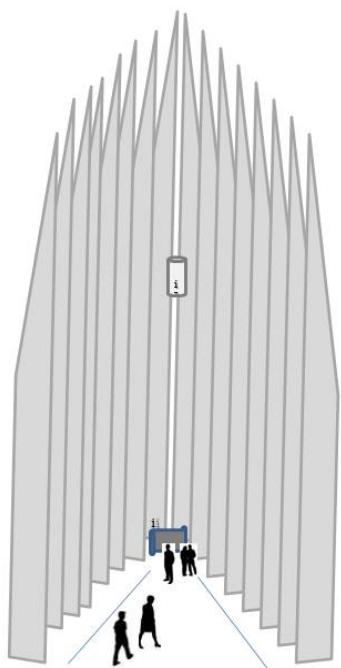


A delegation was awaiting our arrival in the lobby of the Central Visitors Hotel. Paarol shadowed me as we made our way into the hotel atrium, a street-like space, five stories high with glazed walls and a transparent ceiling. In the distance, a glass elevator was slowly making its way to the upper reaches, and I felt almost as if I should be waving in some ceremonial fashion to the solitary figure inside the elevator pod.

Large as it was, the lobby was almost as hushed as the interior of the car that had brought me here. As I walked up the length of this cathedral space, I found myself glancing left and right, expecting a swarm of gliders to come dashing across the lobby. But there was nothing but quiet, quiet and anticipation.

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A delegation was awaiting our arrival.

As I got closer to the welcoming party clustered near the reception desk, I recognized my

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student Adnan Bren hovering slightly behind a tall, ministerial figure dressed in black. *Do they clone them, I began to wonder. Please, don't let me say that out loud.*

Paarol picked up his pace as we neared the group at the desk. They had almost imperceptibly rotated in my direction as I made my way diagonally across the lobby, like daylilies following the morning light in a stop-action nature film. By the time we were within twenty feet of them, Paarol was shoulder to shoulder with me. As we crossed some invisible ten-foot perimeter, he was two feet ahead to my left.

By then they had individualized – to the left, security detail, a big block of protective service; then two steps behind him a staffer adjusting his smile to greeting strength; then the distinguished minister, who already bore a strong family resemblance to Adnan, standing behind him to the right.

Salutations were in order.

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"Minister, may I present to you Professor Malloy, who has graciously arrived to offer his expert assistance in our efforts," Paarol intoned with discreet delight at my graciousness. *Or perhaps he was just sunning himself in my natural glow.* "Professor, Minister Bren of the Development Board of Nusquam."

Intent and intense, Minister Bren fixed his gaze on me, dialed up a suggestion of a smile, and confessed to me, "Professor, it is a great source of satisfaction to know of your interest in our efforts to create a system of exchange equal to our ambitions for the welfare of the Nusquam population."

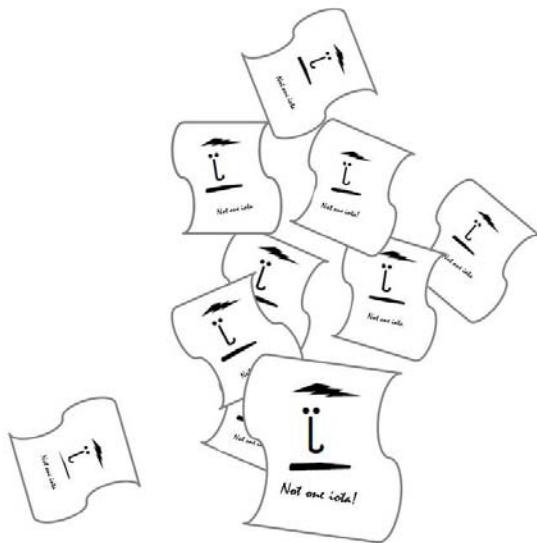
"It is a very great pleasure to be of assistance to you and to Nusquam," I replied, every bit as ceremonial as the Minister.

"Adnan has told me of your many researches on electronic banking. This is of considerable importance to us."

"Thank you, Minister. I hope . . ." But at this point hope was interrupted by an inex-

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plicable event. A snowfall suddenly materialized in the hotel atrium, a snowfall of paper.



A snowfall suddenly materialized.

We all stood there, immobilized for the moment, staring at the paper fluttering down

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from somewhere high above us. All but Adnan, I noticed; he looked into the middle distance straight ahead of him. Then the papers began to close in on us.

I reached out and snatched one as it floated by. There was no mistaking the whimsical caricature that Adnan had shown me after class not so long ago. But this one had a caption - "Not one iota!" I looked across at Adnan, and he obviously saw the recognition in my eyes. His faced went rigid with terror. I blinked, and began staring into the middle distance. I could almost sense his relief at my noncommittal attitude.

Slowly recognition of what was happening lit up the faces of each of the others in turn. The Minister's face turned nasty, and Paarol blanched. The staffer made an involuntary groan, and the security officer began barking orders into a cellphone.

