I fiercely try to hit him from behind with my arms, but it had no effect on him. I desperately gasped for air.

Then, all of a sudden, he let go off me. “No, we might need him. Whoever they are, whatever they want, he might give us some negotiation power.”

“He is useless. We know it. They know it. Kill him!” Bertrand hesitated. “Susan, you know I am a former SAS officer. I have been dropped in many dire situations. I could always get out because of the leverage I created over my adversaries. We need him, whether we like it or not!”

“This stupid conversation is a liability! Time is ticking! Do what I tell you!” Bertrand raised his voice. “Susan, stop it. I have the experience!” Their discussion heated up and while they were shouting at each other, I reckoned this was my only chance to escape.

I quickly stood up and ran to the door as fast as I could. “GRAB HIM!!” Susan shouted hysterically. Bertrand chased me. Before I reached the door, I felt a heavy blow on the back of my head. Time went into slow motion from there. I could not run any further. My knees gave in. The room started spinning. Dark patches started to appear in my vision. And more darkness. And then.... nothing.

26

I followed Frederick through the hall way and we entered a large old fashioned meeting room. The eclectic group of people, mainly old men and seemingly from a walks of life, did not pay particular attention to the stranger who had just entered. I assumed they regularly had guests. Frederick excused himself and indicated he had to go back to the door. I felt uneasy with the entire setting. Why was I here? What is this about? But the questions and doubts would soon vanish into the background of my mind.

It was there where I met her for the first time. She was dressed as a librarian, serious looking and distant. It was as if she had been waiting for me. When I scanned the room, our eyes briefly met, which triggered her to step forward to approach me. In her walk she simultaneously took off her big glasses and untied her hair by removing the pins that had kept her beautiful long manes in a bun on her head. She made one sweeping movement with her her head so that her hair would spread like a wave. Then there was her big radiant smile. The firm breasts, trapped in a purposely slightly too tight blouse.

“Hi there handsome, my name is Susan.” she said self-assured.

My head was pounding. I felt awful. Despite the pain, I understood I was lucky. I was still alive. They did not kill me. They did not take me hostage either. I had no idea what happened. My aching body revealed the struggle I had been in. As I slowly opened my eyes, I saw I was back in my cell again. At least now I was aware I was in my own house, although I did not recall we had a small room that could function as a prison cell.

“Hey, you okay?” I heard a soft voice with a slight Spanish accent. Still hazy and confused, I was frightened. Was this a hallucination? So many things have happened in such a short time. My entire world is upside down. I do not know anymore who I am. Am I getting insane? Is this all a very bad dream?

“You awake?” I was definitely not alone in my cell. I turned around and saw a man sitting on the floor, cross-legged. He smiled at me. He had a Mediterranean look and was wearing a baseball cap and a worn-out training suite. He was not shaven, but he did not seem to have a lot of beard growth either. His face was worn

with tiny blue and red veins around his nose and jaws, hinting at an alcoholic past.

The pain in my head was terrible and I did not have the energy to speak or talk. My life was in shatters and I had no idea of what was happening anymore. And now again, a new surprise was lining up in the shape of an unwanted visitor in my cell. A flurry of common sense questioned my thinking. How can I say my cell? I don't belong here.

“Hello, my name is Carlos”. His smile widened, not bothered by my worried look. Then he turned his head to look at the door. “At least, that is how they call me nowadays.”

28

Susan and I exchanged some pleasantries. I had no idea what to expect of this old men's club, but felt assured I could use Susan as my guide throughout the evening. It was difficult to have a good conversation, but Susan showed an interest in me I had never experienced before, not even from my own mother. I cautiously answered her intriguing questions, to which she promptly responded along with showing her beautiful smile. I felt as if I did not have to pretend with her. I could let my guard down a little.

Frederick suddenly appeared, holding a wooden tray with two cocktails. "It is so important young people like yourselves are part of the Club. Enjoy!" The cocktail was served in a glass skull holding a dark liquid. I smelled it, but could not recognize the flavors. Susan smiled: "Hey, it is okay. They have their own odd recipes here. Lovely meeting you, Hugo!" She raised her glass. I followed and we both drank. Much to my surprise, she finished her drink completely. I assumed this was the custom with this cocktail and did the same. It was a strange taste. I did not resemble any alcoholic beverage I ever tried. It must have been quite potent, as

my mind started spinning a bit. I tried to recollect myself. I did not want to embarrass my conversation partner. We continued talking, as I was trying to keep myself afloat in her blue eyes.

Some bizarre things happened that evening at The Club. At a certain point the lights in the room were switched off. It took my eyes a while to adjust to the darkness and then I saw several candle lights that seemed to come floating into the room. Upon closer look I saw the candles were carried by several men. They moved slowly and with every step chanted the same phrase in a language I did not know. It sounded ominous. I noticed in the faint light that these men were dressed in black monk's robes. They placed the candles on the floor, creating a mysterious shape.

It felt too strange and scary for me and I would have certainly walked out of the venue, were it not for being so mesmerized by the young beautiful lady that stood by my side. She drew all my mental attention and I let her. Although I might have been staring at the mysterious dark theater play that was just happening right in front of my eyes, but my mind was not registering much. I just wanted to know more about her. I wanted to be with her. I never felt such a strong and even unavoidable desire for anyone ever before.

From there on I only have vague memories of the rest of the evening. It became harder and harder to

concentrate. I somehow have lost the chronological order.

The only recollection I have is that I saw a hoodwinked person lying flat on the floor in the middle of the room, surrounded by the candles. The strange thing is, I remember him as if I were floating above him. I know I was standing next to Susan, but in my memory I only recall viewing the scene from the ceiling, straight above this body. The person was being sacrificed. He was dying. The chanting monks walked in circles around him. Their voices became louder every verse. I felt strongly connected to that man. He was struggling for his life, but apparently unable to do anything about it. From there, I do not recall how it proceeded.

I regain again my memory of that evening with the moment Susan touched my hand. We were sitting at a small table in the corner of the room. Susan whispered: "It is all fun and games. I know it is a bit weird, but is an important tradition for them. Don't seek too much behind it." I was feeling drowsy and nodded to please her. She noticed my mental absence and said with tantalizing voice: "You know, let's go somewhere else for a drink to really get to know each other?" Although there was no need to convince me, after she spoke, her lips made the most subtle movement towards me, indicating she was not only interested in talking.

29

I pulled the blanket over my sore head and rolled over in the bunk bed so my back would be facing him. Whomever this person was, I was not in the mood to talk. “Is okay man. Take a rest”. I did not respond. I was relieved I was no longer alone, but I first wanted to understand what was happening in my life.

The conference. Elisa. Where is she? Susan, who is she? What did she mean? It was too much for my mind to process. This awful dream certainly had given me real life headaches and pains.

