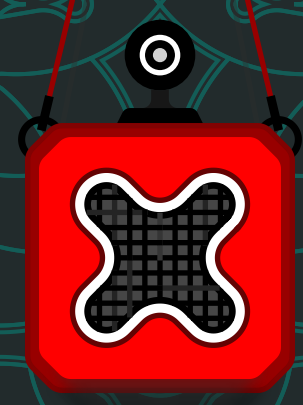




YINSENG TOKKI
INDI IS DEMON



Yaseng Tokki and His Demon
Filipe Cardeira

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18.11.03 DRAFT

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The Vicissitudes of the Axe

'You're late,' Gabriel said to Jake.

'Early, you mean,' and Jake entered the Yellow Cube Gallery like a blue train. The *Vicissitudes of the Axe* was busy. Seven canvases portrayed the beheading of seven European monarchs. Their elaborated clothing and jewellery was in strong contrast to the greyish background and the whitish outfit of the executer. Hard to notice at first glance, the canvases were in fact a film playing in slow motion, almost motionless.

The spectacle was grotesque.

'*But who cares?*' Jake thought. '*Who cares if my work will endure the passage of time? As long as it sells.*'

The Yellow Cube Gallery had settled in a corner of the Spitalfields Market to promote contemporary art in May 2002. Surrounded by a mix of old Victorian and postwar architecture, the Gallery became a successful promoter of British contemporary artists.

'I'm on fire,' Jake screamed at Gabriel.

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know. I was lethargically walking along the kerb and extremely bored, when suddenly something happened. I started experiencing weird emotions,' Jake holds his breath for one second, waves his arms upwards, and shouts, 'And BA-BOOM.'

'What happened?'

'Memories, Dokisuki, memories. Stuff that brings fire to my belly, what else? She will be here. I can feel it.'

'Who?'

'My muse.'

'Sounds great Jake, meanwhile, why don't you talk to the press?'

'Where are they?'

'Hang on.' Gabriel vanished into the crowd.

Jake Ford won the Turner Prize in 2007. His nomination had been controversial, his acceptance speech intriguing. Five years later the British people were still trying to understand him.

Gabriel returned with three journalists and said, 'He's all yours.'

'Why the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*?' one journalist asked. 'Don't you think the *Vicissitudes of the Monarchy* would be appropriate as a title?'

'Not at all. Art is a product of the intellect. It is not meant to represent, but to

connect.' A long silence followed. 'And I have chosen the axe,' Jake concluded.

Jake had a look around, followed by various other attempts at finding a missing object. Unsettled, he pronounced loudly, 'Where's my fucking axe?'

The crowd held its breath and Lula appeared seconds later carrying an ordinary axe, not more than half a meter long, with hand carved notes on the wooden grip.

'Here,' Lula said.

Jake grabbed the axe and performed a full-arc swing before axing the timber floor.

'I find this killing instrument fascinating. It is like an obsession,' Jake said while polishing the blade with a napkin.

'Make room, please,' and without further notice Jake axed the napkin he had dropped on the floor while the journalists were taking photographs.

'It's truly fascinating. I can't get tired of this,' Jake commented before asking, 'Who wants to put his head on the floor?'

No one answered.

'What are you afraid of?' Jake asked but the silence was not broken.

'Please, gentlemen. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lose your head for contemporary art. Are you going to miss it?'

No one volunteered.

Jake swung the axe again in a full circle, ending with a strong strike on the floor.

'I was visiting Sweden when a man axed a woman in central Gothenburg. He axed her without being stopped, despite the blood splashing and the crack of bones.' Jake held his breath for a second and then continued, 'Upon reading the story I wondered why an axe? It sounded so Middle Ages to kill someone with an axe,' and another long pause followed. 'So, I went to a local shop and bought this axe, hoping to understand what drove that man to madness.'

'And?' One journalist asked after a prolonged silence.

'What do you reckon?' Jake asked rather curiously.

'You tell us.'

'Engagement. It's all about engagement.'

While the journalists took further notes and photographs, a lady wearing a red, flamboyant dress rushed into the gallery, screaming, 'Please, can someone help me?'

Confused initially, the guests started to turn their attention towards the Lady in Red, who had started to behave strangely, with a mix of sobbing and talking,

despite the curious looks laid upon her.

‘What a crazy woman,’ one of the guests commented aloud as she and other guests walked away from the unusual and loud intruder.

Meanwhile, as if possessed by a demon, the Lady in Red reached out to a random guest, a gentleman wearing a pink tie, and said curtly, ‘Please help me.’

‘What is going on? Can someone escort this woman out of here?’ the gentleman replied.

As various guests started to wonder what was in fact going on, a well-built man in his early twenties came out from the crowd. The guests watched him suspiciously. However, when he exposed an axe that had been concealed inside his raincoat, the guests, particularly the ladies, started to scream in panic.

The Lady in Red became hysterical. She tried to escape but ran onto one of the guests who pushed her back.

‘Leave me alone,’ she said but the well-built man grabbed her hair and pushed her hard against the floor.

The Lady in Red stood there with her head down; and like a barbarian, the well-built man axed her in the back unmercifully.

A pool of blood appeared under the body.

Hysteria abounded in the premises.

‘Call the police,’ one guest shouted, pointing at the well-built man who was peacefully looking at his victim.

Suddenly, the lights went out and the song ‘*I wish you were here*’ started to play in the background, although few guests noticed it, as a mix of tension, confusion and get-me-out-of-here had infected the crowd.

As the lights came back on, Jake appeared next to the well-built man, clapping his hands.

Seconds later, the Lady in Red rose miraculously from the floor.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, this was a monstrous show to portray the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*. Please accept my apologies if we have shocked you. No such thing was intended.’

Jake surveyed the room, eager to collect reactions from the guests, but nothing materialised.

‘What is this fear that blinds us? The fear that feeds on the unknown. This dark force we carry within? I wished I knew what it means to be dead, but I don’t. Whoever, whatever put us here, it certainly dumped us on a web of lies.’

Nothing holds true anymore.'

Jake surveyed the room one more time but none of the guests uttered a sound.

'Life is a miracle and a question mark at the same time. It is as precious as it is confusing. I wished I knew what it means to be dead, but I don't know. As far as I know living is a curse. I believe it is my duty as an artist, as a creator, to look for ways to break these chains. To look for answers that make sense to me, answers that resonate with you,' Jake said.

After a few seconds of silence, the guests started to clap their hands. Some yelled, 'Bravo, bravissimo.'

'Thank you, thank you. Please enjoy the *Vicissitudes of the Axe* hanging on the walls,' Jake said and slowly the guests started to regroup to focus their attention on the art and discuss the show.

'I've never been in such an opening, truly amazing,' a lady dressed in Prada style said.

'One word; surreal,' Steve Nash said, a successful art curator and critic who had been a friend of Jake since they met in Seoul.

'Great to know you liked it.'

'Liked it? I loved it. This is unreal. I have already been asked to estimate how much this exhibition could be worth in five to ten years from now.'

'Who asked you that?'

'One strange mister.'

'What did you tell him?'

'Don't you trust an old friend?' Steve replied before going for another tour around the gallery.

Jake felt success growing. He noticed a young man, with a loudspeaker strapped against his body, walking oddly towards him. '*What a little freakshow,*' Jake thought to himself.

When the quiet young man approached Jake, he stopped and stood still. Jake heard the sentence, 'Truly amazing,' but the quiet young man had not pronounced a word.

'Who said that?' Jake asked.

'I said it.'

'Who?' Jake said utterly confused.

'Look at the loudspeaker.'

Looking down, at belly level, Jake observed the bespoke loudspeaker, in the shape of a white box, with a matte finish, not bigger than an open hand and

with a small camera on top.

'Is this some kind of joke?' Jake wondered out loud.

'Sorry, we haven't been introduced,' and a gentle, 'I am Mr X,' was heard.

'Mr who? Mr X? Are you serious?' Jake started laughing.

'What's so funny?'

'Everything! Your name. I don't recall ever speaking to a loudspeaker.'

'Haven't you heard of me before?'

'I don't think I've had the pleasure.'

'Makes no difference, you will soon get used to me,' Mr X said. His voice was hard to place.

'I'd better not,' Jake said, still laughing, 'but who are you anyway? Were your parents called Mr and Mrs X too?'

'No, they weren't.'

'Why the letter X? Why not Y, or X²?'

'I like the connotations of the letter X.'

Jake, feeling someone or something was mocking him, considered ignoring the loudspeaker, but he was attracted to the way Mr X had introduced his persona to him and said, 'I'm pleased to know you are enjoying the exhibition.'

'Enjoying it? I'm loving it,' Mr X replied enthusiastically.

'Any particular reason why?'

'It connects, Mr Ford... and that is a great achievement,' Mr X answered. 'Now, if you will excuse me, there are other people I would like to meet. See you soon,' and the quiet young man walked away in the same furtive way he had arrived.

'*Weird*,' Jake thought. '*Who the hell is Mr X?*'

Seconds later, Lula interrupted Jake to say, 'This exhibition will sell like hotcakes.'

'Success always follows a trail of great news,' Jake quoted.

'I have heard the most amazing comments. I don't recall an opening this successful! Even Mr X is here.'

'Who the hell is Mr X?'

'Don't you know him?'

'I've never heard of him. Ever!'

Lula was about to tell Jake what he knew about Mr X, which was close to nothing, when Sabrina entered the gallery.

Lula was the first to notice her. He tried to warn Gabriel, but Sabrina greeted Jake before he could.

'Hi Jake,' she said in a seductive voice.

Jake turned around with a wide smile.

'Look who's here,' followed by a long and emotional cuddle.

'How long have you been back in London?' Jake asked curiously.

'Two months.'

'What? Two months without dropping by to say hi?'

'It was a period of solitude, a time to think about my life so far.'

'What happened? I thought you were in love with Chile?'

'It didn't unfold as I expected. The experience was good, but nothing else.'

'I missed you,' Jake murmured into Sabrina's ear.

'Liar,' Sabrina replied.

'You know it's true. I felt miserable when you left. But everything changed today. I had a good feeling and suddenly you're here, isn't this a wonderful coincidence?'

'You knew I would drop by. I always do.'

'I wasn't so sure this time.'

'Well, here I am. I can't stay long anyway, we speak soon,' and Sabrina walked alongside the exhibition walls, occasionally stopping. Minutes later, she waved and said, 'Bye, bye,' and left without interfering with Jake's radiant smile, who watched her like a hawk.

'Show must go on,' Gabriel whispered to Jake, unsure about the meaning of Sabrina's brief appearance on the premises.

Roughly forty-five minutes later, Jake had a painful discussion with Steve Nash.

'I was stuck in a dead end with nowhere to go,' Jake said.

'How did it feel?' Steve asked and Jake instantly banged his head on the wall.

Jake told the journalists, 'It fucking hurts,' as they were taking photos of the wound.

Twenty-five minutes later, Jake told the journalists how it felt to be a genius.

'My art sucks. It sucks me. It sucks all my energy. I am always exhausted after going through the process of creation. I often feel like ending everything right there on the spot, but I'm weak,' and without warning, Jake grabbed his axe; and seconds later, with a full arc swing, Jake carved another dent in the gallery timber flooring.

Towards the end of the show Jake walked along the walls to say farewell to his art. 'It's like being shagged up the ass. It hurts so much,' he said to the

group of journalists following him.

Lula waved a peeled onion on Jake's face. Suddenly tears start running down his face. The journalists took more photographs.

'The tears might be faked, but the feeling is genuine,' Jake stated.

At 1am, Jake fell to the floor for no apparent reason. One journalist was still on the premises and the last photos were taken. Jake was put on a mattress. Gabriel closed the gallery doors 15 minutes later.

Chapter II

Jake woke up feeling energetic. He bought coffee and a bagel at the Old Spitalfields Market before heading towards the Ten Bells pub, where the whores Jack the Ripper slaughtered used to mingle. Walking down Commercial Road, towards Aldgate East, Jake gazed with a smile at the old council house, one of the tallest buildings in the area, where he had considered buying a flat in his early twenties.

When Jake reached Whitechapel High Street, he turned left and bought a croissant from the 7Eleven. As he walked past the Whitechapel Gallery, he bumped into Elaine Wollstonecraft.

'Jake! Great opening last night, truly amazing,' Rachel said.

'Thanks, I hope the press felt the same way.'

'I'm sure they did. Good luck with the exhibition,' Rachel said before vanishing inside the gallery.

Seconds later, Jake was walking down Commercial Street towards Lula's apartment which was not far. He turned right onto Back Church Lane and kept walking towards the Thames. Five minutes later, he texted Lula, '*On my way. Nearly at yours.*'

Traditionally, Jake and Lula used to follow up a grand opening by drinking a bottle of Chardonnay while reading the art reviews careful assembled by Rochester Ltd during the night.

Lula lived in an old warehouse, a legacy from the West Indies enterprise and industrial revolution, which had recently been converted into character apartments.

Jake's visit happened to be one week after Lula had refurbished his bathroom. The scope of the work was simply to replace the existing toilet with an old one Lula had shipped from Italy. When his parents asked him why he wanted to keep the old toilet, Lula answered, 'Because of the feelings associated to it'.

Jake made no remark when he went inside for a piss. He was only interested in the art reviews.

'What do you think of my new bathroom?' Lula asked.

'What's new?'

'The toilet, mate. Don't you like it?'

'Looks much the same.'

'Have a look at the sketches. Those are sketches from my babyhood.'

Jake had a quick look and wondered aloud, 'Are you actually proud of this shit?'

'Yes, I am. It shows my inclination for the fine arts since I was born.'

'Fine art is a product of the intellect. It has nothing to do with drawing,' and Jake grabbed a glass of wine and curled up on the sofa.

'How are the reviews?'

'We can start with the Guardian,' Lula said.

'Go on.'

Lula started reading out loud, 'One word; surreal. What an amazing work. The future of British contemporary art is in good hands. The *Vicissitudes of the Axe* is a fantastic visual understating of the brutality of the human nature.'

'Who wrote that?'

'Steve. Who else would be so passionate about your work?'

'Our relationship goes back a long way, that's true, but sometimes I get the feeling he's been exploiting our friendship for the benefit of his career.'

'Haven't you been exploiting him too? He is an art critic after all, you owe him some gratitude.'

'Please, Kabugi, don't be so shallow. Pretty much any newspaper in this country has printed a review of last night's exhibition.'

Frustrated, Lula replied, 'Sometimes I wished you didn't call me Kabugi. How many Korean words to you know?'

'More than enough.'

'Not more than ten, I reckon.'

'Still more than you know Kabugi,' Jake said, sounding juvenile.

'I wouldn't be so sure of that.'

Lula was about to start reading another article when the door buzzed.

'It's probably Gabriel. He called this morning with exciting news,' and Jake rushed to the door.

'Tell me, tell me, what is it?' Jake asked Gabriel like a child about to receive a present.

Gabriel lit a cigarette first, curled up on the coach and said, 'The Wallenberg Gallery wants to host your next work. They want you.'

'Are you serious?'

'I am, Jake. I'm flying to New York the day after tomorrow.'

Jake gave Lula a strong hug. 'Can you believe this? I'm so excited,' followed by a loud shout. 'I'm so fucking excited, Kabugi.'

'We'll discuss the details later,' Gabriel said. 'As for the opening last night, let me say the negotiations with Mr X are progressing well.'

Suddenly, Jake's excitement lost its steam. 'Who the fuck is Mr X?'

'He's an American investor.'

'Have you ever met him?'

'No one has. He's in contact with the world through his loudspeaker.'

'Weird fellow. How weird is it to be talking through a loudspeaker? How weird is that? Excuse me for a second, I need to make a private phone call.'

Jake called Sabrina three times.

'Are you calling Sabrina?' Gabriel asked.

Jake shushed him and rejoiced when Sabrina answered.

'How are you?'

'Fine, why?'

'I have fantastic news to share. What're you doing tonight?'

'Working.'

'No you aren't, we're catching up in one hour,' and Jake hung up the phone. He didn't hear Sabrina say, 'What makes you think I want to see you?'

'I have a date, my friends,' Jake told Gabriel and Lula.

'You need to get her off your head,' Gabriel said.

'Jealous? Dokisuki is jealous.'

'Jake, I'm here to help you. I'm your agent and a friend. Sabrina has dumped you a thousand times. It will happen again.'

'She brings fire to my belly.'

'You sound like a virgin.'

Jake hesitated to answer. The relationship between Sabrina and him was not popular.

‘As a contemporary artist you should be dating someone that keeps challenging the status quo,’ Gabriel argued, ‘someone that creates furore in the press. Hello! Someone in there,’ and he poked Jake in the head. ‘Press, mate, press. The likes of Sabrina don’t make the press. She is a successful businesswoman. Who’s interested in that in the world of contemporary art? How many times do I have to tell you that?’

‘One love, one heart, let’s get together and feel all right,’ Jake started singing.

‘Enough of this bullshit, we need to talk about New York and I mean right now. I’m busy today but tomorrow morning, at ten am to be exact, you better drop by my place, and don’t be late,’ Gabriel said before leaving.

‘Go, go, you Dokisuki, like a yo-yo,’ Jake said, as he observed Gabriel leaving.

‘He’s worried and so am I,’ Lula argued.

‘Yes, yes, Dokisuki is worried about his money. But you,’ and Jake shook his finger at Lula, ‘You, my dear Kabugi, what worries you?’

Lula made a cup of instant coffee before answering.

‘Before we start, stop calling me Kabugi. Secondly, Sabrina and you were not made for each other. She turns wineries into profitable enterprises while you turn everything to ashes with one touch.’

Jake drank a glass of water and said, ‘I’ve killed my fire with the wood. I’ve got only air left.’

Lula had one sip of coffee before saying, ‘I’ve heard this before, Jake, and so has Gabriel. It makes no sense.’

‘It makes sense to Sabrina and I. Dokisuki can rot in hell, but you, my dear Kabugi, you should not interfere with matters of the heart.’

‘Matters of the heart? After she’s dumped you a thousand times?’

Jake laughed. ‘Sabrina has all the fire I need.’

‘We’ve noticed how much you need her. Always crawling back, regardless how much she spites you.’

‘She doesn’t spite me. Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘How many times has she dumped you?’

‘It’s only classified as a dump when someone departs. Do I need to remind you that I’m seeing her tonight?’

‘What for? So that she can tell you how unfit you are to keep up an adult relationship? How psychotic you can be.’

‘I am not psychotic.’

Lula gasped and sipped his coffee

'Of course you aren't. What made me think you were? How stupid of me.'
'Anyway, I'm out of here. Sabrina will put me in a good mood.
How many Lady Kabugis can do that to you?'
'I've met a few.'
'A few, my ass, and your mother doesn't count!' Lula giggled and Jake left.

Yaseng Tokki

'How can you be so sure I want to see you?' Sabrina asked.
'Why would you break from your hiatus then?'
Sabrina laughed. 'True, there is a bit of truth in that. Where are you?'
'Soho.'
'Jake, I'm not sure. I have quite a lot to do. Why don't we catch up tomorrow instead?'
'Come on, what do you have to lose? Tomorrow, we'll be dead.'
'You know me. Work comes first.'
'Why can't you work some other day. Tomorrow is alright, but not tonight.'
'I'm not even dressed.'
'It makes no difference. You can show up here naked if you wanted.'
'Jake, are you going to pester me all night if I decide not to come?'
'Yes.'
'Let me put something on then. See you soon.'

One hour later, Sabrina arrived at the Café Nero on Old Brompton Road to catch up with Jake. She was wearing a tight pair of jeans, a dark blue t-shirt, classic matching heels and bag, and a leather jacket.

'I got a hard-on just seeing you,' Jake confessed. 'Let's get out of here,' Jake said and grabbed Sabrina.

'Where are we going?'

'You shall see,' Jake said, smiling and sounding extremely happy despite having no idea where to go. As they walked past the Ain't Nothing but a Blues Bar on Kingly St, Jake commented, 'What do you think?'

'About what?'

‘Shall we go inside and check out who’s playing tonight?’

‘Why not?’ And three hours later, Sabrina and Jake left the bar, both laughing and tipsy.

‘What a great concert,’ Jake shouted at the drummer, who was busy trying to pack his instrument into the trunk of his car. He turned around, smiled, and replied, ‘I think we were lucky with the audience.’

Like sun shining on water, they spent the rest of the night drinking cocktails and champagne and singing, ‘*Sweet and young, you are seventeen.*’

‘It rocks,’ Jake shouted.

The night unfolded like a rollercoaster. At five am, at Sabrina’s house, as they tried to make love Jake argued, ‘Far too many caipirinhas,’ for his lack of virility.

‘We can try again tomorrow morning.’

Minutes later, Sabrina was asleep, snoring like a violin sonata. Jake listened to the music and watched the figure of his long time partner next to him.

Before sunrise, Jake uttered into Sabrina’s ear, ‘I love you,’ and went out to buy almond croissants.

‘Where are you going?’

‘You wait and see,’ and one hour later they both laid in bed looking at the ceiling.

‘I’m feeling like Yaseng Tokki again,’ Jake said.

‘You aren’t?’

‘I am and loving it.’

Seconds later, Jake’s mobile started to ring. It was Gabriel.

‘What do you want?’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m in heaven.’

‘In heaven, my ass. It’s fifteen minutes past ten. You were supposed to be here to discuss New York at ten,’ Gabriel yelled from the other end.

‘Can’t we do it some other time?’

‘I’m flying to New York tomorrow morning. I have other commitments this afternoon. No, the answer is no, we can’t do it some other time,’ and Gabriel hung up the phone.

‘I may have to be absent for a couple of hours,’ Jake told Sabrina.

‘It’s fine Jake. Give Gabriel my regards.’

‘He’s not pleased to know you are back in town.’

'Why not?'

'Don't know. You better ask him,' Jake murmured before leaving the bedroom.

IV

Jake returned three hours later.

Sabrina was sleeping but Jake had the house keys with him. He walked in and joined Sabrina in bed. She woke up seconds later.

'What's the time?'

'Slightly past one o'clock.'

'This late and I have so much to do,' Sabrina said before getting up rapidly.

'Gabriel is considering selling my art to Mr X. He wants to buy everything. He doesn't give a toss about the price tag.'

'Who is Mr X?' Sabrina asked while getting dressed.

'One hell of a weird investor who speaks through a loudspeaker.'

'What does he look like?'

'I don't know. I have only seen the loudspeaker. The box set looks quite attractive.'

Sabrina smiled.

'How does he move around then? Being a loudspeaker, smartass?'

'I know it sounds weird, but that's how it he talks to us. No one's ever seen him.'

'But how does he walk?'

'He hires brain-dead-teenagers to walk him around.'

'How bizarre. Does it work?' Sabrina wondered.

'It is possible to have a conversation with him, if that's what you're asking. I think he's just a boring investor in desperate need of attention.'

'Well, if he's willing to spend the money on your twisted creations, let him do it.'

'I don't like the idea. There's something wrong about it,' and Jake rolled over with the intention to sleep. 'He's also paying top dollar but doesn't want to agree on any resale royalty.'

'Is he getting the art without a contract?'

'Yes. Dokisuki reckons that we should allow it. Considering what he's paying.'

'Do it then. Gabriel is here to help you.'

'I don't know. Something not right. I can almost smell a rat in this transaction.'

'You're acting paranoid.'

'Maybe, maybe I am.'

One hour later, Jake woke up to the noise of Sabrina having a shower. He roamed the living room and kitchen looking for something to drink. He found a bottle of wine on the dining table. *'I can read my name on the label,'* he thought.

When Sabrina walked in, towel around her head, breasts exposed, she said, 'You should have asked you could have opened that bottle.'

'Is this from another Mediterranean winery trying to break into the UK market?'

'Kind of, is it any good?'

'Divine, my dear. Here, have a sip.'

Jake poured wine into a glass. Sabrina had a sip and creased her eyebrows.

'What're you doing tonight?' Jake asked.

'Working.'

'Why don't we go out and have dinner?'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'I have too much to do.'

'But we have so much to celebrate.'

'Celebrate what, smartass?'

'New York and the opportunity to enter the American art market, how about that?'

'Sounds really great. I'm so totally over the moon,' Sabrina said and walked towards the kitchen to prepare a cup of tea. Jake followed her.

'Don't be jealous.'

Jake tried to kiss Sabrina, unsuccessfully.

'Listen Jake, last night was great. I hope we do it again, but right now I have a lot to do. I prefer to stay home working.'

'How can you be so selfish? I haven't seen you in ages. You vanished from London without notice. Don't you think we have loads to talk about? Staying home, working, is so not cool.'

'Not cool? I beg your pardon, but since when did you start paying my bills?'

‘Come on, let’s forget our obligations and live for the moment. Let’s relax instead. Let’s have fun.’

‘You are such a poet. What do you suggest then?’

‘Let’s have dinner.’

‘How original. What if we order some food and stay home, watching DVDs?’

‘That’s so boring.’

‘It works for me.’

‘Let’s go to the new sushi restaurant around the corner and go with the flow. If the night doesn’t look promising, we come back here and watch dramas instead.’

V

Sabrina and Jake were at a bar in Convent Garden. Sabrina, tipsy and at ease, was saying, ‘You are such a smartass, my Jake Ford from the Stars,’ with a tender voice to a mellow Jake. ‘Are you trying to get me drunk?’

‘Of course not. Why would I?’

‘Do you remember the international students association in Seoul?’

‘Of course, how could I forget?’

‘How many times did you try to get me drunk?’

Jake laughed, ‘A thousand, I reckon.’

‘I could hardly drink champagne at the time.’

‘And look at you now. Who would think you would turn into a wine consultant?’

‘It makes perfect sense to me when I think about it.’

‘How come?’

‘Every sip of wine brings back so many good memories. I drank more wine in South Korea than in any other country. What were you thinking, that I would end up in bed with you?’ Sabrina laughed.

‘You sure did. I often think that I would choose the two of us in Seoul if I was given the opportunity to revisit one period of my life.’

‘I wished that too. I would love to live the same moments again.’

‘Any particular moment?’

‘Gosh, I can think of so many. Seeing you drawing. Day after day at my place. I would lay in the sofa and you wouldn’t stop staring at me, documented every single detail of my body. My facial expressions. You were so good at it.’

‘Still am.’

‘No, you not. You haven’t drawn a line in years.’

‘I do it, every now and again.’

‘Do you? When was the last time we sat in a bar and you get you sketch book to draw a portrait of me?’

‘Some time ago, I guess,’ Jake mumbled.

‘Ages ago, Jake. Ages ago.’

A moment of solitude emerged between the two, which Sabrina was quick to break, ‘Do you remember when you volunteered for cleaning the dishes the day after the party because you knew I would be there?’

Jake laughed, ‘What was his name?’

‘Who?’

‘The bloke that organized the party.’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Wait. He was from Germany, I remember that. And he had a car. I used to call him Austin Martin, of course, his name was Martin.’

‘What happened to him?’

‘I think he’s still living there.’

‘Whereabout?’

‘In Seoul, I think he even married a local Korean.’

‘Are you still in touch?’

‘Not really, we never got along that well. But you can check his Facebook. Do you remember our walks together?’

‘How could I forget?’

‘We walked, and walked, and walked through the snow. All I wanted to do was be with you.’

Jake had a sip of wine and concluded, ‘We were happy and we didn’t know it.’

‘Of course I knew.’

‘You did not.’

‘Whatever, Jake.’

‘We’re adults now, we weren’t then.’

Sabrina laughed, ‘Adults? You haven’t changed a bit.’

‘Do I look like an adolescent to you?’

'Yes.'

'I certainly don't see much adolescence left in me.'

'How can you be so sure of that?'

'Why can't you listen to me?'

'Yes, my dear Jake of the Stars,' and Sabrina had a sip of wine before saying, 'Salute!' Followed by a loud laugh.

'Why do you think I can't behave like an adult?'

'Do you want to hear my sincerest opinion?'

'Go on, I'm old enough to be able to deal with it.'

'Ok, the answer is no.'

'How come?'

'You are more selfish than a three year old child.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing, absolutely nothing, although it isn't the sort of behaviour you should be bragging about when seeing someone.'

'Why can't you believe I'm a different person?'

Sabrina gasped. 'Why would you?'

'I had to.'

'Liar, you're such a smartass. You've been lying to me since we met in Seoul.'

'I would never lie to you. Sometimes, when nothing makes sense, I remember the time we spent together and I'm able to smile again,' Jake said in a furtive way.

Sabrina had another sip of wine.

'Don't you want to know why I broke my hiatus?' Sabrina said, throwing a sexy smile at Jake.

'Now that you mention it, I confess I have been wondering.'

'I'm going through a strange period,' Sabrina said, laughing.

'Aren't you happy with your life?'

'I'm not fulfilled.'

'You shouldn't have left me,' Jake argued.

'There's definitely something missing, but it's not you.'

'Not me?! What else is missing then?'

'What I need is quite simple.'

'What is it then?' Jake asked, extremely curious.

'I want babies.'

'Babies, are you crazy? How could you look after them?' Jake wondered,

rather disappointed. 'I thought you were missing me?'

'Why would I miss you, smartass?'

'Are you giving up your professional career just like that?'

'Of course not, but I'll have to work around it.'

'You're crazy,' and Jake ordered a Caipirinha at the bar.

After one sip, he wondered, 'Who's going to be the father?'

Sabrina laughed and answered with a smile, 'You.'

'Me? Are you crazy? I don't want children.'

'Liar, you said you wanted them.'

'When was that?'

'In Seoul.'

'Nonsense.'

'I remember your words like yesterday. Were you lying to me?'

'This is fucked.'

Sabrina smiled and hugged Jake. 'Don't be alarmed, making children will be good fun.'

'You can't be serious.'

'I am, but I'll understand if you decline the offer.'

'Are you crazy? If this is what it takes to keep you close to me, I'm up for it,' Jake said.

Both Jake and Sabrina didn't know what to say to each other. The situation was awkward. Jake broke the ice with a grin on his face and said, 'This is it then. Let's go to my apartment.'

'For what?'

'To make babies, what else?'

Sabrina laughed and said, 'Let's stop at my place first.'

'What for?'

'So we can grab something decent to drink.'

At her place, Sabrina collected three bottles of wine.

'This wine will give us wings.'

'That's Red Bull, honey.'

'Wait until you try this.'

Half an hour later, the first bottle of wine was empty. Jake was on his balcony, gazing at the stars and Sabrina was inside the apartment, selecting a record to play.

'Sometimes I wonder what's out there.'

Sabrina leaned her head out to glance up at the sky.

‘We will know it when the time is right,’ Sabrina said before going back inside. Jake followed her, sometimes dancing to the sound of a cheesy band playing in the background.

VI

The following day, Jake woke up with a hangover and Sabrina by his side. Minutes later, Jake had prepared a cup of instant coffee and was curled up on his couch, listening to a modern jazz record.

Two tracks later, Sabrina entered the room, walking slowly and mumbling, ‘What strange music have you got playing? Do you want a painkiller?’

‘I’m alright. Do you like this music?’

‘It’s a lovely mess,’ and Sabrina walked across to the bathroom, eager for a hot shower. ‘What are you doing today?’

‘Don’t know. Do you have any suggestions?’

Sabrina didn’t answer. She left the bathroom five minutes later and appeared in the living room with a yellow towel wrapped around her hair.

‘Where are we?’

‘At my place, haven’t you noticed?’

‘Looks a bit different, you should improve the hotel style you’ve got around here. For a moment I thought we were in the Sheraton. You need personality.’

‘Do you want to have breakfast by the river?’

‘Breakfast by the river? How romantic. Do I get flowers too?’

‘What makes you think you deserve them?’

‘Don’t you think I should be covered in gold for every minute I spend with you?’

Half an hour later, Sabrina and Jake arrived at the rear yard of the Bangkok Sidewalk.

Jake read the art section of the Financial Times.

‘Two Cesar salads,’ Laura said while setting two plates on the table.

'Thanks.'

'How's everything?' Laura asked Jake.

'Remarkably well. The *Vicissitudes of the Axe* is travelling to Germany. I'm showing in New York. Things couldn't be going better.'

'I read an article about you in the Guardian.'

'What did it say?'

'That a famous American art investor was considering investing in you.'

'Really? Who?'

'A man with a strange name.'

'Who?' Jake wondered.

'A Mr something...'

'I guess you're talking about Mr X.'

'It does ring a bell,' Laura commented. 'Do you know him?'

'I've met his avatar, never had the pleasure of meeting him in person.'

'I read he speaks through a loudspeaker and is known as a creative investor.'

'Is he?'

'Apparently so, whatever that means. Personally, I think he's an ugly man in desperate need of attention, nothing else,' Jake said swiftly and pretended to be more interested in the FT than in continuing the conversation.

'What did the article say?'

Sabrina asked Laura. 'That Mr X is after Jake's catalogue.'

'As long as I'm selling,' Jake intervened.

'Aren't you?' Sabrina asked.

'I guess I am,' Jake said after a sip of water.

The management of the Bangkok Sidewalk cast an unpleasant look at Laura and she felt she had to walk away to attend other tables.

'How can someone speak to people through a loudspeaker? How weird is that?'

'Have you never tried a conference call? I bet that's how he got the idea.'

Sabrina smiled. 'What are you going to do about New York? Are you going to execute more people?'

'Not sure yet, why are you asking?'

'Sounds to me like you're running out of ideas.'

'Who? Me? Of course not, I'm a genius.'

'What're you doing then?'

'I'm working on it. Or do you think I can be brilliant without hard work?'

'Please describe hard work.'

'It's hard work finding an idea that empowers people to engage with me.'

'I don't engage with your ideas.'

'What did you think of the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*? And be honest with me.'

'It was grotesque.'

'That's the sort of engagement I like.'

'It does make you wonder about the end of beauty or how we go about interfering in other people's lives. It made me think about it, slightly, but your art doesn't provide the answers.'

'I'm not after answers. I'm more interested in the aesthetical representation of the human condition.'

'Whatever. I never really liked your art.'

'Makes no difference,' and looking creative, Jake started drawing balloons on a piece of paper.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Absolutely nothing.'

Sabrina didn't answer immediately. She noticed how Laura would sometimes cast a seducing look at Jake and asked, 'How well do you know the waitress?'

'Who? Laura?'

'I guess so.'

'I haven't been to bed with her if that's what you're wondering.'

'She seems quite fond of you.'

'She thinks I'm rich and famous.'

'What made her think such a thing?'

'How would I know?'

'I'm sure you helped her to get the picture. Is she English? She sounded foreign now that I think about it.'

'She's from Brazil or some other corrupt country in South America.'

'Wait a second. I'll ask if she's from Chile.' Sabrina left the table, returning moments later.

'She's Brazilian.'

'Is she? Couldn't be sure.'

'She asked me if I was your girlfriend.'

'What did you tell her?'

'I told her I was your sister. Do you come here a lot?'

'From time to time. Laura always looks after my table.'

Sabrina had a sip of water and gazed at the blue sky, looking for an interesting cloud before saying, 'Why don't we go shopping instead and act like

normal people?’

‘I do need a new suit to be at my best when I land in America,’ Jake commented.

‘So, come with me, let’s shop, let’s shop,’ Sabrina sang and fifteen minutes later, they left the restaurant to find a taxi.

‘Saville Row, please.’

‘Over here will be fine, thanks,’ Jake said half an hour later to the taxi driver.

‘Which tailor do you normally go to?’ Sabrina asked.

‘What silly question is that?’ And seconds later they were welcomed by a gentleman, dressed to perfection. He asked them with a radiant smile, ‘How can I help you, Mr Ford?’

‘I’m after a suit that brings out my dashing side.’

‘Please, follow me,’ the gentleman answered. ‘We have exactly what you need.’ Both Sabrina and Jake were guided through the shop towards the contemporary-looking-suits section.

‘Please let me know if you need me,’ and the gentleman walked away to attend another customer.

‘I like this one,’ Jake said as he removed one suit from the rail.

‘What do you think?’

‘Flamboyant,’ Sabrina answered.

‘Too dashing?’

‘No, just bad taste.’

‘What do you think of this one?’ And Jake grabbed a dark suit from another part of the shop.

‘Morbid.’

