

'And this wasn't an op you were familiar with?'

He hesitated for a second. Old habits.

'Listen, I might be a woman, but in this room I outrank you, you know. This wasn't an op...'

'No!' Laughing dismissively but good-naturedly. 'Hedgehog? No. Nothing like that! We don't call things "Operation Hedgehog" in the SO for God's sake!'

'There are various conditions of course. Don't take this the wrong way: You've heard of Tourette's Syndrome..'

'Uncontrollable outbursts, you mean. Profanities? Well the outbursts I'll give you, but you're not...'

'No. No, of course not, but I'm interested in the difference.'

'Between what I... what I've got, and...'

'Tourette's, yes. Why not.'

'And what is the difference?'

'Oh, plenty. But the day dreams. Visions, whatever you want to call them...'

'I dont want to call them anything. I want them to bloody go away!'



Tony White

'Maybe it would help if you wrote some of this down today.'

She didn't sound that sure of the idea herself, but was still surprised by the vehemence of his answer.

'No! I've written enough about it all. Too damned much. You wouldn't believe it. I'll say anything you want, over some drinks...' Was he flirting with her? '...but I'm not going to write it down. Not going to bloody sign it.'

He was talking quickly. Wobbly, unshaven. Bright eyes looking at something behind her. The dark fan of soot falling up the wall where the flue went in behind the stove.

'What would I write about anyway. The whole lot? It'd be a bloody book.' He looked towards the window and struck a poetic-heroic pose, hand-on-heart: 'In the early morning light the very mountains seemed to be clothed in the rough, grey-brown uniforms of the Partisans. Their...'

She laughed couldn't help it.

'God, I could write all that easily enough. And I wouldn't spare you the gory details either.'

She looked at the file again. 'Someone's translated these. Here's another one there are a few here. "I'm sorry this cord of my headphones is very short. I can't even stand upright. Sorry. It's fine now."'

She looked at him and raised her eyebrows. He shrugged.

'All sounds pretty meaningless now, doesn't it,' she went on. 'Not exactly gobbledegook, but it doesn't sound like something to get worked up about does it? None of this rings any bells I suppose?'

He shook his head apologetically.

'Can you remember at all what was so important about them?'

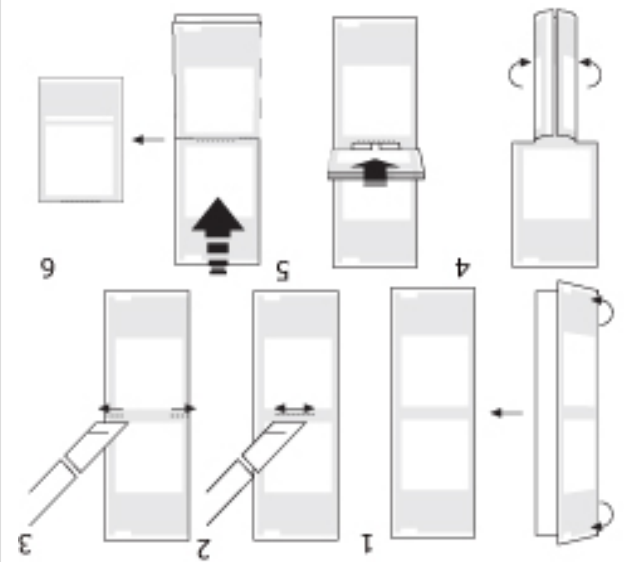
'Oh yes. Yes, I remember that alright.'

'What was it?'

'I told you. That they were the truth. That I was telling the truth.'

'Here's another one "Operation Hedgehog" or something.'

He laughed quietly to himself. Shook his head. 'Operation Hedgehog!'



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**Gobbledegook
 Tony White**

Doesn't take much to get a confession out of me. Always think it'll work out if I just... confess! Get it all down. Two-finger typing in the middle of the night then going to bed in the early nip of morning. Waking up to cold stewed tea and the nostalgic tug of England. Reaching for the cigarettes and finding the tin under a pile of crossings-out. Jesus! Problem is once they're there in black and white you're stuffed aren't you? Got a life of their own. God, I should know. I'm the past master! Write it down? No-one had to wring it out of me, I bloody volunteered it. Didn't just sign my confessions, I refined them, edited them read and re-read them. Signed them "Lots of love" then posted the damn things.'

