

Davy King

S.S.

Stark staring stupidity. Utter nonsense. Futile to say more. Under circumstances like these. Any attempt at humane discourse would be waste of breath. You can't reason with them. As well address a wall. Or knock your head against one. A case of concussion rather than discussion. It's absurd. He has had to travel all this distance west from the south side. A bus ride he could ill afford. Despite the fact there's a branch a Shanghai-shot nay stone's throw as the crow flies round the corner from his rented nest. He's been informed contrariwise to topographical motherwit his district is under the jurisdiction of this farther office. The functionary behind the great dividing counter was inexorable. Bloody-mindedly perverse. Rules are rules. Unjust and unpalatable as they are. He'll just have to swallow them. He has no choice in the matter. He

depends on the charity of the State. Therefore he must bow to unbending Bureaucracy. Obstinate idiocy enshrined. Or maybe there's method in their madness. A devious design to drive him to despair.

When he enters the windowless fluorescent-lit room he sees a long queue stretching to reception where he will have to submit an application form before his claim can be considered. Preliminary to degradation and humiliation. This humble petition. One of manifold hydra-like to beset and besot him thru the endless obstacle course. Ahead lies a depressing wait.

Sacrificial lamb. Shambling step by step forward as each postulant in succession is slowly dealt with. He finally reaches the beginning. Feeds the piece of paper to the gap and the familiar catechism ensues. Then he is instructed to sit and wait.

He sits. He looks at his watch. He waits.

So many people waiting. He didn't know so many were destitute like him. Well he knew but hasn't taken it to heart. Till now. Of course he's kept up with the figures.

Who hasn't. Is cognizant of the increasing total. Who isn't. Can reel off the number of millions and hundreds of thousands. Who can't. But that means little really.

Statistics of the jobless conceal as much as they reveal.

These people are individuals. All with sob stories of their own. No-one bothers to ask them. Even if they told who would listen. Haven't we heard enough already.

Doleful tales of life on the dole. Sordid details of doomed losers. Deserving angels fallen on hard times. A plaintive plight. But spare us please the self-

indulgent moans and groans and lamentations. Woeful weeping and gnashing of teeth. Wailing kaddish in a

sea of troubles. Pass over keening coronach. Sackcloth and ashes and funereal crape. Cheer up. It's not the end of the world you know. Yet. We're working on it. Plenty of cannons we can afford. Plenty of cannon-fodder we can't. Your country needs you. A pool of cheap labour. More like an ocean. And he a tiny drop in it. Teardrop.

He wonders is the office usually as crowded and reckons a simple means to reduce unemployment would be to employ more staff to administer to the unemployed. Obviously that's too simple. Too logical. Too much to hope for. Managing the economy is no mere child's play. You can't go handing out money to anyone as if it were manna from heaven. Nothing comes free. The cost of living's killing him. He'd sell

his soul to the highest bidder. That is if he had one. No-one would buy it.

Pauvre diable. He's stony broke and on the rocks. No blood from stony-hearted skinflint Mammon's uncivil servants. They give no quarter to those in need of an urgent transfusion. No blood money. Though the big bad wolf is howling at the door. Let him cry all he likes about a lack of rupees. No nabob's ransom's in the offing. He'll have to learn to kneel and beg. Be eternally grateful for the Nation's mite. The blessed ready to redeem him.

This interminable waiting he suspects is a carefully calculated torture. The process of seeking assistance a painful trial intended to eliminate the infirm of purpose. Those not in such a predicament are mistaken to surmise that claimants are slothful swindlers. Being

unemployed is damned hard work. Without a job you'll be poor as Job and need his patience.

Unfortunately he hasn't had foresight enough to bring a newspaper or a book. At least reading would help pass time and relieve the tedium. To its credit the dreaded Doctor's Waiting Room supplies a pile of miscellaneous magazines to browse. Last Autumn's issue of Gardener's Quarterly. Its leaves yellow. Or Ladies' Weekly of a summer since. Aerobic exercises for Mothers-to-be and What's New on the Fashion Scene. Not a hint of haute couture here. No pregnant women jumping for joy. Just one sedentary gravid victim of the biological imperative. Looking none too pleased at the prospect. The grass is greener in the glossies. Such lively light reading would be welcome escape from this longueur.