‘Not a bad colour, not at all.’

‘I thought you were after something brighter than that.’

‘It depends. I’m entering the American market as the portrayer of death. Better to look morbid rather than a clown.’

‘Didn’t you just say your art had no meaning?’

‘Do you know the meaning of death?’

Sabrina chose not to continue the conversation and walked towards the women’s section of the shop.

One hour later Jake and Sabrina entered Jake’s apartment. Sabrina went to the bedroom to change her clothes, leaving the door wide open. As Jake

watched her undressing.

Twenty minutes later, Sabrina and Jake were both drinking a glass of wine and looking at the ceiling.

'This wine is fantastic.'

'I bought it initially as an investment.'

'We're not supposed to worship wine.'

'I didn't say we should, but it doesn't stop me from investing in it.'

Jake looked at the bottle and murmured, 'Two years old. Don't you think you are judging the potential of this liquor too early?'

'I have my sources. I think this one is good for drinking. I bought ten cases of Pinot Noir from a small village in Provence which I think has better prospects.'

'Sabrina, don't you think there is something wrong with our society?'

'What do you mean?'

'Investing in wine, really, how distorted is that?'

'What about Mr X buying your retarded installations?'

'I'm a producer of fine art. Nature cannot compete with the intellect.'

'Why don't you shut up and make love to me, my little Jake of the Stars?'

Like butter and knife, Sabrina and Jake made love.

After ejaculating, Jake rolled over to grab his glass of wine from the bedside table.

'I think you've made the wrong choice. This wine is wonderful,' Jake said after a quick sip.

'Jake, I think it's about time we have a serious conversation.'

'About what?'

'I want to start making love without a condom.'

'Why?'

'Do I need to remind you I want babies?'

'Sorry, what did you say?'

'I want to have babies. I told you already.'

'What? Last night? I thought you were drunk and teasing me.'

'Of course not. Don't be ridiculous.'

'Seriously, how do you intend to have babies and focus on your career?'

'I don't care. I'll be a terrific mum and it won't affect your career.'

'We can talk about that some other day. It's late, it's better to sleep,' Jake mumbled.

'You can try to avoid the conversation for the time being but I'm not giving

up on this. No babies, no relationship.'

'I'll think about it,' Jake murmured and rolled over to go to sleep.

VII

The studio of Jake Ford was located in Limehouse. It had been used as a warehouse for goods coming in from the East Indies and was abandoned after the Great War. The high ceilings were ideal for the grand production of art installations. As Jake told Lula after signing a five years lease on the property, 'The scale of what we can produce has no limits. We're going monumental from now on.'

Jake loved his studio, however, as his popularity increased, so did the number of social commitments that came with it making his presence at the studio more casual than regular.

Lula was Jake's production director and responsible for giving a physical form to Jake's ideas and wishes. Working at the studio were also two assistants, Julia, a young artist with an interest in model making, and Peter, an artist with an interest in everything kinky. From time to time, depending on the monumentality of what they were working on, Lula would employ more assistants. However, on numerous occasions in the past, Lula had employed assistants without reason.

Assistants were easy to find. Being Jake Ford and such a famous artist, job applications from art students flooded his studio either by email, post or in person.

These students were more interested in a working experience than a regular job; dreaming of being as famous as Jake Ford one day. Quite often, students would offer to pay for their apprenticeship.

Jake, enthusiastic about the concept, told Lula, 'Rather than increasing your salary, I'll let you exploit the assistants as you please,' and Jake gave Lula full control to expand and profit from teaching.

'You can keep the student fees. After all, why should we pay them to learn from me?' and since then, the studio would expand and contract, especially when Lula was desperate for cash. Initially, his interviews were aimed at

measuring the talent of the applicants, but as Lula became more experienced, he developed a cut to the chase approach. Applicants were asked to confirm that their parents could pay the tutoring fees as well as paying upfront a non-refundable bond for the apprenticeship.

VIII

Jake entered his studio early in the morning. Enthusiastically, he greeted his staff and said to Lula, 'Kabugi, I've been thinking about the new commission. Last night, after passionate sex with Sabrina, I had a vision. Grab a sketch book and follow me.'

Both Jake and Lula moved into the drawing room. Jake closed the door behind him and pulled up a chair made of recycled materials, covered with old paint stains, to sit down. Lula sat down next to him, on a sleek chair, and placed his sketchbook on his knees.

Jake said, 'I want to work on seven films at the same time. Also, the *Vicissitudes of the Axe* has been so successful that I want to keep the same flavour, but this time around I am thinking on a different kind of material for the decapitations.'

'What do you have in mind?' Lula asked.

'Young children, with plenty of makeup, looking like their parents! We can start by mutilating their fingers, legs, arms, and chopping off their heads in the end, without one single scream. What do you think?'

'That's an amazing idea. Everyone will be horrified,' Lula answered emotionlessly.

'Let's get the ball rolling then. I need to discuss the idea with Dokisuki, but have a go at it anyhow.'

'We should have something ready tomorrow.'

'Sabrina and I are off to Paris tomorrow morning.'

Lula, confused, asked, 'Are you, are you dating again?'

'Well, not officially, but she did leave a toothbrush at my place.'

'You can't be serious.'

'Kabugi, she brings fire to my belly. What can I do?'

‘How many times have I asked you to stop calling me Kabugi?’

‘A few, but I’ve always assumed you were jealous of my Korean.’

‘How can I be jealous of your Korean? How many Korean words do you speak? Six?’

‘More words than you, that’s for sure, making my persona a master in the subject around here. What else do we need to discuss?’

‘Steve Nash is coming over. He wants to talk to you.’

‘Why me?’

‘Not sure. Tried to help him out but he was adamant that we needs to speak with you.’

‘What? What’s going on? When is he coming over?’

‘In the next hour or so.’

‘How come you didn’t let me know about this earlier?’

‘I did try to call you, but no one answered. You and Sabrina were nesting in the love boat,’ Lula argued indifferently.

Jake checked his clock before saying, ‘Well, it makes no difference. I’ll have lunch with him.’

Jake decided to check his emails while waiting for Steve. Five minutes later, he told Lula, ‘I’m going to the bathroom for a dump.’

Ten minutes later, Jake returned and said to Peter, ‘Could you please go to the toilet and flush my turd? Thanks.’

Peter went, flushed the toilet, and returned to his desk minutes later.

‘Good sized turd? What do you reckon?’ Jake asked Peter.

‘Indeed, and smelly too.’

Jake put a grin on his face. He walked back and forth around his studio, often checking the time on his clock while Julia started to feel anxious.

Suddenly, Jake stopped. He checked the time one more time, clapped his hands and shouted, ‘Everyone, let’s gather for a creative meeting,’ and both Julia and Peter stood up and joined him.

They sat down on the floor.

‘Who has children here?’

‘No one,’ Peter answered.

‘What about nieces or nephews?’

‘I have two,’ Julia replied.

‘Great. Do you have photos of them?’

Julia rushed to her desk to grab her wallet.

‘Here,’ she said and handed over a regular sized digital photo of two, Far Eastern girls with curly hair. Jake grabbed a chair and pinned the photo onto the chair before saying, ‘Let’s work on these two. What are their names?’

‘Scarlet and Jennifer,’ Julia answered.

‘How old are they?’

‘Scarlet is four and Jennifer is about to turn seven.’

‘Marvellous. Everyone, let’s do this exercise together. Let’s picture Scarlet and Jennifer smiling, as if they are about to eat ice cream. Smiling, like happy children, but let’s cover their faces with makeup. Let’s try to portray them with as much resemblance with their parents as possible. Do you follow?’

Everyone nodded their heads.

‘Good, now, rather than feeding with ice cream let’s slice their legs instead, but slowly, no rush, let’s keep their faces happy. No screams please, are you with me?’

‘Absolutely,’ both Peter and Julia replied, ‘I can see already the repulsion on people’s faces,’ Peter added.

‘Great, let’s chop one arm off. Let’s start with the left one and wait a couple of seconds before chopping the other one off. Don’t let the happy faces dry, not one inch, and we need blood, plenty of blood. Let’s make them spit blood like a fountain. Like Trafalgar Square,’ several seconds of silence followed and suddenly Jake screamed, ‘BA-BUM. Off with their heads!’

Jake started clapping his hands, ‘Come on, come on, let’s start working,’ while Julia and Peter were sketching away.

The storyboards of Jennifer and Scarlet losing their head were produced rather quickly.

‘I like it, what do you think?’ Jake asked Lula.

‘Looks amazing.’

‘Great,’ Jake said and turned to Peter to say, ‘Go ahead and animate it.’

‘What should we name this installation?’ Peter asked one hour later.

‘Let me think. It needs to be something a child would say,’ Jake looked up and down. He combined several words on a piece of paper and suddenly said, ‘Ice cream rules the world.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I figured this is something a child would say. It should work well as a title for this piece.’

‘How do you know a child prefers ice cream, if you’re not a father?’

'I have my sources,' Jake answered.

Julia and Peter turned around and returned to their desks. Peter shouted seconds later, 'Don't think children have this much blood?'

'This is a piece of art, not a real reproduction of life,' Jake shouted back.

Steve popped in fifteen minutes later.

'Steve what a surprise, what are you doing here?'

'Didn't you know I was coming?'

'Lula mentioned something about it. Great to have you here. Come with me,' and Jake guided Steve towards the meeting room. 'Have a seat, would you care for a croissant?'

'No thanks.'

'Coffee?'

'Coffee will be fine,' and before Steve could finish his sentence, Jake had already walked towards the door to shout at Julia, 'Two coffees and one croissant, please.'

Steve sat down on a couch which resembled the IKEA Klippan but the cover was hard to place.

'I read your review about the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*. Thanks for the encouraging words,' Jake said.

'Jake, I was only reporting what I felt at the time. No need to thank me. It's my job to report to society the best contemporary art Britain is producing right now.'

'Please, Steve, you make me blush.'

'Jake, what are you working on at the moment?'

'I've accepted a commission from the Wallenberg Gallery.'

'Have you? So, the rumours are true. That's great news.'

'They've been very persuasive lately and both Gabriel and I agreed it was the right time to conquer America.'

'They're not famous for supporting contemporary artists, but this is great news for you and British art. Are you still working with axes?'

'Why do you ask?'

'I'm curious to know your next move, and so is Britain, by the way.'

'Not sure if I follow you.'

'Jake, I've been commissioned by the BBC to curate a documentary about you.'

'Have you? How delightful,' Jake said while taking a sip of coffee that Julia

had left in the room.

'Isn't it wonderful?' Steve wondered.

'Is this going to be another documentary about investing in fine art?' Jake asked while chewing on his croissant.

'No, this documentary is going to be a lot different, I can assure you.'

'How different?' Jake asked with his mouth full.

'We need to talk about it.'

Jake uttered a not so convinced sound and added, 'you are not doing a great job hooking me on this. Shall we have lunch in Soho?'

'I'm more eager to eat art.'

'I don't have much to show right now,' Jake said before screaming at Julia, 'Do we have something to show to Steve?'

Julia, extremely nervous, appeared in the room and said, 'Not at present, but we have cuts from previous work.'

'Cuts from previous shows. How boring is that? You can zip now,' Jake murmured. 'Steve, let's get out of here. Don't be such a no-no. Come with me. The bill is on me.'

'So, tell me, what's this documentary all about?' Jake asked Steve minutes later. After stopping a black cab on Commercial Street, on their way to Soho via Bank. When the cab entered the City, via Aldgate East, Steve said, 'It's a documentary about you.'

'So were all the previous documentaries about me.'

'This one is going to be totally different. You've been voted the weirdest living artist in the UK.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means that the BBC art department ran a poll and found out that you're the most enigmatic living artist in Britain.'

'And?'

'The public loves you. They want to know more about you. Where you live, what you eat, who do you talk to, what inspires you? They want to understand you.'

Jake didn't say a word for a few moments. When the black cab reached Bank and stopped at the red light, Jake pointed at the people walking across the road and asked, 'This people, you mean?'

'Yes, our own people.'

'Why would people that can hardly picture the difference between a

Caravaggio and a Pollock, be so suddenly interested in my art?’

‘I think everyone in this country has noticed the value your art commands in art auctions.’

‘That’s exactly what I thought. This is just another attempt from the BBC to try to explain why I sell art for millions and the Mickey Mouse artists from Brick Lane can’t do the same.’

‘No Jake, it’s nothing like that.’

‘Pull over here,’ Jake said to the cab driver. ‘Let’s walk instead,’ he said to Steve.

They exited the cab at the north end of Cheapside, not far from St Paul’s Cathedral.

‘I’m okay with walking,’ Steve said as they entered St Paul’s from the rear garden, the Merrill Lynch office behind them.

‘Have you been to One London Wall?’ Steve asked.

‘Not yet, why?’

‘You should take the lift up to the rooftop. The views of London are monumental. We can have lunch there if you like.’

‘I’m more inclined to go to Soho. I fancy the best chicken Teriyaki in town.’

Jake and Steve walked past St Paul’s and the flock of students studying Christopher Wren’s London masterpiece. They walked down Ludgate Hill towards Fleet Street. When they walked past the Goldman Sachs’ office Steve asked, ‘Why are you so afraid of the documentary?’

‘I’m not afraid. I just can’t be bothered.’

‘You should trust me. This one’s going to be completely different.’

‘How different can it be?’

‘The documentary isn’t about your art. It’s about you. The public wants to understand what makes you so special. Everyone seems to agree you are a genius.’

‘I’m not sure yet what you intend to do, but let’s walk instead. I feel like walking through Lincoln’s Inn,’ and they turned onto Chancery Lane.

Minutes later, when Steve and Jake entered Lincoln’s Inn Fields via Serle St, Jake said, ‘Maybe we should have lunch at the Opera House, what do you think?’

‘Sounds good to me,’ Steve said and added, ‘I watched the Parsifal last night at the Convent Garden.’

‘Did you? I can’t stand Wagner anymore. I prefer Italian Opera,’ Jake commented as they walked past the John Soane Museum.

‘Jake, let me tell you exactly what this documentary is going to be,’ Steve said while going through the appetizers, seated at the Royal Opera House.

‘Steve, why don’t you discuss this documentary with Gabriel instead?’

‘Gabriel will appear in the documentary too.’

‘Gabriel? My agent? What’re you talking about?’

‘Jake, who’s your favourite artist?’

‘Living or dead?’

‘Dead.’

‘I like Bill Viola.’

‘Bill’s not dead.’

‘He is to me.’

‘Well, imagine that Bill, in fact, died last week and we were producing a documentary about him. What do you think we would broadcast?’

‘I guess you would collect footage from his family members and close friends to saying wonders about him and emphasise the genius he was, measured by the value his work achieved at the auction houses. Did I get it right?’

‘Absolutely. This is exactly what we want to do for you.’

‘What exactly do you mean by *we*? Who is involved in this? You don’t work for the BBC.’

‘I’ve been invited by the BBC to curate the documentary, or to produce it, so to speak.’

Jake tried his water and said, ‘But I’m not dead yet.’

‘That’s the beauty of it. The BBC is treating this as if you weighed the same as a dead artist, isn’t that amazing?’

‘I’m not sure yet.’

‘Jake you can’t turn away a documentary of this magnitude.’

‘Why not?’

‘You owe it to this country.’

Jake gasped and said, ‘I’ll have to think about it.’

‘We’re planning to start shooting this week.’

‘What’s the rush?’

‘Ask the BBC management board.’

Outside, it started to rain. Jake could see the rain running down the glass and along the steel façade of the Opera House.

‘Who do you want to interview?’

‘Apart from the art curators, agents, and so forth, we want people close to

you, like Lula and Gabriel.'

'You should interview Sabrina then.'

'Sabrina? Are you still together?'

'We are rarely seen in public together, but we've been making love like two wild rabbits.'

'I did think about inviting Sabrina to be part of the documentary, but I didn't want to have issues with Gabriel. I scrapped the idea in the end.'

'But have you been talking to Gabriel about this?'

'We may have exchanged a word or two.'

'What did he say?'

'He reckons it's not his decision to make.'

Jake appreciated the modern architecture of the Opera House in silence.

Steve, nervously, asked, 'Can we count you in?'

'I'm not sure yet. I need to discuss it with Gabriel.'

'What's your gut feeling?' Steve asked, afraid of the answer.

'I'm inclined to say yes, but.'

'Great news, Jake, let's cheer to that,' Steve said without hiding his enthusiasm. 'The BBC will be happy that I managed to get you on board.'

'I haven't agreed to anything yet.'

'I'm sure you won't miss this opportunity. You should be honoured they're doing it.'

Steve asked the waiter to bring the best bottle of champagne.

'This one is on me,' Steve said to Jake.

Enthusiastically, Steve moved across to the table behind him and asked Steve Curry to join them to celebrate the great news.

'What are we celebrating?' Steve Curry asked in a strong British accent.

'Another major event in the history of British art,' Steve said.

'We should indeed cheer to that,' Steve replied.

The three public figures sipped a glass of wine. Steve hugged Jake and shook hands with Steve before returning to his table. Steve Nash was extremely happy.

'Jake, I trust you're going to bless the documentary.'

'I'll think about it.'

'Do you have any insights for my readers about your future artistic endeavours?' Steve asked Jake, less enthusiastically.

'Just write something entertaining.'

'Please, Jake, contemporary art is a serious business.'

‘Steve, to be honest with you, I’m not trying to change a winning formula. The *Vicissitudes of the Axe* sold well. I’m thinking about giving my investors the same plate with a different taste, or should it be the other way around? Give them a different plate with the same taste. Write down whatever makes more sense to you,’ Jake said, while eating a heart-shaped Pavlova with chocolate and vodka mousse.

Towards the end of lunch, Steve took over the conversation. ‘Jake, the art section of the BBC has great faith in you. You’re bringing art to a common ground. Anyone can understand what a terrifying experience it is to be decapitated. It is your humanity, the humanity that is in your art that we praise.’ He sipped his glass of water before continuing. ‘You have dug deep into the human soul. I know it’s cold comfort, but when I watched your set of decapitations, I was compelled to think about my existence, about how we interact in society and I felt terrified. What are we, beasts?’

Steve noticed a young girl with purple hair and red piercings, seating not far from the escalators, under the mezzanine, gazing at Jake and said, ‘I love your art, I really do. I believe in communicating to an audience. I believe art is a form of entertainment until it crosses over to a deeper meaning.’

‘I keep saying to my assistants that the creative process is about searching for something bigger than life. Art should elevate us.’

‘That’s quite right. We need to keep talking about this. Keep the documentary fresh and current. Work in progress should be our focus. Aren’t you working with the Wallenberg Gallery?’

‘I am, but I haven’t been to New York yet.’

‘Whatever you do I will make sure it makes into the BBC documentary. Meanwhile, when do you think we can interview Lula?’

‘Hold on a second,’ Jake said and rang Lula, ‘I’m taking care of it as we speak. What time is more convenient for you?’

‘What about tomorrow morning, at the BBC studios?’

Seconds later, Lula answered the phone.

‘Can you go to the BBC studios tomorrow morning?’ Jake asked.

‘I guess I can. Who do I talk to?’

‘Have a word with Steve to sort out the details of the shooting.’

‘What’s the purpose of this?’

‘It’s an interview for a documentary Steve is producing about me.’

‘What do you need me for?’

‘To talk, what else?’

‘Talk? What do you mean?’

‘Talk, mate, talk about you and me. Answer questions with an open heart,’ and Jake hung up the phone.

When the lunch ended, Steve and Jake walked separated ways.

Jake walked to Soho Square to visit Gabriel at his office.

‘Jake, what brings you here?’

‘Steve and I had lunch at the Opera House. He wants to produce a documentary about me.’

‘Did you accept to do it?’

‘Should I?’

‘Up to you. At this stage, it matters little to your career. It won’t increase the value of your art, apart from cementing your popularity though. I guess it’s hard to access the outcome without trying.’

‘What do you suggest then?’

‘Let the BBC have a go, but we revert the right to decide in the end what can be broadcast or what cannot.’

‘I don’t think Steve will agree to that.’

‘It depends on how we word the agreement. Let’s say we keep the power to halt the documentary if it portrays you as an obnoxious individual.’

‘Find it hard to believe he would.’

‘We certainly don’t want too much fuzz about the value of your art in the documentary.’

‘I think so too. It will hardly help the public to understand my work.’

‘We can’t let the BBC have this power over your artistic career. If they want us involved in this, we should be dictating the terms and conditions. There is too much at stake. Your name took ages to build.’

‘I presume you are taking care of this then?’

‘Yes I am.’

‘Lula is going to the White City tomorrow morning.’

‘Is he? I’ll tell the lawyers to draft the contract before he turns up. Even if he does the interview, without an agreement between us and them, the BBC has nothing to broadcast.’

Jake had a random look at Gabriel’s laptop and asks, ‘how was New York?’

‘Demanding, the Wallenberg Gallery operates in a different way.’

‘They all do,’ Jake commented.

‘How are things coming along?’

Jake browsed the CD collection of Gabriel before answering. 'Having a go at children that resemble their parents.'

'Children? Why children? Sounds a bit grotesque,' and Gabriel wondered for a while, 'are you sure about this?'

'I think it will take the press by storm.'

'It's always hard to predict what the press is going to say, but to be quite honest I am feeling slightly uncomfortable with this idea.'

'Don't be.'

'Why children?'

'You know I like to explore in my art the law of the jungle.'

'But why children? It will be a controversial show to say the least, but maybe for the wrong reasons.'

'So far the whole thing is nothing more than sketch.'

'You'd better produce something soon. The Wallenberg Gallery is not easy to please, I'm warning you.'

Jake didn't answer. He browsed Gabriel's music records instead.

'Do you think these are the times to listen to Mahler? It's so passé.'

'What do you recommend then? Steve Reich?'

'Steve Reich? Of course not, you're not that sophisticated. Why don't you try something trending now? Do you know that Michael is dead? Mahler makes you sound so last century.'

'I'll think about it, anything else?'

Interview: Lula Arcuri

The following day Lula was escorted through the White City by an attractive receptionist. They walked through various corridors and stopped at Studio 9. A knock on the door and, 'Please come in,' was heard from inside. The door swung open and Steve Nash greeted him.

Minutes later Lula was introduced to Vladimir Gogol, the movie director who had been engaged to direct the documentary.

'I'm so excited about this project,' Steve said.

'What's this about?' Lula asked.

'Jake didn't discuss it with you?'

'I haven't seen Jake since yesterday. I believe he's in Paris with Sabrina.'

'We're producing a documentary about Jake.'

'What sort of documentary?'

'We're trying to understand his art through the people that are close to him.'

Lula narrowed his eyes and asked, 'And where do I fit in this?'

'Just sit down and let me ask you a few questions.'

'My pleasure, Steve.'

Lula sat down on a vintage chair in the shape of an egg. Behind him stood a baby blue sheet that covered the wall from top to bottom.

'Well, I think we are ready. Can we get the camera rolling?' Steve asked Vladimir.

Vladimir nodded.

'Lula, I'm going to ask several questions about you before we move on to discuss Jake's life and work. You can refuse to answer, stop speaking, rephrase and so forth. We're simply going to keep the camera rolling and edit everything later. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

Steve took a sip of water and started.

STEVE NASH Lula, the first question that springs to mind is about your nationality. Where are you from?

LULA ARCURI I'm Italian. I was born in Cremona, a small city not far from Milan.

SN What brought you to London?

LA It's a long story. I'm not even sure where to start.

SN Start from the beginning. We're not in a rush here.

LA I don't think I'm even able to picture the beginning. I was born with facilities for handling the brush. I was destined to become a famous painter. I came to London to further my studies.

SN Why London?

LA Helen, my English teacher championed the idea that only London could broaden my knowledge and skills. She played a pivotal role, convincing everyone in Cremona, including the headmaster, that Italy was no longer the centre of the art world. She argued that London and New York were fighting for the title, with New York taking the lead. Helen was so persuasive that by the end of the year, going to Rome or Milan was completely out of the question for me. If I was going to make it big, I had to be in London or New York.

SN Who paid for the trip?

LA Things weren't that simple at the time. My parents were of modest means. They didn't have the cash, or even the knowledge to know what to do. The words of my headmaster, who swore upon his mother's grave that I was the most gifted artist he had come across, encouraged my parents, but they were slow to act.

SN Was the money raised through charity?

LA Correct. Together with the headmaster we organized to paint portraits for the wealthiest residents of Cremona. Everyone liked the idea and the portraits were often commissioned for generous sums. I could master the brush as if it was an extra finger and money was raised fast. These portraits were also the main bulk of my portfolio that was later sent to various London universities.

SN How did that go?

LA I was offered a place at the Metropolitan University. I still remember when we received the acceptance letter. My parents could hardly speak English. Mine wasn't that good either. I had a feeling that I'd been accepted but was not sure.

SN Were your parents happy?

LA Happy? They were over the moon! They cheered the news as if their son had been touched by the grace of the Almighty! The week before I left, even the Mayor came to our house to salute me.

SN What did the Mayor tell you?

LA That Cremona had high expectations and that I should be proud of myself. Nothing a Mayor wouldn't say to fetch a few more votes. But, there wasn't any doubt I was the most skilful pupil Cremona had seen in ages.

SN How did you handle the pressure?

AR Rather well, I must say. I was convinced at the time I would make it big. The support I got from my people only helped to fortify my ambitions.

LN Was your life in London as you expected?

AR Initially, my life was great. I rented a studio apartment in Brick Lane, and area that had a vibrant vibe among arty and intellectual people. Unfortunately, regardless of how much I tried to deny it, most of the people I met in London had come for the exact same reason as me. And the numbers were alarming.

LN What was alarming?

AR I remember reading an article in the Financial Times that estimated the number of art students to be in the region of thousands. At the time, the trend was for graphic design, fashion and art. The Financial Times also estimated that the number of students enrolling in these courses would grow year on year. I remember thinking the universities would do well, but what about the students? With thousands of new artists going to battle

their way into the art world each year, clearly the road to the top was busy and crowded.

LN Did you panic?

AR Not immediately. I had talent. Although the numbers were alarming, talent was not abundant. However, by the end of the fourth year, I came to realise that talent alone was not going to save me. Depression kicked in.

LN How desperate were you at this stage?

AR I considered suicide briefly.

SN Why didn't you do it?

AR I probably changed my priorities for the sake of survival. Art was no longer important. The people of Cremona could all stick one Stradivari up their arses, I thought.

SN What made you think art was no longer important?

AR When I look back, I think my lecturers at University played a pivotal role in my loss of interest in the arts. They imposed a reign of fear on us. My lecturer from free painting, an old man from Norway called Harald, started his lecture saying, 'You're joining a dog-eat-dog world. It's the survival of the fittest out there. You have to learn how to fight before you learn how to paint.'

SN Harald sounded a bit harsh.

AR He was a bitter man.

SN What subject did you pick for your final work?

AR Caravaggio.

SN Caravaggio, in what sense?

LA I repainted the [insert name] in brighter colours. The work was majestically undertaken and my talent mastering the brush was more than evident, but do you think I was praised for my achievements?

SN You should have been. It was quite a challenge.

LA Harald simply destroyed my work. He started by saying, 'In what century do you think we live? Wake up. Realism art is dead. A digital camera can produce an image a thousand times better than this shit'. I was taken aback by his constructive criticism. I let Harald know I was trying to capture the flow of energy in that painting. He said, 'Did you? Whereabout? I can't see it.' Irritated, I replied, 'You can't see it if you can't feel it.' I may have shown disdain since Harald started to fume like a locomotive and said, 'Are you trying to tell me I'm stupid?'

SN Did Harald flunk you?

LA Yes. I was forced to repeat the exam during the summer break. I got a pass on this occasion. I went with a painting of the Brick Lane market in an abstract style. It took me less than a couple of days to produce. It was a real piece of shit, but my lecturer was over the moon with it. I think I was lucky Harald was in China overseeing a charity project.

SN What did you do after finishing school?

LA It was a difficult time. While at University I had a good excuse to postpone the inevitable question.

SN Which question?

LA What was I going to do with my life?

SN And what did you do?

LA I didn't know where to turn at the time. I remember thinking about the words of Andre Malraux that life would do something out of me. Still, after

my graduation I almost had depression. I knew I couldn't go back to Italy and let everyone in Cremona know I didn't have the stomach or the aptitude to achieve stardom in the art world.

SN Were you afraid of becoming a loser?

LA Maybe.

SN Don't you think you should have tried to make it in the art world?

LA Well, in a way, that's what I did, but I wasn't convinced I would go far. I stayed in London to see how things would work out. I worked in a bar during the night and in a retail shop during the day. I was literally working my balls off for nothing. This condition lasted for a year until one of my colleagues from University came to see me. We met in a Brick Lane bar. He spent most of the time bragging about his achievements. In the end he asked me to paint a set of paintings based on his sketches. A bit surprised with the request, I took the commission regardless. I delivered everything in less than one week and I was back working my balls off. Months later, another colleague appeared asking for similar work.

SN Was it then that you met Jake Ford?

LA No. For about a year these commissions were on and off, before becoming more regular. Funnily enough, few of my colleagues ever liked me, but they all seemed to remember my skills with the brush. Jake became one of my clients two years later.

SN Could you tell us about your first encounter?

LA There's not much to say. Jake approached me through word of mouth. At the time he was working on his Bible Depictions, portraying Jesus as living the life of a beggar during the day and that of a businessman during the night. The artwork was to be painted in Baroque style. I was the right person to do it.

SN How did you two worked together?

LA Jake came to my place a couple of times. We would discuss a few ideas and made sketches in the process. Every now and again he would be specific on an item, but there was enough freedom in there to make the process extremely pleasant. For Jake contemporary art has always been a product of the intellect.

SN Can you give us an example?

LA Of what?

SN A specific requirement he had on the Bible Depictions for example.

LA Lapis lazuli.

SN What do you mean?

LA Jake has a strange obsession with that stone. He bought samples in Venice and brought them to London. We prepared everything according to Cennino's instructions. We could have bought the material from a local art supplier, but Jake wouldn't do it that way. He wanted the real deal, not a chemical version of it.

SN Lapis lazuli? How interesting? Strangely enough, I knew nothing about it.

LA Jake doesn't like to talk about it either, you should discuss it with him nevertheless.

SN I will. Definitely. I remember the Bible Depictions exhibition quite well. No one was talking about lapis lazuli back then.

LA No one made much of it, but Jake was okay with it. At the time, Jake was already experimenting with his axe and one depict became a triptych.

SN What happened after the exhibition?

LA We left it there for a while. I got paid and took on more commissions. Jake

had inspired me and for the first time, I felt like I could undertake a few projects of my own. I could transport the world around me into a painting without a problem, but there is no longer a need to emulate nature as we see it. Contemporary art these days is a product of the intellect, as Jake had so well defended, and I was not tailored for that kind of art.

SN When did you work for him again?

LA I would say five months after dealing with Jake, I was approached by Gabriel. He said Jake was putting a studio together in Shoreditch and he offered me a managing position.

SN And so your working relationship with Jake started.

LA Yes. We worked on some amazing installations before moving to Limehouse, where our studio is currently located. The Limehouseviolene studio has much more room than Shoreditch, and Jake has decided to go monumental since we moved in.

SN How does Jake work on his ideas?

LA Plenty of experimentation. Not one day goes by without questioning, what we're working on.

SN Do you feel affected by his creating style?

LA It used to bother some collaborators, but we've learned how to find assistants that blend well with the team. Both Jake and I are extremely selective when we carry out an interview.

SN But doesn't annoy you that he changes things all the time?

LA Not really. I don't mind the change. I love to enter the studio without knowing what the day will unveil.

SN What propels Jake to change his mind?

LA Jake is totally immersed in his work and it's extremely hard to say what goes on inside his head. Sometimes a simple sip of tea can lead him to completely change the idea of an installation.

SN Do you like to work with him?

LA I love it. Jake's enthusiasm for working is often contagious. He has a good sense of how to treat people and get the best out of them. He's a genius.

SN Jake Ford doesn't seem to be well understood by the British people. He's considered to be an odd person. Would you agree or disagree?

LA Jake's art is about destruction, decapitations, rape, mutilations and so forth, but rather than being considered a product of a sick mind, he's been received with great enthusiasm and rave reviews. The art world has judged him and he's come out clean and inspirational.

SN But as a human being, doesn't he act odd sometimes?

LA It depends on the definition of odd behaviour. Two years ago, in Venice, Jake was convinced that Sansovino was still alive and rather than promoting his exhibition, he spent two weeks pestering the local Venetians about the whereabouts of the architect.

SN That sounds rather odd to me.

LA To a normal person, maybe, but in the case of Jake Ford this behaviour is extremely normal. Sometimes he is extremely social and suddenly spends weeks without talking to anyone, curled up on his sofa, experiencing moments of solitude alone in his apartment. He doesn't follow the same social patterns as you and me.

SN What do you think makes him so popular in the press?

LA I guess the odd feeling that almost everyone can relate to his grotesque creations.

SN Lula, I think this will do for now. Thanks for coming.

LA My pleasure.

X

Twelve weeks after its opening, the *Vicissitudes of the Axe* closed to the public in London. Upon closing, a number of pre-arranged events were set in motion as the exhibition was due to open two weeks afterwards in Berlin.

Jake called Sabrina and asked her, 'Aren't you excited?'

'About what?'

'About going to Berlin with me.'

'Right now, I'm not sure if I can make it.'

'Why not?'

'Do I need to remind you that I still work to pay the bills?'

'You should have accepted my proposal when you had the chance.'

'What for?'

'So that you could have an easier job and enjoy trips abroad with your lovely husband.'

'Jake, right now, teaching dogs how to bark sounds more interesting than going on a trip with you.'

'I promise this will be the trip of a lifetime.'

'Who is going to run through the wine auction figures while I'm away?'

'Do you need my assistance?'

'Don't think so.'

'Great, I'll see you soon.' Jake hung up the phone and called Lula in a rush.

'Kabugi, I am off to Berlin tomorrow morning. The *Vicissitudes of the Axe* is moving on. Sabrina is coming with me. Need and urgent favour from you.'

'Yes?'

‘Can you pack my luggage?’

‘Pack your luggage! Are you pulling the leg?’

‘Sabrina needs my care and attention. Can’t you organise something? Drop by my place and put some clothes into my suitcase?’

‘Listen, I may be your art bitch but I’m definitely not your personal assistant. Why don’t you stick your mobile up your ass? And stop calling me Kabugi.’

‘I thought you could do it for me as a favour. Long time partners, that kind of shit. I would do the same for you.’

‘My ass, you would.’

‘Hey, don’t be so harsh. You know, I’m a loving and caring artist with a sensible soul.’

‘Jake, to make sure I don’t need to hear this bullshit again, I’ll ask Julia to help you out. Are you happy with that?’

‘Great. Tell her not to pack anything kinky and make sure she puts the flight ticket in the outer pocket otherwise I won’t be able to find it,’ and Jake hung up the phone.

Berlin

Sabrina and Jake arrived at the airport together. They went through check-in without a question from the counter. They went through security control without a beep.

‘It comes with my travelling experience,’ Jake commented.

On the plane, they shared a Pinot Noir from Margaret River.

‘I’ve been there a few times,’ Sabrina said. ‘The land is so beautiful. Amazing spot for wine production.’

‘I’m bored,’ Jake said.

‘What do you want to talk about then?’

‘What about discussing if my art is the work of a genius or a gifted artist?’ Jake suggested. Sabrina tried to divert the conversation to the floods in South Australia and the impact on the fine wine market, when suddenly the plane started descending for landing.

Diedra, Jake's German dealer, met them at the airport.

'How are you?' They both said, followed by one kiss and a cuddle. 'Pleased to meet you,' Diedra said to Sabrina with one handshake. Soon, the three were on the main road heading towards Mitte.

'Do you want to have dinner tonight?' Diedra asked.

'I thought you had something organized already.'

'I have been quite busy lately. Couldn't find the time, but I know of a place in an old warehouse that I've been meaning to try.'

'Is it expensive?'

'Probably.'

'Sounds good to me.'

'We don't have a reservation, but we should be fine.'

'You can always tell them that Jake Ford is in town in case they can't find us a table.'