The quick gust of laughter didn't break his darkly pensive expression.

'Or might as well have done. Let's face it: you can't camp next to the metaphorical pillar-box every time, can you? Beg the postman to give it back: "Terrible mistake. So sorry. Would you mind awfully?" Once you've written them you might as well have sent them, and once you've done that they're gone. Off in the world, wreaking havoc.'

'Whos gone,' she thought to herself. 'It's not the letters that have gone is it? What was he saying last time?'
 'You were saying. You said that you'd lost touch with one of your contacts?'
 'Did I? Oh, yes. More than just a contact I'm afraid.'
 'I'd wondered. Do you think that she was she killed?'
 'No no no. She ran away. Forged in the heat of war and all that.. Buried the poor girl under a heap of troth. Always bloody plighting it. Can't say I blame her. Frightened her off, I suppose. Chose the wrong way to impress her.'
 'How did you find out?'
 He looked up quickly, then away. 'On bloody duty, wasn't I.'
 'Did she use the broadcasts? How is the message passed I'm assuming your network had their own system?'
 'Poems. The message is... We'd put the message in the tenth line.'
 'So...?'

'Came in and I thought, "This is bloody familiar", then there it bloody well was. "I shall flee to other shores." It's from "Tga za Jug" "Longing for the South" sentimental sods aren't they? Not a bloody peep since. Not a dicky bird. Of course, I'd guessed already, I suppose.'

'You both came up through Salonika?'

'Of course. But there's a bit more history than that.'

'Did you think about...'

'What? Jacking all this in and going to "other shores" myself?' He stopped for a second, a sour, disdainful expression on his face. 'Not very specific is it. Not much to go on! I could always write a postcard I suppose: poste restante other bloody shores! "Arriving on the 11 oclock from Beograd!" Sorry, I don't mean to be sarcastic. It's not your fault. Not sure I feel like talking about that, actually. Her. Not today. Do you mind?'

'Is that when... things got more, difficult?'

So she did mind, but the question was ignored. He'd been sharpening the pencil as he spoke. He took it out and inspected the point, then put the sharpener down and fiddled with the ruled pad

that had been on the table since the beginning of the session closing one eye and lining it up so that its bottom edge ran parallel to the table-edge.

'You were saying that youve written a lot.'

'Oh, God! Haven't we all? I mean: reports, letters, transcripts, en-cryptions, zar ne? I still feel like I'm wearing those bloody headphones now. But Christ, I couldn't leave it be. Always doing it the hard way. One thing I've learned in life and God knows I've learned this the hard way is that when you are absolutely set on one single, final, course of action and you've got to bloody-well do it now and hang the consequences... That's the time to stop let time take its course. Doing nothing is better. Doing anything, else. Because whatever it is you're planning you can damn well guarantee it's the wrong thing.'

He looked up not at her, then at her and said, 'Sorry wandered off the point.'

While he was speaking he'd turned the pad forty-five degrees, anti-clockwise, and started drawing. A line now zig-zagged across the top of the page a graph with no axes. Could be measuring anything. Reminded her of one in an

old school geography book. 'Raininess in Britain since Roman times'. But beneath the line he quickly sketched some diagonal downward strokes not a graph. Mountains. She said nothing. Stayed perfectly still wanted him to forget she was there for a while. If that were possible.

What kind of a job is this? She sometimes thought to herself. String them along for a bit, poke them about to try and provoke some kind of reaction. And keep doing it until they're strong enough not to come any more and you can finally forget all about them. Just keep their files in case something messy happens in a year or so. But it didn't do to think like that. This was supposed to be useful. Supposed to help. For God's sake, they always turned up didn't they? Always polite, deferential. Even him. Never late. An hour or two of very politely talking to himself, more than to her. Always said the same thing at the end of the sessions. Habitual charm ran through him like the letters in a stick of rock. 'Thanks. Lets talk about you next time!' Then hed grin sheepishly as if he'd just told an embarrassing joke at a dinner party.