"Lock down the hotel . . . stop that elevator . . . no, all the elevators . . . send two men to the

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express lobby elevator . . . no no no . . . nobody leaves . . . no . . . now . . . yes . . ." He turned to the Minister. "Sir, we should leave immediately. Please, Minister, the situation needs to be stabilised."

"Of course," the Minister replied. He turned to me and said, "Arno, my assistant, will stay with you, Professor. No worries. This will be handled."

Apparently Arno was expected to improvise. Turning to the assistant, the Minister said, "Report to the central desk when the matter is cleared."

"Instructions, Minister?" Arno asked, hoping for guidance.

"When the matter is cleared," the Minister replied, already on the move to the hotel entrance in the wake of Paarol and the security officer. "Adnan?"

"If I may, perhaps it would be best if . . ." Adnan began.

"Yes, make sure our guest settles in."

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“Of course, of course,” Adnan quickly replied, turning to me for the first time since recognition of the not-so-happy slug had passed between us.

What to say, and when to say it? These are serious considerations when you are accompanied by an unknown quantity like Arno, and you have no idea what your student-host may have stepped into. Fortunately, mundane matters soon occupied us. Checking into the hotel was not an issue, since everything had apparently been cleared by the Minister’s office. Getting to the suite might be another matter altogether, since all the elevators were still being secured and examined by security personnel.

“I am really not interested in walking up 200 floors,” I explained to Arno.

“Ah, no problem, Professor, no problem,” Arno assured me. “The top 100 floors or so are permanent and long-term residences. Your suite is on the nineteenth floor, room 1951.”

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"You are the original Happy Guy, Arno. Let me restate my position. I am really not interested in walking up nineteen floors."

"Of course, Professor, I understand. I am sure the elevators will be cleared soon. May I offer you dinner, perhaps here in the hotel? I am assured in confidence that the cuisine is most satisfying."

"You may indeed offer me . . ." I turned to catch the eye of my mysterious student, who seemed agreeable to my unstated suggestion, ". . . me and my gracious student dinner here in the hotel. And will you be joining us?" I asked, hoping against hope that he might have pressing matters.

"Perhaps for a brief moment, Professor. I must monitor developments to be sure that proper arrangements are concluded for your accommodation."

"I understand. Well, shall we have at it?"

"Sorry?"

"Shall we proceed to dinner, then?"

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“Of course, of course. Please, Professor, excuse me a moment while I ensure that arrangements are in order.” And off he went to check on dinner. I turned to Adnan.

“I think an explanation is also in order.”

“Professor, I apologise most sincerely. If I may, might I suggest that we look for a more discreet opportunity for discussion? The situation is of a complicated variety.”

“Well, you know best – especially since I have no idea what the hell is going on around me.”

“Of course, Professor, of course.” He was whispering anxiously. “But you must understand . . .”

“I most certainly do not understand. I am tired and hungry. I have been stuck in a sound-proofed car with someone intent on spouting poli-sci nonsense at me and worse. I have sat helpless while gliders zip by beating people with sticks, and now I am caught in . . .”

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"Please, Professor," he pleaded quietly. "I promise to explain everything. But in due time. Please."

"Fine, fine, but I need to know one thing right now. Are you responsible for that shower of slug-faces? And what . . ."

"I know of it. I am not responsible for it. Not exactly, not directly."

"That is not . . ."

"I would never have allowed this protest to take place at your moment of arrival. It would be . . ."

"Alright, later on then. The Happy Guy approaches."

Arno rejoined us, obviously relieved if not actually as happy as a Happy Guy should be.

"Professor, dinner is in preparation. And I can now assure you that at least one elevator will be cleared for us by the time we have finished dining."

"Excellent. Thank you for all this. Please, please, lead the way."

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The restaurant was elegant and expansive, the universal dining room that you would find in any first class hotel in any major city around the globe. It conformed to every expectation that such establishments routinely provoke in the traveling diner – artistically presented, unusually small portions of gustatory combinations that you would never find anywhere outside such a restaurant. On the upside, the wine was good, the ambience quiet, the wait staff discreet to the point of ignoring you almost entirely throughout the evening.

It wasn't just the portions that were small; the talk was exceedingly so. I was treated to another recitation of the history of Nusquam and a renewed presentation of the wisdom of Premier Toft. Not surprisingly, most of this was provided by Arno. Adnan was so quiet and polite that it was making me jumpy.

Still, the after-dinner coffee was a new-found joy, and the Irish whiskey that followed was a life saver. I proceeded to save several

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lives by the time our dinner wrapped up. By that point, I was feeling expansive.

“May I ask you a personal question, Arno?” I ventured as we lingered over one final drink.

“Yes, of course, Professor.”

“Why does everyone call you ‘the Happy Guy’?”

“I am sorry, Professor, but nobody calls me that.”

“But I just heard someone call you that,” I said in disbelief.

“That was you, Professor,” interjected Adnan.

“Oh.” And so our dinner concluded.