'Plenty of restaurants around Prenzlauer Berg anyway if the place is fully booked.'

'I'm sure we will be fine,' Sabrina said.

Thirty minutes later Diedra parked her car. The Soto House Gallery was exhibiting the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*. Sabrina and Jake were greeted by the gallery staff and several questions unfolded, which Jake answered in an artistic manner, sometimes crystal clear sometimes unclear.

One hour later, Diedra erupted in energy to say, 'Actually, we are exhibiting Luther Becker after the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*.'

'Who's he?' Jake asked.

'Haven't you heard of him?' Diedra asked in indignation.

'Not really, have you?'

'Neither have I,' Sabrina answered.

'Luther is quite famous in this country. He ate two prostitutes three years ago.'

'Why would he do that?'

'We wanted to create a perfect woman out of two women. The two women were cut into small pieces and assembled in one perfect woman. The end result was grotesque, but interesting. It made Francis Bacon look like a babysitter.'

'I still can't understand why he would eat them in the end.'

'He fell in love with his art, apparently.'

'I think I have heard that story before.'

'Some people believe he is a good man. They believe the country needed his assistance. The girls he ate were illegal immigrants in this country. The AfD raved about him in the press.'

'That's sick. How come the gallery is promoting this lunatic?'

'We are not supporting his act. We provide the space for his voice, for his artistic pursuits.'

'Who came up with such a distorted idea?'

'I did,' Diedra said proudly. 'His artistic side cannot be denied. He recorded the process of assembling the two girls together meticulously in his drawings.'

'Shouldn't the drawings belong to a court house rather than this gallery,' Sabrina wondered aloud.

'It never crossed my mind to expose his wrongdoings, but there was nothing stopping me from asking him if he wanted to exhibit in our art gallery.'

'Did he agree to that?'

'Yes, he did.'

'I'm sorry but this is sick,' Jake remarked. 'Are the fine art markets suddenly interested in art produced through the blood of real victims?'

Diedra laughed. 'No one is coming forward to claim Luther as an artistic genius, but there is money flying around for this kind of art. His work won't end up in the bin, I can assure you of that.'

'Do you honestly believe his work will increase in value?'

'Why not? No one can foresee the future.'

'It hasn't come to my attention or even Gabriel's.'

'Jake, I'm not saying Luther is a stable person or that we should judge the merit of his creations as a great artistic achievement. What's important is that the press is all over this exhibition. People are reacting against it. A petition is circulating to stop it. This is more press than you've ever got in this country. We're living in a very scandal-orientated era. People stay home, watching television. They need to be entertained and Luther, for the good or the bad, has been very entertaining in the last couple of years. On that thought alone, I'm sure investors will take the risk and jump at the opportunity of grabbing a piece of it.'

'This sounds extremely twisted, but I can see the point you're trying to make,' Sabrina intervened.

'How is Luther handling the delivery of the goods?'

'So, so. I admit we're struggling to get him to work. We're sixteen weeks

away from the grand opening and only one art piece has been delivered.'

'I'm sure he has plenty of time to work in his cell.'

'He has, but his artistic methods are demanding. He requested four pigeons yesterday. Alive if possible.'

'Make it five and add a dead duck,' Jake suggested with a grin on his face.

'I would send him a cow if necessary, but do you think it's easy to smuggle this stuff into his prison? Nothing is allowed inside without authorization, and it takes weeks for the prison management to respond to my queries. It's crazy. What are they afraid of, that he's plotting to grow wings?'

Later, Sabrina, Jake and Diedra had dinner at the La Soupe Populaire. Initially the restaurant was fully booked. Jake told Diedra, 'I am really disappointed,' however, on the way out, as they walked down the staircase, one Neo Rauch painting kept Jake busy for several minutes and suddenly the restaurant waiter came downstairs to let them know that someone had cancelled their reservation.

'What a stroke of luck,' Sabrina said.

Thirty minutes later, after orders had been placed, Diedra added to the conversation, 'I had to fly to London to convince him I would be his best agent in Germany. I always felt I could see through his art. There's quite a lot of destruction in his work, but beauty too. He's tremendously popular in this country. It was painful, but I persuaded him in the end.'

'Painful? How come?'

'Jake has a special way with females.'

'Ladies, ladies, what are we talking about?' Jake intervened.

'Don't try to divert the conversation. What was so painful about the relationship?'

Diedra looked at Jake with a smile. She raised her glass of wine, cheered one more time, and said, 'I had to work my ass off to get him interested. Literally.'

'What do you mean by literally?'

'I mean exactly that; literally.'

'Why are we having this conversation?' Jake asked. 'What's the purpose of this? What's wrong with a bit of fornication?'

'There's nothing wrong with it, but it was painful.'

'It was a good deal considering the good fortune my name has brought to you.'

‘Don’t you think it hurts?’

‘Since you bleached your asshole, I assumed it was your favourite spot for fornication.’

‘Just because I’m a body artist doesn’t mean I can tolerate that kind of pain.’

‘You sure did.’ Jake said, ‘Let’s cheer to that,’ and Jake cheered alone.

Two hours later, when was time to pay for the dinner, Diedra browsed her smartphone instead.

‘You surely don’t expect me to pay for this,’ Jake said.

Diedra raised her eyes and replied, ‘why not?’

Jake, rather irritated, decided to go to the toilet. He noticed the bill had been paid upon his return.

‘Happy to see that you come to your senses,’ Jake said.

‘Sabrina paid the bill,’ Diedra confirmed.

After dinner, Jake and Sabrina walked towards Alexanderplatz and afterwards along the canal. It was a quiet and tender night. The water on the canal reflected the moonlight, as if Beethoven’s moonlight sonata was playing in the background.

‘Sometimes I wonder why I have to meet the women you flirt with,’ Sabrina said.

‘Flirted. It was a mistake. I wished I have known better.’

‘Why are you still dealing with her then?’

‘She is a ruthless art agent, even more efficient than Dokisuki.’

Sabrina didn’t say a word for a while. Minutes later she asked, ‘Have you thought about having babies?’

‘What do you mean? Having babies for real? Not like an art experimentation.’

‘Yes, having babies for real.’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘I think you should.’

‘I don’t think you and I can carry that responsibility.’

‘What responsibility?’

‘To bring life into this world.’

‘Jake, this relationship will end right here if you don’t make an effort to father a child.’

‘Why are you so keen to have children anyway?’

‘Nothing is more beautiful than sharing our life with the ones we love. To be

bonded to another human being.'

'That sounds really good, but why babies? Why don't we take a trip to Svalbard instead to see the melting of the icebergs?'

'What are you afraid of?'

'We don't live a normal life. We move around too often.'

'I've heard the same before, but I'm having babies with or without you. Your problem is not about us being unstable, you're simply afraid of them. Jake Ford, the famous contemporary artist, is afraid of having children.'

'Afraid of what?'

'Afraid of being a bad father or not knowing what to say, but that matters little if you think how much you will learn from the experience.'

'What can I honestly learn from that experience that I don't already know?'

'You can discover your humanity, little Jake of the Stars. You can learn the meaning of love.'

Jake stopped. He looked at the bend in the river and said, 'Thanks, but I'm not interested. Love kills.'

'If that is how you feel, then enjoy the rest of your stay in Berlin.' Sabrina gave Jake a hard look and walked in the opposite direction.

Initially, Jake thought Sabrina was teasing him, but after thirty minutes of waiting and no answers to his phone calls, it was obvious that Sabrina had temporarily dumped him. As he walked back to his hotel, he went past the bend in the canal and heard the curt, muted jangle of a bell.

The Vicissitudes of the Axe

The following day, Jake made the final arrangements for the exhibition.

'Show must go on,' he thought to himself.

Sabrina went to the Soho House. With a laptop and a cappuccino on the table, she worked nonstop until flying back to London in the afternoon.

'I find this killing instrument fascinating,' Jake said, after his axe performed a

full-arc swing before axing the timber floor. The journalists leaned backwards nervously.

‘It’s like an obsession,’ Jake added while polishing the blade with a napkin.

‘Your attention, please,’ Jake said suddenly. ‘Make room, please,’ and without further notice, Jake axed a napkin he had placed on the floor.

The journalists photographed the dent in the timber floor.

‘It’s truly fascinating. I can’t get tired of this,’ Jake commented before asking, ‘Who wants to put his head down on the floor?’ No one answered.

‘What are you afraid of?’ Jake asked but the silence was not broken.

‘Please, gentlemen. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lose your head for contemporary art. Are you going to miss it?’ No one volunteered.

Jake swung the axe again in a full circle, ending with a strong strike on the floor.

‘I was visiting Sweden when a man axed a woman in central Gothenburg. He axed her without being stopped, despite the blood splashing and the crack of bones.’ Jake held his breath for a second and then continued, ‘Upon reading the story I wondered why an axe? It sounded so Middle Ages to kill someone with an axe,’ and another long pause followed. ‘So, I went to a local shop and bought this axe, hoping to understand what drove that man to madness.’

‘And?’ One journalist asked after a prolonged silence.

‘What do you reckon?’ Jake asked rather curiously.

‘You tell us.’

‘Engagement. It’s all about engagement.’

While the journalists took further notes and photographs, a lady wearing a red, flamboyant dress rushed into the gallery, screaming. ‘Please, can someone help me?’

While the journalists took further notes and photographs, a lady wearing a red, flamboyant dress rushed into the gallery, screaming, ‘Please, can someone help me?’

Confused initially, the guests started to turn their attention towards the Lady in Red, who had started to behave strangely, with a mix of sobbing and talking, despite the curious looks laid upon her.

‘What’s going on,’ one of the guests commented aloud as she and other guests walked away from the unusual and loud intruder.

Meanwhile, as if possessed by a demon, the Lady in Red reached out to a random guest, a gentleman wearing a pink tie, and said curtly, ‘Please help me.’

'Can someone escort this woman out of here?' the gentleman replied.

As various guests started to wonder what was in fact going on, a well-built man in his early twenties came out from the crowd. The guests watched him suspiciously. However, when he exposed an axe that had been concealed inside his raincoat, the guests, particularly the ladies, started to scream in panic.

The Lady in Red became hysterical. She tried to escape but ran onto one of the guests who pushed her back.

'Leave me alone,' she said but the well-built man grabbed her hair and pushed her hard against the floor.

The Lady in Red stood there with her head down; and like a barbarian, the well-built man axed her in the back unmercifully.

A pool of blood appeared under the body.

Hysteria abounded in the premises.

'Call the police,' one guest shouted, pointing at the well-built man who was peacefully looking at his victim.

Suddenly, the lights went out and the song '*I wish you were here*' started to play in the background, although few guests noticed it, as a mix of tension, confusion and get-me-out-of-here had infected the crowd.

As the lights came back on, Jake appeared next to the well-built man, clapping his hands.

Seconds later, the Lady in Red rose miraculously from the floor.

'Ladies and gentlemen, this was a monstrous show to portray the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*. Please accept my apologies if we have shocked you. No such thing was intended.'

Jake surveyed the room, eager to collect reactions from the guests, but nothing materialised.

'What is this fear that blinds us? The fear that feeds on the unknown. This dark force we carry within? I wished I knew what it means to be dead, but I don't. Whoever, whatever put us here, it certainly dumped us on a web of lies. Nothing holds true anymore.'

Jake surveyed the room one more time but none of the guests uttered a sound.

'Life is a miracle and a question mark at the same time. It is as precious as it is confusing. I wished I knew what it means to be dead, but I don't know. As far as I know living is a curse. I believe it is my duty as an artist, as a creator, to look for ways to break these chains. To look for answers that make sense to

me, answers that resonate with you,' Jake said.

After a few seconds of silence, the guests started to clap their hands. Some yelled, 'Bravo, bravissimo.'

'Thank you, thank you. Please enjoy the *Vicissitudes of the Axe* hanging on the walls,' Jake said and slowly the guests started to regroup to focus their attention on the art and discuss the show.

'The fine art market works better if you are a dead artist,' an old woman in Prada style said.

'What do you mean?'

'It's a lot easier to invest in dead artists. It's like owing a piece of history. Modern artists are making history but it's difficult to see who will survive the passage of time and who will not.'

Jake didn't say a word. '*Who cares if my art will endure the passage of time,*' he thought.

The *Vicissitudes of the Axe* was busy.

Various guests approached Jake to query him about his art. Jake gladly answered, until a black woman holding a loudspeaker against her chest appeared.

'*No way,*' Jake murmured to himself.

'How are you?' Mr X emanated from the loudspeaker.

'I'm surprised to see you here, Mr X. The show is sold out.'

'I know. I'm the happy owner of everything displayed on these walls.'

'I had a word with Gabriel about selling everything. We're not going to allow it anymore in the future.'

'I'm not the usual client. I don't like diversification either. I believe in you, Jake,' and the black woman walked away.

The opening couldn't end without several partitions being axed. Towards the end of the night, Jake started to scream as if possessed by a demon, axing a timber table in the process.

Diedra was happy with the outcome.

'Luther was better at engaging with his victims,' Diedra confessed to Jake when she dropped him at the airport.

Jake waved good-bye and walked, aloof, to the check-in wondering, '*Engaging with his victims? What's that supposed to mean?*'

At the airport, eager to board the plane back to London, Jake received a call from Gabriel.

'Are you still in Germany?'

‘On my way to London.’

‘Can you fly to New York instead? I’m at the Wallenberg gallery. Joshua and John are keen to see you.’

‘Do I have to? Sabrina and I had an argument yesterday. I need to head back to London and make up with her.’

‘Why don’t you let that woman alone and date someone of your age, mentally speaking? Everyone knows she was going to dump you. Besides, do you think Joshua and John are in the mood to tolerate this kind of behaviour?’

‘Why can’t you talk to them? Tell them I’m thinking about torturing children that resemble their parents if you can’t think of something, as dry as you are.’

‘Listen, you get your ass down here! Let me know what time you arrive,’ and Gabriel hung up the phone.

Jake wasn’t in the mood to fly to another continent. He tried to call Sabrina three more times, with no answer. ‘*Why is she doing this to me?*’

Four hours later, on a flight to New York via Frankfurt, Jake text Gabriel, ‘*0450 JFK. I’m feeling dismal.*’

New York

Jake arrived in New York City ill humoured.

‘Was it so difficult to talk to them yourself, Dokisuki?’

‘This is a different market. I’m not going to bend my ass around here on my own. I need support.’

‘What for? You’re the best brownnoser that I ever met.’

‘Hold your tongue, Jake. Save your scorn for someone else and have some respect for your agent. It’s not my fault Sabrina dumped you again. This is about your career in America and how successful we’re going to be. Meet Joshua and John, be charming, and let me do the rest.’

The Wallenberg Gallery was located in Soho. The gallery had a collection of Andy Warhol’s best nude shots on display.

When Jake and Gabriel arrived, they were greeted by Joshua and John.

‘Jake, how are you?’ Joshua and John said.

Jake muttered, 'Pleased to be here,' and handed them his business card.

'Interesting,' Joshua said after flipping the card several times, 'We're great admirers of your work.'

'Pleased to hear that.'

'Do you have something to show us?'

'What do you mean?'

'We wonder about what you intend to bring to America, to be precise.'

'I'm thinking about having something in the same flavour of the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*.'

'That sounds lovely. We loved the exhibition. We were in London before it closed, it was phenomenal.'

'I'm pleased you liked it. I'm planning to go monumental in America.'

'Do you have a sketch, an idea, a film you could share with us?'

'Not sure. I need to make a phone call first. But what is the buzz about it anyway, can't you wait?'

'We can, but it's the gallery's policy to work with our artists long before the opening.'

'Don't you trust my artistic instincts or the character of my work?'

'We always do, however, business comes first and so does the reputation of this gallery.'

Jake called Lula in private. It was rather late in London.

'Kabugi, I am in New York. Dokisuki deviated my travelling plans. I am with Joshua and John, the two morons that run the Wallenberg gallery. They are rather inquisitive about what we're doing. Do you have something that we can show them?'

'Jake, it's quite late around here and stop calling me Kabugi.'

'Fine, fine, but how much have we done so far?'

'Why don't you call me bitch, instead? What's the Korean word for bitch?'

'I would never call you a *bitch*!'

'Why not? How do you think you make me feel, calling me in the middle of my sleep?'

'You're too grouchy to be my bitch.'

'Grouchy, my ass. The truth is that you don't know how to say bitch in Korean.'

'That's nonsense, of course I know?'

'No, you don't. As for the sketches you want, Julia and Peter have been torturing a wax baby as you suggested. Much in the flavour of the previous

work, nothing new here.'

'Could you email it to me?'

'I'm not at the studio. It's about 1am, for fuck's sake!'

'You don't live that far away. Joshua and John are eager to see something. You know how people are around here, a bit daft.'

Lula sighed. 'I suppose I can drop by the studio, I need half an hour before I can email you the animation.'

'Good stuff Kabugi,' Jake said and hung up the phone.

For the next hour Jake talked about the opening of his exhibition in Berlin and how Luther Becker engaged with his victims. Jake also banged his head on the wall to check the quality of American partitions.

'It hurts more in the UK,' Jake concluded.

Thirty minutes later, an email from Lula came through. Jake laid his iPhone on a working desk and everyone came around him to watch the film.

When the animation was finished, Joshua and John faced one another in silence.

'It's just a sketch,' Jake commented.

'This isn't going to work,' Joshua murmured.

'I don't think so either,' John added.

Jake, taken by surprise, asked, 'Why is this not going to work?'

'In this country, we don't torture children for the sake of art.'

'My dear friend, this is a piece of art, not a political manifest. This can be about childbirth, death, legacy, the killing of the innocents, but essentially it's merely an aesthetical experimentation,' Jake replied.

'Sorry, Jake, but why don't you torture cats instead? What do you have against children? We're keen to introduce you to the American market, but we cannot be seen as supporting this kind of art.'

'Joshua, you don't seem to understand. This is just a piece of art. Some years ago, a friend of mine made sculptures of young and innocent teenagers with dicks attached to their noses and it was a major success.'

'Jake, you don't seem to understand either,' and imitating Jake's accent, Joshua added, 'That this gallery won't be associated with this kind of art. We know our market and this is not going to receive good reviews.'

'How can you be so sure? Can't you be spontaneous?'

'Spontaneous? What for? To fulfil your artistic desire and then for things to go wrong and this gallery losing much of the reputation it has worked so hard to achieve? Thanks, but we'd rather not.'

Jake didn't defend his work further. Upset, he turned around and left the premises. Gabriel followed him outside.

'Jake, I think they're right.'

'Right about what? What do they know?' Jake answered, infuriated.

'Jake, it seems to me you're going cheap.'

'What do you mean?'

'Maybe Joshua and John are right. Maybe this kind of art makes furore in the press, but it's not as refined as the art you have produced in the past.'

'It's just sketch.'

'The concept is the issue here. Torturing children is just going to infuriate a lot of people and it won't add value to your work.'

Jake didn't answer. He looked at cars passing by instead.

'We need to compromise. What's the point of arguing about this? Joshua and John are not going to let you do it, and they might be doing us a favour.'

Jake kept looking randomly at cars passing by.

Five minutes later, they returned to the gallery. Gabriel said, 'Jake agreed to decapitate gruesome children instead of beautiful ones.'

'Gruesome children? Hmm, we're not sure about that either,' Joshua answered.

Jake felt like shouting, '*You can go fuck yourselves,*' but instead, he said, 'What about whores? Can I rape them? Is that okay with the American market?'

They faced each other in silence.

'Prostitutes are not a bad idea. But what do you have in mind? We've seen a couple of movies from your early beginnings with prostitutes.'

Jake, taken by surprise with the deep knowledge of Joshua and John, asked, 'Did you read the reviews too?'

'Sounds interesting and safe. We'll think about it,' John said.

When Jake was about to have a megalomaniac tantrum, Gabriel dragged him out of the gallery.

'Let it be. I'm sure they will agree to it. They're just considering the implications of what you're proposing to do. The idea was brilliant. I couldn't have sold it better than you.'

'Dokisuki, sometimes I wonder why I need you. Can I fly back to London?'

'Not right now.'

'Why not?'

'I have organized a meeting between you and Mr X for tomorrow morning.'

'Mr X? How come? Why?'

‘He is keen to see you and he deserves it, considering his investment.’

‘I told you not to sell everything to the same investor.’

‘It makes no difference, I told you already. He wants to have a word with you. I’ve arranged everything for tomorrow morning. You can leave for London afterwards. Meanwhile, call Lula to start working on the new idea straight away.’

Jake called Lula minutes later.

‘Kabugi, Joshua and John are not happy with the sketches.’

‘Stop calling me Kabugi, and what do you mean? It’s just a piece of art.’

‘They don’t seem to agree, but it doesn’t matter anymore. We’re going to rape whores instead.’

‘Whores? Why whores?’

‘If the Joshua and John think it’s okay to rape them, so do I. Please stop annoying me and start working on this right away.’

Lula, feeling the distress in Jake’s words, diverted the subject of the conversation.

‘What do we do with the previous work?’

‘Shelf it.’

This was not what Lula wanted to hear, considering the many hours of work wasted.

‘When are you coming back?’

‘Soon, I hope. I must meet Mr X tomorrow morning. I should be on my way back to London in the afternoon. Meanwhile, I’ve emailed a few sketches to get you guys up and running on this,’ and he hung up the phone.

XIV

Late at night, Jake met Limousine at the Village.

‘Limousine is a promising contemporary artist. Spend some time with him and let me know what you think of his intellect,’ Gabriel had said to Jake before setting the two up.

‘Where are you living?’

‘Corner of Broadway and 69. Not far from the Beacon Theatre.’

‘Sounds noisy.’

‘It is, much to my satisfaction. I’m close to the park which is great too. You should drop by. Where are you staying?’

‘At the Hudson,’ Jake said.

‘You should stay with me next time you are in New York.’

‘I will think about it.’

‘I have heard rumour that you might be exhibiting at the Wallenberg Gallery.’

‘You know more than me, it seems.’

‘Doesn’t chock you,’ Limousine said suddenly, ‘The transformation of fine art into a commodity? Aren’t you against it?’ Limousine asked.

‘Who, me? Not at all. Beauty has always been a commodity.’

‘I can assure you that it’s not because of the money fine art commands these days that made me wish becoming an artist.’

‘What is it then?’

‘I want to meet interesting people. I want to share ideas, and learn, that’s all.’

Jake laughed.

‘I don’t think I have met that many interesting people in this business. I even think being famous exposes you to a great deal of people you don’t never wanted to meet, but I guess it’s all good in the end. What are you working on at the moment?’

‘I’m about to hack the servers at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. I will make their systems go havoc and document how their employees react to it.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Not at all. It’s all be arranged and commissioned by the museum.’

‘Can you do it? Can you hack their server?’

‘I can. Although I have been given free access to their servers. This art piece is not about hacking their system. What interests me is to observe how people react when their daily routines are torn apart. How technology affects our lives. These are the experiences I am keen to document with my art. To understand how the individual soul interacts with the other souls. Sometimes I think that the individual and society at large, are one item altogether.’

‘Are they actually paying you to hack their systems?’ Jake asked, rather inquisitively.’

‘Yes, they are.’

‘How bizarre.’

‘Bizarre? Why is that? I think it is time to start considering machines as

another tool to produce art. We can't produce art without tools.'

'I guess, I was referring to the fact of someone paying you to destroy the tranquility of that day.'

'They are giving me money to experience something new in their lives.'

'You are probably right, I have noticed how some of the people I know pay top dollar to ride camels in the desert, while sleeping in shitty tents and spend weeks without a shower. I couldn't never see the point in that, but I think we have to consider the human experience in it.'

'I don't think art needs to provide food for thought, or being a life experience, but it's certainly one of the objectives of this project.'

'What else is of interest to you?'

'I have defined a clear path of how I want my art to develop. I don't see myself experimenting any more. I know exactly what I want to do and where I want to go.'

'What are your plans?'

'I plan to collect as much data as I can and then code my own software to convert my hand sketches, and data, into vectors. After that I am planning to build my own printing machines so that I can print my ideas in the format I want, and in the size that I want. It's a titanic task, and sometimes, at night, I wonder if I will have the time I need to produce the works of art I have in my mind.'

'Why don't you get people to code and build the machines for you?'

'When I have mastered my art, yes, but not right now.'

Seconds later, the jazz legend starts playing the first notes of *'round midnight'*.

Limousine listened to the song and when the band's improvisation reached the end he asked, 'Did you feel something?'

'I like the melody,' Jake replied, without enthusiasm.

'Nothing else?'

'Nope.'

'Same here. I was hoping the music would crossover. The Fourquid were playing here last week. In the heat of the night I felt could just see it. Like a brick thrown at my face.'

'See what?'

'The music. I felt I was able to touch it.'

'You mean metaphorically?'

'Music can create form. I've seen it happen.'

'Where?'

'I went to Milan as an exchange student several years ago. After six months, I experienced an art revelation, but it was not in the form of a painting.'

'Where about?'

'At the Scala.'

'What were they playing?'

'Number five from Beethoven. It was played to perfection. I literally felt I could touch the music.'

'You can't touch music.'

'I believe we can. Maybe not physically, but we can have the same perception.'

'If you say so.'

'I'm quite surprised you don't agree with me. I've studied your work. There's always a beautiful melody that emerges from the violence of your installations.'

'I wouldn't call it a melody.'

'What is it then?'

Jake had a look around before uttering, 'some sort of something.'

'And what would that be? Our human nature?'

'If you say so.'

'The essence of the human soul?'

'Potentially, so.'

'Our link to mother nature?'

'I certainly hope not, mother nature kills,' Jake said firmly.

'Does it?'

'You should see the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*. There is a lot of killing in there. A lot of mother nature killing in my opinion.'

'I would love to. Is it coming to New York?'

'It's currently showing in Berlin. It may be exhibited one day in New York as an American bought all the pieces.'

'Wait a minute. Can I borrow your mobile phone?'

'What for?'

'I'm sure I'll be able to find some footage on YouTube.'

'Here, go ahead. Why don't you use yours?'

'I have a bad data plan,' Limousine answered, and minutes later he had watched two movies. 'It's beautiful,' he commented.

'Thanks. The critics had rave reviews, but as usual, no one seems to grasp the true meaning of my work.'

'Which is?' Limousine asked, extremely curious.

Jake pretended to check the time and said, 'I think it's about time to leave.'

'So early? Now that the conversation is warming up?'

'I'm not in the mood for talking. I'll text you the next time I'm in New York.'

'How are you getting back to the Hudson?'

'Walking.'

'Are you crazy? Just take the subway or a cab.'

'It shouldn't take more than an hour. I'd rather walk. I love to walk in New York.'

'How come?'

'It makes me treasure my life in London like no other city does,' and minutes later, Jake was walking up the 7th Avenue, towards Central Park. It always dazzled him how the locals were able to go through the hustle and bustle of New York City 24/7.

Jake walked the main avenue without being disturbed. He turned left on 58th Street and was back minutes later in his hotel room.

Jake went to bed immediately, hoping to be in London the next day. '*Glad I'm not staying one more night in this city.*'

Mr X

'Mr X lives on Long Island, that's all I can say. How he made his money, I have no idea, but who cares as long as he's buying.' Gabriel made a long pause before saying, 'Mr X likes to make press releases with contradictory information. Once he claimed that all that he knows he learned it from being a good servant to the rich and famous. It's hard to know what is right or wrong about him.'

'What do you expect me to say?'

'Say nothing, listen to him instead. He can be an interesting character if you give him a chance.'

'For a loudspeaker, he's quite fascinating.'

'Listen, Jake, just do the best you can,' and when Gabriel was about to hang up the phone, he asked, 'What about Limousine? What do you think of him?'

'Nice chap.'

'Can he make it?'

'What do you mean? To crossover?'

'Yes.'

'If he can make his ideas work, I guess he can, but why are you so interested in him?'

'It's Mr X who is interested, not me. He asked me to have a word with him.'

'For what? To spy on him?'

'I'm not sure. He may be considering investing in him. I met Limousine two days ago at Mr X's request. I liked him too. Anyway, meet Mr X, be pleasant and I'll see you back in London.'

One hour later, Jake arrived at Mr X's house. He lived in East Hampton, in a massive mansion with ocean views.

'It's probably rented,' Jake thought.

Twenty minutes later, a young boy, with curly blonde hair and a tiny scar across the top of his nose, looking like an angel from a Ruben's painting, entered the room carrying a loudspeaker against his chest.

'I'm pleased you accepted my invitation,' Mr X said.

'I was forced into it. I don't like to talk to loudspeakers.'

'Apologies, but I no longer engage in direct contact with people. This is how I manage my operations in the modern world.'

'Does it work?'

'Initially, my associates resisted talking to the loudspeaker, but being so rich, everyone got used to it.'

'What's the point of kidnapping and bringing me to Long Island?'

'Gabriel told me you were pleased with the invitation.'

'Did he say that? I'd rather be in London right now.'

'I have been studying you, Jake.'

'I'm not surprised or flattered. What have you found?'

'We know that you call Gabriel vulture in Korean.'

'You're well informed.'

'My research team does a great job before advising on an investment. I know everything about you.'

'What else do you know?'

'We know that you've been advised by Joshua and John to drop the subject of torturing children.'

'How do you know that?'

'It wasn't that difficult.'

'Are you stalking me?'

'Not quite. It's relatively easy to know what happened to you in the past. Our problem is to be able to forecast the future.'

'I can't do that either.'

'I disagree. You're in charge of your future acts. Deeds that will dictate if the value of your art increases or decreases at art auctions.'

'I'm not sure if I follow you.'

'Jake, don't play games with me.'

'I'm not playing games.'

'Put it this way then. I paid top dollar for the *Vicissitudes of the Axe* but let's imagine, for instance, that your next exhibition is a flop. Gets little press and doesn't convince the critics. What happens then?'

'No such thing has ever happened to me.'

'I find it difficult to imagine such a scenario too. My investment in you is not a wild card. But where are the guarantees?'

'What guarantees?'

'That you are not going to fail miserably.'

'What do you care anyway, it's not your career that's in jeopardy?'

'What concerns me is the value of my stock. It will lose a lot of face value.'

'That's your risk.'

'I know. I carry the risk and that's why we're having this conversation.'

'What for?'

'So that I can minimize my risk.'

'What are we talking about?'

'Jake, we need to know what goes on inside your mind. What you intend to do so that we can prepare a good risk management plan.'

'You must be joking.'

'I'm not.'

'Are you telling me I need to report to you?'

'Not quite, but I would appreciate if you could be more cooperative with Joshua and John for example. We need to work with you. You should maybe even allow us to refine your work.'

'You should be joking.'

'I'm sorry, but considering the investment we have made in you, I trust you will understand our worries.'

'I'm sorry but I don't need to listen to this bullshit.'

‘Jake, don’t get me wrong. You’re a brilliant artist. Your ideas are excellent. I loved the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*. No wonder I bought the whole set. I think you’re an amazing producer of fine art.’

Jake, facing the loudspeaker said, ‘You bought it without my approval.’

‘You can’t choose your investors, Jake. The fine art market doesn’t operate that way. It’s all about who pays the most.’

‘But why the whole set? One piece should be enough.’

‘It would have been if you were a Mickey Mouse artist. But I believe in you and I like to invest in what I believe is good. Diversification is protection for the ignorant. I like your work, Jake, and I’m going to buy plenty of it.’

‘I’m not flattered.’

‘You should be. Your work is great. I believe we both can make serious money here.’

‘I won’t let you buy more pieces from me.’

‘You can try, but I doubt you will succeed.’

‘Mr X, I don’t like your patronage and if you don’t mind, I would rather leave now.’

‘Not at all, my chauffeur will take you back to New York or to JFK, whichever you prefer.’

‘JFK will do.’

On his way to the airport, Jake called Gabriel.

‘Dokisuki, please stop selling my work to Mr X.’

‘Why?’

‘I can’t trust him.’

‘He is a fine art investor. What’s wrong with that?’

‘There is certainly something wrong about collecting art pieces by one artist only.’

‘He doesn’t believe in diversification. Look at Keynes, for example, a successful investor that never gave a bar for diversification.’

‘Doesn’t matter, until I tell you otherwise, nothing should be sold to this man.’

‘But what are you afraid of? That he’s going to kill you?’

‘Why would he kill me?’

‘For a moment I thought you were afraid he would eliminate you to increase the value of his stock.’

‘Can he do that?’

‘The practicalities are conceivable. You’re a famous artist. Your art pieces are likely to increase in value upon your death.’

‘Are you sure about this?’

‘I have thought about it, but relax, it’s not that easy.’

‘What did you say? Have you considered killing me?’

Gabriel chuckled and said, ‘Not quite. It doesn’t work that way because I’m here to sell your art, not to keep it. But I have advised several friends that you were a good short term investment since I assumed you were going to die young.’

‘Die young? I am not even young anymore.’

‘It was just a marketing manoeuvre. I sold several pieces based on that statement. I am sure many investors would like to see you dead, but there’s nothing new about that.’

‘This is madness. I never thought I was worth more dead than alive.’

‘As long as you keep producing good, lasting work, you don’t need to worry about it.’

‘You’re not making me feel any better.’

‘Jake, everyone likes your work, but most of the time they prefer money. It’s probably a sign of the times we are living in.’

Jake hung up the phone without replying. At the JFK, he bought a cappuccino at Starbucks. He noticed his hands were shaking. ‘*I hope I am not getting Parkinson’s,*’ he thought.

XVI

At his home in London, Jake was rather distressed. He browsed the internet looking for information about Mr X, but found nothing of interest.

At three in the morning Jake rang Lula.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Will the word *sleeping* make sense to you?’

‘I need a favour from you. This is not art related.’

‘In that case, I’m going back to bed.’

‘Kabugi, shouldn’t you behave like a friend when I need you the most?’

‘Stop calling me Kabugi. What do you want?’

‘I’m curious about Mr X. Can you see what you can find out about him? I’m

not interested in his private life or his business affairs, only in his art investments. I'm keen to know more about his sudden interest in me.'

'Why?'

'I don't trust him as an investor. I'm curious about his real intentions. Apparently, he made a fortune investing in art, but how can that be possible when everything is so expensive these days?'

'What exactly do you want me to do?'

'I want you to spy him?'

'Who, me? How am I supposed to spy on a loudspeaker?'

'I don't know, but you can think of something. That's what I pay you for.'

'Why don't you hire a detective? I know one. I can ask him to help you.'

'A detective?'

'Yes, the sort of guy you hire when you think your wife his banging the gardener.'

Jake grunted, 'Hmm, why not? Tell your mate to go ahead and investigate Mr X. Tell him to invoice the studio.'

'Can I go back to bed now?'

'Yes, you can. See you at the studio tomorrow morning.'

Still incapable of sleeping, Jake text Sabrina, '*Are you sleeping?*'

No reply and two minutes later Jake text again, '*I miss you,*' with no reply.

'I know you are awake. I have been thinking about babies,' Jake wrote and one minute later, the first reply arrived, '*Yes...*'

Jake, smiling, text back, '*Maybe you are right. Maybe it's about time to forget our lifestyles and father as many children Mother Nature will allow us. That way, we can spend endless nights without sleeping, say goodbye to our freedom, and enjoy the smell of baby shit.*'

One minute later, Sabrina returned the text, '*Sounds great to me.*'

'A dream come true.'

'We can talk about it tomorrow morning. It's late and I need to sleep,' Sabrina text back.

The following day, Jake arrived at his studio at eight in the morning. Peter arrived at eight forty five and Lula at quarter past nine. Julie arrived at ten o'clock.

'Jake, what are you doing here this early?'

'I couldn't sleep.'

'You look like you've been smoking marijuana through your asshole,' Lula

said after a closer look at Jake.

'How come you're starting this late?'

'We do late hours instead.'

'There's nothing wrong with late hours and early hours.'

'We'll think about it but the answer is no.'

'What's the point of paying you exorbitant wages then?'

'You don't. I have to exploit the assistants to increase my salary.'

'Do I need to remind you who's in charge here?'

'Not really, that's why we do long hours.'

'Enough of this bullshit, let's get creative.'

Jake walked around the office to see what had been produced.

'How are we doing?'