I used to be in full control. I thrived by the power I felt. Being the most important person in the country, I could do whatever I wanted. And, most importantly, no one would be in a position to harm me ever again. The pain from the past would be safely buried under all my successes and slowly fade out of my memories. I dedicated my life to executing The Plan, as if my life depended on it.

As an adolescent, I had found great encouragement in reading the biographies of great leaders, dictators and

people in power. The promising thing I noticed and what drove me was that all of these leaders were not particularly powerful as an individual. People always tend to think of a pyramid structure and, according to Darwin's theories, the most powerful person ultimately ends up reigning at the top. The reality was quite different. If you decide you want to be on top, the actual pyramid you need to climb is very small. You just need to be smart about it. You first need to study the laws of lies and deceit. Then you find a small number of powerful people. Whether they got into that position pure on merit or on deceit is irrelevant. Some of these leaders might see through your game, but as long as you provide more incentives and promises than they can themselves, you win them for you and inherit their pyramid structure. So in the end, for me, it was a matter of carefully selecting the right people and win them over by feeding them with the right lies. And since I had been forced to distort the truth from childhood on for my own protection, it was almost an automatic process for me.

30

Very soon after her proposal, we left The Club together. We did not say goodbye to the others. That was not needed, Susan assured me. The taxi, that was conveniently already waiting when we walked out of the door, drove for a short fifteen minutes and dropped us off at her house. She was living on the top floor of a luxury apartment building. She gave a brief tour and then led me to the balcony overlooking the entire city. “Let me get us some drinks”. She excused herself and I was admiring the magnificent view. All these people live there and I am standing above all of them. For a moment my excitement of meeting Susan was replaced by the even more addictive feeling of ultimate power.

“Do you like merlot?” Her two hands were carefully holding a beautiful Saint-Émilion Grand Cru. It couldn’t have been more perfect, Susan had picked my favorite wine.

We talked for hours and hours. It was like we knew each other for a long time. There were so many similarities between us. It felt unreal. We have been to the same places, but somehow we never met. I felt

comfortable with her, but also felt I had to be alert and aware as well. I tried to discard that feeling. It was just a remnant of my childhood and I had to stay rational.

Here was a beautiful woman with a large network of influential people. With her looks and demeanor she could easily accomplish many things. As time would confirm, I reckoned correctly she would be instrumental in achieving my ambitions. Being with her would be a very smart investment which would yield high returns. She was the perfect partner and I did not even need to construct a narrative to win her over. Not surprisingly, our relationship began that very next morning.

31

“Hey man, I am going to meditate now, but if you want to talk, I am here”. My back was still facing him and I did not respond. Instead, I decided to wait for a while. Now that he had his eyes closed, I felt comfortable to observe my cell mate closer.

I tried not to make noise as I turned around. Carlos just sat there, his senses seemingly switched off. He looked like he lived on the street. Why would they put me in the same room with this vagrant? What on earth did he have to do in this bizarre saga I was experiencing?

My neck and throat were hurting me. I could only in and exhale with shallow breaths and that forced me to remain calm. As I examined Carlos’ face, I noticed the corners of his mouth moved slightly and a subtle smile appeared.

Then he opened his eyes wide. “Hey man, you okay?” I wiggled my head a bit in response, but wasn’t sure if I communicated a yes or a no. It didn’t matter much anyhow. “I am Carlos”. I tried to look irritated at

him, but wasn't sure it came across. "I know, you already told me." I mumbled. The headache was pounding me. Carlos seemed to be a person who needed to talk for the sake of talking and in the process would not convey any interesting information. I had to control the situation and keep it very short and simple. "I will tell you when it is time to talk." This would give my cell mate a clear message of who was in charge here, even in this small confined micro space. I turned around and pretended to sleep.

32

A few months after our wedding day, I became more and more occupied with my work. Susan had always been busy anyhow, so we started to see each other less and less. Our conversations over the phone were concentrated on practical or menial matters. It started to irritate me, as it distracted me from the important work I was doing for the party. Susan was very accommodating and understood the importance of my ambition. In fact, it was she who suggested I would rise to the top of the pyramid of power in our country. And she knew the right influential people who could make that happen for me.

It was therefore not a surprise for me when she announced at the end of another tedious phone call she was going to hire a person to help her out. A handyman who could repair things in and around the house, who would maintenance and take care of the garden. I was happy with that news. She would not feel alone and probably feel safe with a trustworthy person around.

I met Bertrand only a couple of times. A calm person with a poised personality. He did not speak

much, but when he did you would immediately notice the profound articulateness in his verbal expression. You could easily mistake him for a rather cultured, academic person. But that was just his voice.

His nose was a bit deformed, probably been broken before, and above his left eye he carried a large scar. He must have been in bar fights. The tattoo on his arm further offset any hints of sophistication. The design featured an devilish looking animal with below a banner with a couple of letters. To me, Bertrand was just the plain maintenance man who Susan hired, good at his work and nothing more.

But now I knew he worked together with Susan in some sinister conspiracy. They used me, but I could not understand for what. I had been diligently working with Elisa and the team. The Plan was well thought out and perfectly executed. My speech would seal the fate of the nation. And then, everything collapsed. People were not who they pretended to be.

33

I had no idea of time, but it felt like an entire hour had passed since I forbade Carlos to talk. I had contemplated on everything that happened but could not comprehend anything. I kept going in circles in my mind and it was driving me to despair.

I stretched my back and slowly turned my face towards Carlos. I recalled my lessons in psychological conversations, I scraped my voice and said in slight irritated voice “Okay. Tell me, why are you here? Briefly.”

Carlos’ face radiated. I had given him the green light to talk and he sure was going to take advantage of it. “Oh man, so happy you are feeling better. It is weird isn’t it? The two of us. Here in this room. Who would have thought?”

I regretted giving him the opportunity to speak. He clearly had not registered I instructed him to keep it short. Carlos happily continued. He might as well continued talking if I had simply walked out of the cell. Only if that were possible.

Carlos was not worried at all about talking in a concise or structured way. “This place is good for meditation, man. So many cool new insights. You should try it. Is the bed comfortable? Carlos would like to try. But hey, you need it man. Carlos is happy now with being here. So no worries man. Carlos didn’t bring anything. You didn’t either, did you? Travel light, you are a smart man”. Despite his worn out face, I was dealing with a child here. He did not have the faintest idea he was talking to the president. I doubted if he even knew what a president was. Whatever was going to happen next, if anything, I figured I had to find a use for Carlos as soon as possible. Meanwhile, Carlos kept talking non-stop.