Better still to have come equipped with pen and paper. He could be writing a letter. A long letter. Several lengthy letters. Ample time for copious correspondence. The collected epistles of Saint Paul the Apostle would appear scant in comparison. At a penny a line he'd be a wealthy man by now. He could have kept himself amused and have something to show for his period in limbo. He isn't in the mood for billet-doux. A diatribe befits his humour more. Dear Sir. I'm writing to complain. There is no shortage of bones to pick within these four walls. Hours of fun to be had for the price of a ballpoint and a pad. That would take his mind off this.

Who's responsible. To blame. For such an ugly mean impoverished environment. It could be made slightly with minimal outlay on a few plants. Nothing fancy.

Fields of Asphodel would be excessive. A full-blown indoor botanic garden's uncalled for. But modest ikebana none could fault. Naturally delicate flowers would wilt and shed their petals in that oppressive atmosphere. Need to adapt to desert conditions. A cactus would stand more chance of survival. He feels thirsty. Parched. All around him the sands of time. An arid expanse. No oasis in sight. Not even a mirage.

It seems like his argosy will never arrive. Wrecked the odds are long ago. Or a slow boat. Becalmed in the doldrums. Not worth scanning the horizon bounded by the nearest wall. And what use such images to deck that wall. That impenetrable wall he's up against.

He needs dynamite but all he has are his squibs and whimpers of pathetic words. Some people could do with an Atom Bomb under their presumptions. Their

deadly indifference. Unregenerate rejection. Chronic hurt has made him bitter. Meek and mild in outward manner. But deep down bitter. Is there no chance of getting thru. What can you say.

How about a speech to the gathered assembly. A rousing exhortation. Comrades. Much too bolshy. Ballywell choreographed by Kremlin old boy. Select an appellation with more popular appeal. Take two. Dearly Beloved. Ladies and Gentlemen. Fellow Humans. Oi you lot. Why are we waiting. What are we waiting for. These are the questions. Can't you see. There are more of us than there are of them. We have nothing to lose but our losses. Let us arise like. Far too stilted. Get up off your goose-pimpled arses and. And. Go back to sleep. Not so much the pregnant aposiopesis as a downright abortion. He's no orator.

Accustomed as he is to inner soliloquy. Public speaking isn't his forte. He's too shy to proclaim his creed. The world isn't ready for these ideas. He would raise heckles. Your bod in the thoroughfare's a middle-of-the-roadster. Stuck-up stick-in-the-mud. But there's no despond in the miry slough. Don't we all enjoy a blatant wallow. Rare's the person not bogged down. Try to struggle out and you may sink deeper. No danger of anything stirring here. Spontaneous revolution would be as probable as putative immaculate conception.

Another dead-end in the maze. He pauses exhausted by the effort of mixing moribund metaphors. Looks at his watch. Glimpses out the corner of his eye a movement. Sweet vision of delight. And sitting only a seat away. Has she been there along. He hasn't noticed her before.

Recent school-leaver by the look of it. Blue suits her. Anonymous nymph off the city streets. Turning his head. He tries making eyes at her. Sheep's eyes. No more than a tentative ogle. But his heart isn't in it. Can't screw up courage. Is too screwed up. Would screw up too. Anyway can't think of anything to say. What's a nice girl like you. No. He couldn't get away with that. She's here for business not pleasure. And he's a callow amateur in amatorial punctilio. Past master at the gauche fax pas. N'essayez pas de danser un pas de deux monsieur. It's not the setting for the serenade. Forget it. Think of something else. For Christ's sake what.

He's beginning to believe they have forgotten about him. Mislaid his papers. Lost in the filing system. Perhaps the computer has a chip loose. Then he'll have

to wait forever. Forlorn. It seems like that. The mind extrapolates a future state from present data. And his consciousness of this very moment is a mélange of memories-preconception-fears. The wool pulled over his eyes. He doesn't quite see clearly. That's why he finds this situation unsatisfactory. He's not exactly thrilled by Life and the Infinite Universe. So little of it is disclosed.

The most mediocre story has a stronger plot. Who said truth's stranger. Fiction's more fickle than stubborn fact. Doggedly loyal that son of a bitch. Can't shake it off. The actualities don't disappear. His wishful thinking is no magic wand. If wishes were fishes he'd live on chowder. For all that he optatively would that something surprising could happen. Some dramatic coup or twist. Hey presto in the nick of time. A

startling turn up for the book. The deus ex machina he conjures. Say our Saviour suddenly strolled in. Come to liberate humankind. It'd be a miracle if he got anywhere. Afraid these people were before you. Take a seat like everyone else. They would need convincing about the Word made Flesh. He'd have to bring proof of identity. No. Divine intervention cannot be relied on. In such a godforsaken hole as this. The realm of hungry ghosts.