'We did a group session and we selected three sketches from Julia which had a lot of soul. We produced the first three animations yesterday.'

'Good. Let's see what you've got.'

Lula clapped his hands and said, 'Everyone in the projection room.'

Jake sat in the middle of the room. Lula played the animation.

'Next,' Jake shouted when the animation reached the end.

Lula played the second piece. Jake reacted the same way in the end. When the last animation reached the end, Jake didn't say a word.

'I want to see everything again, but this time alone,' Jake demanded.

Lula programmed the three animations to play in a loop and left the room after Julia and Peter.

Jake shouted ten minutes later, 'I'm done here.'

'This is crap. I disappear for a week and you start doing rubbish,' Jake shouted as if the room was filled up with journalists. 'This is a great piece of shit.'

He walked back and forth.

'A great piece of shit, that's what this is. The only thing missing is the smell.'

'Can you be more specific?' Lula asked.

'More specific? Can't you identify a piece of shit when you see it? Don't tell me you have to taste it to be totally sure?'

Peter started laughing.

'What are you laughing at?' Jake shouted.

'Can you imagine having a bite just to confirm it's made of shit, wouldn't that be hilarious?' Peter answered, initially with a smile, escalating into continuous laughter, after saying, 'Yep, it tastes like a turd.'

'Peter,' Jake said, 'can you shut up and let me concentrate?'

The frantic walk around the room continued. Suddenly, Jake disappeared, returning ten minutes later to say, 'I had to go to the bathroom. I didn't flush. I left the turd floating in case someone wants to smell it.'

The frantic walk was restored. Five minutes later, Jake asked, 'What defines a whore?'

Peter was the first to say, 'The willingness to sacrifice the body in exchange for money.'

'Thanks, Peter. That was extremely deep. Next!'

'I think a whore can be so many different things. It's power over men too,' Julia said.

'Power? I see your point, a threat to men,' and he clapped his hands. 'Let's get to work. The whore we are after has an artistic dignity. She sells her body as a business. Let's scrap the cheap and dirty bitch you've been portraying.'

'Let's get to work,' Lula said. 'Everybody, back to your working desks.'

'I'll be back in a couple of hours. I'm having lunch with Sabrina,' Jake told Lula.

'But it's only eleven o'clock.'

'Call it brunch then,' Jake said before leaving.

Jake walked across the road to the Pellicci. The staff knew him well. Some of his most brilliant ideas had been conceived there.

Two hours later, Sabrina arrived.

'This is your last chance,' she said immediately upon seeing Jake.

'Why can't you hear to what I have to say, first?'

'Say it.'

'I'm up for it. We can move in together if you want for the sake of a child.'

'Why do I find that so hard to believe?'

'The circumstances have changed since we met. I'm craving babies more than ever.'

'I'm having difficulties to believe you.'

'There's no need to believe me. I'm only asking that you move into my apartment and have sex with me. How difficult is that?'

'You have to admit it is odd. A couple of weeks ago you said, 'love kills', and now you seem so desperate to be a father.'

'Can't you be spontaneous?'

'No, and neither can you. You are most selfish person I've ever met.'

'People can change. I've changed.'
'I don't think so, but I'm willing to play along.'
'Great. When are you moving in? Tonight?'
'Why so early?'
'Can I sleep at your place?'
'For what reason?'
'So that we can fornicate all night long.'
'You want last that long.'
'Please.'
'Ok, if it's so damn important to you.'

Minutes later, two chicken rusticanas were served together with the staff's usual small talk conversation.

Sabrina and Jake talked about New York while eating.

'We're getting there.'

'Don't you think it's about time to go back to start using your hands?'

'I am not meant to use my hands. I'm too brainy for that. I'm a producer of fine art, not an executer of fine art. I think about art and its forms, whereas Kabugi and his crew think about the production methods.'

'I can't understand contemporary art anymore.'

'There is nothing to understand. Only auction sales matter these days.'

'Don't you have a message to the public?'

'Not anymore. Contemporary art is not meant to have a meaning. How can I pretend to have something to say when I don't have the smallest clue about the purpose of living. My art is nothing more than an aesthetical visual form that does not crave for understanding, but rather the good eye of an investor.'

'You can't be that shallow.'

'You know I am not. We both know I'm constantly thinking about the meaning of art, what it means to me and you, but the process of creation is a waste of time if the final product doesn't find the wallet of an investor.'

'Don't you believe in art for the sake of art?'

'I don't think such a thing ever existed. Art is a commodity. Even Michelangelo had to eat.'

Towards the end of the afternoon, Jake returned to his studio.

'We've been waiting for you since you left,' Lula complained.

'I was having intercourse with Sabrina. She was ovulating. Did you come up with something while I was absent?'

'In fact, we did.'

'Let's see it then,' and everybody assembled in the projection room. Another slow animation played. In the end, curiosity rose in the room. Jake murmured, 'Hmm, hmm,' before a prolonged silence.

Suddenly he exploded hysterically, saying, 'Can someone tell me what's wrong with this animation, please?'

'Is it the background? The blank, greyish background doesn't really intensify the scene,' Peter commented.

'Yes, the background is a real mess, but the biggest *shite* was seeing a whore that looks like a common lady.'

'We used Mata Hari for inspiration,' Julia intervened.

'It doesn't work. Don't forget the whore I'm chasing sells her body like a business. She sells pleasure. That's her business, a business that goes to the core of any men's needs, and she sells it without losing her dignity.'

'What if he put neon lights flashing *'two for the price of one'* in the background?' Peter asked enthusiastically.

'Peter, why don't you shut up?' Jake replied before leaving the room.

Lula followed him and asked, 'Don't you think Joshua and John will be a bit worried with the content?'

'Not at all, they both believe that whores are sinners and should be raped to death. America thinks likewise.'

When Jake was about to leave, he turned around and asked, 'What about that detective working on Mr X? Any news from him?'

'Nothing so far. I'll call him later today.'

'Thanks. I want Mr X out of my mind. Right now, he is so inconclusive that I find it hard to sleep at night. It's my genius working against me.'

XVII

One week after, when Jake and Sabrina were officially back together, Jake received a draft report about Mr X.

'Do you want me to forward it to you?' Lula asked.

'Did you read it?'

'Should I?'

'Better not. It doesn't concern you. Yes, email it to me,' Jake replied.

Jake and Sabrina were celebrating seven continuous nights of passionate sex. Sabrina had prepared chicken with macadamias and had lit a set of green candles to celebrate the occasion. During dessert Jake decided to browse the report.

'Let's see who this wanker is,' but when the reading was finished, Jake was left feeling slightly uneasy about the identity of his investor.

The report was inconclusive. Basic information such as date of birth, official residence and nationality were noted down 'TBC'. Most extracts from newspapers were about Mr X appearing to the public in the form of a loudspeaker.

One article from the Financial Times caught Jake's attention. It read, 'Mr X is the first art investor to auction the work of James Sullivan, a promising contemporary artist, after his death. Mr X auctioned his stock for five million dollars. The sale was a tremendous success. Mr X decided to offload his stock based on the saying, 'buy cheap and sell at the peak,' despite many art analysts still believing that the value of James Sullivan's art still has further to go.'

Jake read the article several times. 'Who is James Sullivan?'

Jake searched for his axe inside his wardrobe. He sat on his sofa and swung the axe back and forth.

'What are you doing with that?' Sabrina asked.

'I'm thinking.'

'I'm going to bed,' Sabrina said and walked towards the bedroom. She left the door wide open and Jake could see her undressing. When Jake decided to join Sabrina in bed, he brought his axe along with him.

Sabrina rolled over and, with a sexy smile, asked Jake, 'Could you put that thing away for me, please? It's scary.'

They made love to each other. Jake ejaculated and ten minutes later, Sabrina was snoring. Two hours after that, Jake was still awake.

'Is Mr X trying to kill me?' he thought to himself.

XVIII

Saturday morning, Gabriel called Jake.

'The Financial Times has published an article about you. Have you seen it?'

'Who is Jack Sullivan?' Jake replied.

'Jack who? I've never heard of him.'

'Haven't you? Will a five million profit help your memory?'

'Nope.'

'Let's say Mr X profited beyond the realms of imagination with the death of a young and promising contemporary artist.'

'I think I know what you're talking about, but let me tell you, it's bullshit.'

'The Financial Times doesn't publish bullshit.'

'They don't get everything right, either. No one makes five million dollar profit with the death of a famous artist. The article was unrealistic.'

'The work was auctioned.'

'He may have bought the work himself, to create this furore in the press. I remember reading about the five million at the time. I didn't buy it then and still need to be convinced.'

'I told you not to sell everything to Mr X,' Jake said hastily.

'Honestly, Jake, I'm not sure what you're afraid of. He's not going to kill you. He's speculating your work will increase in value, nothing else.'

Jake promised Gabriel he would read the article in the FT despite Gabriel reconsidering and advising him it would be better not to.

'Now I'm definitely going to read it,' Jake argued before hanging up.

The article read, *'Jake Ford could well be the art investment of the year. Mr X has been reportedly buying all the stock available. Jake Ford is also reported to be preparing an exhibition in New York City to strengthen his presence in the American art market.'*

Jake, livid and struggling to read through the first paragraph, put the newspaper aside.

Sabrina browsed through several pages and said, 'Have you seen this, the Neo Rauch painting Platz sold for more than one million at Christie's London. I didn't know he was that famous.'

'Truly amazing,' Jake answered. 'I think I'm going for a walk.'

Sabrina stayed home alone, immersed in a four-page article the FT was running about wine. In the end, she made several phone calls.

'I'll be home soon,' Jake said.

Jake walked towards Liverpool St, hoping he would find asylum at Exchange Square. He sat and gazed at the sky for a while. His moment of solitude was interrupted with the arrival of a couple that started to take random photos of the big fat Venus.

‘How much do you think this is worth?’ one tourist wondered.

‘I bet it’s worth a fortune,’ his friend replied.

On his way home, as Jake turned onto Bethnal Green Rd, he saw a large advertisement board. The punch line was quite clear; *‘We live in Financial Times.’*

‘Have you read this? They’re running a supplement about wine. It seems the Chardonnay we emptied is doing extremely well. Much better than the Pinot Noir I bought,’ Sabrina said.

‘I told you the Chardonnay was divine. Can you handle the losses?’

‘The Pinot Noir is not losing value. I’m not trying to make a fortune here anyway.’

‘Why are you doing it then?’ Jake asked, while ripping off the front page of the newspaper. ‘I thought you had enough money.’

‘I do it for the learning curve.’

‘I thought you were saving for the baby. They don’t come cheap.’

‘I’m relying on you to support us.’

‘You’ll never rely on me to support you. I figured that out ages ago.’

Jake ripped off another page of the FT and said, ‘I feel like getting out of here. I wish I could fly, I wish I could touch the sky.’

‘Do you think about it every night and day?’

‘Yes, spread my wings and fly away. Don’t you feel like getting out of here?’

‘Not really.’

‘Let’s catch a plane and go bananas. Tell me the first country that pops into your mind?’

Sabrina thought for a minute and said, ‘Iceland!’

‘No way.’

‘Japan then.’

‘Let’s go to Morocco.’

‘Why not Japan? Why Morocco?’

‘Look,’ and Jake pointed at a bus in the distance with a huge advertisement on its rear back, saying, *‘Morocco, the country that will spice up your life,’*

adding, 'I think I need a bit of that.'

Morocco

'This place is great,' Jake said to Gabriel.

'Next time you vanish from London, you should let me know beforehand.'

'What for?'

'What if Joshua and John need to talk to us?'

'You tell them I went on peregrination to Trondheim to search for the meaning of life.'

'Jake, this is no way to run a business. I'm your partner, not your agent. I need to know your whereabouts.'

'I'm abroad, I told you already.'

'Listen, I've just spent two days chasing you unsuccessfully. You can't jet off without telling me.'

'But what do you want?'

'I need to know when your work is ready to ship to America. Joshua and John keep asking for a date.'

'How can I know? Have you asked Kabugi?'

'Yes. He needs your approval before sending anything over. When are you coming back?'

'I don't know. We bought a one-way ticket. I take it that when we get bored, we will head back to London. Why?'

'Why?! Why?! Is this a joke? Are you out of your mind? Where are you?'

'Listen, I'll have a word with Kabugi and keep you posted. How does that sound?'

'Great! Just give me a date, but where are you, for fuck's sake?'

'Bye for now.'

Rather than calling Lula, Jake put a text together. '*Return date to the UK not confirmed yet. Put New York exhibition on hold until my return.*' He sent it over and binned his iPhone.

'Why did you do that?' Sabrina asked.

'I'm experimenting living without a mobile phone. Do you remember how it

used to be?’

‘Yes I do, it sucked.’

‘Well, let me be the judge of that,’ Jake uttered.

‘I can’t believe places like this exist so close to London,’ Jake said, happily shopping in the local Marrakech markets. After finding a leather suitcase he liked, Jake asked Sabrina to do the bargaining.

‘They say I bargain like a Berber,’ Sabrina giggled to Jake. ‘I love to bargain for you.’

‘I love it here. These people are so nice. What are we doing for Eastern?’

‘I don’t know, go out I guess.’

‘We need to do something special,’ and the following day, Sabrina returned with a special tourist package.

‘What’s this?’

‘An invitation to eat Berber food and listen to folk songs in the desert.’

‘I’m not going,’ Jake said.

Two days later, Jake found himself driving through the desert together with Sabrina, two tourists and the trip organizers, to experience a different Good Friday.

Jake never felt well amid Mother Nature. He experienced a cold sweat when two local men arrived with a suitcase, which could be potentially hiding a gun.

When one of the locals opened the suitcase, Jake shivered. ‘*It’s only a guitar,*’ he said to himself.

Later, one of the locals started playing folk songs.

Two hours afterwards, when they returned to the hotel, Jake was thrilled to be alive.

‘I loved it,’ Sabrina commented. ‘Are you fine, honey?’ Sabrina asked while undressing and exposing her body majestically.

‘What should we do next?’

‘Nothing, honey. Absolutely nothing. Why don’t we stay at the hotel?’

‘And do what?’

‘Watch TV, I don’t know. We can always fornicate. It’s entirely up to you.’

‘I feel like going out.’

‘We need to respect the vernacular traditions of this wonderful country.’ In Fez, Sabrina and Jake stayed in a Riad.

‘I would love to have a house like this,’ Sabrina commented.

Back in Marrakesh, three weeks after vanishing from London, Jake was experiencing a life without a mobile phone, people to chase or entertain. 'Travelling life is sweet,' he concluded.

Later that day, while having dinner at a funky restaurant, Sabrina went to the bathroom and Jake gazed at a young sexy woman passing by when a gentle, 'How do you do?' came through a loudspeaker.

Jake felt his upper lip quiver.

'Well,' Jake murmured, 'what's this girl's outfit supposed to mean?'

'How do you know this isn't me?'

'Unless you're a ventricular, it's hard to believe.' A loud laugh was heard from afar.

'I like you Jake. I'm on holiday.'

'I'm sorry, but the only person on holiday around here is your loudspeaker, whatever that means.'

'How do you know I'm not in this restaurant, eating and enjoying the Moroccan hospitality?'

'Because the only thing you know about life is how to count money, Mr Loudspeaker.'

Mr X chuckled.

'Let me tell you, I'm heading to the Atlas Mountains tomorrow morning. Have you been?'

'Not really. I stayed away from the desert and the mountains. Too much sun will damage my skin.'

'I heard it's one of the most mystical places there is.'

'I'm sure for a loudspeaker it will be a surreal place to be,' Jake argued, 'I've also heard a few things about you.'

'Mostly untrue, I can assure you.'

'I'm sure your appetite for business and profit is not unfunded.'

'That's one of the few things the press got right.'

'Are you trying to kill me?' Jake asked.

A strange laugh emanated from the speaker, as if someone was snoring like a pig.

'Don't be ridiculous. How can someone profit from a kill, enjoy the rest of your holiday,' Mr X said and walked away.

Sabrina found Jake livid.

'Have you seen a ghost?'

'Yes, Mr X just whizzed by.'

'Who's Mr X?'

'My devoted art investor.'

'He's probably just looking after his investment since no one knows where you are. He probably wanted to know that you were doing fine.'

'Well, not anymore,' and two hours later, Jake started shouting at the management of the restaurant. 'I want to know who Mr X is.'

'Sir, we don't know him.'

'Liar, you ignoble liar. I want to know who he is.'

Jake's persistence was remarkable. Three bodyguards were required to escort him out.

In the remaining days, Jake searched for Mr X in the streets of Marrakesh in vain.

'He's in the mountains, why can't you listen to me?' Sabrina kept saying.

'He's stalking me.'

'We can go and visit the mountains if you want.'

'No, no, no more trips to the desert.'

'Do you want to go back to London?'

'I think we'd better do.'

XX

'You cannot treat me like this. I'm sorry, but you can't,' Gabriel yelled at Jake upon his return.

'I felt I had to go, to find my inner me so to speak.'

'And did you find it? Did you find your twisted, perverted, inner you?'

'I found Mr X.'

'Well, I'm not surprised he tracked you down. You are worth a million. The least he expects to know is the whereabouts of his investment.'

'Listen, Dokisuki, you got me into this, you get me out of it.'

'Jesus, Jake, how many times do I have to tell you that Mr X is your friend, not a killer?'

'Ask Jake Sullivan.'

'You should stop believing everything you read. I checked the FT article that

came with your report. It's bullshit. It's never been published.'

'Why would a private detective forge an article?'

'Because he couldn't find anything meaningful about Mr X and he wanted to sell you fear.'

'I don't like Mr X.'

'That's fine, as long as you don't think he's trying to kill you.'

'I am not convinced yet.'

Gabriel collected Jake's luggage and asked, 'Where's Sabrina?'

'She left me.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. She didn't like my behaviour in Marrakesh. I told her she was Mr X. She told me I sounded like a dick. I'm sure she'll come back.'

'I hope she doesn't. That woman has never been good for you.'

'But she will come back.'

'How can you be so sure? It's often you that goes crying under her window.'

'This time it's different,' Jake argued and took his luggage from Gabriel.

'I'll get a taxi. I'll agree to a delivery date with Lula and let you know the outcome.'

'Why can't I come with you? This concerns me more than you.'

'You make my assistants nervous.'

Jake called a cab at the airport, 'Limehouse, please,' and one hour later entered his studio, yelling, 'Show me the fucking whores,' but no one was present.

'Where are you?' Jake asked Lula over the phone.

'At home.'

'Shouldn't you be here, working?'

'Are you back in London?'

'I'm at the Studio.'

'Did you inform us of your return date?'

'Well, it's today, isn't it, or where do you think I am?'

'I'll see you in a minute,' and Lula hung up the phone.

Seven missed calls later, Lula arrived at the studio.

'Where is everybody?' Jake asked immediately.

'Julia went to Tokyo for a couple of weeks. Peter is surfing in Cornwall. I went to Stockholm to visit a dear friend.'

'You must be kidding and what about our work?'

'What else could we do?'

Jake banged his head on the wall. Lula ignored him.

'Show me a fucking whore.'

Lula played one animation on the computer. A greyish background with a post and a woman leaning against it appeared. A car stopped. Words were exchanged. A man left the car, slapped the woman and raped her. Like the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*, the five minutes film was almost motionless.

'Next!' Jake yelled.

'This is all we've got,' Lula replied.

'This can't be happening.'

'How did you find it anyway?'

'It's *shite*.'

'What should we do?'

'I didn't like the car and the man leaving. I don't want to tell a story. I want the movie to start with the rape and end with the rape. That way, it goes into a perfect loop, like an eternal rape. Like Dante's circles of hell. How long do you reckon you need to mend it?'

'One or two days.'

'Great. Tell Dokisuki the first animation will be ready in two weeks.'

'What are we supposed to do in between?'

'Go travelling to Sweden. What do I care?' And Jake rushed out of his studio to grab a taxi and head to Sabrina's house.

Jake arrived at a nice and well looked-after Chelsea Street. Sabrina didn't answer the buzz and Jake decided to wait by the door.

Sabrina arrived several hours later.

'Jake, what are you doing here?'

'Why didn't you answer my phone calls?'

'I don't know, what do you reckon?'

'No idea. I was hoping you had a good explanation.'

'Let me see, chasing loudspeakers in Morocco. Accusing me of being Mr X. What else, what else?'

'I'm sorry, I may have overreacted.'

'You don't need to be sorry. I was the one that got in touch. I should have stayed out of your way. I don't think you are well.'

'I'm fit, like superman. I've just been to the doctor.'

'And what did he tell you? That your sperm was top quality and every woman

should desire you to be the father of their children?’

‘Not those exact words but more or less the same.’

‘So, how come after two months of intense sex I’m not with child?’

‘Maybe you’re too old to get pregnant? Have you checked that?’

‘Do I need to remind you I’m in my mid-thirties?’

‘You’ve passed your peak then.’

‘Have I? I don’t think I have.’

‘Listen, I didn’t come here to discuss my sperm. I came here to apologise and ask you to move back into my place.’

‘And why should I do that?’

‘I can think of a million reasons why.’

‘Tell me one.’

‘I’m a famous artist.’

‘I’d rather be with a gifted artist.’

‘Famous, gifted, both mean the same thing.’

‘Listen, Jake, right now I don’t think I’m able to move back to your place. But we can still go out together, have unprotected sex and see how things go.’

‘Do you want to go out tonight?’

‘What about tomorrow?’

‘Today or tomorrow is fine with me. Great, see you later. I just need to make a phone call. Speak soon.’

‘Two weeks? I’m sure you can do better than that.’

‘What’s the rush? The opening is still a few months away.’

‘Jake, you know this is not how we do business in this market.’

‘Well, I discussed the issue in detail with Kabugi; there’s nothing we can do about it. Joshua and John will have to wait.’

‘I’m sure one week is plenty of time.’

‘Not for what we’re trying to achieve here. They can wait,’ and Jake hung up the phone

The following day, Gabriel called. It wasn’t Jake’s intention to answer but Sabrina thought it was better to.

‘I’m on a date, what do you want?’

‘I had a word with Lula.’

‘And?’

‘He swore upon his mother and father that he needed two extra weeks to

finish off the sketches.'

'But for God's sake, Dokisuki, what did I tell you?'

'The fact that he was flying to Stockholm at the time of the call doesn't support your case, but anyway, I'll put this issue to bed. I'm calling to discuss a different thing.'

'I'm busy, what do you want?'

'Mr X is giving a party next week.'

'I'm not going.'

'I think you should.'

'Tell Mr X I gave up the producing of fine art to concentrate on teaching penguins how to save the ozone layer.'

'I'm not interested in what you're going to do. The venue will generate good press.'

'I'm not going.'

'Put it this way, if you don't go, Mr X will become your only patron.'

'Why do you say that?'

'At this rate, being so abreast from the press like you have been, who's going to know Jake Ford? People will start wondering who the heck he is.'

Jake didn't answer immediately.

'Ok. I'll drop by. Have a photo taken, but I'm not staying long. And I'm taking Sabrina with me.'

'Fine, I agree she has a good figure to look at. By the way, Steve wants to interview Sabrina for the documentary.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The documentary the BBC is producing about you.'

'I almost forgot about that. Sure, I'll let her know. What should I tell her?'

'Don't worry. They can't broadcast any footage unless it's approved by us. Tell her to have a word with Steve and book a time,' and Gabriel hung up the phone.

'Where are we going?'

'Mr X is hosting a party next week.'

'I'm not sure if I can make it.'

'You can at least try. You love this kind of venues.'

'How can you be so sure? Maybe I've changed?'

'You did change a bit. I've noticed a subtle difference, but the way you move like fish in water at these parties will most likely never change.'

'To be quite honest, I would prefer not to go.'

'Don't be such a no-no. You love the paparazzi and the people. Why are you playing so hard to convince?'

'I have different priorities at this point in my life.'

'Do it for me then. For the sake of our relationship,' Jake said.

Sabrina gasped.

'I'll think about it.'

'By the way, the BBC is producing a documentary about me.'

'And?'

'They want to interview you.'

'What for?'

'So you can teach the public how to understand me.'

Sabrina thought for a moment and answered, 'I would be delighted.'

Jake laughed and said, 'I could see this one coming. Have a word with Steve first.'

'Steve, who?'

'Steve Nash, I'm sure you remember him.'

'Yes, I do.'

'He is the enthusiasm behind the documentary.'

'When should I call him?'

'Soon. So that you know, regarding broadcasting, Gabriel has the final say about what goes on live. You can say what you like, but if it damages my reputation, it won't make the cut.'

'What's the point in doing it then?'

'Don't you think you owe it to the public?'

'Owe what?'

'The privilege of sharing your life with a genius. Don't you think the public has the right to hear about your experience?'

'You ought to be kidding.'

'The British people want to hear how fulfilling it is to live with me.'

'This is pathetic.'

'I know. But call him anyway, and let your heart speak the truth during the interview.'

Interview: Sabrina Adam

The following day, Sabrina was escorted around the White City by an attractive receptionist. They walked through various corridors and stopped at Studio 9. A knock on the door and, 'Please come in,' was heard from inside. The door swung open and Steve Nash greeted her and introduced her to Vladimir Gogol.

Sabrina was wearing high heels with a narrow stiletto, tight jeans, a white shirt and a black blazer, combined with a silk scarf and a leather handbag.

'Sabrina, many thanks for accepting my invitation to answer a few questions about your relationship with Jake Ford,' Steve said, trying to focus on Sabrina's attire and not her long legs.

'My pleasure, Steve.'

'Please, sit down.'

Sabrina sat down on a vintage chair in the shape of an egg, designed by a famous Danish designer. Behind her stood a white sheet that covered the wall from top to bottom.

'Well, I think we're ready. Can we get the camera rolling?' Steve asked Vladimir.

Vladimir nodded.

'Sabrina, I'm going to ask several questions about you before we move on to discuss Jake's life and work. You can refuse to answer, stop speaking, rephrase and so forth. We're simply going to keep the camera rolling and edit everything later. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

Steve took a sip of water and started.

SN Sabrina, let's start from the beginning. Tell us about where you lived, your parents and so forth.

SABRINA ADAM I grew up in Surrey, on the outskirts of London. My father was English, my mother was from Slovenia.

SN Any traumas or major disappointments during your childhood?

SA I don't recall being depressed or wearing black during this period of my life, if that's what you wanted to know.

SN How would you rate your childhood?

SA Neither exciting nor asphyxiating. I remember being bored at times, but as I started University my boredom slowly came to an end.

SN What did you study?

SA Marketing. I knew from a young age I wanted to be a marketer.

SN But you work as a wine consultant these days.

SA I suppose one thing led to another.

SN What attracted you to wine consultancy?

SA Flavours and memories.

SN How did you move from a marketing career to a career in wine consultancy?

SA A Portuguese wine producer used the marketing company I was working to enter the UK market. I spent a lot of time in Portugal learning about their company and wine. The campaign we put together was a huge success and I took most of the credit. From then on, everything that was wine related was handed over to me.

SN Do you have anything to say about women in the corporate world?

SA I believe that strong-minded women are advancing in positions that were often associated with men. Unfortunately, the media still portray women as being in heaven when shopping in a Prada store, or that they can only be successful in the corporate world if they act like men. But the world is evolving.

SN Do you consider yourself successful?

SA Professionally yes, but not personally.

SN Why is that?

SA My personal life didn't evolve the way I imagined.

SN What about your relationship with Jake?

SA What about it?

SN Where did you meet?

SA Seoul, South Korea. More than fifteen years ago, we were both in our early twenties.

SN How was he back then?

SA A smartass! I'm used to men trying to get laid but often by hiding their true intentions. Jake was different. It was obvious he was after my body. He didn't even try to pretend he liked my character or me as a person.

SN How is he now?

SA What do you mean?

SN Do you find him different? Jake Ford is considered rather odd to the British people. Did he have this odd behaviour back in the early days?

SA Jake is not an odd person. He used to live with a smile back when I first met him.

SN Do you think becoming a public figure made him a different person?

SA No, not really. It just gave him more opportunities to engage with the worlds around him differently.

SN Differently? In what way?

SA It's hard to explain and I'm not going to attempt to do it here, it wouldn't be fair to Jake.

SN Why not?

SA It's merely my personal judgment. I may be on the wrong. I'd rather not go there.

SN How was your life together?

SA A mix of good and bad. Personally, I don't think our friends ever pictured us as a couple, despite the many years we've been together.

SN You don't feel you were meant to be together?

SA Absolutely not. The only reason we came to know each other was due to the unusual circumstances we were in. I was studying marketing and Jake was studying fine art. We were both at different schools, but since we were both living in a foreign country, we ended up frequenting the same venues.

SN Don't you believe in destiny?

SA Not for a minute. We just happened to be in the same spot at the same time, but even if it was destiny, we never managed to produce a healthy relationship together. Our relationship was nothing more than a shoulder to lay our heads on at night.

SN What happened?

SA It's hard to summarise. Jake was always in a rush. I had my professional career to consider. Jake got into the lifestyle that went with being a famous artist early on. I started to pursue a career as a wine consultant. England hardly produced any wine and travelling was frequently a feature of my agenda. I think, even if we had wanted to make a life together, one of us would have had to sacrifice their professional career and none of us was ready for that.

SN What about having children?

SA We never had any. I would've considered giving up my career to start a family, but Jake has always been afraid of children. I guess, we probably thought that having children would bring his career to an end.

SN How does it feel to share your life with an artistic genius?

SA Sometimes it's asphyxiating. Although he needs to eat, sleep and talk like any other person, he can be hard to reach at times.

SN Don't you think that being the beacon of modern art in this country puts him under pressure?

SA Maybe, I'm not sure. I'm normally not interested in his work.

SN Did you ever consider becoming an art consultant?

SA I could never do that. I started to develop a kind of dislike for contemporary art when I started dating Jake.

SN What do you think makes Jake so attached to you?

SA What do you mean?

SN Don't get me wrong, you are a lovely and attractive woman but you're not a model or an artist, but rather a successful businesswoman.

SA Steve, to be quite honest, it's a mystery to me too, why he likes me. It's probably the power of memories. That's the only explanation I have. But you are wrong if you think that Jake isn't interested in the power of money.

SN What do you mean?

SA Jake isn't shy to acknowledge that, without patronage, without the power of money, he would hardly be able to produce the grandeur installations he's so fond of.

SN Don't you think his work speaks for itself?

SA His work only exists because someone is willing to pay for it.

SN I'm sorry but I disagree.

SA Do you honestly believe that without the availability of funding, without patronage, contemporary artists would be able to push their art in way they've been doing in the last few decades? There is absolutely no way. Their work is useless and expensive, and Jake knows that very well.

SN I totally disagree.

SA You aren't an artist, are you? How do you explain the legion of unsuccessful artists living in Brick Lane? From what I gathered, it isn't because of their lack of talent.

SN I think you are confusing talent with the dream of becoming an artist, which often do not go hand in hand.

SA I think Jake understands the economics of contemporary art better than most artists.

SN Could you give me an example why you think that way?

SA Have you ever discussed lapis lazuli with him?

SN Lapis lazuli? Why lapis lazuli?

SA Ask him.

SN Why lapis lazuli? What's the link between Lapis Lazuli and economics?

SA You better ask him.

SN I will, I will. Thanks Sabrina for accepting our invitation. We will keep you

posted about the documentary and let you know when it's broadcast.

SA My pleasure.

XXII

Mr X's party was in Russell Square. The press was well represented at the event and the paparazzi were confirmed in the area.

'What's this all about?' Jake murmured to Sabrina while holding her hands and smiling at the flashes.

'It's the power of money.'

'Jake, how are you?'

'Fine, thanks,' Jake answered a journalist.

'Happy to be here?'

'Absolutely,' Jake said, grinning before going inside the building.

Inside, the premises were decorated with red carpets. Guests were talking and drinking champagne.

Sabrina commented on the quality, and the scarcity, of the wine.

'This vintage is not easy to find,' Sabrina said and five minutes later she started discussing wine production with a French architect who owned a famous vineyard in France and used to consult with her.

Jake, seemingly disinterested about the conversation, went for a random walk. Before leaving, he whispered to Sabrina, 'Don't forget to tell your friend how well you spotted the Pinot Noir potential.'

Walking in a mix of espionage and let-me-not-be-recognised, Jake concluded that Mr X was absent. He was the only well-known artist invited to the event. He noticed a Hollywood star, although he couldn't remember her name, and a famous art dealer that he decided to avoid.

The only quiet room available was a transitory space between the reception hall and the ballroom where Jake decided to hide until a young woman, dressed in Prada style, appeared unexpectedly.

‘Hiding from someone?’ she asked.

‘Not quite, what about you?’

‘Same thing, it feels like a meat market around here.’

‘You came to the right spot then. I’m not a lady eater.’

‘Aren’t you?’

‘Not really. I’m attracted to intellects, not body figures.’

‘Indeed, Mr Ford.’

‘Mr who?’

‘Aren’t you Jake Ford?’

‘I’ve never heard of him. Who is he?’

‘Mr Ford, are you trying to fool me?’

‘How do you know I’m not Jake’s twin brother or a CIA agent pretending to be an interesting artist to get into bed with you?’

‘Mr Ford, when you and Sabrina popped in, everyone noticed.’

‘How do you know Sabrina? What’s this all about? Who are you?’

‘I’m June.’

‘What do you want? Are you stalking me? Are you working for Mr X?’

‘Who, me? Of course not.’

‘What are you doing here then?’

Jake, noticing the ridicule of his observations, added, ‘I trust you’re not a man eater.’

June laughed and asked, ‘Don’t you like the party?’

‘Not so excited about it. I thought it would be livelier.’

‘I know. So many formalities, which is kind of weird, when Mr X has a reputation for being a creative investor.’

Upon hearing the sentence creative investor, Jake had a sip of wine and gazed out at the ballroom.

Ten minutes later, Mr X joined the party, walked by a sexy female in a tight, black dress who could almost attract the same attention as a beacon of light if it wasn’t for the orange loud speaker with a funky yellow hat that she was carrying against her chest.

‘She’s probably a model hired for the occasion,’ Jake commented.

‘Do you know Mr X?’

‘Well, I meet his loudspeaker several times.’

'I've never had the privilege. He's very selective.'

Mr X, upon seeing Jake, walked towards him immediately.

'*Shit, he has seen me,*' Jake thought to himself.

'Jake, many thanks for coming, I'm flattered. How was Morocco?'

'So, so.'

'So, so, are you teasing me? The country is amazing. The food, the people, the weather, the culture, it was a marvellous experience.'

'I can't be supportive of a culture that allows more freedom to a dog than a woman,' Jake argued.

'That's their culture. We should respect it.'

'Should we? Should we respect a society that denies freedom to women?'

June intervened, eager to chat to Mr X.

'Excuse me, where are you?' Mr X asked.

'I'm here,' and almost at the same time, the fit lady spun thirty degrees to the left.

'Who are you?'

'June.'

'Are you with Jake?'

'She's not,' Jake was quick to add, 'We met minutes ago.'

'Pleased to hear that,' and addressing June, Mr X noted, 'It's not easy to communicate with gifted artists. You've done well.'

'What are we celebrating?' Jake asked Mr X, to divert the conversation.

'We throw a party every quarter. One in London, New York, and Tokyo, and we always start the year in Sydney on New Year's Eve. Keeps our investors satisfied. To make and spend money, that's our motto.'

'Do you have good results to report?' June asked.

'We always excel in what to do, although the focus tonight is in promoting a new investment fund.'

'What sort of investment fund?' Jake wondered.

'A fund whose primary investments are in contemporary art.'

'What's so new about that?'

'Our approach is unique.'

'If you're talking about this loudspeaker rubbish let me assure you, there's nothing unique about it.'

'No, Jake, I'm talking about our investments. We invest in contemporary art like no fund has done before. We believe in what we buy, and we buy plenty of it.'

‘What’s so remarkable about that?’

‘Put it this way, we’re buying the work of living artists. In great quantities.’

‘Isn’t that a lot riskier?’ June interrupted. ‘Everyone knows a dead artist is a lot safer as an investment.’

‘Obviously, it is riskier to buy contemporary art but we invest in artists with the self-destructive mind. Those are the investments we seek. It’s riskier but more profitable than investing in the old masters.’