My memories of my one and only visit to The Club are primarily centered around meeting Susan. The bizarre events are nothing but a faint reminiscence. Susan and I did barely ever talk about The Club. I sometimes asked her what The Club was about and how she became involved. She always eschewed the question. “Hugo, I came there to meet the love of my life. I happily succeeded and now I do not need them anymore!” she laughed and grabbed my hand. Her answer annoyed me, but her smile made up for it.

I never knew if she was still a member and if she still went to those meetings. She never spoke about it. In the first years of our marriage I was just very happy to be with her. She supported me in my efforts of climbing on the political ladder. It surprised me how many influential people she knew. When I queried her about it, she usually answered that this was a person she met in the past. “From university or the Club or so. I actually can’t remember. What is more important now is what he can do for you!”

And she was right. Susan had introduced me to so

many powerful and influential people, one after the other, as if she followed a schedule. And I was able to win them for me, quite easily. Sometimes I even felt it went too easy, as if the person had already decided to support me before the meeting.

The last introduction Susan had arranged for me was with the then president. On this memorable day, I was picked up by a state limousine and driven to a remote villa in the forest. It was there when he and I had our first private conversation.

It was during this meeting he confided the contours of The Plan to me. It was a daunting and bold project to establish absolute power. I was not sure how he could possibly pull that off. People would never accept that. "But how will you do that?" I asked him. His response was something I could have only dreamed of. It fulfilled all my ambitions and would immediately gratify all my efforts and justify the sacrifices I had made.

“How will we do it you ask. Great question. And I will be honest, Hugo. The Plan cannot be done.” The president ignored my bewildered expression. “That is to say, not with the current administration. In order to get here, we had to make so many concessions and covert deals. We are so close, yet the entire plan is a house built of cards. That was the only way we could do it. But right now, any step further will for sure collapse everything we have built and destroy the progress with have made so far.”

The president was a man already in his seventies. A popular leader when he started, his charismatic appeal was rapidly eroding. He had lost many political allies. The word on the street was he started to suffer from dementia. In the last year he had introduced many conflicting laws that did not seem to make much sense. But here I was with a man who was razor sharp in his thinking and speech.

“And we knew that right from the beginning.” My befuddled face seemed to entertain him. “And that ... is precisely the reason, Hugo...”. He pointed his finger at

me and then himself. "... the reason you and I have this conversation." The president was a master in building up suspense. We had both learned the skill of persuasive speaking, but this man had so many more years of experience that even I was caught into it.

"Therefore, to fully implement The Plan, we do not only need to restore the credibility with our adversaries, but also with our allies. Both have been criticizing us heavily, and rightly so." He paused for a while and then took a deep breath. "Well that is, when you are not aware of The Plan of course." A deliberate yet delicate smile appeared on his face as his eyes pried into mine.

36

“We have almost gone beyond the threshold. There is only one way to proceed. And we have only one chance. It needs to be perfect or all is lost.” His words sounded very severe and I felt the tension rising, although I could still not guess what that crucial next step possibly could be.

“You can clearly see where I am going with this, Hugo. Correct?” I bravely nodded, hoping he would not query me. Any attempt from me to dodge his question would miserably fail, as I was facing a veteran in conversation techniques.

“Exactly Hugo. That is precisely why you and I are here.” He pointed at me. “You understand it!” I wasn’t sure anymore if he was being genuine. My mind was too occupied with desperately crafting an evasive answer if he actually asked me what it was I understood.

He grabbed my shoulders firmly with both hands. He repeated the same words but in a different tone. “You UNDERSTAND it”. I could see and even sense

the untamed vitality and radiant vibrancy of a man others deemed unfit for office. They were so wrong. He looked so intensely at me, I started feeling nauseous. Moments passed and I could not think what would happen if I disappointed him by not understanding what he was talking about.

“And that is why, Hugo...” I was instantly relieved of my stress. I was not going to be questioned.

37

Carlos did not notice I was getting very agitated. I shouted “Stop it!” at him, but Carlos did not hear me and continued his senseless utterance. I stood up and shouted “STOP IT!” This did made an impression on him. “Okay man. Sorry.” I relished the return of the silence, but it was only for brief moment. “Really sorry, man. Carlos knows he talks too much. People always say ...”. I raised my hand as if I were to hit him and yelled “Shut up!”. This finally muted Carlos.

I had no idea what I would do next. The only thing I wanted was to get out of this prison cell. I needed to find a way to use Carlos for this. The perfect useful idiot. He had yielded to my power and I needed to further extend my control over him.

“I am going to stand on your shoulders so I can look out of the window”. Carlos stood up immediately and got ready. He clearly felt this was an opportunity to regain my trust. I remembered I was not going to give him any compliments or thank you’s. This way I could further increase the psychological value of these meaningless words and his desire to hear them from

me.

I balanced carefully on his shoulders in order not to fall but at the same time I wanted to feel as heavy as possible to make him physically understand I was his superior. I looked out of the window. I recognized the garden and finally could position better where I was in my own house. The green pasture, the flowers and perfectly trimmed bushes, it seemed so tranquil and inviting. I enjoyed the view so much. The illusory visual escape sparked glimpses of hope my personal world had not completely collapsed.

38

“That is why...” The president repeated himself. He took a deep breath and continued: “We have decided you become the new president. You are the perfect man. You will gain so much power. You will be on top of the pyramid. All your hard work, all the arduous effort you put in all these years. Finally rewarded. Finally you achieve your goal of ultimate power. How does that sound to you, my dear Hugo?”

I was astonished. The most powerful man in the country wielding over all of his power to me. Indeed this is what I wanted. But I did not expect it to be presented to me like this. This was the opportunity of a life time. I was extremely happy, excited and also relieved. Of course I wanted this and I eagerly replied “Wow, that would be ...”.

I stopped myself for a split second, as I remembered never to fully show your emotions. That is a sign of weakness. I couldn't afford to run the risk of showing how desperate I have been for all these years. All this time I felt like an impostor. All my tricks, my lies and deceit brought me to this point. But it was still a very

unstable house of cards. With the position of president, I no longer had to lie. What a relief that would be. People would just bend and yield to my supreme power and do whatever I wanted them to do.

With my desired role so near in sight, I had to remain vigilant. Therefore, now more moderate, I continued with a slightly deeper voice: “That would indeed be wonderful.” I was hoping the improvised maturity would cancel out the silly boyish enthusiasm I displayed a moment earlier. Fortunately, the president did not seem to have noticed.

39

I must have been blissfully staring out of the window for several minutes when I felt my legs shaking. Carlos had started trembling. He had difficulties carrying my entire weight on his shoulders for such prolonged time. “Keep still” I shouted at him. I tried to put extra pressure on his shoulders. You can always push the limits of others when you are in a position of power. It worked. Carlos re-positioned himself and did no longer shake.