Outside she could hear voices and footsteps. She thought of hot, dusty streets; longed for summer

to arrive. He was still sketching. Seemed little point in stopping him. The Sun. A valley, a jagged ridge. It was like a child's drawing. Rocks strewn across the valley floor. A puff of smoke, then another and another. Little matchstick soldiers moving across the landscape like ants. Some climbing up to a v-shaped niche in the rock. Flower patterns. Intricate. A city. Shoe-box skyscrapers with rows of square windows and big radio masts on top all of them with big, ragged, smoking holes punched through the walls. Bombed trains. Broken bridges. Doodlebugs in the air with dotted-line trajectories. Doodlebugs? Had the Luftwaffe used doodlebugs on Belgrade? Would have if they could, she supposed. They'd used everything else. A ditch piled up with matchstick corpses.

They both looked at it for a while, neither acknowledging the other's presence, until: 'These "outbursts" as you called them...?' She was changing the subject. Trying to get something out of the last quarter of an hour. Didn't need to look directly at the clock these days. Not since she'd noticed its faint reflection in the window opposite. That had taken her the first few months of her posting up until then she'd

Accessed 20 July 2007

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'Longing for the South' ('T'ga za Jug').

<http://www.macedonia.co.uk/client/index1.aspx?page=430>

Accessed 20 July 2007

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Standing up he took his jacket from the chair back and smiled. 'Well, thanks. Let's talk about you next time, eh? We should, you know, *idemo u kafanu* sometime. If you fancied. You know where to find me.' He actually winked before he opened the door and stepped outside.

Shaking her head, she listened to his footsteps, his scuffing walk. She carefully tore the picture from her pad and slipped it into the file.

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'Gobbledegook' was created by cutting up, remixing and re-narrativising fragments from the following sources to create a completely new story:

Burgess, Alan. The Lovely Sergeant, London: Heinemann, 1963. p.74-75

Durrell, Lawrence. White Eagles Over Serbia, London: Faber and Faber, 1957. p.70

ICTY. 2003. 'Page 16367-8, Milosevic (IT-02-54) "Kosovo, Croatia and Bosnia"'. International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

<http://www.un.org/icty/transe54/030218ED.htm>

propped her watch beside the flowerpot on the windowsill, just where they couldn't see it. Otherwise it was no good at all; no matter how discreetly you peeped at it, they'd notice.

'What?'

'These "outbursts". Do you want to tell me a bit more about them?'

'Not much to tell don't know too much about them myself, to tell the truth. Must be in a bit of a day dream or something. Can't remember what I'm saying, afterwards. Just moments in time no before or after. But it's as if there are people looking. At me. I want to tell the truth but I can't. No that's not it. A sense that I'm expected to tell the truth; no... that I'm expected not to tell the truth. So I don't. Only sometimes. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I have to. These times. And then I just blurt it out, but no-one's paying attention to it.. Except its not "truth" which has any value or any sense a lot of the time. Just things that I'm sure at the time feel like demonstrable truths... I don't know.'

'Are you aware of what you're saying? I mean, at the time. Are you telling these truths about yourself? Is it you, actually you, that's on trial?'

them that,'
'Bugged if I know,'
'What did you do that was so terrible?'
He didn't answer for a while, then said, 'Nothing. Well, no more than any of us.'
They sat in silence for a few seconds, before there was a slight change in the pattern of her breathing. He'd not noticed the pattern of her breathing until it changed, but he recognised it now that it had. Remembered the code. If it weren't so slight he'd think her withdrawal of attention was almost ostentatious. But it worked, it was second nature now. Like the tenth line. Though he'd forget this immediately, until the next time; until the end of the next session.
'Ah. Time's up is it?' Charming sod. Flashing the old smile now as if the past hour hadn't happened. She could have been someone he'd taken a shine to in the pub or on the bus. Something was certainly working alright. She could give the bugger that.
'I'm afraid so. See you again on Thursday.'
'Right you are!'