‘Excuse me, but do you think I have a self-destructive mind?’

‘Oh yes, you certainly don’t think the *Vicissitudes of the Axe* is the work of a normal person? However, you’re a different kind of investment. Often a subtle order emerges in your disorder. I like your stuff. It will be a pity to see you die before fulfilling your potential. I’m not the only one who believes in you. Your name has been on the streets for a while. Your installations never ceased to increase in value.’

‘Am I part of the amazing returns the fund is reporting tonight?’

‘Yes and no. In your case, I’m also investing my personal funds.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The fund invests in contemporary artists. But as the fund grows we need to spread our risks by investing in various artists to protect our investors. However, since I’m so passionate about your work, I invested my own funds in you.’

‘Are you going to keep my fine art?’

‘I never do. I’m a profit collector, not an art collector.’

‘When are you considering selling?’

‘It’s hard to guess for an investor when the time is right to exit. Sometimes, I have to play it by ear.’

‘I’m considering giving up art,’ Jake replied.

‘To do what?’

‘Teach penguins how to save the ozone layer.’

Mr X didn’t laugh, but June did.

‘You shouldn’t. You’re a gifted artist. You should fulfil your potential.’

‘So you can profit?’

‘Not just me. Humanity will profit too.’

‘Sounds very deep,’ Jake commented, ‘and now if you will excuse me, I need to go to the gents for a piss.’

Mr X chatted for a few seconds with June before walking into the ballroom.

‘Ladies and Gentleman, thanks for coming,’ Mr X said, as if talking with the

aid of a megaphone. 'I'm pleased to be among investors. Let the show begin,' and after clapping hands a group of professional dancers entered the room, their bodies half naked, dancing pirouettes, while a projection screen rolled down from the ceiling.

As the dancers finished their choreography, the song '*I want it all*' started to play in the background. Mr X reappeared when the first slide of his presentation was projected onto the screen. It read, 'X Fund'.

'The first fund of its kind,' Mr X added.

The professional dancers returned to the room to circle Mr X and dance a financial choreography. They shook their legs right up, lifted their skirts and turned around to bend over and show the symbol of the dollar drawn on their underwear. No one seemed to react against the chauvinism that inspired the choreography. Some conformist investors even clapped their hands frantically and started to whistle loudly.

'This is an extremely unregulated market. We can make serious money here,' Mr X said as the song '*stuck on you*' started to play. The presentation carried on.

'We have invested in old masters before and we have done well, but there are no bargains in such a market anymore.'

The financial result for the current quarter was shown. The returns were in the double digits. The guests were excited about it.

'The X Fund has been created with the sole intention of acquiring contemporary art. We believe the returns in this market outdo the risks.'

'How do you value the stock of such a fund?' Asked one investor.

'We reevaluate each art piece every quarter using an accredited Art Valuer. Although the true value of an art piece can only be established at an auction.' Mr X paused to have a sip of water, or so it sounded.

'Unfortunately, historical data regarding funds of this nature is almost non-existent. It's hard to forecast potential returns and even harder to come up with a decent benchmark.'

'How do you intend to convince the financial markets?' Asked another investor.

'We don't. We are keeping things simple. We are committed to returns in the double digits, year on year. That's the nature of our business plan. Less than double digits will be considered a failure to us.'

Mr X spent the next thirty minutes promoting the X Fund. The initial returns were astonishing and everybody wanted a piece of it.

Suddenly, without notice, the spotlight went out and Mr X disappeared within a cloud of smoke that emerged in the room. The song *'you're the sunshine of my life'* started to play and the professional dancers returned to the room.

Minutes later, the professional dancers exited the room and the guests were left to discuss the risks and opportunities of the X Fund.

Jake left the ballroom for a stroll alone in the terrace, gazing at the moonlight with mellow eyes. *'I am sick of this place.'*

'Here are you? I've been looking for you,' Sabrina said. 'Don't you want to come inside? Some guests would like to discuss contemporary art with you.'

'I'm not in the mood right now. I want to go home. I was only waiting for you. Where have you been?'

'You know me, mingling,' Sabrina was happy.

'How did you find it?'

'Mr X is quite a charmer. He has a special touch. He is not grey and boring like most people in finance.'

'He's a creative investor.'

'Yes, I guess he is, whatever that means. Aren't you jealous?'

'Absolutely, I can't think of anything more attractive than walking around in the form of a loudspeaker. I'm leaving soon.'

'Can't you wait five minutes?'

'I can't wait a minute longer in this shit hole.'

'I need to say goodbye to a few people. Wait a minute,' and Sabrina returned inside. Seconds later, Jake left the premises alone.

XXIII

'You're a wanker.'

'I'm your agent. What did you expect from me? Mr X is just an art investor.'

'An investor, my ass.'

'Don't be pathetic, Jake. He's a serious investor.'

'I saw his presentation last night. His target returns can only be achieved if I'm eliminated.'

‘Don’t be so melodramatic. How is Mr X going to kill you? I’m sorry but the art business does not work that way.’

‘It would help if you stopped selling my work to him, even if he pays a million for a dot on a canvas.’

‘Jake, is this another of your artistic tantrums? If Mr X is willing to pay a million for a dot on a canvas, of course I will dispatch it to him, and you’ll thank me. Besides, he can always buy the art using third parties and we would never know about it.’

‘Tell him to stick his money up his arse.’

‘Don’t act juvenile. He can be a bit awkward, I admit. Using a loudspeaker to interact with people is furtive to say the least. Sometimes I suspect he’s cleaning money but who are we to stop him? We’re not the police. I did a credit check and he came out clean.’

Jake hung up the phone, irritated. He walked between his living room and his bedroom about a dozen times. He opened and closed the window curtains several times. He walked outside, onto his balcony to light a cigarette and thought to himself, *‘Who am I kidding? I don’t even smoke.’*

Jake tried a glass of whiskey. Minutes later, his phone rung. He answered the call.

‘I forgot to tell you that I’m in New York,’ Gabriel said.

‘So what?’

‘Two weeks have passed. Joshua and John are eager to see progress.’

‘I’ve got nothing.’

‘Don’t bullshit me.’

‘I’m having difficulties coming up with ideas.’

‘Listen, Jake, I’m not in the mood to deal with another one of your artistic freak outs. Go to the studio, talk to Lula, grab what you’ve got and fly here to present the stuff yourself.’

‘I don’t want to go to New York.’

‘Well, I think you should.’

‘For what? So that Mr X can profit?’

‘So that I can promote your name in this corner of the world. If you make it here your art will increase in value, regardless if Mr X kills you or not. I’ll schedule you in the next couple of days. I’ll kick your ass around if you don’t come here. I hate it when you’re in this mood. If it helps, go on a romantic tour to Paris with Sabrina! Do whatever you need to change your stupid attitude.’

‘Why don’t you mind your own business?’

Jake hung up the phone murmuring, *'tired of this business,'* and headed to his studio.

'Jake, you look awful. Have you been sleeping?'

'Like a baby.'

'Have you been drinking?'

'Water, what have you got for me?'

'Follow me.'

Ten minutes later, in the film room after watching everything, Jake moaned, 'Hmm, hmm.'

'Don't you like it?'

'I'm not quite sure.' Jake walked around the room.

Peter popped into the room and asked, 'Tea, coffee?'

'Coffee please,' Jake replied and returned to his frantic walk.

Julia entered the room and left quietly after noticing Jake inside. Ten minutes later, Jake said, 'The rapist should leave and return. This way the rape breaks. Without the stop, the whore gets used to the rape.'

'It can be done.'

'I need it ready for tomorrow. No travelling to Sweden this time.'

'No worries. I'm only flying to Sweden in three weeks.'

'Why do you fly up there anyway?'

'I love Sweden.'

'I love Sweden too but it doesn't mean that I have to go there every month.'

'I met a Swedish bird some time ago. We get along well. Unfortunately, she was already planning to move back to Stockholm.'

'What? Are you marrying her?'

'At the moment we're only trying to have a child.'

'What for?'

'For the child care benefits. If I father more than three babies, I'm set for life.'

'Why are you thinking about your retirement so early?'

'Early? You're the only one making serious money here. Who is going to support me when I'm old? I doubt it will be you. Besides you're not paying me a fortune.'

'I've always assumed you were making plenty of money exploiting the assistants.'

'I am but there's a limit to how much you can charge them. You're not a Hollywood star.'

‘Well, I guess you’re right. If it makes you feel better, I can pay for your next ticket to Sweden.’

‘That’s so nice of you, so thoughtful.’

‘It’s better than nothing, Kabugi.’

‘It almost equates to nothing doesn’t it? Unless I’m getting a first class ticket.’

‘You are already shagging first class meat, I’m sure economy class will suffice. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to leave.’

XXIV

The following day, Jake was at the airport when an email from Lula appeared on his iPhone. It said, *‘Julia worked late last night to produce this animation. Buy her a nice present.’*

Jake played the attachment.

Sitting next to him was a young mother with two toddlers who, upon noticing the film Jake was playing on his iPhone, relocated her children three rows away and said loudly, ‘This is a disgrace. There’s no dignity left anymore in this world. We’re returning to a world of savages, deprived of God.’

Jake watched the animation with maximum concentration and didn’t notice the agitation around him. Not even the sentence, ‘You’re going to burn in hell,’ yelled by another passenger.

Jake arrived in New York in a bad mood. *‘I hate these business flights,’* he kept saying.

Gabriel was waiting for him. Jake tried to dodge him unsuccessfully.

‘What did you bring with you?’

‘An amazing piece of art.’

‘Can I see it?’

Jake gave Gabriel his iPhone and five minutes later Gabriel said, ‘This is very good. Not what I expected, but sensible. I’m curious to hear what Joshua and John are going to say.’

‘Since when have you become an art critic?’

‘Jake, I know your work. I can sense something breathing in here.’

'I'm sure your friends will love it,' Jake commented before heading towards the Starbucks to order a cappuccino. Later, they left the airport to grab a taxi, 'Soho, please,' Gabriel said.

One hour later, Jake and Gabriel arrived at the Wallenberg Gallery.

'I hate this country,' was the only sentence Jake uttered during the trip.

'I love it,' Gabriel answered with a smile.

Gabriel entered the gallery triumphantly, as if he had managed to control his artist.

Joshua and John greeted them with warm kisses and cuddles.

Later, everyone came around Jake to see the animation on his iPhone. Ten minutes later, Joshua was the first to express his enthusiasm, 'This is brilliant. This is beautiful.'

'It isn't raw or aggressive, rather sexy. A slow, raping process, of a beautiful woman. The outcome is so melancholic. It's like poetry. I love it, oh my God, I love this,' John added to the excitement growing inside the room.

Gabriel was quick to add, with a strong English accent, 'I had quite the same enthusiasm when I first saw it,' and the three of them went into another room to discuss, 'Frugalities,' as John put it.

'This is it, I'm out of here,' and as Jake started to move towards the exit, Mr X entered the premises.

Jake shivered.

'How do you do?'

'So, so. I'm leaving.'

'So soon? I came here to see you. Joshua and John told me you were here.'

'Do you know them?'

'I'm one of their clients. I actually suggested your name for the next exhibition.'

'They seem quite happy with my work.'

'Are they? That's great. This gallery always does well in the US. I can smell it, Jake. This is going to be a great start.' Jake uneasily thought of an excuse to escape.

'Would you like to have a croissant at my favourite New York patisserie?'

'I have a plane to catch.'

'Don't be such a no-no, Jake, planes can always be rescheduled. Air traffic between New York and London is so intense that you can always catch the next flight,' and fifteen minutes later Jake sat next to Mr X at the Dominique

Ansel Bakery.

'You can trust me, this is a very famous establishment, the food is not poisoned,' and Mr X emanated a loud laugh from the loudspeaker.

Mr X was wearing a dark, blue baseball hat, the size of the speaker and a pair of trainers.

'You look casual today.'

'I had nothing formal to attend, so I decided to go casual. Do I look great?'

'You look quite funky, for a loudspeaker.' Jake started chewing his cronut.

'How is Sabrina?'

'Well,' Jake answered with his mouth full.

'I read the gossip column after the London party. You appeared holding hands and much in love.'

'Our relationship goes back many years. We were both young when we met.'

'And when was that?'

'Fifteen years ago, in Seoul. We both arrived there as international exchange students, but you know that already.'

'Yes, I do. Did you study much?'

'We drank and smoked pot more often. We had a great time. Who would have imagined that Sabrina would become a wine expert?'

'Gabriel doesn't like to picture you two together.'

'We're not together, we passed that stage ages ago.'

'What sort of stage are you in now?'

Jake declined to comment, 'That's private,' he said.

'Don't get me wrong, Jake, I'm only trying to understand you.'

'Good luck with that. Let me laugh at your conclusions.'

'Artists are better understood by their critics, or if I may say so, by their investors.'

'Listen, many thanks for this weird croissant and the tea, but I'm trying to catch the six o'clock BA flight to London.'

'Not so fast Jake, the purpose of this meeting is not to indulge you in the latest New York patisserie creations.'

'Beg your pardon?'

'Have a seat. Let's talk business.'

'I have a plane to catch. Can't you email me instead?'

'It won't take long.'

'If I must listen to your bullshit, I might as well do it with another croissant, but make it London style please.'

Mr X, rather irritated, said, 'Amelie, could you please go to the 7Eleven around the corner and get a croissant to serve this gentleman. Thanks.'

Amelie dropped the loudspeaker on the table and walked towards the nearest 7Eleven.

'For the record, I'm not trying to kill you, although you behave as if I am. What I've done was to invest a considerable amount of money in you. Let me tell you that behaving like a child is not going to improve your name in the market. I'm considering offloading 25% of my stock after you open in New York, if the price is right,' Mr X said.

'25% of what?'

'Of what I have bought from you.'

'Not with my consent.'

'Makes no difference. I'm not going to keep it, I can tell you that. But I'm worried that your recent behaviour will damage your good artistic name.'

'How do you want me to behave?'

'Like a freaking show, not a freak.'

'I behave the way I like.'

'Jake please note that when Mr X has an investment in you, you don't behave the way you like. You are my asset and I don't let my assets misbehave.'

'What do you intend to do?'

'We can always escort you, like parents do to a toddler.'

'Mr X, are you threatening me?'

'No. I'm only trying to have a serious conversation with you.'

'Through a loudspeaker? Who are you trying to bullshit here?'

'Jake, in simple words, we're not trying to kill you, quite the opposite. We want you to succeed. Your success is our success. Besides, if it wasn't me investing in you, it would have been someone else. You know how the system works. You're not in this business alone.'

'Can I go now? I don't have the stomach for this kind of conversation.'

'Did I kidnap you? I don't think I did. You can go if you so damn well please.'

Jake grabbed his industrial looking croissant and left the patisserie. Outside, he shouted, 'Taxi,' and 'JFK,' to the driver.

XXV

The streets of London looked deserted. Empty night buses drove by. Jake dropped his luggage on the floor and hesitated to enter his apartment.

Ten minutes later, Jake called Sabrina.

Sabrina didn't answer. Jake called several times.

'Hey, do you mind dropping by my place?' Jake said finally.

'Jake, it's three o'clock in the morning.'

'I know, but I'm feeling lonely. Can you come, please?'

'Where have you been?'

'New York.'

'I tried to get hold of you last night.'

'My life is in a mess. Mr X is trying to kill me, and no one believes me.'

'He doesn't need to kill you, you're killing yourself.'

'I had the most shocking conversation with him.'

'In New York?'

'Yes.'

'What happened?'

'Can't you drop by?'

'At this late hour?'

'We can make love tonight if you want.'

'That's exactly what I wanted to discuss with you. I think I am ovulating.'

'So, come down here and I will do you.'

Sabrina eventually agreed to see Jake.

Upon arriving, Sabrina found Jake by the entrance door. Jake gave her a kiss, followed by a strong cuddle and the keys to his apartment.

'Can you open the door? He asked.'

'Sure. Are you feeling well?'

'Jet lag, I'll get better.'

After the door was opened, Jake asked, 'Can you go into the bedroom, please?'

'Don't you think we need to have some foreplay first?'

'I have a surprise for you.'

'A surprise? Whereabout?'

'Just go inside. You'll find it in my bedroom.'

Sabrina rushed into the room, 'Where is it?'

'Try the bathroom.'

'Nothing.'

'Try the wardrobe.'

'Nothing here either.'

'AHHHH!' Sabrina screamed suddenly.

'What happened? Are you alive?'

'Yes, I just found one of your hideous creations chucked in the wardrobe.'

'Did you have to scream like a tart?'

'Where's my present anyway?'

'Under my bed.'

Sabrina looked under the bed and found nothing.

'Look again.'

'There's nothing here.'

'Well, now that you know the place, try to have another look tomorrow morning and you might find something.'

'You were teasing me all along.'

They had a pillow fight. Suddenly, when a picture frame dropped onto the floor, Jake jumped and yelled, 'I am not Jake Ford.'

'Jake, are you well?'

Jake had a look around and said, 'Of course I am.'

'Great,' Sabrina answered and started to undress her magnificent body. Naked, she could almost reflect the full moon outside.

After the sex, they turned off the lights. Five minutes later, Jake said, 'Maybe we should leave the window open slightly. It doesn't need to be pitch-black in here.'

XXVI

Jake woke up to the sound of Sabrina having a shower. It was early morning.

'What's the rush?' Jake asked Sabrina when she returned to the bedroom to fetch her clothes.

'I'm busy. I'll call you later,' Sabrina said, while dressing in a black business suit. She put on her leather shoes and went to the bathroom to comb her hair

quickly.

'Bye, bye,' Sabrina said before slamming the door on her way out.

Silence emerged in the room. Later, Jake noticed the *Cavalleria Rusticana* being played in the apartment next door. He glued his ears to the wall.

'Am I going nuts or is Mr X trying to drive me crazy?' Jake thought to himself.

'Turn the volume down!' Jake yelled at his neighbour and banged the wall with a fist.

Almost at the same time, Jake's neighbour yelled back, 'Shut the fuck up,' and increased the volume.

'You shut the fuck up, dickhead,' Jake replied.

'You're such a disgraceful son of a,' and rather than hearing the end of the sentence, Jake heard a loud thump on the floor instead.

'I hope you're dead!' Jake shouted. After various unsuccessful attempts to reach his neighbour, Jake decided to complain to the Facilities Manager.

Thirty minutes later, Mr Peterson was found dead in his apartment, cause of death unknown.

'What do you mean by unknown? It had to be something,' Jake asked the Facilities Manager. 'Any suspicion of murder?'

'Most likely it was heart attack, sir.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'The house was fine. No blood on the carpets. Whatever killed Mr Peterson came from his own body.'

'Maybe he was poisoned.' Jake argued.

'Why would someone have something against such a lovely person, sir?'

'His musical taste was terrible. People have killed for a lot less in the past,' Jake commented.

'Mr Person was a renowned music critic.'

'My ass, he was. Let the press know he liked the *Cavalleria Rusticana*.'

'What for, sir? Mr Peterson is dead.'

'The world should know about his appalling music taste,' Jake said before slamming his front door.

Inside his apartment, Jake could not stop wondering, '*Is Mr X trying to drive me nuts?*'

Gabriel called minutes later.

'Where are you?'

'Back in London.'

'Why didn't you stay longer?'

'In New York? No way.'

'We have so much to discuss. Joshua and John have lined up a promotional plan for you.'

'Tell them I'm not available.'

'I'll tell them you're available five days before it opens, whether you like it or not. What about the rest of the work?'

'I gave you the rape, didn't I?'

'Yes, but where are the other pieces?'

'I'm working on it.'

'You'd better hurry up.'

'I'll talk to Lula about it. What else?'

'This will do for the moment. I'll see you at the end of the week.'

'I won't be in London.'

'Where are you going?'

'Most likely six feet under. I'm writing my will as we speak. Sabrina will get everything.'

'You're not qualified to write a will.'

'It's just a draft. Sabrina gets the lot. My apartment, art and money.'

'Jake, I'm not interested in this bullshit, but I do need to know where you are.'

'I'll tell you when I'm there,' and Jake hung up without notice.

Afraid of being alone, Jake went to his studio. He entered the premises unseen, curious to see the level of concentration of his staff in his absence. He found Lula interviewing a young girl, Asian looking. Peter was surfing the internet and Julia was tucked away on the couch, reading Kafka.

'What is going on?' Jake shouted.

Peter was the first to react, 'How did it go? Did they like it?'

'That's beside the point. I disappear for a few days and you start behaving like this studio is some sort of summer resort?'

Before Peter and Julia were able to utter a word in their defence, Lula popped into the room.

'Jake, great you are back. How did it go?'

'So, so.'

'Gabriel called yesterday, saying it was a great start.'

'He is an imbecile, but what have you been doing while I was away?'

'Nothing, what did you expect us to do?'

‘Does the word *work* mean something around here?’

‘Work on what?’

‘Can’t you be creative?’

‘Jake, you left the studio in a rush three days ago. Besides, do I need to remind you both Peter and Julia pay for their apprenticeship?’

‘With this attitude you are not going to go far,’ Jake started shouting.

Indifferent to Jake’s distress, Lula introduced him to Leah Fu, a new wax modeller.

Jake, noticing the sexual appeal of the young lady, commented aloud, ‘Contrary to Julia who doesn’t look more attractive than a raw beetroot, you have a sexy body. In case you suck at wax modelling, you can always walk the streets and to earn money.’

Leah Fu, nervously, sketched a smile.

‘Let’s get to work. We have a lot to do,’ Jake shouted. ‘Everyone in the drawing room.’

Once inside the room, Jake started chopping up old dummies. Everyone watched him without paying much attention or interest, apart from Leah Fu, who did not know what to think.

Jake stopped and said, ‘I don’t want to work on another six pieces of the same thing.’

‘What do you suggest then?’

When Jake was about to answer, his stomach made a strange noise.

‘Leah Fu, could you please get me a falafel from the shop around the corner? Thanks,’ Jake said instead.

Leah Fu, slightly confused, left the premises while Jake started to chop up another dummy.

‘I am not sure yet,’ Jake sighed and cast a thoughtful gaze over the scattered pieces of the dummy.

‘About what?’ Lula asked.

‘The right way to go. The rape is so beautiful. What could six more rapes add to it?’

‘We could give more character to the whore,’ Peter said enthusiastically.

‘Did I ask you for your opinion?’

‘What’s wrong with character?’

‘Peter, would you shut up? I need to concentrate!’ and Jake began frantically chopping the dummy until Leah Fu entered the drawing room. She gave Jake a small carton box with one falafel inside.

'Would you mind trying it first?' Jake asked Leah Fu.

Jake watched her like a hawk as she gently bit the falafel.

'How are you feeling?' Jake asked.

'Well, why do you ask?'

'For no particular reason,' and Jake devoured what was left of the falafel in one gulp.

'Truly amazing, I need to learn how to cook these things, anyway, let's get back to work. Six more art pieces is what we need, any suggestions?'

'What about raping the whole family, the mother, the child, the father?' Peter proposed.

'Whose family?'

'The whore's.'

'Next,' Jake said immediately, but nothing materialized. Peter looked at the ceiling and June looked down at the timber floor. Leah Fu scribbled in her sketchbook and Lula looked down at his Smartphone pretending to browse images.

'Why not raping the same whore, seven times?' Julia said to break the silence.

'I like it,' Jake concluded. 'Let's work on it. I'll be upstairs.'

Everyone started discussing ideas and, three hours later, Lula approached Jake with a handful of sketches, but Jake was sleeping.

Two hours later, Jake woke up. Lula tried to brief him on the work of the studio but Jake cut him short by saying, 'Let's work on seven animations with a whore being raped seven times by a different rapist each time, and let's go controversial. Let's put a member of parliament, a police officer, a fire worker, a stock broker and a priest banging her.'

'As if she was being raped by the system?' Lula asked.

'If you say so.'

'We'll work on it straight way,' Lula clapped his hands and asked his assistants to follow him to the ideas room.

Jake called Sabrina.

'Where are you?'

'Working.'

'When are you coming home?'

'Not sure yet, I have lots to do. But I'm going to my place anyway.'

'I thought you were living at mine?'

'I can hardly work at your place.'

'Fine. I'll sleep at yours then.'

Sabrina hesitated but then she said, 'I think it's better not to. Maybe tomorrow.'

'Why not?'

'I have lots to do.'

'I promise to let you work.'

'Jake, what's wrong with you?'

'I'm in love.'

'Another answer like that and I'll put you on hold.'

'Can I come, please?'

Sabrina was two seconds in silence before saying, 'I guess you can. Bring some take away with you and a bottle of wine. Buy something decent. You know I can't drink cheap wine,' and before Sabrina was able to finish her sentence, Jake had already left his studio and text Lula, '*Off to see Sabrina. Drop by tomorrow to see work done.*'

In the evening locked the door of her bedroom.

'I have plenty of work to do,' she said.

Jake tried to watch television, but, feeling so at ease, he felt asleep on the couch.

Jake woke up the following day, his head numb from the long sleep. After getting up, he noticed a note on the fridge door. *Left early this morning. Help yourself. Talk later.*

'*This is great,*' Jake thought to himself, while preparing coffee and boiling an egg.

When Sabrina returned in the evening, she found Jake having a nap on the couch and looking rather comfy.

'What have you done today?' Sabrina asked.

'Carpe diem,' Jake replied as if awakening from a prolonged siesta.

'Such as?'

'I can't remember. Isn't that wonderful?'

'If you think so. What have you prepared for dinner?' Sabrina asked, initially teasing, but feeling embarrassed later upon hearing, 'Salmon with blue cheese. Have a look in the kitchen. I was waiting for you.'

'What's wrong with you?' Sabrina asked, after the dinner, laughing, 'I didn't

know you could cook.'

'I can be a great chef when I need. What if I move in? Rather than you living at mine, I live at yours?'

Sabrina removed a good portion of the icing on her dessert before saying, 'As long as you do the laundry, clean the house and cook dinner.'

'Agreed,' and one week later, Jake was still happily carrying out his duties as a househusband to perfection, much to Sabrina's surprise.

Calls from Gabriel and Lula were never answered.

XXVII

Three weeks later, while having breakfast with Sabrina, Jake made his usual comment about the coffee, 'Honey, did you put sugar in it?'

'Yes, why?'

'Nothing really, do you mind having a sip? Just to make sure it's sweet as I like it.'

'Jake, why this question every morning?'

'Due diligence, dear,' and when Jake was about to sip his coffee, the phone started to ring. It was Steve Nash.

'*What does he want?*' Jake thought to himself, 'Not sure if I should answer this call?'

'You better do.'

'Jake, how are you?' Steve asked on the other end of the phone.

'What's the occasion?'

'Gabriel announced the press release of your latest work. Do you think you'll be able to drop by the BBC studios so we can interview you for the documentary?'

'The work isn't finished yet. Gabriel doesn't know what he's talking about,' Jake commented.

'Do you think so? Everyone's invited. Day and time booked. The Barbican is hosting it.'

'You're delirious.'

'Do you want me to show you the invitation?'

'Can we cancel it?' Jake asked, confused.

'Cancel? Not at this stage. What do you mean?'

'I have completely forgotten about it.'

'I knew you would, but the Guardian is not the sort of newspaper to miss out on an opportunity like this. But the reason I'm calling is that I need to book a time to interview you. The BBC management board are getting pretty nasty with me.'

'I'm not ready yet, and I can't do the interview either. Also, the Wallenberg Gallery is against showcasing the art before the opening.'

'We're fully aware of that. Gabriel, who organised the event, was clear about that to the press. We're only going to see work in progress. No final pieces.'

'When is it?'

'This Friday, haven't you been informed?'

'Not yet, but it makes no difference, I'm not coming.'

'Why not?'

'Steve, thanks for calling. I'll talk to you soon,' and Jake hung up the phone in a rush.

'Hello, my friend. Long time no see, no hear, no nothing, we thought you were dead. How do you do?' Gabriel asked.

'This press release coming up, what's the story?' Jake asked, rather worried.

'Jake Ford showing interest in his career, how interesting.'

'Yes.'

'It's booked for this Friday. We're not showing much of it, just a slice.'

'But everything is still a work in progress.'

'I wouldn't be so sure about that.'

'Do I need to remind you I've only signed off on one piece so far?'

'I wouldn't be so sure about that either.'

Three seconds of silence and Jake started screaming like a madman, 'What have you done?'

'Relax, my friend. Have a word with Lula and then talk to me,' and Gabriel hung up the phone.

Sabrina, noticing Jake was about to explode, said before leaving, 'Don't take things too personally. See you later. Don't forget to iron my shirts.'

Jake drank his coffee in one gulp and called Lula.

'What's going on?'

'Can you be more specific?'

'New York, what's the story?'

'All done and shipped, mate. Joshua and John are over the moon.'

'With what?'

'I tried to call you a zillion times. I left a zillion messages on your phone and you never got back to me. Gabriel did the same. In the end, we agreed to ship everything over.'

Jake tried to calm down, 'This isn't happening,' and he pinched his arm.

'Since when are you authorized to bypass me?'

'I'm not.'

'What happened then?'

'Do you really want to know?'

'What do you think?'

'Well,' long pause, 'it was,' another long pause, 'sort of a bribe.'

'What do you mean, a bribe? What are you talking about?'

'Put it this way, Gabriel offered four times my salary if I would forge your signature and ship everything over to New York.'

'So little?'

'I mean, per annum.'

'Did you take it?'

'Obviously not. I cut a deal for five times my salary instead.'

'You can't be serious.'

'I am.'

'This is fraud, a criminal act. This transcends me. What were you thinking?'

'Let me see, five times my annual salary is not a bad figure. Worst case scenario, I get the sack, but then I have at least five years to do whatever I want before considering going back to work. Even better, if I move to Thailand, I can almost live on the interest. And most importantly, Gabriel accepted full responsibility for this. He even signed a paper. So what was I thinking? I don't know, what do you reckon?'

'I thought you were my friend.'

'Am I not? Helping to prevent the shutdown of your artistic career? Do you think those people in New York have the patience to deal with spoiled artists like you? You should thank Gabriel and me. Despite your lack of gratitude, we're still here looking after you like good friends.'

'How could you?' Jake asked trying to fake a tear. 'How could you betray me like this? How could you?'

'Jake, if you're so distressed, I'm happy to resign. Maybe it will make you

feel better.'

'Resign? What will you do without me?'

'Let me see, hmmm, what can I do? For instance, I can travel to Sweden and make love to my lovely girlfriend, or do you have a better suggestion?'

'I won't give you that pleasure,' Jake said cutting Lula short, 'what you've done to me deserves a real punishment.'

'I've done nothing to be ashamed of, but you're seeing everything from the wrong angle. This way, your artist career is saved. We had to act, like we have done so many times in the past.'

'Bullshit,' and Jake hung up the phone.

Gabriel called five minutes later but Jake didn't answer.

Sabrina came home later and found Jake in the living room lying on the floor and staring at the ceiling.

'Is the dinner ready?' she asked.

'I'll order something, or do you want to go out?'

'Thai will do. I have an important meeting tomorrow. Let me know when the food is here,' Sabrina said before vanishing inside her office.

Jake went to bed alone.

The following day, while having breakfast with Sabrina and after his coffee had been tested, Jake called Gabriel.

'You bribed Lula.'

'I had too.'

'Who do you think you are?'

'I would never let you damage your career.'

'So I've gathered, but forcing my collaborators to walk the same path you have chosen, that's so evil.'

'He didn't seem that gutted.'

'Lula is weak, and you have weakened him even more.'

'Jake, cut the crap, what's the point of this conversation?'

'I'm not going.'

'What do you mean you're not going? We are not going anywhere.'

'I'm not going to the press release.'

'Fine. Lula will go instead of you.'

'What's going on?'

'Lula can do the presentation. We can always say to everyone you are malfunctioning. It will make the opening more interesting.'

'I'm not malfunctioning.'

'Aren't you?'

'Why can't you say I am with the cold or the flu instead. I had enough of artistic promotion. After your treachery, I want to focus on my art instead.'

'That is great stuff to hear but unfortunately, without the press no one will remember your name. Also, Joshua and John are going to use the extracts from the press to start promoting the exhibition in America and build momentum.'

'Where are you now?'

'In New York, but I will make it to the press release.'

'You don't need to. I'm not going.'

'Jake, don't act Prima Donna on me. I'm here to help. I'm your friend, but if this is what you want, I will let Lula replace you.'

'You are the devil's friend. That's what you are!' and Jake hung up the phone.

'You shouldn't talk to Gabriel that way,' Sabrina commented when she stepped out of the door. 'He's your friend. You know that. You're being unfair to him.'

'Unfair? For what I gathered, he could be Mr X.'

'Jake, you are acting ridiculous,' Jake heard from afar. Upset, Jake grabbed a bottle of whiskey and hid in the library.

'This is going to be a real punishment to drink,' Jake thought to himself.

Sabrina returned home late that evening. Believing Jake was away, she went to the kitchen to prepare something to eat. She found a note on the fridge saying, *'I'm sleeping and drinking in the library until that bloody press release comes about. Don't pity me. In the end, love will overcome.'*

Upon reading the note Sabrina walked to the lobby and shouted to the floors above, 'Where are you?'

'Don't shout, please. My head hurts.'

'What day is the press release happening?' Sabrina shouted.

'In three days.'

Sabrina started laughing, 'You are behaving like a child.'

'I'm not a child, I'm a wild rabbit,' Jake uttered.

Interview: Gabriel Bernett

One day before Jake's press release, Gabriel landed in London in the morning and made his way to the BBC studios. He was escorted through the White City by an attractive receptionist. They walked through various corridors and stopped at Studio 9. A knock on the door and, 'Please come in,' was heard from inside. The door swung open and Steve Nash greeted him and introduced him to Vladimir Gogol.

'Gabriel, I'm glad you were finally able to make it.'

'My pleasure, Steve. I couldn't do it before. The last three weeks have been crazy.'

'Please, sit down.'

Gabriel sat down on a vintage chair in the shape of an egg. Behind him stood a pinkish sheet that covered the wall from top to bottom.

'Well, I think we're ready. Can we get the camera rolling?' Steve asked Vladimir.

Vladimir nodded.

'Gabriel, I'm going to ask you a few questions about your person before we move on to discuss Jake's life and work. You can refuse to answer, stop speaking, rephrase and so forth. We're simply going to keep the camera rolling and edit everything later. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

Steve took a sip of water and started.

SN Gabriel, tell us about your beginnings.

GABRIEL BERNETT I'm the only child of Simon Large and Maggie Bentley. My father was a London-based architect, well regarded by local property developers and my mother was the Marketing Director of the Royal Opera House. They're both retired. They live in Tuscany.

SN Did you study art at university?

GB Not at all, I studied business.

SN Why business?

GB Well, initially my father wanted me to study medicine. He arranged a summer job at the Royal Hospital, working as a clerk assistant, but it didn't work for me.

SN Why not?

GB I don't like hospitals. I don't like the smell. I don't like the look on people's faces. I don't like the architecture. I couldn't work in that environment.

SN But why business?

GB I was never excited about studying business, but I had to study something. I was getting bored of listening to my parents complaining about my lack of interest in making a decent living. I remember protesting that I couldn't see myself running a business, but my father replied, 'You can trust me, son, business is the only trade that requires no talent whatsoever.'

SN What did you do after graduating?

GB I already had a job offer. My father arranged for a position through one of his friends as a Market Analyst at Morgan Stanley.

SN Without a job interview?

GB I had one job interview that lasted half a day. I was literally stuck in a room answering the most awkward questions as people were popping in and out. But, despite their queries, I knew the job was mine. Funnily enough, my father even asked, 'How did it go?' As if I didn't know he was talking me up to his friends at the bank.

SN When did you start?

GB Straight after graduation.

SN I take it you didn't like it?

GB I hated it. Initially, the idea was to spend two weeks in each department but after two months I was merely analysing cash flow and balance sheets

for mining companies. This was throughout the nineties and mining was quite a boring sector at the time.

SN What did you decide to do?

GB I quit my job, despite my father pleading me not to do so. Other members of the family also tried to change my mind. Everyone was worried. My father accused me of behaving like a child. He said, 'What are you going to do now? Are you out of your mind? It's very hard to get a job at Morgan Stanley.'