I noticed there were no cars parked outside, which surprised me. I had expected several vehicles, but then I remembered Susan and Bertrand intended to leave immediately before Bertrand hit me and I lost my consciousness. “But if they are gone, who was still here guarding us?” I pondered.

I looked at the small crack in the window. There was no possibility of escaping through the small opening, but irrationality took over and I started slamming the window with my fist. Perhaps I wanted to smell the garden. Or it was a desperate attempt to demonstrate I was not going to be stopped by anyone. In the end it

didn't matter. I couldn't smash the glass.

I heard a muffled noise from under my feet. It was from Carlos, who was trying to cope with the pressure. He started trembling again. "Keep still!" I yelled again but it was too late. He could no longer uphold his shoulders and let go. My feet slipped away and as I sank, it seemed as if the window was propelled towards the sky.

I fell on my back. "You idiot!" I stood up and was determined to slap him. As I raised my hand, suddenly he grabbed my arm and twisted it. All of a sudden he was behind me and had locked my arm behind my back. Still with a Spanish accent, but now far more sophisticated Carlos said: "O my goodness. I really wanted to see it with my own eyes, because I didn't believe it. But now... oh yes, they were right. Absolutely right!"

Carlos continued: "Enough with this silly play. I think it is about time you and I have a proper conversation."

The president showed the transition plan. It was well worked out. Within a week I would take over. A fake scandal would leak to the press, leading to the forced resignation of the current president. Two days later I would come into the spotlights as the savior of the party. I did not need to prepare anything or be bothered by the details. His staff, soon to be my staff, had the scenario already written out and communicated to those who played a role in the transition. I imagined what a joy it would be to work with such professionals.

“Oh, and Hugo?” I looked at the president. “Of course you continue to execute The Plan, exactly as it mandates. I do not need to remind you of that.” He looked at me in a mysterious, slightly threatening way. Although I thought I knew everything about The Plan there was to know, it clearly felt like there was something of it I did not know or was not told about. He made it clear there was something about The Plan that was beyond my control and knowing. It raised my insecurity, but by thinking I would soon be The president, I soothed my fears and the thought disappeared again. “Of course!” I replied in an

attempted firm voice.

The president now laughed. He patted me on the shoulder and laughed even harder. It started to sound more sarcastic than joyful. “Excellent, my dear Hugo, that is just excellent!”

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Carlos pointed to the bed. “Sit there and I will sit on the floor again, just like how we started.” Reluctantly I followed the instruction and looked at him. He sat down, crossed his legs and placed his feet where his upper legs joined his torso. I had not seen such flexibility in a man before and wondered if I would even come close to what he just did. Carlos continued: “Close your eyes and take a deep breath. We are taking a journey inwards.”

I had no clue what he was on about, did he want me to meditate? He for sure was not who I thought he was. He was far more powerful, physically, but perhaps also mentally. I was resistant but still closed my eyes. I needed to be smart about how to handle him.

“Have you ever thought about the recurring events in your life?”

I did not respond, as I wasn't sure what to do. I did try to think about what he asked me, but couldn't come up with anything.

“Have you ever thought about why certain things keep happening in your life?”

Perhaps he was asking rhetorical questions. I decided not to answer. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't have known what to say.

“As an example, do you think what has happened to you recently is a coincidence?”

“Hugo? You can answer me if you want to.” A short burst of recent memories flashed through my mind. The conference. The abduction. Susan. I almost died. It was too much to comprehend. I resorted to a trusted response, the one that had always given me more time and possibilities in a conversation. I replied with a fairly honest: “I don't know.”

“I see Hugo. You say you don't know. Of course you do know. But you are not yet willing to admit it. Not to me, that is irrelevant. You are not ready to admit it to yourself.”

Indeed, the president was right. Within a week, everything unfolded as he had mentioned. It went so fast and a week later I found myself being inaugurated as the new president. As predicted, our allies, our enemies and the masses, everyone was welcoming the new face that was me.

In the next weeks, I just had to give inspiring speeches. They were carefully prepared by Elisa. I saw the lies and the contradictions. It was so obvious for someone in my position, but that didn't matter. As long as the others took the bait, it was working. And it did, they saw me as the person who was going to bring the change that was so desperately needed.

And that was true, based on the words I spoke. But based on the actions we took, we were never going to. The ultimate goal for us was to complete The Plan. I was going to be the one that finally put the masses at total submission to the government. They would be so deceived and programmed, they would do this out of their free will.

Existing legislature would quickly change, without any notice. Critics would be silenced by coercion, misinformation or any other method we deemed fit. That included that some people were blackmailed, suddenly disappeared, or were suicided.

And the beauty of it all, I was going to be the most powerful man in that government. I would be totally sovereign. No one could do me any harm. No one would contradict me. Finally I would have found peace.

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“Have you not noticed that in your life, nothing is what it seems?”

“What do you mean?” I replied to Carlos.

“Think about your wife. Was Susan who you thought she was? Or what about Elisa? Was she who you thought she was? The former president? Bertrand?”

I was silent. Carlos had caught me in an invisible web of truth. He knew everything about me and I knew nothing about him.

“And me, I am not even who you thought I was. What does that all tell you?”

It was painful to be confronted by reality. I had been betrayed by so many people. “It tells me people are not to be trusted.” I replied, trying to keep my emotions to a minimum.

“Indeed. But why do you think all these people have come on your path of life? Why is that you think?”

I was losing control over my emotions. My voice started trembling. “I don’t know. They used me... I feel... I feel abused.” By listening to my own words, I finally burst in tears. All the hard work, the sacrifices I took, was it all in vain?

Carlos let me sob for a while. It felt good to let the emotions out as they were blurring my rational thinking. As I regained control I continued talking to Carlos: “They pretended I was the king but they just played me as a dispensable pawn.”

“Ah, there is a chess player in you. But why do you even think you were a pawn? What makes you assume this was a chess game in the first place? Who would be the other player then?”

I had no idea anymore what Carlos was talking about. I let myself fall backwards in the bed, hoping I would sink into the mattress never to return again. Carlos wouldn’t let me and continued talking.

“Nothing is as it seems, Hugo.”

“Stop it! I don’t even know who you are!” I stared at the ceiling.

“In due time I will tell you who I am, although it is

not so relevant. I will tell you what has happened, so that will clarify some things for you. But the real work still has to start. And we need you for that.”

“We? Who the hell is we?” I became more desperate and angry. I knew I was giving my control away, as I had duly learned in the conversation manipulation classes I followed, but felt helpless against him anyway.

“Nothing is as it seems, Hugo. And there is one more person who is not who he seems.”