His mind is on his stomach. His stomach on his mind. His stomach is empty. His mind is full. He'd be happier if it were vice versa. Food not thought. The bread of life. He could eat a whole loaf. Half would be better than none. A slice would do. Only no airy figment or phantom comestibles can satiate his cravings. Quite the opposite. His appetite is whetted

even more. Yet though weak with hunger he doesn't dare leave to search for nourishment in case he misses his turn. At infrequent intervals a loudspeaker summons someone to a room the other side of a closed door. Each time he prays it will be his name next. Always he is disappointed. Tantalizing Tannoy. To annoy.

Sound of shouting. Words made indistinct by intervening wall. Man emerges from adjacent room. Slams door. In his expression anger and dejection. No luck. No cash in hand. Should hear from them within a few days. A week at most. Heard that one before. Whose go now. Too bad not him. A Rosa something foreign. The next contender steps into the grilling chamber. It's the damozel he fancied earlier. His five minute infatuation. Doesn't notice her exit afterwards.

Wrapped up in his private thoughts. Solipsistic in the extreme.

Social Security must be a euphemism. Catachresis or palpable lie. Unsociable and insecure it makes him. He can be excused for feeling persecuted. The staff are scarcely sympathetic. Guilty of a criminal waste of his precious time. Give them the benefit of the doubt. These ciphers doing the dirty work have good intentions. Oblivious they pave the way to hell.

As time goes by it's getting worse. Not that it was ever what you'd call elysian. It was always less than so-so in his estimation. Actually little enough has changed but gradually he's becoming more restless and impatient. Looks at his watch. Sighs. Fidgets. Some of the claimants metamorphosed into inmates are apparently habituated to the ordeal. You get resigned to

what seems inevitable. Passivity saves energy from being vainly expended but atrophies the will to rebel. His disquiet notwithstanding he must sit this out. Stick at it. Stick out for his due.

The internal commentary is grinding to a halt. Stuck. It has been getting monotonously repetitive. Sitting waiting. On an on. And on and off his mind goes blank. A dull dark heavy sort of stupefaction. Not the radiant emptiness of mystical awareness. But even in his inanition he can't rest. Before he knows it he's at it again. Wool-gathering. Spinning some yarn. Spinning it out. Weaving warp and woof with words. Taking the measure of what is. Cutting out to fit his notions. The material seems unpromising. Perhaps it's what he makes of it. Dressing up the naked truth in habit.

His own garb's garbage. He's a jumble sale mannequin in faded motley. Caparisoned in cast-offs. Unwilling exemplar of the démodé. Reduced by indigence to shoddy duds. Vestments of the order of bald hair-shirts and shabbiest fustian. Verdict sartorial suicide. A sorry sight. His down-at-heel shoes are on their last legs. Old inexpressible off-the-peg from Oxfam. Ragged trousered philanthropist. He'd make a good scarecrow. Should apply for the job. Standing in the field all day wouldn't be more wearisome than present inertness.

Were he an anchorite or yogi used to the solitude of unadorned cave this place might overwhelm him with its teeming activity. The rich tapestry of human culture here on display. The social fabric. Threadbare tatters. Manmade fibre.

Why is it so difficult to sit quietly content without external entertainment. Zen monks might do it. He becomes bored. The Powers-that-be could put on a floor show. Perhaps screen the video of War and Peace or some eight hour epic for a captive audience. A window to look out of would make a world of difference. No clue what season it is in here. What time of day. Beneath the artificial light. This relative lack of stimulation is like an experiment in sensory deprivation. It plays strange tricks on the mind. Normally he has no passion for mental arithmetic. Now he finds himself counting. Counting the walls. There are still only four. Counting the uncomfortable plastic chairs. The number of people who sit uncomfortably on them. The seconds. Minutes. Shifting numerals on the face of his digital watch are

hypnotic. He's getting drowsy counting. Counting whatever comes to mind. Except his blessings. And because he mustn't fall asleep he thinks it prudent to keep clear of sheep. How can he be sure this isn't a nightmare. He dozes off for a few moments. When he jerks awake he's back where he started. Sitting waiting.