SN Did you know at the time that you wanted to be involved in the world of contemporary art?

GB Not immediately. After I quit my job, I started socializing again. I was socially thinking, I guess, whatever that means.

SN Are you saying that socialising shed a ray of light onto your path to becoming an art agent?

GB Not as the crow flies. I guess, an eye opening moment came about when one of my friends invested in a John Brown. 'John who? Who the heck is he?' I remember asking. 'It's an artist, dumb head. I bought the Brown because the value of his work has been increasing year on year,' he said. Since I had no idea who John Brown was, I asked him about the piece of fine art he had purchased. His answer still lingers in my head, 'It's a turd in the shape of a banana.'

SN How did you react?

GB I laughed! I was finding it hard to take him seriously. But he was dead serious. Do you know what he said to me?

SN Go on, tell us.

GB It's a turd in the shape of a banana. It doesn't smell but it's made of real shit. The best investment I have ever made. This was not a comment, but

a revelation. How could someone invest in a turd and be so passionate about it? He defended his investment, saying things like, 'It is a great piece of shit. Every time I have guests in the house, we spend a good half hour talking about it.' During my business studies I had never come across a business that could convert turds into pounds and even get clients bragging about it. It became clear to me back then that art is an investment vehicle, regardless of what people would say.

SN What happened next?

GB My first reaction was to try to find out the going rate for turds in the shape of bananas.

SN How did it go?

GB I found absolutely nothing. It was easy to find information about the Turner Prize, or who was showing at the Tate, but accurate cash transactions were not available, apart from Christie's auction sales.

SN How did you get your foot in the door?

GB Luckily, my mother had contacts in the art world. She kept working relationships with several art dealers who worked with the Royal Opera House. One of these dealers was Pestirof. He was a German art dealer who lived in Chelsea. He had a summer house in Majorca, designed by a famous architect.

SN Did you work with him?

GB Not directly, but he took an interest in my passion for making money through contemporary art and was happy to mentor me. We used to meet once a week, sometimes every second week, to discuss his experiences and ideas.

SN Did you learn much from him?

GB Yes, Pestirof was one of the first persons to highlight to me the role an

exhibition space plays in what can be perceived as contemporary art by the public, or investors.

SN I am not sure if I agree with you. I can't possibly believe that Jake Ford is a famous artist just because he was exhibited.

GB Well, galleries these days certainly play a part in it, otherwise how can you differentiate contemporary art from the mundane?

SN I guess when I think of the work of Maurizio Cattelan I have to agree with you. Personally, I never bought the idea that he is a great artist. In my opinion his work would be perceived as entertaining in a bar, or club, but in an art gallery somehow, we have a complete different perception of it.

GB Funny though. I do think Cattelan is a great artist.

SN He can't be. It's pure marketing rubbish.

GB I guess so, but at the same time we could say that marketing is his brush, his medium. His work is not easy to forget. I remember when I saw his work for the first time. I was visiting the Tate. Initially disappointed to notice that the installation in the turbine hall was not yet finished, I had a stroll through the permanent exhibition when suddenly I came across the "Ave Maria". I remember thinking 'What the hell,' as everyone sees the work first and reads the title afterwards. The art was in the title, in my opinion.

SN I think Coca Cola could do better.

GB One year later when I was in Sydney visiting the MCA I had the opportunity to see an exhibition of collected works from various contemporary artists. I exited that exhibition thinking about the image of a horse hanging from the ceiling. The awkward location of the horse made me feel at odds with my feelings, and although I didn't understand Cattelan's initial intentions with that piece back then, the truth is that I can't remember anymore what else I saw that day, and his art piece still lingers in my mind, after all these years.

SN I still think Coca Cola could do it better.

GB It's all about ideas isn't it?

SN What do you mean?

GB Well, Coca Cola does great marketing campaigns because they have the money to engage the best marketers out there, but so did the Catholic Church. We rave about Michael Angelo and Rafael, when in fact their work was commissioned by the church with the sole intent to marvel their followers and market their services. When I think about Cattelan's work I think about how he works the idea. He can admire the craftsmanship of his art pieces, although Cattelan is not shy to admit that the craftsmanship is done by third parties. Unless I am missing something here, it is my belief that we can only assess the emotions his work produces among human beings as being his making.

SN His lack of interest in using his hands to produce art is infuriating.

GB But that's beside the point, because his medium is not the craft but the idea. Take the Ninth Hour as an example. Initially I thought the whole thing was ridiculous. But then again, I started wondering, what are the odds of the pope being hit by a meteor? You tell me.

SN I don't know, I am not a mathematician.

GB Well, I am not one either, but I am pretty sure that only through an act of God.

SN What do you mean?

GB The likelihood of seeing the pope being hit by a meteor is so so remote that in my opinion only through an act of God could such an event come to happen. It looks rather odd to see Pope John Paul the second being crushed by a meteor, but if we consider what needs to take place for that event to happen, I am a strong believer that the Ninth Hour is one of the most religious sculptures that I have ever seen. Even the title alludes to it.

SN I guess I can see your point.

GB As an artist, Cattelan explores the essence of the idea, to produce a bulk of work that doesn't move one inch from it. Either we like it or not, either we support craftsmanship or not, Cattelan's work also reflects a shift in the production of art, although remaining engaged with his audience. On that thought alone is relatively easy to understand the hype about his work.

SN In the case of Cattelan I'm convinced it was the galleries that created the hype.

GB If you say so.

SN What about your gallery?

GB What about it?

SN What led you to open such a business?

GB I just wanted to be involved. I had the funds, money that I had inherited from my grandfather. By my simple calculations, I could survive almost a full decade without going into the red.

SN Did you enjoy it, the early beginnings?

GB I was quite happy doing my own thing, staying true to my instinct. It took me six months before the first exhibition was organized. I was showcasing a young Malaysian artist called Anaclo. His recent work had been praised by critics. The exhibition was entitled '*Paintings for Black Sofas*' and was reasonably well received. Anaclo was the first artist I worked with. I think these days he lives in Vanuatu, a tribal island in the south Pacific.

SN Are you still in touch with him?

GB No. After he was convicted for cannibalism I lost interest in his artistic

career.

SN Cannibalism? I didn't know Anaclo to had been convicted of such a thing.

GB He was, but no one talks about it. Art investors were stuck with some of his early productions and everyone is afraid his artistic name could suddenly be discredited by the press. I sold my last two pieces recently to the Nordic Watercolour Museum in Norway.

SN What happened to him?

GB To be quite honest I don't know. After two years living in Vanuato he disappeared in the mountains. Rumours started to circulate about him engaging in cannibalism. The rumours increased when the remains of local artist were found with the word Anaclo to tattooed onto one finger. The police found him one year later living in Vanua Lava.

SN Why cannibalism?

GB I'm not sure. These are strange islands. Tourists like to brag about their beauty, but not long ago the natives were eating their enemies. I have no idea what led Anaclo to behave the way he did. The path to the soul of an artist is often blocked. I rarely make attempts to understand them. I only care about their work.

SN I am surprised to hear that.

GB Same here.

SN Did you ever imagined you were going to come this far in the art world?

GB Personally, none of my peers believed I would, but when Jake Ford won the Turner Prize we were no longer the smallish gallery my competition believed we were destined to be.

SN How did the two of you meet?

GB Jake always had something going for him. One particular gallery was doing great, selling what people called 'pornographic installations'. I invited Jake to show at my gallery. Initially he didn't like the idea. I had a reputation for being conservative, but I told him he could display whatever he liked and that I would sell it for him.

SN Did you sell?

GB Everything. I even debated the possibility of selling Jake's sketches.

SN What do you think persuaded Jake to collaborate with you?

GB We both share a similar interest for lapis lazuli, which helps us work well as a team.

SN I googled lapis lazuli recently. Interesting stone. Not quite sure why Jake would be interested in it though, as it represents rebirth, fertility and life, which in my opinion are not the best words to describe his work.

GB Don't think Jake cares much about the spiritual meaning of that stone.

SN What is it then? What's so special about it?

GB You discuss it with Jake. I don't talk about lapis lazuli with anybody else.

SN Is it the darkness of the colour?

GB Best to discuss it with him. There is more about that stone that meets the eye.

SN Is it somehow related to economics?

GB Why would you say so?

SN Sabrina seems to think that way.

GB As I said, there is more to that stone that meets the eye, but I rather leave it to that right now. Happy to discuss something else instead?

SN Very well, let's move on and change the topic, then. Talking about success, did you ever think Jake would come this far?

GB No.

SN Why not?

GB Jake has the mind of a child. He learns through destruction. I believed his mind would destroy him.

SN Tell us about his fears.

GB It is hard to speak about Jake in that manner because he is not a sensitive person. He hides or ignores his feelings extremely well. But consider the *Vicissitudes of the Axe* for a moment. Initially, rather than royals, Jake wanted to decapitate Popes.

SN Why Popes?

GB You should ask Jake. I have my personal view on the subject, but I am not going to tell you.

SN Why not?

GB It is my personal view, which I have never discussed with Jake and I could be completely wrong. I advised Jake to forget about decapitating Popes. It seemed to like provocative art to me. I never really asked him why he was after their heads.

SN Gabriel, one final question, what do you think makes Jake the great artist he is?

GB His work engages with people. People like you and me, and most importantly, people that are not trained to understand contemporary art.

He won the Turner Prize on that account.

SN I am happy we can close this interview on a high note. Gabriel, thanks for coming.

GB My pleasure.

XXIX

Jake arrived at the Barbican in pyjamas. He paid the cab and walked towards the main entrance indifferent to how fellow Londoners were reacting.

‘What’s this? What are you trying to achieve here?’ Gabriel asked, who was waiting for him by the door.

‘I couldn’t be bothered.’

‘To do what? To shave? To have a bath? To wear clothes?’

‘I couldn’t be bothered, what’s wrong with that?’

‘You stink.’

‘I’ve been using the toilet if that’s what you are wondering. I tried to refrain from defecating for a couple of days, but I couldn’t cope with the smell.’

‘What for? It’s already been done. John Brown, hello,’ and Gabriel hit Jake in the head. ‘He made a live portrait of himself covered in shit and stayed for two weeks in the National Gallery without going to the bathroom. I was there towards the end. It was disgusting and smelly, but generated a lot of enthusiasm in the press, life is shit, isn’t it?’ Gabriel had a sophisticated laugh.

‘You’re missing the point. I’m not trying to be creative.’

‘What is this all about then?’

‘I lost my will to live.’

‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘Does Mr X’s willingness to kill me ring a bell?’

‘No one is trying to kill you. How many times do I have to tell you this?’

‘It’s easy for you to say it, but what about me? Do you think it’s funny to be run over by a truck, or stabbed in a dark alley, or be gunned down in Trafalgar

Square? How do you think Mr X makes me feel?’

‘Why Trafalgar Square? Why do you go there?’

‘I like to talk to Nelson. He understands me.’

Gabriel cast a glimpse at his clock.

‘Jake, nothing is going to happen to you. Can we put this behind us? If you die I promise to lead the investigation to put Mr X in jail. What about that?’

‘What’s the point of being eternally grateful to you from the grave?’

‘Please Jake, don’t you think enough is enough? Don’t you think it’s time to put this thing behind us? We have been arguing about it since Joshua and John criticized your work? Are you nervous about the opening? Is that what this is all about?’

‘Should I be worried?’

‘Of course not, for God’s sake. Everything is shipped and ready for the grand opening. Joshua and John are confident it’s going to be a huge success. You should be over the moon.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Jake, enough of this bullshit. Follow me instead,’ and Gabriel dragged Jake towards the conference room.

‘I don’t want to go.’

‘Don’t be childish. No one is here to harm you. People are just curious about your work.’

‘I want to go home.’

‘Jake, going home is the downfall of your career.’

‘Maybe that will come quite handy. Mr X would probably lose a million.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘If I’m no longer popular he will be penniless.’

‘And do you think Mr X would let that happen? I would personally shoot you in the head if you were putting my money at stake. You better go inside.’

The conference room was busy. Students, journalists, curators, fellow artists and wanna-be-artists abounded in the premises. When Jake entered the room, everyone clapped their hands.

On his way to the main stage, Jake removed a picture hanging on the wall and smashed it against a chair as whistling and excitement grew in the premises.

As Jake reached the main stage, the main lights went out.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, thanks for coming,’ and Jake did an unexpected

pause to survey a strange movement in the audience. 'I brought five slides and one animation to present. It shouldn't take more than five minutes to go through everything. Please do not ask many questions in the end. I have other venues to attend. Let's begin.'

The presentation started.

'Whore and rape,' Jake said after the first slide and allowed ten seconds before moving onto the second slide.

'Whore and rape,' Jake said and nine seconds after he moved onto the third slide.

'Whore between rapes,' Jake said and eight seconds later he moved onto the fourth slide.

'Whore and rape,' Jake said and seven seconds later he moved onto the final slide.

'Whore and rape,' Jake said and added, 'I trust you have enjoyed the slides. Let's play the animation.' While it played, Jake gazed out at the audience.

Jake, noticing unusual behaviour from one of the guests, started to scream, 'Kill him, kill him, kill that fucking bastard,' and hid under the desk.

High hysteria followed by low level panic while the raping of a whore played in the background.

The suspicious guest, a gaunt bloke in the middle row, received a strong blow from the security guard.

The lights were back on.

'I was just looking for my iPod,' the guest, face against the floor, claimed.

The audience was confused.

Jake asked the security guard to escort the man to the exit. He added, 'Make sure he is properly interrogated. Break his leg if necessary. Let's carry on.'

Jake continued his presentation as if nothing had happened. The animation ended two minutes later. Everyone clapped their hands.

Questions were forthcoming.

Jake pointed at a journalist to speak. A timid voice was heard.

'Sorry I can't hear you,' Jake shouted. 'Speak up!'

The journalist spoke loudly and everyone in the room seemed to hear him apart from Jake who yelled, 'Next,' and picked a lady in the middle row to speak.

'Mr Ford, being the first artist to promote the motto *Creation follows destruction*, do you perceive the act of raping as a creative or destructive deed?'

'What's this? A fit body flirting with intelligence, who does she think she is?' Jake thought and answered, 'Everything is relative.' He pointed at another journalist, 'You!'

'Jake, the raping of a whore in a continuous loop gives the impression she has been punished for eternity, almost like the Divine Comedy. Are you seeking peace with the Catholic Church?'

'Should I?' Jake said and after a quick survey, he gave word to a female journalist in the front row. With a broad smile, she asked, 'There is a certain beauty in each slide, as if female violence can be perceived as watchable and, as in this case, an object of fine art. Do you think this is a work of art that aims at the glorification of men over women?'

'No,' Jake answered five seconds later.

Jake refrained from pointing at another journalist despite the several hands raised in the air. After a prolonged pause Jake said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, thanks for coming, I hope to see you in New York.'

'Please Jake, only one more question,' someone shouted in the background. Jake turned around to say, 'It'd better be good.'

The same someone asked, 'Don't you think it's about time to glorify life in your work? This praise for destruction can sometimes be disturbing.'

Almost immediately, Jake replied, 'Mother Nature kills.'

Initially in silence, the audience started clapping hands.

'Now, if you will excuse me, I have more important things to attend to,' and as Jake was walking fast towards the exit, Steve Nash blocked his way to say, 'Amazing stuff, Jake. The stunt man was brilliant. For a moment I truly believed someone was trying to kill you. My heart was steaming like a locomotive. I was feeling alive. Thanks for the art.'

'Get out of my way,' Jake demanded, but Steve started leaning forward and saying, 'The BBC documentary is starting to look fantastic. Gabriel endorsed it yesterday.'

'What are you talking about? What do you need from me?' Jake shouted.

'When do you think we can interview you?'

'Who? Me! Not in a million years! Get out of my way,' and reacting frantically, Jake hit Steve's testicles with a strong fist.

As Steve fell to the floor in pain, Jake used the opportunity to escape, despite the screaming of Gabriel in the background, 'Jake, I need to speak to you.'

Jake arrived at Sabrina's house wearing sunglasses and a hat.

'You will attract more attention looking like that,' Sabrina commented.

Jake walked past her without answering. He entered the library room and locked the door behind him.

‘Do you still have the keys to the house?’ Jake shouted.

‘Yes, why?’

‘Leave the set on the kitchen benchtop. I want to be alone for the next couple of weeks. I’m going through a life changing process. I’m turning into a fly.’

Sabrina laughed, ‘You’re turning into an asshole. Do I need to remind you that you are living at my place?’

Without replying, Jake unlocked the door, walked down the staircase, dropped his set of keys onto the table and slammed the door behind him.

Thirty minutes later, Sabrina received a text message saying, *‘I think we need to start seeing other people.’*

Upon reading it, Sabrina was unsure if it was a moment for laughing or crying.

The next morning, Jake’s iPhone rang several times. After seven missed calls, Jake allowed Gabriel an opportunity to speak. He was hoping Gabriel would tell him that his artist career was bouncing on a dental string, like fish out of water.

‘Let him be the bearer of bad news,’ Jake thought.

‘Finally, Jake! What have you been doing? I have great news, fantastic news,’ Gabriel started, extremely excited.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The press release was a big success. Steve was over the moon. You should grab his balls more often. He felt like an art installation.’

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘Serious? I’m more than serious. Have you read Steve’s article?’

‘No, what does it say?’

‘You’re going to love this,’ and Gabriel read out, ‘Jake Ford is an artist of a different blend. Sometimes he can act psycho. He can grab a man’s balls. He can act delirious. He can even swear in public, however from his social dysfunction, amazing, if not brilliant, pieces of art are produced. Like unexpected beauty, love poems to the glorification of life. Jake Ford hates boredom. He can’t accept the trivial. He can’t cope with the mundane; and by acting restless he connects with us.’

Gabriel stopped and asked, ‘Do you want to hear more?’

‘Go on,’ and Gabriel read on. ‘Jake Ford’s glimpse into his next exhibition brought his art closer to me. His art is alive. His art engages with people. His

art comes in the form of axes, raping, decapitation, but rather than feeling the grotesque, my heart beats as if my life has been lifted to an unexpected territory.'

'That's enough. Stop it!'

'There's a lot more, you can read the article online.'

'I'm not interested.'

'Jake, Steve is not Mr X. He is a young curator who loves your art. He believes you're going to break the current art boundaries between the artist and the community. Bring art to a common ground. Jake, you should be proud of yourself.'

'I'm not. Not if the likes of Mr X keep profiting from it.'

'Everyone profits and you more than anyone else,' Gabriel argued.

'I bet the art stock of Mr X just increased in value.'

'It probably did, but you will profit too.'

'I'm not desperate for money. I'm not in the mood to talk to you right now.'

'Don't forget we need you in New York pretty soon.'

'I can't guarantee I'll be able to make it. I think I'm turning into a fly.'

'Please Jake.'

'No, I'm serious.'

'No worries, I'll call you soon to organise the trip to America. If you turn into a fly you can fly across the ocean.'

'Don't be ridiculous. Flies can't fly that far.'

'It would be a lot better if you were turning into a duck, a migratory duck.'

'Initially, I believed I was going to become a duck. I even started quaking during the night. But right now I'm pretty sure I'm turning into a fly.'

'Why a fly?'

'So that Mr X can whack me, isn't that obvious? If I'm a duck, he needs to shoot me.'

'Jake, I'll call you next week. You can tell me then how it feels to be a fly.'

XXX

One week after the Barbican's press release, Jake left his bedroom. He opened the door slowly and checked the various divisions of his flat with a good grip on his axe. His microwave and fridge returned to the kitchen and in the afternoon, tired of junk food, Jake ventured into the outer world to indulge in a succulent meal at the Bangkok Sidewalk. 'Jake, how are you today? You look a bit tired,' Laura noticed.

'I'm well.'

'What can I do for you today?'

'A hamburger will do.'

'Any drinks?'

'Water, please.'

Laura went inside and returned with a glass of water.

'You need to pull yourself together. You don't look well.'

'No big deal. Same old, same old. Imagine looking always the same, how boring is that?'

'Jake, you should look after yourself. You're quite an attractive man.'

'It makes no difference. I'm not interested in dying fit,' Jake argued.

'It doesn't mean you should give up on life.'

'What can I do? Someone is trying to kill me and no one cares.'

Laura started laughing, 'Why would someone want to see you dead? You're so sweet!'

'Please, don't laugh. I'm serious. Even my agent doesn't listen to me.'

'Jake, don't you think it is a bit random to be thinking like that?'

'Not at all, it makes perfect sense to me.'

'Why would someone want to kill you?'

'I'm more valuable dead than alive. My name is worth a fortune but my body just a few quid.'

'Who could potentially benefit from killing you?'

'Those who bought my work when I was unknown to the public. Do you think they did it because it looked good on the walls? Hell, no. They were gambling on the fact it would increase in value throughout the years.'

'And did it?' Laura asked, although giving the impression that she already knew the answer.

'I've done well for my initial investors but most of what I produce these days is so expensive. I'm at my peak. My art can't trade for a lot more unless,' Jake had a sip of water before saying, 'I die.'

'You surely don't think your investors are plotting to see you dead.'

'They would love to see me dead, I'm sure, but I agree they wouldn't consider eliminating me yet.'

'Why are you worried then?'

'I guess when someone starts to acquire everything I do and speaks through a loudspeaker one can only wonder.'

'You should be proud of yourself. It's a sign your work is truly appreciated.'

'I don't feel that way.'

'Stop selling you work to him then if it makes you feel better.'

'My agent has advised me not to do so. He could always acquire the work through third parties. I have tried to damage my artistic name, to look less attractive, but nothing works. It feels like I can't get off the amazing ride I'm having.'

'Why don't you enjoy the ride instead?'

'Knowing that I will end up dead in the end?'

'Jake, you should see things from a different angle. Look at me, for example. I've been serving tables for more than ten years to pay the bills. Do you think I like the ride I'm having? No way!' Jake had a sip of water.

'Laura, thanks for the comforting words, I wish I could see things from your angle but I can't. Not when someone is trying to kill me.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

Laura left to serve another table. She went inside the restaurant and returned later with a question.

'Why don't you react against it?'

'That's what I'm doing.'

'Why don't you hide for a while?'

'This thing is bound to find me, regardless where I hide.'

'Jake, we may live in a dog eat dog world, but if you are sure someone is trying to kill you, why don't you kill him first?'

'What do you mean? How can I kill him first? I'm not a killer.'

'Jake, obviously you should defend yourself if your life is threatened.'

Jake had another sip of water and started thinking to himself, '*I never thought about that, interesting, kill the bastard and stop being as afraid as a pussy cat?*'

Jake started to speak, 'I never thought I could kill.'

Laura looked Jake in the eye and said, 'Maybe killing is bit too much. But why don't you threaten him instead? Let him know that you're up for a fight. You can punch back. Bite his leg until it bleeds, if necessary.'

'I like the way you think.'

Laura walked into the kitchen and returned with a hamburger.

'Amazing,' Jake commented with the first bite. 'Laura you are a godsend,' Jake murmured, brain suddenly energetic and working.

Laura attended other tables with a smile, sometimes throwing a flirtatious look at Jake.

'But who is Mr X?' Jake wondered.

'Everything fine?' Laura asked.

'Indeed, Laura. I was thinking about our conversation. It makes perfect sense to protect myself, if I only knew who is threatening me.'

'How can you be so sure someone is trying to kill you if you don't know him?'

'He's played it smart. He appears in the form of a loudspeaker.' Suddenly, Laura felt enthusiasm running through her veins.

'Do you think Mr X is trying to kill you?'

'Do you know him?'

'I read about him in the Guardian. You are his biggest bet to date.'

'Am I? I still don't know who he is'

'Maybe he is a she,' Laura wondered.

Jake forked his hamburger.

'Nah, I reckon he's a man. He has the mannerisms of a bloke.'

'We can never be sure these days.'

'I know what you mean, but he feels like a man. It's hard to fake that, even with the aid of a machine.'

'Could he be a group of people?' Laura wondered again.

'A group of people? Never thought about that.'

'It was just an idea.'

'He could be, but it's hard at the same time.'

'Don't you think they could rotate from one person to another and use the machine to keep the same voice structure?'

'Maybe, although I experience the same boredom every time I speak to Mr X,' Jake said.

'But have you wondered about this possibility?'

'No. I need to be more vigilant from now on. I've always assumed it was the same person, but there is nothing confirming my assumptions.'

'Why have you assumed that?'

'He knows me extremely well.'

'What do you mean by extremely well? These days everyone can get to your

personal details with patience and intelligence.'

'He tracked me down in Morocco when only Sabrina knew my whereabouts.'

'Maybe she is Mr X.'

'She can't be. She doesn't have the ability to play this game.'

'It should be someone else then, someone extremely close to you.'

'At this moment in time, Mr X could be everyone and no one.'

'It has to be someone, or something.'

'Good point, Laura, I should have employed you as my assistant instead of Kabugi.'

'It's never too late.'

'Well, I can't fire Kabugi. Despite being a disappointment, he's still my bitch, where are you from, Laura?'

'Brazil, I have told you a zillion times.'

'Yes, of course. How dumb of me. For a moment, it occurred to me you were from Sweden or Norway and you and Kabugi could get together, fornicate, that sort of thing, what was I thinking?'

'I would love to live in Sweden.'

'I know. Imagine all those childcare benefits. It's the peak of human existence. Have you been to Sweden?'

'Never. I'll go one day, when I'm able to afford the trip,' Laura commented.

'It's a beautiful country. Maybe one day we'll take you there.'

'I would love to,' Laura said with a sexy smile on her face. Jake didn't reply. He devoured his hamburger instead. Later, he went back home to mastermind a plan to wipe Mr X from his mind.

XXXI

Jake arrived at his Studio early in the morning. Without warning, Jake started striking a wax dummy with an axe. Loose, but ravenous strokes were performed, making the dummy a mix of broken pieces scattered on the floor.

Peter and Julia hid away with livid expressions.

Abruptly, Jake started laughing, as if possessed by Lucifer, and saying, 'Kill them all.'

Leah Fu started to quiver and bite her fingernails hard. Blood flowed from one finger. When Jake faced her, she covered her face with her hands and anxiously ran towards the exit.

'I quit. I can't stand this anymore,' she said, sobbing.

'Don't forget to close the door after you,' Jake shouted at her.

'What's this all about?' Lula asked.

'We have serious business to discuss, Kabugi.'

'What's up?'

'I had a brilliant vision for the New York exhibition.'

'Too late. Everything is done and shipped.'

'Shut up before I demote you. I want to sketch a real axe killing as an entertainment act.'

'What for?'

'Lula, after your treachery, you'd better do what I say.'

'What do you want?'

'Picture an executer entering the gallery, walking towards a random guest to split his head in two, with an axe, as real as we can make it. I want Mr X to get the picture that we can kill.'

Lula stopped sketching and asked, 'You want us to stage a killing?'

'Exactly, a real killing, as quick as you can. It needs to be finished before the New York show opens. Employ more assistants if you need.'

Lula had a flashback of Leah Fu quitting her job and said, 'It's difficult. I'm not sure how we are going to achieve it.'

'We have to. I want Mr X to fear us. I want him to feel the power of the axe. I want him to feel the power of Jake Ford and his expertise in the business of death.'

'I like it. It's difficult but memorable.'

'Get out of here and see what you can do.'

Lula dragged Peter and Julia into the ideas room. As the creative process was set in motion, ideas were discussed and sketched, some performed; in the end Lula told the team, 'It cannot be done. Not in the format Jake wants.'

At nine pm, they officially gave up. Frustrated, Peter turned around to say, 'We should give it another go.'

'Don't be silly. We cannot fake death. We can kill but we can't fake it,' Lula argued.

Jake appeared the following day, energetic and full of ideas, eating an almond croissant.

'You should try these croissants. The shop around the corner is selling them. It puts the New York cronut to shame.'

'I love New York cronut. They taste so good, you have to admit that.'

Jake faced Lula and shouted extremely loud, 'Peter, where are you?'

Peter appeared seconds after, panting and saying, 'Here.'

'Could you please get a croissant from the shop around the corner, rub it on your asshole and leave it on Lula's desk.'

'What for?' Lula asked.

'So that you can tell us the difference between a smelly and well ass-rubbed croissant and the New Yorker cronut. I am under the impression that they taste the same, but I'll let you be the judge of that.'

'I'm on my way,' Peter said.

'What progress have you made since yesterday?' Jake asked Lula.

'We can't do it.'

'What do you mean, we can't do it?'

'It's never been done before.' Jake laughed.

'I know it's never been done before. That's why we are artists. This is our gift to the community.'

'We can't fake death.'

'I'm sure we can. The sky is the limit.'

'We have to deploy real people.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'We can't kill people.'

'With an axe we can.'

'Jake, are you out of your mind? We cannot kill people. Not even for the sake of art.'

Jake said nothing for a couple of seconds.

'People commit suicide every day. Why don't we give them a few quid to die for us?'

'You can't be serious.'

'We can advertise. I'm a serious artist looking for serious, suicidal people. I'm sure someone will be interested.'

'Jake, I don't want to be associated with this kind of art.'

'Why not?'

'It's wrong. It's unlawful, and what's the purpose of performing a killing act anyway? Why don't we stick to what we do well?'

'I want everybody to know that Jake Ford can kill.'

Lula, ignoring Jake's enthusiasm, said, 'Killing is not going to work. Not even with suicidal people. That's just sick.'

'I'm sure we can compromise on something.'

'Jake, tell me, how do you intend to kill people on stage and not be sent to jail?'

'With an executed waiver we can axe anyone we like.'

'Why would someone sign a waiver?'

'Can you think of anything more honourable than giving your life for the sake of art?'

'Yes, I can think of more honourable ways to die, nevertheless, even with a waiver, we can't kill people.'

'I think you're misinformed. I discussed this with the lawyer,' Jake argued.

Seconds later, Peter appeared in the room and said, 'Lula, I've left a well rubbed croissant on your desk.'

'How well rubbed?' Jake asked.

'Let's just say I went to the toilet first and cleaned my ass with the croissant.'

'Marvellously,' Jake said. 'Why don't you have a bite and think about our discussion,' Jake told Lula.

'Jake, enough of this bullshit. It can't be done, how many times do I have to repeat the obvious?'

'Eat the croissant first. We can talk later,' Jake said, walking towards the exit. 'If it doesn't work, we run the same axing show we did for the *Vicissitudes of the Axe*.'

'But Jake, this exhibition is about rape, the *vicissitudes* was about decapitations. It doesn't make sense.'

'It doesn't matter if it makes sense or not. The important thing is to put the message across.'

'What message?'

'That Jake Ford can kill,' Jake yelled before slamming the door.

XXXII

Jake had elaborated on one plan of action to unveil the identity of Mr X. At

exactly two pm, Jake called Sabrina.

'What's this, aren't you seeing someone else?' Sabrina asked.

'You know I never mean what I write.'

'It hurts much the same.'

'I can be a dick sometimes, but I can change. You know I can.'

'What for Jake? For love and a happy family?'

Jake hesitated for a second and then said, 'I promise to stop taking pills and make love to you.'

'What do you mean by, stop taking pills?'

'Sabrina, I don't want any more lies between us.'

'Go on.'

'I took medication to avoid getting you pregnant.'

'You what?'

'Yes. What you've just heard is true. No point in repeating it. I'm not proud of it and I'm sorry.'

As Jake expected, Sabrina hung up the phone immediately.

Like fire burning through powder, Jake rushed to Chelsea.

'Keep the change,' Jake told the taxi driver upon arrival.

'Sabrina,' Jake shouted to no avail.

Acting delirious, Jake ran towards the main entrance without stopping. He charged into the door with his full weight, a solid wooden door, only to bounce back with an extremely sore shoulder.

Jake tried the doorbell with no answer.

Desperate, Jake started shouting, 'Sabrina, open the door,' again with no answer. Upset, Jake started throwing rocks at the windows, despite the dismay of the people passing by.

One of Sabrina's neighbours, a well-built man, asked Jake to stop.

'Go fuck yourself,' Jake told him.

Appalled, the well-built man knocked Jake out with a strong fist to the groin. Jake fell to the pavement, his hands between his legs. The police arrived minutes later in response to a neighbour's phone call.

Jake was arrested, sparking curiosity in the press.

'It was a silly thing to do but I did it for love,' Jake said to Steve Nash, who was the first to publish an article entitled, *'Love, ten reasons why we can't have enough of Jake Ford.'*

Gabriel text, *'Rather idiotic thing to do but the press was good,'* and one day after being released, charges never made, Jake finally received a phone call from Sabrina.

'What were you thinking?'

'I love you.'

'Jake, you don't know what love is. Smashing the windows of my house is not even close.'

'I know it was a silly thing to do, but you know me. I just wanted to be near you.'

'I wasn't even home.'

'Listen, I don't want more lies between you and me. I can make it up to you, child by child if you want.'

'You are starting to sound juvenile. Were you abused by the inmates?'

'Why don't you come on a trip with me? Let's disappear. Let's talk this over. I'm different. You'll spot it immediately.'

'I saw your mug photo in the newspaper. You did look different.'

'Please, honey, trust me, I'm here for you.'

Sabrina didn't answer.

'So, what do you think?'

'I'm thinking.'

'Why can't you act on instinct?'

'What makes you so sure I'm still in love with you?'

Upon hearing the word love, Jake's brain went numb.

'What do you mean? I love you too.'

'No, you don't. You just need me.'

'Give me one last chance and if I blow it I promise to stop chasing you.'

Sabrina reverted to a long silence before asking, 'Can you call me later?'

'No. But I can drop by your place tomorrow morning. Meanwhile, pack your clothes and a toothbrush. We're leaving town.'

'Shouldn't you be in New York in a couple of weeks?'

'Not anymore. I want to show Mr X who's in charge here.'

'What? By vanishing from London? That's quite a show. Even a three year old could do better than that.'

'I have a plan, but forget about the plan for a minute. At this moment in time, nothing is more important to me than getting things right between us two, and yes, I love you. You know I loved you from the beginning.'

'Jake, you've got one last chance, one last chance to prove me wrong.'

‘Great, I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Don’t take too many warm clothes. We’re going to have fun,’ and Jake hung up the phone.

Fiji

Upon landing, Jake said, ‘We’re here to have plenty of fun.’

‘I thought we were here to hide from Mr X.’

‘No, we not.’

‘Let’s enjoy the pool then. It’s such a lovely day.’

Jake agreed to go for a swim, but after checking the Resort’s activities he asked Sabrina, ‘What if we go scuba diving instead?’ and they spent the rest of the afternoon swimming alongside fishes of various colours and sizes.

‘This is great,’ Jake said, feeling relaxed. ‘We’ve just arrived and I’m feeling better already.’

Sabrina, sensing a sexual tension growing between the two, undressed and exhibited her sexy underwear.

‘Nice.’

‘Are you still taking those pills?’

‘I stopped. I told you, no more lies between us. But, the infertility will linger for a while.’

‘How could you do that?’

‘You were right. I was afraid of children.’

‘How come you aren’t anymore?’

‘I gathered you’re going to take care of them, so why bother?’

Later on, Sabrina and Jake watched the sunset from their balcony.

‘I suspect one day the sun will set and never rise again. What do you reckon?’

‘Don’t you ever relax? Why can’t you let that feeling go and enjoy life instead?’

‘What’s in life to enjoy?’

‘Jake, I think I’m going to bed.’

The following day started with a romantic stroll along the white sandy

beaches, scuba diving, dinner and watching twilight from the hotel's balcony.

Jake told Sabrina, 'Maybe we should buy a flat in this lovely country. What's the point of living in London anyway?'

One week, feeling relaxed and energized, Jake called Gabriel.

'Where are you, idiot?' Gabriel asked immediately.

'Relax man, I'm taking some time off.'

'Where are you, dickhead? Where are you? Joshua and John have been crying so loud that the fire workers are thinking London is on fire. Not to mention Mr X.'

'Relax, everything's fine. I just needed a break.'

'The exhibition opens in seven days, are you aware of that?'

'What's the rush then?'

'What about the interviews that Joshua and John have lined up for you? The promotion work, you heard about it before. Where are you?'