I got frightened. About all the people in my life have betrayed me and here was Carlos telling me there was one more. Who could that be? I was thinking about my parents. Have they lied to me all this time as well?

I grew up as the only child of parents who didn't love each other. They did not have anything in common. There were no photos of their wedding in the house, nothing even remotely hinted to a better past. I always wondered what it had been that attracted them to each other. I also didn't know why they stayed together. Whatever it was that kept continuing this failed marriage, it certainly had nothing to do with love. It was only till much later that I found out.

My mother was an academic who blindly focused on her career in the university. She was obsessed by becoming a professor in psychology. She tried to control all influencing factors which could help her obtain that goal. As a consequence, everything in our family life had to yield for her career desires. Her job was more important than my father, than me, our family and the household.

My father was a weak person. He always accommodated to his wife's commands. He worked as a part-time book keeper for the municipality. A mind numbing job as he once confided to me. But I

understood why he kept the job. It was his escape from her. Instead of standing up for himself, he needed an external mandate, his job, to allow him to temporarily escape the mental abuse from her.

I can't say my childhood was difficult. For a long time, I did not know any better. I only had one friend. His parents were constantly fighting with each other, so I considered myself somehow lucky with my family situation.

My parents hardly argued. Whenever there was a conflict, my mother would be quick to blame my father and he would be equally quick to accept his mistake. Truth did not matter. Mother was right, per definition.

I was fascinated in the way how my mother was able to manipulate my father. During dinner time, I was always quiet, closely observing the dynamic between my parents. The creativity with how my mother distorted the truth was nothing short of masterful. I would carefully analyze and dissect the things she said. It was never a flat out lie. It was a clever lie which always carried a few elements of truth in it. This way, she was able to covertly undermine his self confidence. By constantly reinvigorating his doubts, she was able to take over control of a situation she created herself. My father was unaware of being gaslighted by her. He was always in a reactive mode and couldn't step out of the

mental stranglehold she put him into.

For me, it was a fascinating display of the wicked versus the weak. I often spoke to my father encouraging him to stand up. “Don’t you see what she is doing?” But I did not do this out of love, empathy or fairness. I think I just wanted more spectacle. It was too easy for my mother. My father simply accepted everything and that annoyed me. It was like he wanted it this way.

But when my mother and I were alone in the house, she would be desperate. A caged lioness, she couldn’t do anything. She did not have my father to control him. She felt completely helpless, anxiously waiting for him to come home. And when that happened, my normal family life was instantly restored.

I learned a lot from my parents about relationships between people. I discovered the abuser and the abused are heavily dependent on each other, although they will vehemently deny it. The abuser needs the abused as much as the abused needs the abuser. Both my parents needed each other as it filled the void of not finding any meaning in their lives.

“Think about it. Who is not who he seems? You do not need to answer right away. Give it time and let it just sink in. Nothing is as it seems.” Carlos had a faint smile on his face.

I was quiet for a long time. In my mind I tried to recall all the people I worked with, but there were so many. Then I stopped thinking. The silence around me helped me to quiet my mind. I decided not to answer at all to Carlos and enjoy the bliss of stillness while it lasts. No more thoughts, no more fears.

After what felt like many long minutes, Carlos spoke again. “And that person, Hugo, is your very self. You have not met the real you. Although early in life, you were the same person. Now he is very different from who you are today. But this time, it is not he who betrayed you. You betrayed him.”

“You never paid any attention to him, while he was shouting for attention. You wanted to disconnect from the real you. But this betrayal comes with a high price. You attracted these deceitful people in your life,

because you were deceiving yourself by pretending not being you but someone else. And now your entire outside world has collapsed, I think it is a great time to get acquainted with him again.”

A long silence followed. I stared at the ceiling as I didn't want to face Carlos. It seemed he knew everything about me, more so than I did. What was I about to do know?

I only heard my own breathing. The quietness in the room calmed me down. I let my entire life pass by as in a movie. He was right. I had been lying all the time. But it was for a good cause. I would never be hurt again.

Suddenly Carlos laughed. He stood up. “Ha ha, indeed, nothing is as it seems. Let me show you. You thought we were locked in this room. Well, I am getting hungry, so let me get something to eat!” He walked to the door and simply opened it, walked through it and disappeared.

The door was not locked at all! I stood up and ran out of the room. Out of my confinement. Free again! The hall led to the kitchen, where I saw Carlos investigating the contents of the fridge. He heard me, but did not turn around. He asked: “So you thought you were imprisoned, but you were not. What are you going to do?”

I was not sure what to do. Should I just ran out? But what world would I step into? I still had so many questions. I needed Carlos to answer them.

“I think I will make a nice omelet. Interested in joining me?” I could not remember how long ago the last time was I ate and I certainly did not feel hungry, but decided it was probably best to eat something. And besides, I had to be with Carlos.

“Nice kitchen and utensils you have got here.” Carlos was trying to figure out how the stove worked. I realized I couldn’t help him as I had never cooked in my own kitchen all those years.

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As he whisked some eggs in a bowl, Carlos continued: “Who we are is irrelevant for the moment. But I can tell you we have been monitoring your every move. And with you I mean the plural you. We know everything about The Plan. We know every trick you have used to misled the entire population. And you were almost successful if it wasn’t for us.”

By now I realized nothing would surprise me anymore, yet the way Carlos spoke revealed I was in for another shock. “Yes, in a way, we were impressed. The Plan was so detailed. And that is where the biggest vulnerability was.”

“We believe in the sovereignty of the individual. Then, and only then, can the individual intrinsically understand, void of any dogma or coercion, that he or she is interconnected with the miracle of life. That we human beings depend on each other. That we need the connection and closeness of each other.”

“You had almost perfected the opposite. By instilling fear into the population, you were able to

easily roll out your totalitarian regime. You misled the citizens into believing they were dependent on one single solution provider for all problems in life. And, very skillfully, The Plan also created and provided the problems to the people.”

Whoever the group was that Carlos was representing, they were indeed completely aware of The Plan. Perhaps they understood it even more than I did. I always relished in the fact that I would be the person wielding all the power, but I had my own questions about The Plan. I didn’t write it. I didn’t even know who did.

“By using the most advanced technology, you were able to distort and censor the entire flow of information in society. Your propaganda was able to influence the masses. Yet, you did not foresee you had an Achilles Heel.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I started feeling more comfortable in having a dialogue.

“Look, we are a very small group of people. By trade we are information technologists, but by heart we are philosophers, activists, researchers or renegades. I wouldn’t know how to describe it any better. You have met Pia and myself. There are a few more, but that is not important. We are very aware of the great potential

that technology has to change the world. But that can be used in a good way or a bad way.”

“I agree with that.”