'No. I mean; I don't know. Not judging by what I seem to blurt out. From what people tell me. Nonsense a lot of it. Gobbledegook. And it's in bloody Serbo-Croat apparently!'
'The people in the... dreams tell you this?'
'Tell me what?'
'That it's gobbledegook?'
'No the people... the ones who bloody well sent me here. Chaps in the office. Well, I don't blame them; the typists were getting upset. They always put it so well. You know: "Look here, nothing to worry about old man. Do you good to have a break. Nice girls over there lovely nurses. Lucky sod almost wish I was going myself!" Then they all breathe a huge, collective bloody sigh of relief soon as you're out of the door. Done it myself. Methuen got referred here last year didn't he? Can't have people upsetting everyone left right and centre can we. Not good for morale. Get someone dependable in. No, I mean, as I said, I've done it myself. Participated. Drawn corkscrews in the air when he wasn't looking. Rolled my eyes at my superiors. Thought he didn't notice, but I bloody noticed, I can tell you that for nothing. Poor Methuen was going through

People watching who I can't see. A vast bureaucracy. Like Babel everyone talking different languages. Bosch and everything. Dutch. English. But I'm the only Serb even though I know *I'm* not. And everyone's... looking at me, analysing every sodding move. Incredibly convoluted mind games. People trying to second-guess my triple bluffs. They sound pretty queer now, but those things I say... I feel I have to cling to them like bloody life-rafts, because they're more important than anything else. Because they're just plain old, simple truths. What was that one you just read? "The cable on my headphones is too short," was that it? I mean... Just to say something, anything, true like that feels like such a damnable relief.'

'Do you think it's the newsreels that have, you know, planted this idea in your head? This image?'

'I don't know, but no, I don't think so. Not speaking in bloody German am I, for one thing.'

'Your Serbo-Croat is good?'

'Of course. Wouldn't have got very far for King and bloody country otherwise!'

She decided to be blunt. It sometimes worked. 'So why are you there, in these dreams? Let's call

bloody hell though, wasn't he? Pathetic, really. Sorry I'm not... Oh, don't worry. I know you're not supposed to talk about it, but you know what I mean. Generally speaking. Slightest thing and he'd faint, or feel faint. No, that was it: Convince himself he was going to feel faint then get himself all worked up and end up nearly fainting from the anxiety of waiting to faint. Sitting their sweating in silence, terrified that he might feel faint at some point in the future! A grown man! Afraid to stand up in case he fainted. Unable to stand up and speak at the same time, in case... Good God, I mean, you can laugh can't you, but "Cup of tea?" doesn't work with people like that does it?'

He looked at the drawing as if someone else had done it. Reined himself in. It took a few seconds.

'Listen to me. People like that. I mean people like me.'

'Contrast,' she thought to herself, making a mental note whilst pausing to let the insight sink in, or to mark it at least, 'between lucidity and presentation of symptoms. Check frequency of episodes? Harbingers? 2-3-4.' Then she picked up the conversation again: 'Gobbledegook?'

'Crowded, very crowded. Like Nuremberg you've seen the newsreels. But not like that more like a radio studio you know, white walls, microphones. And movie cameras. People everywhere looking at radar screens. Oscilloscopes. With words on them.

'In what way not like...'

'matter.'

'You don't strike me as being shell-shocked. I mean I can understand that you may feel a certain amount of guilt we all do, don't we? Perhaps that's why you see yourself up against some kind of... charge. Maybe you're charging yourself. Do you notice if there's anything special about the moments when these, episodes occur?' 'Well it's not like there's a loud noise and I'm under the table soiling myself. Just suddenly, yes I suppose there is some sort of feeling of guilt. I'm in the dock. But it's not my guilt. This all sounds potty I know, but it's not like any court you'd get back home nor over here for that matter.'

'Hallucinations are more common than you'd think, in these situations though I'll admit that yours are slightly unusual a bit more... complex, self-contained.'

'Thanks. I'll take that as a complement.'

'I don't know either. Sorry. I'm not sure exactly.'

'You don't remember?' 'No, 'Fraid not. Sorry.'

'Ah, yes. That was it, was it?'

'That's what it says here. Seems pretty innocuous stuff when you see it like this, but you were quite distressed I gather. Sobbing it out over and over again. Can you remember why you feel so distressed? I mean it happened again yesterday, Staff Nurse told me. In the canteen. Can you remember anything about that? She's not so good at writing these things down, so I don't know what you were saying.'

'Sorry? Oh, yes, yes, so I gather. All sorts. Nonsense. Something about Labradors and Mr Nice I don't know. Mr Nice is taking his labradors to the opera. Something like that, ha-ha. That was one. So I'm told.'

She looked at the file which was open on her lap, leafed through a couple of pages and then read aloud from it: 'Um, "I can't use it since Mr Nice did not ask any questions about the Opera case or Labrador."''