'Relax, take it easy. Let me enjoy the sunshine. I'll call you tomorrow to discuss details,' and despite the shouting, Jake hung up the phone.

The following day, Jake went for a morning stroll along the beach and a romantic lunch at the local restaurant. In the afternoon, Jake indulged in a *siesta*. He fell asleep lying on a hammock that gently rocked in the breeze.

Hours later, after sunset, feeling energetic and excited, Jake stayed behind at the bar to drink another *caipirinha*.

'I'll see you in a minute,' Jake told Sabrina.

Sabrina, who had planned to use the holiday to catch up on her sleep, walked back to their room.

Jake had a brief talk with a bartender from Glasgow.

'Celtic or Rangers?'

'Partic Thistle,' the bartender said. Jake was about to pay when a strange voice, coming through a loudspeaker, said, 'This one's on me.'

Jake shivered.

Mr X was wearing a *Billabong* t-shirt and a pair of thongs.

'How are you, Jake? I am surprised to see you here. Shouldn't you be in New York?'

Jake looked as if he had lost his tongue.

'Don't tell me I was the last person you wanted to see?' Mr X said and

laughed. 'I'm on my way to New York. I had a horrible time in China.'

'I'm here to relax too,' Jake decided to answer.

'I thought you were in New York, working with Joshua and John?'

Jake didn't reply.

'Cheer up, Jake, I'm not going to kill you,' and Mr X exploded into laughter.

'What's so funny?'

'Well, if you don't catch the next flight to New York, the American press will start to think Jake Ford has gone missing, which is not a bad thing as it will make your posthumous work an enormous success.'

Mr X had a sip of something, or so it sounded from the weird sounds emanating from the loudspeaker.

'I land in New York tomorrow morning. Whoever arrives first tells the great news to Joshua and John.'

'What news?'

'Let's say I land in New York before you and inform everyone looking for you that you had a terrible accident at a holiday resort.'

'What does that mean?'

'I don't know, you can figure it out yourself. Still, if I were you, I would catch the first flight to New York and show up at the gallery, alive and kicking, to deliver a fantastic exhibition.'

'Why don't you go fuck yourself?'

'Jake, please, let's have manners. You created this situation, not me,' and before leaving, Mr X's avatar placed one fifty dollar bill on the bar and pushed it toward the bartender.

Jake ran upstairs. He rushed into the hotel room, frantically, finding Sabrina in bed wearing French underwear, reading a book about parenthood.

'Mr X is here,' Jake shouted, almost incomprehensible, and searching in the wardrobe for his passport.

'Where are you going?'

'I have to go. I know who Mr X is.'

'Who is he?'

'I'm not going to tell you, for your own protection.'

'Jake, you're not well. What are you doing?'

'I'm leaving for New York. I'm going to corner this bastard. He doesn't know I know who he is. I'll keep you posted.'

Minutes later, Jake was on his way to the airport. Three hours later, he was on a plane to New York City, via Auckland and Los Angeles.'

XXXIII

Jake arrived in New York before Mr X.

At the airport, Jake told the taxi driver, 'Put the metal to the pedal. Soho, please. Don't worry about running over old men or children. I'm insured.'

Joshua and John were initially surprised to see Jake rocking up to their gallery.

'*Where have you been,*' they wondered, but both refrained from speaking their thoughts and said instead, 'Let's get to work. We have plenty to do.'

One hour later, the first journalist arrived. She was wearing a yellow shirt, short jeans, a pair of orange sneakers and a pair of thick lenses with white chunky frame glasses. After the acclimatization, when the interview was about to start, Jake cut the journalist's first question short and suggested, 'Maybe you should wear contact lenses.'

Embarrassed, Joshua and John gasped, but the journalist answered with disdain, 'Glasses make me look more intellectual.'

'Go ahead then. Let's see the flavour of your questions,' Jake asked, feeling rather sorry for the little freak show.

The first line of questioning was about the role of woman in society, victims of men desires, sometimes treated as sexual objects, followed by the aftermath of victims of rape. When Jake was just about defend the insinuation of portraying women like a caveman artist, the young and colourful journalist divagated on the 'mechanisms of making money out of nothing.'

Joshua and John intervened by escorting the woman out.

'What was that all about? Who was she?' Jake asked.

'We're not sure yet. We obviously invited the wrong press. Apologies for that,' Joshua said.

Half an hour later, a lady in Prada style, late thirties and with shiny sunglasses entered the premises.

'*This will be a lot easier,*' Jake assumed and upon the first question, 'Do you like the states?' Jake shivered in happiness. However, after ten straightforward

questions came a question regarding the Dante's circles of hell. Speechless, Jake managed to defend his work quoting Nietzsche, 'That which does not kill us makes us stronger.'

Gabriel arrived the day after.

'What is wrong with you?' was his initial comment but Joshua and John looked at him as if he had been worried for no reason.

'Let the artist work,' Joshua argued in Jake's defence.

Jake spent the following five days interviewing for radio shows, magazines and newspapers. The little freak show he had initially experienced often boomeranged. American journalist hinged from casual questions to complex observations; and not all of them were intellectually dressed to allow Jake to prepare himself in advance.

On the second day, Jake sharpened his brain. 'I'm not going down without a fight,' he said to Joshua and John, who cheered his brave spirit.

Jake survived the most important interviews but not without banging a few partitions with his head. The 100.3FM radio show about contemporary art ended in disaster.

Jake had thrown his chair at the host, a journalist named Isaac Robinson, after being asked, 'Are you a true artist or a fraud?'

The chair may have missed Isaac, but he managed to whack him later in the head with a microphone.

Isaac was hospitalised. Joshua and John were initially worried, but Jake's dysfunctional behaviour sparked curiosity in the most diverse national circles and his Twitter account received a wave of American followers.

On the fifth and final day, Jake gave interviews incessantly throughout the day, stopping only to eat a local burger and the New York cronut. The only causality reported during the day was a tape recorder that Jake had thrown at a journalist after she asked him, 'Could you please be more specific about who builds your installations?'

'Well done mate, I forgot how everyone loves a tainted soul in this business. Everyone seems to love your attitude here in America. I can't believe you created this furore in five days only,' Gabriel told Jake when the string of interviews finally reached an end.

On the sixth day, the exhibition was meant to open to the public. Final

arrangements were taken care of during the day.

The exact location of a wooden table was subject to a hot discussion. Joshua and John couldn't agree on the exact location and Jake proposed to place it by the entrance door, in line with the flow of energy going through the gallery, so good Feng Shui could be achieved.

The Vicissitudes of the Whore

At seven o'clock, the exhibition was going full steam ahead.

Jake, surrounded by journalists, felt on top of his game.

'I find this killing instrument fascinating,' Jake said, after his axe performed a full-arc swing before axing the timber floor. The journalists leaned back nervously.

'It's like an obsession,' Jake added while polishing the blade with a napkin.

'Your attention please,' Jake said suddenly. 'Make room, please.' Without further notice, Jake axed a napkin he had placed on the floor.

The journalists photographed the dent on the timber floor.

'It's truly fascinating. I can't get tired of this,' Jake commented before asking, 'Who wants to put his head down on the floor?' No one answered.

'What are you afraid of?' Jake asked but the silence was not broken.

'Please gentlemen. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lose your head for contemporary art. Are you going to miss it?' No one volunteered.

Jake swung the axe again in a full circle, ending with a strong strike on the floor.

'I was in Sweden when a man axed a woman in the busiest area of central Gothenburg. He axed her without being stopped, despite the blood splashing and the crack of bones.' Jake held his breath for a second and then continued, 'Upon reading the story I wondered, why an axe? Why not a gun or a knife? It sounded so Middle Ages to kill someone with an axe,' and another long pause followed. 'So I went to a local shop and bought this axe, hoping to understand what drove that man to madness.'

'And?' One journalist asked after a prolonged silence.

'What do you reckon?' Jake asked rather inquisitive/curiously.

‘You tell us.’

‘I was led to believe it was all about engagement.’

While the journalists took further notes and photographs, a lady wearing a red, flamboyant dress rushed inside the gallery, screaming, ‘Please, can someone help me?’

Confused initially, the guests started to turn their attention towards the Lady in Red, who had started to behave strange, in a mix of sobbing and talking, rather theatrically, despite the curious looks laid upon her.

‘What a crazy woman,’ one of the guests commented aloud as she and other guests walked away from the unusual and loud intruder.

Meanwhile, as if possessed by a demon, the Lady in Red reached out to one guest, a gentleman wearing a red tie, by saying the curt words, ‘Please help me.’

‘How?’ the gentleman replied.

As various guests started to wonder what was in fact going on, a well-built man, in his early twenties, came out from the crowd. The guests watched him suspiciously. However, when he exposed an axe that had been concealed inside his raincoat, the guests, particularly the ladies, started to scream in panic.

The Lady in Red became hysterical. She tried to escape but run onto one of the guests who pushed her back. She turned around and said, ‘Leave me alone,’ but the well-built man grabbed her hair and pushed her hard against the floor.

The Lady in Red stood there with her head down; and like a barbarian, the well-built man axed her in the back unmercifully.

A pool of blood appeared under the body.

Hysteria abounded in the premises.

‘Call the police,’ one guest shouted, pointing at the well-built man, who was peacefully looking at his victim.

Suddenly the lights went out and the song ‘I wish you were here’ started to play in the background. A mix of tension, confusion and get-me-out-of-here infected the crowd.

As the lights came back on, Jake appeared next to the well-built man, clapping his hands.

Seconds later, the Lady in Red rose miraculously from the floor. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, this was a monstrous show to portrait the *Vicissitudes of the Whore*.

Please accept my apologies if we have shocked you. No such thing was intended.'

Jake surveyed the room, eager to collect reactions from the guests, but nothing materialized.

'What is this fear that blinds us? The fear that feeds on the unknown. This dark force we carry within? I wished I knew what it means to be dead, but I don't. Whoever, whatever put us here, it certainly dumped us on a web of lies. Nothing holds true anymore.'

Jake surveyed the room one more time but none of the guests uttered a sound.

'Life is a miracle and a question mark at the same time. It is as precious as it is confusing. I wished I knew what it means to be dead, but I don't know. As far as I know living is a curse. I believe it is my duty as an artist, as a creator, to look for ways to break these chains. To look for answers that make sense to me, answers that resonate with you,' Jake said.

After a few seconds of silence the guests started to clap their hands.

Some yelled, 'Bravo, bravissimo.'

'Thank you, thank you. Please enjoy the *Vicissitudes of the Whore* hanging on the walls,' Jake said and slowly the guests started to regroup to focus their attention on the art and discuss the show.

'I think this whore got what she deserved, truly amazing,' a lady dressed in Prada style said.

Jake felt success growing within.

Mr X arrived wearing a bow tie with a pink stripe. He mingled initially. Soft words were exchanged about his presence. He settled later in a group led by Joshua and John. Most guests had smiles on their faces, discussing complex issues like the art of Jake Ford, the BP oil spill in the gulf or the awakening of the butterflies in Mexico.

Outside New Yorkers rushed past the gallery. Sporadically, one would stop and glance inside.

Jake answered the journalists, holding his axe with a strong grip. The question, 'If hidden within his art, would a catholic and powerful message emerge?' was received with a strong axe strike to the timber table.

'God is wrong. This world is not the best of all options available,' Jake said amid brochures and loose papers in free fall.

Later, an old woman confessed loudly that her father had put her virginity at the disposal of the management board so that he could keep his job, yelling in

the end, 'It was rape, I was only sixteen.' Amongst her teardrops and hugs, Jake axed a partition and said, 'So much cruelty in this world.'

Towards the end of the opening Jake was still trying to figure out how to reach the X rather than the avatar.

'Here pussycat, come here pussycat,' Jake thought. With his axe against his chest, Jake tiptoed across the room, and emerged between Mr X and Joshua and John with a laborious smile. Gabriel was not present.

'Fantastic work, Jake, what an amazing achievement,' Mr X said, despite the nervous look on the avatar's face.

'I followed your advice.'

'So I've noticed. Pleased you did it.'

Jake worked on his smile and on his grip.

'By the way, I bought everything. Gabriel and I trusted you wouldn't mind this time.'

'You trusted absolutely right,' Jake answered while polishing the axe's blade with a paper tissue and looking intensely at the loud speaker.

'We are buying the pieces at premium rates. Gabriel would not settle for less. You have a good agent.'

'You know what they say, you can't separate the brunches from the trees,' and rampant Jake axed the wooden floor of the gallery, between Joshua and the avatar.

Joshua became livid and the avatar almost fainted.

John used the opportunity to say, 'Jake, don't forget you have a plane to catch.'

Jake glanced at his iPhone before saying, 'We have plenty of time to chop a few more trees,' followed by another axe swipe that missed the avatar by one inch. The avatar started walking sideways, attempting to leave the premises and run for his life, amid the strong laughter of Mr X and Jake's random swipes.

'Jake, stop it, this timber flooring is recycled from a Dutch boat that sunk four hundred years ago along the Cuban coast. This was not cheap,' Joshua shouted, extremely upset.

Letting the Avatar escape, Jake uttered, 'The axe can kill. Jake Ford can kill.'

XXXV

Jake returned to London alone.

Gabriel had stayed behind to work on 'frugalities'.

At home Jake read several articles that had been written about his opening in New York. He noticed a mix of enthusiasm and deception, but regardless if the reviews were good or bad, the seeds were laid in America to make his name grow and profit.

'Well done, Jake. Mr X is over the moon,' Gabriel text.

Jake didn't reply. At home, Jake ventured outside his apartment only occasionally.

One week after the opening of the *Vicissitudes of the Whore*, the Financial Times reported that Mr X had privately auctioned two installations by Jake Ford.

Gabriel text Jake, *'Mr X is offloading your initial work. You don't need to be alarmed.'*

Upon reading the text, Jake called Gabriel.

'Did you know about this?'

'Not at all, but as I told you before, it makes no difference if he buys through us or not. He can always acquire your work through third parties.'

'You should have known he was also targeting my early work.'

'How was I supposed to know? I could have guessed it, maybe, but these days your work trades in the art market without you knowing.'

'Don't you keep in touch with these people? I thought they were your friends.'

'The art pieces that went on sale this week were acquired by an investor totally unknown to me.'

'Why is he selling now?'

'To keep the momentum going. Good investments should follow on the back of good reviews.'

'How come?'

'Keeps everyone interested in your work and curious to see how expensive it can get. It tends to drive valuations through the roof.'

'That's exactly what I wanted to hear.'

'I'm pleased to know.'

'Sounds like you two have been plotting to see me dead soon.'

'How can you possibly blame me?'

'Who am I supposed to blame then? Who created this monster?'

'Who? Mr X?'

'Yes, that fucking weirdo that appears to the public in the form of a loudspeaker. You created this freak show!'

'I don't know. But consider yourself lucky he talks to you. I only get emails.'

'Don't you find his existence rather odd?'

'I think he's a product of the times we're living in.'

'How come he rocks up in my life knowing me so well?'

'I don't know, research I guess,' Gabriel hesitated to answer.

'Research, my ass!'

'Jake, can you stop acting paranoid, I've had enough of this bullshit. You have one week to pull yourself together,' Gabriel said, rather irritated before hanging up the phone.

XXXVI

Tired of eating junk food, Jake was forced out of his apartment to head towards the Bangkok Sidewalk.

'Madre Teresina, you look so tired,' Laura commented upon seeing Jake.

'I had a rough week in America.'

'I'll give you a good treat to help you forget about it,' Laura said and twenty minutes later, she brought a succulent breakfast; bacon, eggs and one almond croissant.

'So, do you still believe Mr X is trying to kill you?' Laura asked.

'I don't doubt it anymore, but I know who the bastard is.'

'Is he aware of it? That you know his identity.'

'I don't think so.'

'What do you intend to do?'

'Not sure yet, time will tell,' and Jake looked down before articulating, 'kill him, I guess.'

'Shouldn't you talk to him first?'

'How can I? He would probably kill me straight away to keep the truth about

him a mystery.'

'Aren't you going to talk to the police? They are supposed to protect us.'

'They will never believe me. The motive is obvious, but I'm not dead yet.'

'You should lodge a complaint, so that the police will know where to start the investigation in case you disappear,' Laura said. She attended three tables before returning to Jake and asking, 'How are you going to prove your innocence?'

'I'll kill him in self-defence.'

'Jake, don't do anything stupid,' and without notice, Laura gave Jake a quick kiss on his cheek. 'What was that for?'

'In case I don't see you again.'

'Laura, thanks for your attention, but I'm not going down without a fight. I won't be running away like a coward. I'm going to deal with this aberration in style.'

Laura kissed Jake on his lips.

'What was that one for?'

'I was carried away by your words. Jake, I hope you give that aberration what it deserves.'

'I will. I promise you when Mr X is no longer we are going to celebrate his passing at the trendiest restaurant in London. Eat and drink all night long.'

'Please, Jake, promise you won't get killed before that.'

'Don't worry. Right now we're not pulling guns at each other. We both benefit from each other's existence.'

'Why don't you tease him instead?'

'What do you mean?'

'Rather than confronting him, why don't you trap him in an environment you can control? Why not pretend everything is okay before unleashing the final strike?' Laura said, pronouncing the word *unleashing* with a certain enthusiasm.

Jake raised his eyebrows and said, 'I confess your idea sounds very reasonable and wise.'

'Defeat him where he doesn't expect it.'

Jake didn't answer immediately. He paused for several seconds. With a voice as gloomy as he was able to express he replied, 'Indeed, I need to think about this.'

'Yes, think about it. I can't bear seeing you this pale and unhealthy. For God's sake, you are an attractive man. You should enjoy the ride while you are young

and fit.'

Jake laughed.

'Laura, you're a godsend. I'll do the best I can.'

For a moment Jake felt a passionate urge, an almost uncontrollable desire, to kiss Laura; a feeling that his celebrity status was quick to axe. Instead, Jake gave Laura a succulent kiss on the cheeks and left the Bangkok Sidewalk feeling extremely active.

XXXVII

On his way home, Jake made a phone call.

'What do you want? I'm busy!' Gabriel said mockingly.

'Gabriel, let me apologize. I have behaved like a nob recently. I've put our friendship at risk, which was silly and childish.'

'Go on, tell me more,' Gabriel said, extremely interested in the conversation.

'You were right, I've been acting paranoid. There was no need to doubt your judgement or Mr X's real intentions.'

'Jake, I'm extremely pleased to hear this. What made you change so suddenly? I confess I was starting to lose faith in you.'

'I'm an attractive man. I should enjoy the ride while I can. Why bother if someone wants to kill me?'

'Please Jake, we should avoid this conversation. I've had enough of it.'

'Don't be alarmed. I'm calling to let you know that I'm back at work. I have my brain spinning around with ideas.'

'That's great news. Should we catch up?'

'Soon, but not now. This time around, I'm doing things differently.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm going to hibernate for a few weeks in order to put myself together.'

'What exactly do you mean by hibernating? I trust you're not taking pills to sleep.'

'Of course not, don't be silly. I'm simply taking some time off, refurbishing my crypt so to speak.'

'Sounds good, but what about work?'

'I'll do both at the same time.'

'Jake, you have no idea how glad I am to hear this.'

'I thought you deserved to be the first one to know.'

'This is incredible news. We should start re-focusing on your career immediately.'

'Absolutely.'

Gabriel took a few seconds to think and then said, 'Do you feel fit to give an interview?'

'To who?'

'Steve. He wants to finish his documentary for the BBC. He's been pestering me almost every day for the last couple of weeks.'

'What's holding him back from finishing it?'

'You.'

'Me? What do you mean? What do I have to do with this?'

'You haven't been interviewed, have you?'

'Why does he need to interview me? There are zillions of interviews on the internet about me and my work. He can use any of those to finish the documentary.'

'This is different. The documentary is about understating you as a person, not your work, and it's starting to look really good.'

Jake sighed, 'I don't feel like travelling to White City.'

'Meet him tomorrow at the recording studios. After that, you can have some time off.'

Interview: Jake Ford

The following day, Jake was escorted through the White City by an attractive receptionist. They walked through various corridors and stopped at Studio 9. A knock on the door and, 'Please come in,' was heard from inside. The door swung open and Steve greeted him and introduced him to Vladimir Gogol.

'Jake, I'm so happy you could come.'

'My pleasure Steve. I'm sorry I couldn't do it before today. I've been rather busy lately.'

'Please sit down.'

Jake sat down on a vintage chair in the shape of an egg. Behind him stood a red sheet that covered the wall from top to bottom.

'Well, I think we're ready. Can we get the camera rolling?' Steve asked Vladimir.

Vladimir nodded.

'Jake, I'm going to ask several personal questions about your person before we move on to discuss Jake's life and work. You can refuse to answer, stop speaking, rephrase and so forth. We're simply just going to keep the camera rolling and edit everything later. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

Steve took a sip of water and started.

SN Jake, where you're from?

JAKE FORD I am from Devon, Plymouth.

SN Did you always want to be an artist?

JF I never thought about doing anything else. I've been producing art since a young age.

SN When did you start?

JF I was 17 when I had my first exhibition at a local gallery.

SN Why art?

JF I am drawn to the process of creativity. I simply cannot escape it.

SN Did you ever imagine that working as a fine art artist would make you famous?

JF No. When I started, my only objective was to be able to make a living from my work. It wasn't until the price of my installations started to go through the roof that the press started treating me as a celebrity.

SN How come you studied fine art in Seoul?

JF I was offered a scholarship from the Research Council of South Korea to do it. I believe they were trying to foster better relationships with the West. I wasn't looking forward to the exchange, but then I thought, what the hell, why would I prefer to stay home when I can try something new?

SN Seoul didn't appeal to you?

JF I didn't think they were at the centre of the art world, but considering they were awarding me a full scholarship, it would've been foolish to refuse it.

SN But you liked it in the end.

JF I loved it. Most international students were in Seoul for a short period of time. We all knew that the intention was not to burn eyebrows studying, but rather to enjoy the experience as time was short and we were running out of it.

SN One of those international students was Sabrina.

JF Correct. We meet at a party for international students. We became an item several weeks later. Two months after we met, I moved into her flat. I literally went to my place to fetch my mattress, drag it across the student dormitory and chucked it into her place.

SN Did you do the same back in the UK?

JF At home things were different. We finished our degrees before moving in together. We kept postponing important decisions. Personally, I think our situation was the typical case of not knowing what we wanted and wanting everything at the same time.

SN Tells us about how you started up as an artist. What worked for you? What made you famous?

JF There is no such a thing as becoming famous overnight. I don't even think there is a recipe for it. To be quite honest one day I found myself selling installations for a million. I can think of several events in my professional career that led to that event, but that would be only half the story. The other half is a myriad of variables we can't control, that seemed to have align themselves to my benefit.

SN Could you tell us about your first major art piece, the Dark Side of Sex.

JF What can I tell you that you don't know already?

SN You could tell us how that piece came to exist.

JF You now I don't like to talk about that piece.

SN Would you prefer to ignore this question and answer the next one instead?

JF Who know I never quite liked to talk about this piece. I was accused of exploiting women and a zillion of other things.

SN No one is accusing of anything in here. We are just trying to understand how that piece came to exist. Twenty years later since it went public.

JF Was it that long ago?

SN Yes, I checked it yesterday.

JF It still feels like yesterday, or maybe not. When I think that piece was produced when I was in my final year of uni.

SN Do you want to tell us more about it?

JF Not really.

SN If I may, I would like to say that I never understood the Dark Side of Sex until I went through a divorce.

JF Some people did get back to me with similar comments, and those were the ones that kept me going rather the grilling I got from the press.

SN I guess a five-minute installation recreating a seventeen years old nun, being raped in the bum was bound to hit the nerve of many people in the art world.

JF Still, no one cared to understand about the background of the story. Everyone failed to understand how sex can blind us. I was criticized for embellishing an ugly man when I knew so well every single one of us was reflected in that rapist.

SN Don't you think that's debatable?

JF Not really. That's why I decided to work on that piece. I flew to Chişinău where I stayed for one month, working and researching the story.

SN Who played the rapist?

JF A local art student. I also hired a local prostitute for the shooting. She was quite young, but I could see sadness in her eyes already.

SN Did you pity the girl?

JF No. I pitied us. We failed her.

SN Are you in contact with her?

JF She got paid and vanished in the same furtive way as she appeared when

I was looking for someone to do the shooting.

SN Weren't you curious to know more about her?

JF Not really. Life hasn't been easy on her. I couldn't go near a person like that. The seeds they carry within can poison you in a flash.

SN I still remember the furore it made when the Dark Side of Sex made it to the public.

JF Everyone labelled the work as plain pornography. I even had the women activists circulating a petition to put an end to it.

SN If you could go back in time, would you do the same thing again?

JF Probably. Although these days I wouldn't work on anything similar to the Dark Side of Sex.

SN Do you think pornography can help artists promote their work?

JF Not anymore. When my art installation was produced, the internet wasn't what it is today. The connotation to pornography, rather than kill my artistic career, had the opposite effect as tons of curious Londoners came to see the installation. The art piece didn't have a closeup of a penis or a vagina, but the raping was very explicit.

SN What happened to the installation?

JF I think it was acquired recently by a famous gallery.

SN How much do you think it's worth these days?

JF I don't know. Well into seven figures, if not eight, I reckon.

SN Do you think it's worth that much?

JF It's debatable.

SN What do you mean?

JF A couple of years ago the Paysage de Banlieue was sold for 22.5 million. I didn't think much about it at the time, but then I read somewhere that the same painting had been auctioned a few decades ago for 6.8 million.

SN In which currency?

JF Can't remember, but it's not important, what made me think back then was the name of buyer.

SN Who bought it?

JF Acquavella.

SN The New York art dealer?

JF Yes, and then again, I didn't think much about it at the time, it was only when he had lunch with the FT that the whole thing started to play with me.

SN I am not sure if I follow you.

JF Apparently, Acquavella's first art deal ever, was a Vlaminck that he bought in Paris for eight thousand and sold for twelve thousand in America.

SN Are we still talking in American dollars?

JF I guess so, but what made me think was not the profit margin of that particular deal, or Acquavella's comment making fun of himself by saying that he thought that was a good deal back then, what really made me think was the fact that maybe, and this is just a maybe, maybe Vlaminck bought that painting not because he had an investment strategy in mind, but because he had a special attachment to Vlaminck.

SN But do you think the painting was worth that much?

JF It's relative, isn't it? Probably not if we take into consideration that half the world is starving right now, but we can't deny that objects of art are able to transport feelings. A Vlaminck might not be worth that much for the two of us and at the same time be a powerful source of energy to keep Acquavella's soul alive.

SN It's interesting that you mentioned Vlaminck in this interview. Personally, I think Acquavella had a real strategy in mind when he bought the Paysage de Banlieue.

JF You think so?

SN I think expressing emotions in the style of Fauvism is just going to get more and more popular. As society moves towards the demystification of our social dogmas and replaces everything with our basic instincts, Matisse and his crowd, will never cease to increase in popularity. It's not by accident that they were called wild beasts after their first exhibition.

JF And look at the world now? I was reading recently that when Modigliani exhibited his famous nudes people called the police and the paintings had to be removed. We have more freedom today because artists in the past had the guts to challenge the status quo. I am sure paintings like the Paysage de Banlieue, little by little, have helped society to transform and reform. Still, Fauvism paintings have been around for more than 100 years. Paintings from this period have been produced in great quantities. It's not that we are talking about renaissance paintings that took long periods of time to produce. I even think that a ten years old child will be able to paint in the same flavour and look just the same. I don't really understand the economics of Fauvinism if it wasn't for the fact that the economical world produces more and more output, which translates in more and more money in the hands of shareholders, which then again must find a justification for the surplus funds in their bank accounts and start paying top dollar for every unique product they can find.

SN Don't you think that's a simplistic way to illustrate the art market.

JF Is it? I guess so. We can complicate it, if you want, but how long do you think it will take before investors start paying top dollar for the original manuscripts of pop songs? There is no value in sketches. The value that is attributed today can only be justified by the chunks of money some have and other don't. These are the economics of modern society. I don't dwell much in the economics of my work, but I do think about it.

SN What about the uniqueness of these works?

JF What uniqueness? These works belong to the public domain. I was once in Florence observing the David from Michelangelo when I was approached by a tourist who wanted to let me know that the David I was looking at was not the original. As a reply, I challenged him to spot the difference between the copy and the original.

SN How can a copy resemble the original?

JF I was not interested in the difference. I was more interested to see how that piece of art played with the surroundings. The process of creation is unique. The result not so much.

SN I don't think the copy will ever look the same as the original.

JF I was not suggesting that. Just to start with, the Carrara marble used in the statue is unique and no similar raw material will ever be found, but most art features, ideas, once created, or materialized, can be easily replicated.

SN Why would you use produce your own ultramarine colour for the Bible Depictions when cheap paint from a random art supplier would render the same effect?

JF What else did Lula tell you about lapis lazuli?

SN Not much. Sabrina and Gabriel have somehow linked lapis lazuli to your interest in economics, but I'm not quite sure what they are referring to.

JF Economics? I guess it does, although I don't like to talk about it.

SN Why not?

JF It's personal.

SN Nothing you can disclose in here about it? Surely there is something that you could share with us.

JF I noticed the intensity of lapis lazuli, or ultramarine, for the first time on a Poussin painting, and for a long time I associated that strong blue colour to his work. I would notice the same lazuli colour in other paintings, but it wasn't until I was in Berlin and entered the replica of an old master's studio, that I discovered the lapis lazuli and the ultramarine pigment. I had no idea back then that the manufacturing of colours was such a laborious task, and lazuli possibility the most difficult colour to produce. For centuries, artists had to rely on lapis lazuli to replicate one of the most abundant colours in nature.

SN I can't really understand why you would be interested in the economics of it.

JF Have you ever noticed that Caravaggio never really used it that much? In his most famous paintings.

SN Never thought about it, although I can't really see the use of a strong lazuli in his pallet.

JF Maybe his pallet was a reaction to the economics of the colour rather than the other way around. I am sure most old masters would feel attracted to this colour, but since it was extremely expensive to get they had to be wise how to apply it to their work.

SN Makes no difference to his work, with or without it. Caravaggio is still a great master.

JF I agree. Caravaggio was in fact the first painter I started copying in my youth. Reason why it was so easy to notice that he made little use of lapis

lazuli in his work.

SN I am more inclined to think that he had no use for it.

JF Put it this way, during renaissance times the virgin was often depicted wearing a lapis lazuli dress. The colour was then reserved for one of the most important symbols of Christianity. More than five hundred years later I walked into the Sydney National Gallery and come across the Balcony 2 by Brett Whiteley which is a huge painting painted almost in its entirety with ultramarine colour. Whiteley confessed later that ultramarine had an obsessive and ecstasy-like effect upon his nervous system. I do agree that the painting reminded me of Sydney Harbour, but the only reason why that painting came to exist is because these days lapis lazuli is produced in great quantities and it doesn't cost more to buy than any other colour. Had the cost being the same as five hundred years ago, that painting was simply not going to make to the public eye. That one and a zillion of other paintings.

SN I don't fully agree that the genius of an artist can be explained through the economics of his time.

JF Possibility not, but I do believe that most genius blossom according to the economics of the time. I don't think Matisse was going to make it during the Renaissance.

SN How do you know?

JF I don't. That's why I don't talk about lapis lazuli and my personal investigations.

SN I still believe a genius like Matisse would make it any age.

JF If you say so.

SN I am surprised you don't seem to see it the same way.

JF I find it extremely unlikely, but this is just my opinion. I would prefer if we

could discuss something else instead.

SN Very well, how would you describe your working relationship with Gabriel?

JF Productive. I think it is extremely important for an artist to have the support of a good agent. We can't do everything ourselves. Gabriel has a good eye for what he does. He gives me freedom to work.

SN You have nicknamed him vulture. Does it reflect your feelings towards him?

JF Not really. I wouldn't have won the Turner Prize without his support.

SN Would you consider him one of your best friends?

JF He is a good friend, for sure. I guess best friends are relationships we created during our childhood. It takes decades to develop a relationship like that. Friends come and go, depending on the path we decide to take. So far, we've been both heading in the same direction, hence our friendship.

SN What about Lula?

JF I have a great working relationship with him but I've no idea what he does in his private life.

SN Don't you care to know?

JF Not really. He is my employee, after all, despite being able to profit from the business. Sometimes we travel together to Tuscany, but he seems to like the trip more than I do. I find Italy totally overrated.

SN How did you meet?

JF Long time ago, when I was working on the Bible Depictions.

SN Have you ever imagined the British people struggling to remember the

Bible Depictions?

JF It wouldn't bother me. I am the first to admit my art represents the flavour of the now. Different art forms will trend higher than my art in the future. My name, my art, might even be forgotten, and to be quite honest I will be the first person to accept that. I'm cool with it. I don't need to adapt to it. I have made my contributions to the now. As a creator, I must accept that the now will go on evolving. I couldn't see myself an artist if I was against it.

SN In your opinion what was your contribution to the now?

JF My contributions had different forms and objectives. When I was young my work was aimed at generating press rather than a strong connection to my art. As I got older I changed that approach.

SN What propelled that change?

JF Not quite sure. There was a time when Sabrina left me, albeit she has left me many times, which had a profound effect on me. She left me in the lurch, when things were at their worst. I didn't hear a word from her for more than six months.

SN What did you do?

JF I mourned my loss accordingly. I went out clubbing, drunk plenty of caipirinhas, travelled to Bhutan, looking for the secret of happiness, but nothing really worked. It was almost impossible to fill the void she had left in me. Only my work benefited.

SN What do you mean?

JF Suddenly, my art was able to inspire people. People were able to see my work and see beyond the destruction in a different manner. And these were normal people. Not people trained to understand art. This was a completely different type of entertainment. Rather than being a simple aesthetical discussion that had gathered momentum, my art became an

instrument where people were finding some form of redemption.

SN Do you think your period of solitude connected you to God?

JF I'm not sure I follow you.

SN It came to my attention that the *Vicissitudes of the Axe* was meant to portray Popes rather than Royals.

JF And?

SN Don't you find it rather odd that you are trying to portray the beheading of the ambassador of God?

JF Steve, between me and you, and for the sake of this documentary, let me assure that my connection to God can be reduced to two simple words.

SN Two simple words?

JF Yes, two simple words. Every time I look up and wonder if someone is watching over me, I always think, Fuck You, out loud hoping that someone will get the message.

SN One last question. Do you think you can describe your work in one simple sentence?

JF I think I can. One love, one fear. That pretty much sums up everything I've done in my artistic career.

XXXIX

The following week, Jake didn't leave his apartment. He planned and re-planned a set of actions to wipe out Mr X from his life.

On a Sunday morning, Jake answered a *'private number'* without thinking much of it.

'How do you do?' someone asked.

'Who's this?' Jake replied.

'Don't you recognize my voice?'

'I'm afraid I don't. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have better things to do,' and when Jake was about to hang up the phone, a snorting laugh came from the other end which Jake immediately recognised and made him shrug.

'Why are you calling me?'

'I was delighted to hear the good news.'

'What good news are you talking about?'

'My team just reported that you're coming to your senses and back at work.'

'Who told you that?'

'I told you already, my team.'

'Which team are you talking about. Is the circus in town?'

'Please, Jake, are we starting this all over again?'

Jake took a deep breath and said, 'You're right. Please, let me sincerely apologise for my behaviour. It was totally unnecessary.'

Mr X paused for a brief second before saying, 'So, is it true, are you indeed back at work?'

'Indeed, I am.'

'I'm so pleased to hear it. This means a great deal for art investors.'

'I'm delighted to know that resuming my work impacts the financial markets.'

'It surely does. It's not like a press announcement from the White House, but for the X Art Fund, it ranks pretty close.' Jake didn't comment.

After a few seconds in silence Mr X said, 'My call was just a courtesy call. Since Gabriel was approached by the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art, interest has surged in the press. As usual, I want to be the forefront buyer of everything you do.'

'I'm doing things differently this time around.'

'How different?'

'I'm not sure yet, but I'm working on a different method of displaying my art.'

'Jake, whatever you do, I want it.'