“And here is the thing is. We worked for your organization. We were invisible for you as we operated low in the hierarchy in the background. We were tasked to implement the technology as The Plan described, without knowing the details or its intention. We were able to monitor and track all communication in the country. Everything. Every phone call, every e-mail. We centrally stored every photo taken on any mobile phone and applied face recognition. We even read every encrypted message. We had access to every closed circuit security camera. Every door bell with a camera. And much more.”

So far, Carlos hadn't said anything I didn't know, although the sheer size of the operation did impress me. He continued: “Now this seems like harmless data collection, right?” I nodded.

“If you live by the law, you have nothing to hide. Your exact words, right Hugo?” I remembered saying that during my inauguration speech.

“Exactly. No effort to you, great contribution to all”, I replied with our slogan.

Carlos got excited explaining the work he was doing. “Our systems intercepted, interpreted and combined all the information. Then, our program looked up the psychological profile of the individual in the central database. This profile was carefully curated by years of automatically tracking behavior on the internet and listening in on conversations via mobile devices. Our artificial intelligence program would then alter the original communication in a tailor-made way, so the individual would best understand and remember it. This way, important information would be communicated in the best possible and effective way. This personalized communication would avoid misinterpretations due to emotions or personal biases of the individual. Society would be better off as technology would shield us from our own conflicting personal traits.”

I nodded. “And this was this reason I got on board: using technology to create a better world. It was therefore strange that from the start, our small team was not allowed to speak to the other technology suppliers. We weren’t even allowed to know who they were.

Everything was on a need-to-know basis. The pressure was very high and we had to deliver according to the tight deadlines. But technology decisions had to be made and our contact person in your organization was lacking in answering them. He often said he did not have the security clearance. Everything was compartmentalized. We didn't understand why everything was so secretive. The most worrying was that he did not grasp the technicalities of what we were doing. Every action we took had huge implications and he was not willing or able to make any decision."

Carlos sighed. "So we were stuck. We couldn't move forward while huge contractual penalties were waiting for us if we didn't deliver on time. Even if we were not to blame, we weren't very keen on a long legal battle with a behemoth like the government. We came up with an idea. Since all the systems were interlinked, we used that infrastructure in an attempt to signal the suppliers of the other systems. A bit like sending a message in a bottle. Luckily, the other suppliers picked up on that and responded. Soon we found out they were facing very similar issues."

"By cooperating, we are able to hack our way into the entire infrastructure. Mind you, we were all doing this with the idea of delivering the project on time for your organization. But the more we understood from the technical side, the less we understood of the purpose

of the project. So we were stuck again.

At a certain point, out of desperation, someone mentioned we should monitor you, so we could figure out what direction to take. Mind you, we were clearly instructed to exempt a number of people from tracking, including you. However, we saw no harm in doing so and honestly thought there was a remote chance it would really help us.”

Carlos look at me with a straight face. He was completely quiet and wanted to read my reaction. He must have sensed I was starting to feel nauseous. All kind of thoughts ran through my mind. I had a notion of where Carlos was going with his story. His group might have spied upon all my conversations! That means they know all my secrets.

I stammered “Seriously?” Carlos laughed out loud. “That is exactly what we said to each other all the time whenever we read a new communication from you! Can you imagine the things we discovered?”

I felt completely naked. This mysterious group of people knew everything about me and my life. Carlos continued: “What began as a harmless action quickly unfolded into an ever growing nightmare. We were not only able to retrieve the covert intention of The Plan and all its details, we immediately understood the grave consequences of it.”

While you thought you had all the power, it was actually us who you had all the power. And at first we didn't know what to do with it. We had heated debates on what action to take.”

“We felt very ashamed haven taking part in this. We also felt stupid for not having seen this at a much earlier stage. It was all happening in front of us and we were facilitating, yet we couldn't make the mental jump to see where this was going. And thanks to us going the extra mile to help you, our eyes were painfully opened.

“We considered destroying the entire infrastructure we had so diligently built. We were so furious we wanted to hit back but did not know what to do. We

needed a powerful method to undo the damage.

And to the rescue came... The Plan. Yes, The Plan itself. It contained all we needed. We just had to change the audience. Instead of manipulating the masses, we targeted everyone in your organization. Hence, we were quickly able to create an entirely artificial reality for all of you. We made you believe the Plan was implemented accordingly. The reality was very different.

To undo the dangers you had created, we quietly reversed all the actions we had taken. We used the same deep fake technology that had impersonated your opponents, but we used it on you. Yes Hugo, as a result, in the eyes of the people, you are the hero! Only few know that it is only the virtual you that is the hero. Since this was also in The Plan, you and your team wouldn't notice. That was the beauty of what we were doing. But we also knew that the image the public had of you is not who you really are. So we were forced to continue the false reality.”

“And, with all this power, we quickly became aware of the dangerous position we had moved ourselves in. None of us had interest in continuing having this power. We noticed how it quickly corrupts the wielders of it. It started to influence us too. Now that we had all this power, we also felt responsible for what to do next. Our primary motivation was to diffuse your danger. Now we

had to move forward.”

I listened attentively. What Carlos was telling me was something I could have never imagined. All the bizarre events of the recent past all started to make sense now. Although I still had so many questions, I had understood the gist of what happened.

“Just to illustrate the power we had, let me elaborate on a few things. While you were locked up here, we created fake news articles and sent fake messages to Susan and the others. We told them The Plan had leaked to the masses and they were furious. Riots had broken out and thousands of people were marching towards your house. Susan and companion ran away in sheer panic.

Then we sent another series of messages, basically telling them they were going to be ambushed. We told them several politicians were already brutally murdered. The fear ran so high in them, they decided to commit suicide. We had not foreseen this at all and it demonstrated again the power that was in our hands. And in reality, no one was out there to get them. All the citizens of this country were just minding their own business and feeling happy to finally have a good and trustworthy president.”

In a way, their suicide resolved a big part of the

problem. The evil was gone. Well almost gone, you were still around. But we are faced with a new issue. A moral dilemma.”

“What could that be?”

“We had no idea what to do next. Just like The Plan, we had created a fake reality. We would choose ours over yours of course, but it was still fake. We couldn’t continue it. Dropping the charade would create chaos in society. We needed to continue The Plan and use it to build a beautiful society and phase out The Plan and its systems. That requires strong and inspiring leadership.”

“None of us aspires to assume this leadership role. It was just by sheer luck we were put in a position to be able to thwart your devilish plot and, luckily, we succeeded. But that is all we could do. At the same time, we knew no one who could be the leader that society needs. Except...” Carlos paused. He contemplated for a long time. He had been quite animated in the way he told the story, but now I could see he was severely worried. He moved his head to the side, pondering what to say.

I was getting impatient. “Except what?”