It's a game of patience. He's losing. The cards are stacked against him and he has none up his sleeve. Someone else holds all the aces. How then can he turn up trumps. However he can hardly throw in his hand and go home. He has no alternative but to hang on. For dear life as it were. Surely soon he will be called. He isn't. Not yet but surely soon. Have faith. Don't lose heart. All he has to do is remain where he is. Abject in obeisance to the status quo. Quiescent. In abeyance.

Like suspended animation. Frozen there. Accepting paralysis is to persevere. Catalepsy the stratagem to prevail. Paradoxically. Strive not to strive. Easier said. All the same. Needs must. Play the stoic in earnest. With determination. To persist. And he may as well stay calm. Too tense with expectation. Repeatedly defeated. He tells himself relax. Nothing for it but to sit and wait. And wait. All bad things must come to an end. Will better necessarily follow. His prognosis in financial terms is poor. If he gets out of here alive he can look forward to terminal debt. A pauper's grave. He's sick to death of this.

Added to his mental torment corporal discomfort makes itself felt. It's not solely a question of numb buttocks. Pressing though that problem may be. Something more serious is up. His notorious weak

bladder has had as much as it can take. Its insistent demands will not be gainsaid. Blissful the animal in ignorance of civilized self-restraint unbothered by neurotic inhibitions happily discharging water on the spot. His fastidious concern for hygiene and the niceties of social convention prevents him from being likewise forthright. He must stall not stale. Cross his legs and fingers. Grin and bear it and hope for the best. Before long the office will be closing. Another day spent fruitlessly with no progress made. So this was what Kafka had been on about. Beckett too. Waiting for Godot. Waiting for a Giro. A similar elusive godsend. And remember poor old Sisyphus. An uphill struggle. Till he went downhill. Getting nowhere slowly. Pushing his weighty burden of care like the scarab its dung-ball. It's no small consolation that there

are literary and mythical precedents for his miserable fate. That's one advantage of being an unemployed English Graduate. He appreciates the value of his years of study at public expense. There's a lot to be said for a University education. Nevertheless. Such crumbs of comfort intellectual contemplation provides are not sufficient sustenance for his bodily needs.

The waiting grows intolerable. Involuntarily his hands clench. He feels an impulse to express his frustration by an act of physical violence. He will stand up. Stand up for himself. He will walk into the inquisitorial room. And. He will. Scream. Hit. Slap. Punch. Kick. Assault the officer. That would be a gesture. Body language. Communication more immediate and sincere than the parroted jargon of diplomatic double-talk. And perhaps that kind of plea would get a response. The

realization he can be free if he wants makes his mind giddy. He is perfectly at liberty to kill the officer. He's certainly able to. That possibility gives him secret satisfaction and a sense of superiority over his tormentor. But is he obliged to demonstrate his freedom by acting. At times like this he regrets not having read that tome on Existentialism.

Unconventional behavior would cause too much trouble. Committing murder might jeopardize his entitlement to Supplementary Benefit. On the other hand it would cost the state more to maintain him in penal servitude than to allow him the privilege of untrammelled penury. Faced with such a moral dilemma what should he do. Conformist that he is at heart he inclines to the orthodox religious view. Despite appearances to the contrary life is probably

more sacred than money. To slay an enemy ain't worth the effort. We all end up as corpses anyway. Besides the official is only doing his job. It's the job that's wrong. And the system it stems from. Root of all unnecessary evil. Buried deep in history and human nature. The seed of error. Flawed. Accursed. Crazy. Describe it how you will. Something or other needs putting a stop to. Radically altering in some way. But what on earth is he meant to do. Under circumstances like these.

Rationally it would be easiest to submit. To suffer silently. If he is patient he will be paid. Not today. Not tomorrow. Nor the day after. Later not sooner. But eventually. As sure as spring succeeds winter. Night surrenders to the rising sun. Thick ice thaws and water

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flows again. Till then hibernation. Torpor to win thru.

At last. Extremely long last.

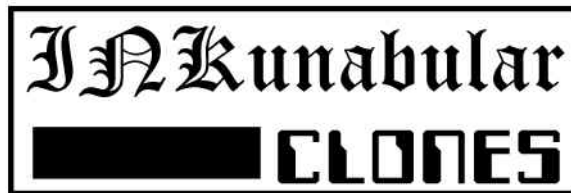
Sitting still. He looks at his watch and waits.

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