“Well, then it dawned on us we actually did know a leader. It is a person that the people love. A great, honest, inspirational, trustworthy individual. A man who the people immediately accept as their leader.” Again Carlos paused. He looked away from me, scanning the room in search for an object to stare upon. He wasn’t comfortable continuing the conversation.

I tried being a patient listener and gave him some time, but he remained quiet. Finally I broke the silence with “Okay, who is it?”

Carlos sighed deeply. “Oh boy, you still don’t get it do you Hugo? You really don’t!” I was puzzled. “And the irony is that the reason you don’t get it is both speaking in favor of you and against you. I am in severe doubts.”

“But I am desperate as well. We all are. And it is up to me to decide. That is why I volunteered to be with you in the cell. I might regret my decision for eternity.

“That leader is you, Hugo. And at the same time, it is not you. The leader that is needed is the artificial Hugo we created. And that is not you. But we want you to become that leader. You need to become the Hugo the people think they have.”

“Our work needs to be undone, which is a huge task

and will likely result in absolute chaos and we cannot know where it will end. However, if you assume the ideal Hugo we created, that is much more likely to succeed. But it all depends on you.”

“In order to become that ideal Hugo, you need to do a lot of work. You need to undo your own programming. You need to work on your psychological traumas from the past. You need to do your shadow work.”

“Hugo, the task we are giving you is huge. Huge for you. You are going to be running the country as well as healing yourself. And I will be honest. None of us are fully convinced you can do it. You have demonstrated to be a very weak person, easily controllable by those who understand the fears that drive your motivation. So if we wanted to psychologically make you do the things we deem necessary, we could do so. And that will be for the good of society. However, it would not alleviate us from the duty to keep you in check.”

“I am speechless...” I uttered. There were no words in my vocabulary that could have aptly described my feelings and thoughts. Yet my core was touched. Carlos was talking my truth. I have felt small all my life. In a sense I do not even trust myself. How could I even have dreamed of truly leading a country? I have been successful by deceit. The only confidence I had in

myself was my ability to bend reality in the minds of others. I had become an expert in that. Yet now I had been played myself in such a masterful way, my entire self-image was shattered.

“Of course you are speechless.” Carlos looked at the ceiling, seemingly annoyed and irritated. “But... at the same time... I also believe in the potential of people. The world is not black and white. There is good in you, no matter how far away you have to search to find it. I know you can do it. I know for sure, because I have been there myself. So it is not a matter of potential, it is a matter of intent. Are you willing you do it?”

“Is that a direct question to me now?” I felt surging pressure on me. I hardly swallowed the confrontation with all I had been doing, and now I had to make a decision. I felt powerless. I never experienced such lack of control.

“Yes it is. We consider it your moral duty to do so. Let’s say... to compensate for all the mess you created. And to actually positively contribute to this world.”

“Okay hold on. I need time to grasp everything you have been telling me. So many questions I still want to have answered!”

“Like what?” Carlos asked. “You want to know

what happened during the conference?”. “Yes!” I exclaimed. “Listen, I can explain everything and I can even show you the proof of every detail. We have all the call logs, the recordings, the location data, the e-mails, the instant messages, social and psychological profiles, medical records, criminal records, financial details up to every transaction... of whomever you can think of!”

“Please show me the proof!” I shouted. “Of course, but I would suggest that by now, is it still relevant to have confirmed what you already know? Can you not infer from what you have seen and experienced so far?” Carlos slammed his fist on the table. “For crying out loud, we are talking about The Plan here! We have just used it on you! What is so difficult to understand and believe about this?”

I just stared at Carlos. There was no point in making any argument against what he was asserting. There was no point in disagreeing either, I believed everything he said.

“I am going to leave it up to you. I will walk out of this house. You will be here alone. I am giving you one hour to decide. You either do the right thing... join us and clean up the mess... or you disappear from this country. We will make sure your transfer goes unnoticed and you can start a complete new life under a

new identity. The virtual version of you will continue to rule until we have found a new solution. That is, of course, under the assumption we ourselves can withstand the addiction of power.”

“Please don’t leave. I already know what I want.”

Carlos looked surprised. “Really? Well, I am listening.” he said in a condescending way. Perhaps he already sensed what I was going to say. “Let me go to another country.” Again, Carlos slammed hard on the table. He cursed and shouted in the air, as if others were listening in on us. “Too weak! What a waste of effort! I told you guys!” With that last short sentence, I understood others were listening in on our conversation.

I could not have felt any smaller and was yearning for an escape. I wanted to ask Carlos to immediately help me, but felt I better wait till his fury subsided. I expected an outburst of anger, but instead Carlos closed his eyes. It was quiet for minutes.

“Okay, you have made up your mind. You take no responsibility and just run away. Fine. That is the consequence of our offer to you. But please tell me, what are you going to do in that other country?”

“I don’t know.”

“I mean, what is the purpose of the rest of your life?”

You will be living a lie, just as you have done for the past decades. A new lie, a new environment. But in reality it is the same lie. Never allowing yourself to be the real you.”

“You already know your life will be empty. You possess all the tricks to make it seem like success, but at the end of our life, you will be confronted with the reality. It was all theater. And for whom did you do that? Who benefited from your lies?”

“No one benefited. And the worst thing, not even you. You have not lived life at all. You have been an actor playing someone who you are not! And only... only because you are too weak, Hugo! Too weak to do the shadow work. Too weak to go inside. Too weak to face the pain. And because of your weakness, others have to suffer.”

“Yet, the real Hugo, the one who is ultimately superior to any virtual Hugo we can create, is still alive in you. You just have to search for him. But that effort is already too much for you. You simply give up. Quite contrary to what you wanted people to think of you.”

Carlos paused for a long time. He just looked at me. I looked back. I did not know whether to reply or to keep my mouth shut. As I was doubting what to do, I inadvertently choose for the latter. It was quiet in the kitchen. I only heard the soft ticking of the clock in the

living room. Although I did not actively count the ticks, it must have been well over a minute before Carlos broke the silence again. As he took a deep breath, his face revealed he was very upset. Then he turned his eyes away from me.

“Well... So be it. We will arrange your escape. But first, I need time to cope with the raging fury inside of me and my utter contempt for you.” Carlos stood up, murmured a few more words of which I could only understand the word “useless”. Then he strode away.

So there I was. I felt pathetic. Of course I was to blame for all the mess. And again, I was to blame for not cleaning it up. I simply had no life. I would be lonely forever if I left. It would always be hiding. I was not escaping this country. I was escaping myself. What could I do?

“Wait! Carlos, wait!” I shouted. “Well what now?” Carlos shouted irritated from the hall way, but I could not see him. “I think... I think I changed my mind.”. “Are you very sure?” he replied. “I think I am... No, I am sure.” Carlos did not respond. I stood up and walked towards him, but all of a sudden he stood in the doorway. “Are you serious?”

“Yes I am.”

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“Thank you, Hugo!” Carlos smiled. “Thank you on behalf of everyone in the nation, including the millions that don’t even know. There is a lot of work to do. A lot of work for you to do.”

I nodded, although I did not understand what I could do immediately. “Listen, somewhere early in your life, you took a wrong turn. And from there, many other wrong turns. You cannot undo that, but going forward, there are also many opportunities to take the right turns again.”

I feel very insecure and looked desperately at Carlos: “Will you help me?”. Carlos put his hand on my shoulder. “Yes, I could help you, I even would like to help you, but what you really need is a coach. And, you also urgently need a mentor. You need a wise elder. A psychologist. A therapist. Just to name a few. Can you already grasp the immensity of the work you need to do on yourself?”

I was losing hope. I had always run away from my weaknesses, but listening to Carlos, the task itself

seemed simply too much to handle.

“I see your confidence is fading. Don’t despair. In anticipation, we have already assembled a team for you. And, I might even say, it is a dream team!” I looked puzzled at him, but the smile on his face grew bigger and bigger.

It was tremendously hard to not be able to have any control. What was I getting myself into this time? I had put trust in people and they betrayed me. Similarly, I have betrayed others. Everything has collapsed in my life and here I am rendering absolute control to a group of unknown people.

“How can I trust them?” Carlos looked at me for a long period without saying anything. Then he broke the silence. “If you can’t even find it in you to trust this particular team, you will never trust anything in your life!”

“And, to confuse you a bit more, the team consists actually only of one person. And at the same time, of many people.” Carlos clearly seemed to enjoy his enigmatic demeanor. I was about to protest, but he interrupted in time: “You know, it is time for you to meet your team. Right here, right now. Give me a minute to setup a video call.”

He grabbed a laptop out of a backpack and was playing this digital instrument as a professional pianist. I did not understand what he was doing, but it seemed very technical. Then Carlos grabbed a chair and put me in front of the laptop.

On the screen in front of me I saw myself. I had a scar on my face, a souvenir Susan left there when she interrogated me. I looked awfully tired. I arranged my hair and clothes a bit, waiting for whoever I was going to meet. The image in the digital mirror showed the improvement. But then, my own image started moving differently from my own movements.

“Hello Hugo!”. The image of myself that I was looking at morphed into a very well-groomed version of myself. “Yes, I realize this must be a bit strange, but it is you who is talking to you right now!”

I was perplexed. I was talking to a digital version of myself. “I am you. And at the same time I’m not. I am the fascinating result of a magical concoction of algorithms, huge data-sets and artificial intelligence. In a way, I know so much better than you about who you are psychologically at the deepest level, and also I know nothing, because I am just a program.”

“Yes, I am your coach, mentor, elder and all these other roles. If we were to use real life professionals, it

would take us many years to help you transform. The biggest challenge therein is that we have to go deep inside. Thanks to all the technology you actually helped create, we can do this much quicker. Who is more capable and trustworthy than the best version of yourself?”

I was mesmerized by the words of myself. It not only made sense rationally, it also strongly resonated with me. I felt inspired by the words of my digital version.

“Carlos and the other let me, the virtual you, guide you towards becoming a genuine leader. The way you respond and cooperate in this process immediately feeds into my artificial intelligence algorithms. So together, we are progressing towards becoming more you. And then the ultimate action for you to take is...”

The digital Hugo paused. Was this a genuine moment of reflection or a learned artificial delay? At any rate, it was masterfully done. The way I’d like to see myself. “The ultimate action is to terminate me. That is the permission you give yourself that you have graduated. I will no longer be needed then.”

Carlos patted me on the back. “I see you are getting on nicely. That means I am going to leave you now. Stick to Hugo and work together. Everything will be

fine. You will be fine. Let me get my coat now.”

I was lost for words. Carlos gave me a hug and then walked to the hallway. There I was, in conversation with the best version of myself, teaching me to become the best version of myself. Hugo prompted me: “Go to the window and wave Carlos goodbye.”

As I looked outside, I saw a man walking in a white monk’s robe. He turned around. Carlos gave me a big smile and then continued his path to an unknown destination.

MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

The internet helped us to connect with people from all over the world. It created a boundless virtual world where an abundance of information, knowledge and perhaps even wisdom became freely available for everyone.

Unfortunately, its underlying technology is managed by only a few entities. Despite public appearances of the opposite, Big Tech firms and governments are covertly colluding with each other. A handful of individuals effectively wield the power to feed the entire population with any desired narrative and subsequent drive to action.

Although most do not realize it, with the mass surveillance, data collection and censorship, we live under a global digital dictatorship. Our digital existence is rapidly becoming more important than our physical existence.

Furthermore, we are rushing into a post-human era where bionic body parts, chip implants and other technologies enhance the human experience. It forces

upon us the most difficult task: we need to determine at what point of augmentation a human being ceases to exist and becomes a robot. That immediately brings us to the existential question: what is it that makes us a human being?

And this is why I remain positive and have a lot of hope. This is a tremendous opportunity. The internet transformed society. Now it is time to transform ourselves. In each one of us resides darkness. It is part of being a human. It is our task as individuals to meet that darkness and bring it to light. This light will illuminate all the hidden truths of who we are, where we come from and why we are here on this planet. This is true power. And with such great powers come great responsibility; a necessity for starting to explore other worlds.

Bertil Schaart, 2022

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Bertil Schaart. I am an activist entrepreneur and author and live in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Years ago, I had created an external life that was perfectly accepted and lauded by my environment. However, my life and work, like that of everyone else, was all theater play. I was an actor with a script on the stage of my own life. I decided to take radical measures. It was very painful saying goodbye to a very comfortable life that my ego desperately tried to cling onto. I died a little on the inside, but it also brought new life with a new mindset.

I learned that true impact comes from decisions taken from a transcending multidimensional perspective. Such pluriform approach to reality is at odds with the global monoculture that is currently covertly forced upon us.

Due to the rapid digitalization, we are at a critical junction now. A wrong turn could send humanity back into serfdom, a right turn will help us to explore new

and forgotten realms. Digital sovereignty is a necessary first step for the latter.

I hold a Master of Science degree of Delft University of Technology and an MBA degree from INSEAD.

SUPPORT

This book is made available free of charge. Feel free to send the book to others to help spread its message.

I highly appreciate receiving your (anonymous) testimonial. It gives me the motivation to continue and helps others to start learning more about digital sovereignty.

If you have the financial means, your recurring gift or one-time donation is very welcome. Your funding will support the promotion and the distribution of the print version across the globe. If you would like to support in another way, please contact me.

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