'We shall see about that.'

Mr X paused again for a brief second. Jake, for a moment, believed he was being advised by someone in the background.

'Who am I to interrupt your precious time? Please, go back to your studio and create. I will discuss these frugalities with Gabriel. Bye for now,' Mr X said in a rush, before hanging up the telephone.

Not quite sure whether to rejoice or shout, Jake walked out onto his balcony to gaze at the rooftops of London.

'*Son of a bitch,*' Jake thought to himself.

XL

Hours later, Jake received an awkward text message from Sabrina. '*Moving to the land down under. Wish you well.*'

Jake was on his balcony, tucked into his bamboo chair, gazing at nothing in particular. He returned the text message with a phone call.

'When are you coming back?' Jake asked when Sabrina answered the phone.

After several seconds in silence, Sabrina said, 'How are you, Jake?'

'I'm sorry that I've been absent. So many things happened. *The Vicissitudes of the Whore* was a huge success.'

'I read about it. I wish I'd been there.'

'Didn't I invite you?'

'You left me alone in Manga Island, don't you remember?'

'What do you mean by alone? There were plenty of people on the island and even more at the resort.'

'Well, it's too late to discuss your behaviour or what I was thinking in trying to reconnect with you. I'm off to Australia.'

'I got the text, for how long?'

'I have a four year working contract. But it could be six, ten years, who knows?'

'What are you going to do?'

'I'm taking over a vineyard. Our goal is to create an international brand.'

'Don't you think it will unfold in the same way as what you experienced in Chile?'

'Not down-under. I know these people and their wine.'

'I think you're making a big mistake.'

'You should be joking. What's here for me?'

'Australia can't possible have the intellectual appeal of London. You'll get bored.'

'I don't think so. If you're trying to persuade me to stay, you need to do better than that.'

'I'm not trying to persuade you. You can go if you like. Who am I to stop you?'

Sabrina didn't answer.

'But I'm warning you, you're making a bit mistake,' Jake interrupted. The silence was making him feel uneasy

'I don't think I am, but let's stop talking about me. What about Mr X? Are you still convinced he's going to kill you?' Sabrina asked.

'Yes, but I know who he is.'

'I heard you saying that. Who is he then?'

'You'll know when the time is right.'

'So, you're no longer afraid of him?'

'Not really. He's doomed.'

'Don't do anything foolish. You have to let it go.'

'Let go of what?'

'This obsession with destruction, death or even Mr X. You should confront that demon, once and for all.'

With one strong grip, Jake pulled off the arm of his bamboo chair.

'As if I knew how to do that,' Jake replied.

Several seconds in silence and Sabrina was the first to break to ice, 'Well, Jake, I have some stuff to do. Thanks for calling.'

'Hold on. When do you think we can see each other again?' Jake asked in a hurry.

'I'll let you know when I'm back in the UK.'

'Should I keep you posted about my whereabouts?'

'No need unless you're travelling to Australia.'

2 seconds in silence.

'I guess I will see you then. Bye for now,' Sabrina said.

'This is it? This is how we say goodbye?'

'Do you have something else in mind?'

'How about having lunch before you leave?'

Sabrina sighed, 'Jake what can we possibly have to say to each other?'

Jake inhaled a deep breath.

'I was a dick, I know.'

'You are a dick. I knew that all along. You had your last chance to prove me wrong.'

'And let you down, again.'

'You did.'

'I am sorry. I wanted to make it up to you, but it's easy to live like this. To know I can be wiped out any minute, so that someone can make an extra million.'

'Jake, no one is trying to kill you. If it wasn't Mr X, it would be something else. You're not well. You were different in your twenties.'

'You're wrong. I'm the same person.'

Sabrina sighed again, 'You lived life with a smile back then. You know as well as I do that no one is trying to kill you. The real Jake would be laughing at that.'

'What makes you think I am not laughing?'

'Are you, Jake?' Sabrina paused for a brief second to wipe a tear away and said, 'I tried to be there for you, to be there by your side, but you don't want me. Fine, go to hell then. Kill Mr X if it makes a difference, but you listen to me, if you think you'll find peace, you're far from the truth. The same fear will hunt you, again and again, until you can no longer breathe.'

'I'm not sure I follow you.'

'Jake, you have to let it go.'

'Let go of what?'

'That feeling you carry with you. That hate for the creator.'

'You don't know what you're talking about.'

'Jake, you used to have so much energy, but look at you now.'

'I'll mend my behaviour. You'll see me when I come to Australia, radiant and grinning.'

'Jake, there will always be a place in my heart for you. But I don't want to see you for a good year or two.'

'Why not?'

'Your self-destruction is having an influence on me and I won't let it happen again.'

'Are you hiding away from me?'

'Let's say that recent events fast tracked my decision to relocate. The job offer has been on the table for a while, just so that you know.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Well, it makes no difference. You go and think about it. Right now, I have work to do. Also, it's probably best for both of us that I keep in touch. Not you!'

'If it makes you feel better.'

'It does, Jake.'

Sabrina hesitated to hang up immediately, as if she was hoping Jake would say what she wanted to hear. Jake, noticing the heat of the moment, the last opportunity to hold on to a person dear to him, said nothing instead.

'Bye for now. Good luck,' and Sabrina left London the day after, in the same furtive way she had arrived.

XLI

The loss of Sabrina pushed Jake to work laboriously on his plan to put Mr X out of action.

'I'm going to corner this freak show,' Jake thought before calling Gabriel.

'Sorry that I've been absent, but I've been working day and night. I feel I've lost my sense of time.'

'Working sounds good to me. What are you working on, if you don't mind me

asking?’

‘It’s just a sketch at this stage.’

‘Listen, Jake, the *Vicissitudes of the Whore* received glowing reviews. Everyone is responding. Even the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art are making inquiries.’

‘Are they?’

‘Yes, but they’ve been extremely sensitive about exhibiting any work from you. I need to convince them first that you can deliver. Can you?’ Gabriel asked, hesitantly.

‘I’m not sure how long it’s going to take, but I’m onto something here.’

‘Lula tells me you’re working alone, is it true?’

‘Yes. I want to crack this one on my own.’

‘On your own? Are you out of our mind? You’re not supposed to use your hands. We have plenty of conferences, venues and so forth to attend.’

‘Not this time. I’m taking time off to get this right. I don’t want to be distracted attending venues. I need time to accomplish what I’m pursuing here.’

‘Why don’t you involve Lula in the process?’

‘He tried before and failed.’

Gabriel, after careful consideration, said, ‘I guess it’s better to wait and see what you come up with. You are a genius, after all,’ and upon hanging up the phone, Gabriel called various art critics, Steve Nash being one of them, for a press release.

‘Jake is in a period of incubation and working.’

‘Do you have any idea what he’s working on?’ Steve asked.

‘Whatever it is, he is extremely serious about it.’

‘Any clues on what he’s working on?’

‘Personally, I think Jake is trying to reinvent himself. It’s typical of him to go through these stages when one of his paranoid fears loses steam.’

‘When was his last breakdown?’

‘Two years ago, in Venice. He disappeared for two months. We started working on the *Vicissitudes of the Axe* when he reappeared,’ Gabriel said and Steve noted down every word and sentence.

‘Don’t you think the BBC’s documentary should address Jake’s paranoia in detail?’

Gabriel narrowed his eyes and said, ‘When are you submitting the final draft for approval?’

‘In a couple of weeks.’

'We will discuss it then. As it generally happens, Jake's paranoia will soon start to decrease. By the time you and the BBC try to recollect it, Jake will behave as if it's gone and forgotten.'

'I understand. We have no interest in portraying Jake Ford as a madman, anyway. We're here to create a British trademark. The BBC's documentary is aiming more at turning him into a national asset rather than being a liability.'

'Sounds great, I'm looking forward to watch it,' Gabriel said, before hanging up the phone.

The following day, Steve published an article in the Guardian about the art ambitions of Jake Ford. The article was entitled, '*Jake Ford, our favourite artist, working towards reinventing himself,*' and generated curiosity and expectation amongst fellow artists and the public.

XLII

'You have to show us something. We need to feed the press. Lula is bored. Mr X wants to be more involved. Please, Jake, this silence is almost unbearable,' Gabriel said to Jake over the telephone.

'Have you noticed the chilly mist out there?' Jake replied.

'Please, Jake, what are you doing? You need to get out of your flat and see us.'

'I can't. Leaving now would be the death of me.'

'But we need to see what you're working on.'

'When the time is right, I'll show it to you.'

'But why can't we get involved?' Gabriel asked, almost infuriated.

'To prevent the likes of Mr X getting wind of what I'm doing.'

'It's ok, Jake. I guess I can understand that. But you still need to give us a simple sketch of what you are planning to do. I promise not to tell Mr X.'

'Not at the moment. I have only loose ideas.'

'Jake, please, at this stage, even the most insignificant work you produce will generate furore in the press.'

'The press can wait. I'm craving for perfection.'

'Perfection can wait too.'

'I'm sorry but you need to learn to wait,' and Jake hung up the phone.

It took one week for Gabriel to have his phone calls answered, although it was only to hear the same initial statement, 'I'm not ready.'

On the third week, Gabriel made his way to Jake's apartment, wearing a fake moustache, contact lenses and a master plumber outfit. Gabriel was unrecognizable, but his voice pitch gave his identity away.

'Do you think a plumber will sound like a tart? What do you want?' Jake yelled, upon realizing the charade.

'I need to speak to you. Can I come inside?'

'I don't think so.'

Gabriel reflected upon his actions and said, 'Listen Jake, I've invested money, time and patience in this enterprise. You can't dump me like this. Mr X is talking about you being his biggest mistake. This will damage your name, your artist reputation and your future.'

'I don't give a shit about what Mr X thinks.'

'But I do,' Gabriel yelled. 'We're here to make money and your behaviour is not helping.'

'Why don't you find another artist to work with?'

'Jake, you have one week to come up with a follow up to the *Vicissitudes of the Whore*. If you want to act like a child, fine, but don't let me down. You're not alone in this business. We made you.'

'I'm not a commodity.'

'Your name is.'

'Are you threatening me? Do I need to remind you, you are my agent?'

'I'm your agent and your friend, but you're behaving as if I'm some kind of cancer in your life. How do you think that makes me feel?'

'What do you expect me to do? Have you put yourself in my position?'

'Many times, and I still can't understand your behaviour.'

Jake paused. He ran his hand across his head and said, 'Gabriel, right now, I need this time of solitude to work out how I want my career to evolve going forward. You need to trust me.'

'I'm trying, but it's hard.'

'It shouldn't be. We've worked together for so many years, why can't you let me have a few weeks on my own?'

Gabriel pretended to think before answering, 'Half the world is crying to hear from you and you do nothing about it. What should I do?'

'I understand your worries, but you have nothing to worry about. I'm only asking for time on my own.'

Gabriel looked Jake in the eyes and asked him, 'Will you promise me that this is just a stage and it will be over soon?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Fine, call me in two weeks, and you better have something to show me,' Gabriel shouted as he walked away from Jake's apartment towards the lift lobby.

XLIII

On a typical London greish day, Jake submitted his file about Mr X to Frederick Abberline, the Scotland Yard Chief Inspector.

The file included a list of Jake's art that Mr X was sure to possess, his devious past deeds and a cover letter substantiating the likelihood that Jake Ford would be his next victim.

Frederick Abberline replied promptly.

'I will personally lead the police investigation if something happens to you, Mr Ford.'

'Can't you act right now?'

'The police department will act when something happens that could lead to a criminal charge against Mr X.'

'Why can't you act right away?'

'Mr Ford, what has Mr X done so far against you?'

'Don't you think his intentions are quite clear?'

'Assuming your file is correct, Mr X may have a motive, but he hasn't killed you yet. Without a criminal act, we have nothing to act on.'

'Can't we work on the preservation of life instead? What's the point of putting Mr X in jail if I'm already dead?'

'So that justice can prevail Mr Ford.'

'Do you think I'll care about justice from the grave?'

'But you should, Mr Ford.'

'What for? If I have already found my peace.'

'You're approaching this problem from the wrong angle, Mr Ford. In the event you're eliminated, the police department will most certainly find the killer.'

'How good is that to me?'

'It certainly isn't good news for the killer.'

'Beg your pardon?'

'Why don't you tell Mr X that if he kills you, Scotland Yard will most certainly find him? I don't think Mr X is fully aware of how efficient we are these days. The technology available is so developed that we can almost read his mind.'

'Don't you think Mr X will know how to dodge the system?'

'It's very difficult, Mr Ford. I would like to see you dead to prove how efficient we can be. We're the best at this game and proud of what we do. You should let Mr X know about that.'

'I will. Most certainly, I will.'

'Let him know that he may get you killed, but we'll get him convicted, even if his alibi is airtight. Is there anything else we can help you with, Mr Ford?'

'As a matter of fact, there is.'

'And what could that be Mr Ford?'

'Assuming that Mr X is jailed for plotting against my life would you think that he would be able to bribe a judge?'

'Most certainly, you cannot.'

'Not me. My only concern is that Mr X could get away with bribery.'

'I repeat, most certainly he could not. In which country do you think you live? In some Mickey Mouse Monarchy that doesn't care for its citizens?'

'I'm sorry if I have offended you.'

'Offend me? You have offended yourself, Mr Ford. As a citizen you should be proud of the foundations of your country.'

'What makes you think that I am not?'

'In that case, stop pestering the police department, and act like a proud citizen. Trust in what we can do. We always find the killer, Mr Ford. In the end justice will prevail. You let Mr X know that.'

'I will,' and without much more to add, Jake hung up the phone, '*How did they know I can't stand the monarchy?*' he thought to himself.

XLIV

Jake called Gabriel to discuss work in progress. One sketch had been produced for the occasion.

‘Hold on a second. I’ll take a photo and email it to you.’

On the other side of the line, Gabriel was excited. Several seconds later, after the email arrived, Gabriel opened the attachment promptly.

Jake’s sketch was a blank sheet of paper.

‘What’s this?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘There’s nothing here. Can you resend?’

‘Don’t be alarmed. What you have in front of you is just a sketch, an idea, a thought.’

‘There’s nothing here, Jake.’

‘You need to see beyond it.’

‘Jake, are you pulling my leg?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘In that case, I suggest we get Lula involved in this piece as soon as possible?’

‘I don’t need to. I’m moving away from filming decapitations. I’m aiming at staging one instead.’

‘Sounds great, but why can’t we get Lula involved? I admit, I can’t see beyond this sheet of paper, but Lula surely can.’

‘I’m not ready yet but I’m making progress.’

‘Progress? The fucking white dot on white canvas was exhibited ages ago and looked better than this shit. Are you going backwards?’

‘Quite the opposite, I’m pushing my artistic boundaries.’

‘You’re pushing fuck all at the moment.’

‘Gabriel, you need to trust me.’

‘I’m trying, but we can’t waste more time on this stupidity.’

‘We have to. I’m onto something.’

‘Time is money in this industry. We need to feed the market. Show must go on. Your fucking blank sheet of paper is not helping at all!’ Gabriel shouted, extremely irritated.

‘You need to do me a favour.’

Gabriel calmed down, 'What do you need?'

'Can you call Helen Hamilton and ask her who they've used to fabricate their neon lights.'

'What for?'

'Is it so hard to call her without asking too many questions?'

'They probably did it themselves.'

'I don't think so. Call Helen. I need to commission a few lights.'

'Is this work related?'

'Yes.'

'Why don't you use Lula then?'

'Could you just please call them, or give me the number? Is that too much to ask?'

'Okay, I'll do it. But with one condition.'

'What?'

'You stop producing this rubbish. Your work right now is not worth a fig.'

'I need time.'

'How much more? Another week?'

'Two weeks.'

'Two weeks? You must be joking. What for?'

'I have other business to attend to.'

'What else could you possibly be doing? Are you planning to move down under?'

'No.'

'What's the two weeks for?'

'Mind your own business. Call me in exactly two weeks and I'll be ready.'

'Jake, you'd better have something then. Mr X is driving me crazy.'

'Tell Mr X to stick a ferocious dildo up his ass.'

'You tell him that, dickhead. So that he knows that you like to bite the hand that feeds you.'

'He doesn't feed me! Tell him to have a word with Frederick Abberline for a start.'

'Who the heck is Frederick Abberline?'

'You can have a word with him too.'

'Who is he?'

'He's a police inspector. I've reported Mr X to the police.'

'Reported who? A loudspeaker?'

'Indeed I have.'

‘What did they tell you? That they’re going to bring a loudspeaker to justice?’ Gabriel said, smiling at his own words. Jake replied with a frail sentence.

‘In the end, justice will prevail.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ Gabriel asked.

‘It means that I had a mind blowing discussion with Mr Abberline yesterday. These days it’s impossible to go missing without the police knowing. We’re no longer living in the dark ages.’

Gabriel, rather confused, asked, ‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘So you can pass it on to Mr X.’

‘Consider it done, Jake, if that’s what you want. Whatever, are you serious about this?’ Gabriel asked suddenly.

‘Promise me you’ll pass the message on to Mr X.’

‘What do you think Mr X will make of the message?’

‘Just promise you’ll pass it on.’

‘Consider it passed on. Do you feel better now? Knowing that Mr X can’t have your head on a plate?’

‘Slightly better, I confess.’

‘Wonderful news, when can we get Lula involved?’

‘I told you already, he’s not fit for what I’m trying to do.’

‘Jake, please, Jake, look at my position. You’re not dealing with the press, investors, curators, as I am. These people are extremely demanding.’

‘I’m working, for fuck’s sake.’

‘Are you? Right now you’re working without direction and support. How good is that?’

‘Why don’t you give me a break? Why don’t you trust me instead?’

‘A blank sheet of paper literally tells me you’re running out of ideas.’

‘I’m definitely not. I’m a genius. An artist can always reinvent himself. Two more weeks and if nothing comes up, I let you think of a plan of action.’

‘We’re finally starting to make sense. I text you in a minute. Get back to work and don’t travel anywhere without my consent. I am tired of not knowing your whereabouts.’

Minutes later, Gabriel text Jake the contact details of the company Helen Hamilton had used to fabricate their neon lights.

Lisbon

Two days after promising Gabriel he would not fly to Fiji, Jake boarded a plane to Lisbon.

Jake had visited the capital of Portugal for the first time, travelling with a friend, in the summer of 97, after returning from Seoul. Jake's first impressions were neither good nor bad.

'Everyone is shy to talk in this city,' Jake told his friend.

Even at night, when both Jake and his friend were trying to engage with the locals, they would often end up playing table football on their own.

However, one night, when they were returning to their hostel, while one of them stopped to lace his shoes, they were guided towards a bar by the voice of Michael Jackson singing *Billy Jean*.

The bar would only serve Jack Daniels, nothing else.

'I hate whiskey,' Jake said to the bartender.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' the bartender replied.

Jake browsed the menu one more time and said, 'Give me an Orange Jack then. I'm sure I can survive that,' and hours later, both Jake and his friend were under the influence. In the meantime, they had engaged with the DJ, played table football, interacted with two lesbians and danced with a fit, Lithuanian waitress.

The party didn't end that night and continued into the day, with friends of lesbians and friends of friends and other friends, until Jake could no longer hold his breath, or keep drinking, and fell into the bed of a stranger. He slept for 14 hours straight.

Jake returned to London three days later, but he would return to Lisbon every now and again from then on. He noticed the city changing throughout the years, however, the historical centre kept its filthy smell, the street begging, and the neglected state of most of its buildings. But, like many tourists, Jake liked it that way.

Jake checked in at the Hotel do Chiado. Minutes later, he headed to the hotel's bar.

'I never really understood why this hotel bar is not heavily frequented by tourists,' Jake told the bartender, a young lady with olive skin and long dark hair. She smiled.

Jake sat out on the roof terrace. He'd ordered a cappuccino. He was the only one in there, like he had been so many times in the past, in that exact spot, trying to make sense of his life, without reaching any conclusions.

'Life just goes on,' Jake thought to himself. *'There's no real sense to it, it just carries on.'*

The views of the old city were majestic from the where he was sitting.

'It's no doubt a wonder that tourists haven't found this place yet,' Jake told the bartender when she came onto the terrace with his cappuccino.

Jake sipped his cappuccino and contemplated the old castle across from him. It was the beginning of November.

'That bloody castle,' Jake thought to himself. *'So deceiving.'*

Jake had another look around.

One hour later the bartender came onto the terrace and asked, *'Another coffee, sir?'*

'Not for the time being, thank you,' Jake replied.

Seagulls hovered over Comércio Square.

'Who the fuck is Mr X?' Jake uttered to himself. *'It can only be one person, but why is he doing this to me? Money corrupts everyone, I guess,'* Jake thought.

Another sip of coffee.

'To kill or not to kill, that is the question,' Jake murmured to himself with a smile.

Jake could almost see the roof of St Domingo's Church from his spot. The church had a pivotal piece of architecture to understand the work of Jake Ford, although he had never mentioned it to anyone, not even Sabrina.

Jake visited the church for the first time after waking up from a fourteen hour sleep. Suffering from a hangover, he entered the church looking for a place to sit down. What he saw would influence him as an artist for year to come. An influence so deeply encrusted into his being that he felt it was better to protect it and never tell anyone about it.

Jake would sometimes fly from London, often returning on the same day, to spend a few moments inside the church.

'I wish I could produce work of equal scale,' Jake mumbled to himself.

After one more sip of coffee followed by another random look at the old town, Jake's mobile started vibrating. It was Gabriel.

Jake, feeling at ease, decided to answer.

'What is it?'

'Where are you?'

'What do you mean?'

'You're not in London.'

'How do you know that?'

'The Sun has just published a scoop on you. Do you want me to read the article?'

'Please do.'

'Jake Ford, boarding a plane to Lisbon in pyjamas. This may be next year's fashion trend, but should someone that sells art for millions walk around like this?'

'I was wearing pyjamas at the check-in, I admit, but I did put on a pair of trousers and a shirt after an irritating, freckle-faced young child tossed a quid at me.'

'Jake, very funny, to be quite honest, I don't mind the press, but shouldn't you be in London working, as you promised me?'

'But I am working.'

'On what?'

'I'm here pursuing other business.'

'What other business?'

Jake thought for a minute and said. 'I'm here chasing a lead.'

'A lead for what?'

'Sansovino.'

Gabriel gasped, feeling like he had been caught unarmed.

'I thought that subject was dead.'

'Don't be ridiculous. I didn't find him in Venice, but I'm not giving up the task.'

'Jake, has it ever occurred to you he died more than four hundred years ago?'

'How do you know that? Were you there when he died?'

'No, I don't think I was.'

'In that case, don't be so certain.'

'What's the lead then?'

'Andreia Sansovino visited Portugal twice in his life.'

'Shouldn't we be talking about Jacopo Sansovino?'

'I think Jacopo Sansovino may have moved to Lisbon after the death of his master.'

'He moved to Venice after the sack of Rome.'

'I think he moved to Lisbon.'

'Do you think he's going to salute you?'

'That's what I'm trying to find out.'

'How, if you don't mind me asking?'

'I'm at the Hotel do Chiado, waiting for him. It can certainly happen that he drops by for a coffee.'

Gabriel didn't say a word.

'When are you coming back?'

'I'm not sure, maybe tomorrow or the day after.'

'Do you promise not to fly down under?'

'Don't worry. It's not going to happen. Sabrina and I are going through a long separation.'

'I'm pleased to hear that. She's never been any good for you. Good luck chasing Sansovino and let me know when you're back in London.'

'I will,' and Jake hung up the phone.

Jake spent the rest of the day eating, drinking and reading at the Hotel do Chiado. He didn't try to catch up with old friends. He didn't bother to visit the landmarks of Lisbon.

He repeated the same programme the following day. Sansovino was absent throughout his stay.

XLVI

Upon his return from Lisbon, Jake engaged a local builder to beef up the main entrance of his apartment.

'Sir, why do you want to beef up your door?'

'I want to feel safer in my apartment.'

'Sir, what you need are brand new doors.'

And after the fitting of premium solid doors, Jake asked the builder to make his entrance bomb proof.

'What do you mean by bomb proof, Sir?'

'Bomb proof, what else? You know what I mean. If someone throws a grenade at the main door, the explosion will not destroy it.'

'Sir, do you mind me asking, but are you planning to shelter terrorists?'

‘No, I’m only looking after my safety. Everyone is so paranoid these days.’

‘Sir, I can brick up another wall and put a metal sheet, twenty millimetres thick, inside the cavity.’

‘As long as it makes it bomb proof.’

‘Sir, not even a bazooka will get through five kilograms of TNT.’

When the builder was almost finished, Jake asked him to demolish all the walls in his apartment. ‘You can also remove the load bearing walls,’ he added.

‘But, sir, those walls are untouchable.’

‘I’m sure something can be done about it. I want to be able to enter my apartment and see the far end, regardless of where I am.’

‘What about the bathroom?’

‘Get rid of everything. I’m the only person living here.’

‘But, sir, this is going to be expensive.’

‘How much?’

‘I’m not sure at this stage, but when I think about the logistics, the price of the steel these days, there is quite a lot of dosh in this job.’

‘Go ahead. Money is not an issue. Demolishing walls can’t be that expensive anyway,’ and after a second thought Jake added, ‘and paint whatever is left in black. How long is that going to take?’

The builder had a look around and said, ‘Why do you want to do it?’

‘Mind your own business. How long is it going to take?’

The builder, after using his fingers to analysis the situation and some thinking, said, ‘Six weeks.’

‘You have two weeks. You can work night and day. I’ll be staying in the hotel next door. If you finish in time, I’ll give you a bonus. If you fail, I’ll sue you.’

‘On what grounds?’

‘Does it matter? I can assure you my lawyer will take you to the cleaners.’

‘And if I decline to do it?’

‘I’ll sue you anyway.’

‘On what grounds?’

Rather than answering, Jake browsed his desk looking for a business card. He flicked the first one he found to the builder.

‘Call this lawyer tomorrow morning. He’ll describe the situation to you.’

Reluctantly, the builder grabbed the business card and read aloud, ‘*Steve Nash, Curator*, what is a curator?’ the builder asked.

‘Call him. Steve will tell you.’

The builder spent a couple of seconds in silence and said afterwards, ‘Okay,

we'll do it.

It's going to look like a shit hole when we're done with it.'

'That's the spirit, mate,' Jake said. 'Are you starting today?'

The builder nodded.

'In that case, I'm out of here. The Facilities Manager will attempt to stop you. When he does, flick him my lawyer's card and tell him I'm going to take him to the cleaners,' Jake said before leaving.

Nine days later, the builder called Jake to tell him that the interior of his apartment had been totally demolished and the remaining walls painted in black.

'How does it look like?'

'Like a shit hole.'

'Sounds great. I'll see you soon. I'm just around the corner.'

Five minutes later, Jake inspected his apartment. 'Great,' he muttered. The builder tried to warn him that the management of the block was going to sue him on behalf of the residents, but Jake didn't take any notice. Instead, he requested a panic room to be installed in his apartment.

'Is that something you can do?'

'I'm sorry, sir, but that's specialised work.'

'Do you know who can do it?'

'No, sir.'

Jake settled his account with the builder and browsed the internet to find a firm specialising in panic rooms.

'We normally don't install these rooms in apartments.'

'Can't you make an exception? I'm a famous artist.'

'Sir, most of our clients are famous people. This product is more suitable for houses still under construction.'

'Can you send over a catalogue?'

'Why?'

'I'm sure something will fit my apartment. It doesn't need to be a room. I don't mind if it looks like a cubicle in the middle of the living room.'

'We have a panic room about the size of a London toilet.'

'When can you deliver?'

'I need to check first if it's available. We don't hold stock.'

'What do you mean, you don't hold stock? Don't you manufacture these things?'

‘We sell them. Our suppliers look after the manufacturing. I’ll check with the warehouse and let you know in the next couple of hours.’

‘Please do,’ and hours later, Jake and the salesman agreed on a date to install the panic box in the middle of Jake’s apartment.

XLVII

The installation of a panic room into Jake’s apartment was a complex task achieved in a matter of a day. The traffic had to be stopped, while a mobile crane on the pavement lifted a panic room three stories high, so that two riggers could pull it into the main balcony and from there, move it to the middle of the apartment for installation.

The complex operation coincided with the unexpected visit that Lula and Gabriel had decided to make to Jake.

‘How weird is that? What is he doing at his place?’ Lula commented as he watched the operation from the main road.

‘Doesn’t matter as long as he’s working again,’ Gabriel replied to Lula, ‘I bet he needs your assistance.’

Minutes later, Lula and Gabriel were outside Jake’s apartment. Gabriel buzzed and several minutes later there was still no answer.

‘Open the door Jake. We know you’re inside. The porters told us,’ Gabriel tried to yell through the main door.

‘Go away, I’m not ready,’ Jake said from the other side of the door.

‘We’re here to help.’

‘I don’t need your help,’ Jake answered, his voice closer to the main door.

‘What about that box you craned into your apartment. What was that all about?’

‘I’m turning my apartment into an installation room.’

‘You’re doing what?’ Gabriel sputtered and made faces. ‘You can’t be serious!’

‘You heard me right. I’m making the biggest private installation in the history of art.’

‘But how are we going to bring visitors in here? How are we going to sell it?’

Are you out of your mind?’

‘You’ll figure something out.’

‘Jake, I do not like the sound of this. Let us come inside. We need to discuss this before you go ahead. How are we supposed to sell your flat to Mr X?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Please, Jake, stop this madness.’

For a brief period the buzzer went dead. Gabriel panicked, ‘Why is he doing this to me?’ he commented to Lula.

‘Gabriel, I we can relocate the installation once I am done with it,’ Jake said suddenly.

‘Sounds great, but when can we come inside?’

‘When the time is right, you and Lula are invited, but not right now.’

‘Are you sure about this?’

‘Yes, I am.’

Gabriel paused, reflected upon his words and said, ‘Okay, Jake, I trust you. You’re a genius after all. We are having lunch around the corner if you care to join us.’

‘Thanks, but not today.’

‘Call us if you change your mind.’

Gabriel and Lula walked down Bethnal Green Road towards Shoreditch until they turned onto Brick Lane. Gabriel greeted Lito Cox as they bumped into each other. While Gabriel had a quick chat with him, Lula went into the Bagel shop to buy a bagel with smoked salmon and cream cheese.

Minutes later, they walked past the old Truman brewery and turned right towards the Old Spitalfields Market.

‘It’s amazing how much this area has changed,’ Gabriel commented to Lula. Minutes later, Gabriel and Lula were seated in a venue decorated with tables and chairs that looked like they had been artificially aged, together with a good sample of the artistic community living around Brick Lane.

‘Do you think Jake will join us?’ Gabriel asked Lula.

‘What do you think?’

‘Probably not, how are you keeping busy in his absence?’

‘We aren’t. There’s absolutely nothing we can do. Until we hear from Jake, any attempt to look busy is in vain.’

‘I know. This situation is quite unproductive, to say the least. Sometimes I wish Jake could time his tantrums outside his artistic peaks, but maybe they go hand in hand. Who knows?’

'If you think so,' Lula said in a furtive way.

'I know he can be slightly difficult at times, but there's fun in him too, don't you agree?'

Lula didn't answer immediately. He sliced a loaf of bread before saying, 'I can't stand him anymore.'

'Why is that?'

'I've had enough of him and his bullshit. I'm moving to Sweden.'

'Sweden? Are you serious? Jake did mention something about Sweden, but I thought he was talking rubbish.'

'I'm definitely moving up there.'

Gabriel had a sip of wine before asking, 'Why Sweden?'

'I love it. The people are so nice and everything works so well.'

Gabriel cleaned his lips with a napkin before adding, 'Sweden always looks good on paper.'

'What are you trying to tell me?'

'You'll get the picture when you live there. What do you intend to do, anyway?'

'I'm getting married and having children.'

'Are you going to live off thin air?'

'On top of the child benefits, I'm applying to teach fine arts and English.'

'English? Are you serious? You're from Italy!'

'They seem to like my accent and they are also desperate for teachers. I've applied for a teaching position at the secondary school of Rönningen. I'm starting next semester.'

'You're foolish.'

'Wise, you mean.'

'Wise? Do you think that swapping your London lifestyle for Stockholm's suburbia with children and wife is a wise thing to do?'

'I'm actually looking forward to it.' Gabriel forked his steak.

'Why don't you ask your partner to move to London instead?'

'I'm in love with Sweden.'

Gabriel sighed and said, 'It won't last long. You will soon get the picture.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'I lived two years in Stockholm.'

'Did you? I had no idea.'

'The experience wasn't that great. I find the country extremely boring and old fashioned.'

‘Old fashioned? Sweden is one of the most sophisticated countries there is,’ Lula argued with a mouth full of meat.

‘I’m worried Jake will start malfunctioning after you leave. It’s going to be hard to replace you.’

‘After the bribery, our bond lost its strength.’

‘It’s still stronger than many. Why do you think he still works with you?’

‘Does he? I don’t feel that busy right now.’

‘This is just a stage. It will go away. We’ll get something done before another dysfunctional episode starts to emerge, you know the drill.’

‘Yes, I know the drill! It feels like I had a term in jail. Sweden will let me enjoy life to the fullest.’

‘Come on, it isn’t that bad.’ Gabriel said with a grin on his face.

‘It’s a freak show and to be quite honest, it’s scary sometimes.’

‘I disagree with you. I like Jake the way he is. He brings fire to my life. Things are quite unpredictable around him, I love it.’

‘Good for you.’

Gabriel appreciated the modern architecture of the Old Spitalfields Market and said, ‘This place used to be a lot different. Whores used to walk the streets not far from here,’ he paused, had a sip of wine and added, ‘I can’t stop you from moving to Sweden, but I can bribe you to stay.’

‘It won’t work anymore.’

‘What if I increase your salary?’

‘It won’t work. I’m no longer desperate for money after what happened. You should know that. A few more weeks and I’m off to Sweden.’

‘Have you handed in your resignation letter?’

‘Not yet, I wanted to have a word with you first.’

Gabriel checked his watch and said, ‘I have to leave now. I’ve been invited to participate in a conference about contemporary art. We’ll touch base some other time. Hold on to that letter for the time being. I’ll make you an offer you can’t refuse.’

‘You know that money is not the issue.’

‘We shall see. You haven’t heard my proposal yet. Money talks.’

‘Money talks shit,’ Lula replied.

Gabriel left the restaurant in a rush, heading towards the University of the City of London.

XLVIII

The University of the City of London was running a series of lectures about the role of third parties in the art world. Gabriel had been invited to participate. Today's debate was about forging working relationships between the agent and the artist.

The lecture room was busy.

Gabriel was introduced to the audience as a successful agent, well regarded for his productive relationship with Jake Ford.

'A disengaged artist will sell little in the current art market,' Gabriel argued when the debate was overheating, 'while at the same time, a dysfunctional person, like most genius, will hardly survive the complexities of modern society. The role of the agent has never been so pivotal.'

'Don't you think the agent can interfere too much in the creative process, to an extent that it can damage the artistic outcome?' One art student asked.

'I find it unlikely. The role of an agent is to help artists find ways to channel their creativity.'

'Don't you think an artist can look after himself?' Another student asked.

'How can they? With so many venues to attend, investors to please, promotion work and so forth, how do you expect them to cope? We're asking the modern artist to operate as if he or she is running a business. We demand creativity from our artistic community, not a business plan.'

'But how can these two individuals, being so different, develop a working relationship?'

'Relationships are not easy and working with dysfunctional artists is probably the hardest. It's about finding common ground together while spending time with each other.'

'What happens if they don't get along?'

'Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of cases of artists not working well with their agents. But beside a great artist is often a great agent.'

'How can an agent spot talent?'

'I believe real talent, dysfunctional talent, can sometimes appear in the most unexpected environments.'

'What's the difference between a good artist and a genius?'

‘Art agents have different ways to identify talent. I go with my gut feeling and a genuine need to allow art to engage with me. It can be in the form of a sound, a sculpture, sometimes even a sketch, but if something seems to breathe in there, the artist has managed to create something that appeals to me. In my opinion, to be able to create a piece of art that breathes life requires a true stroke of genius.’

‘Just because it speaks to us doesn’t mean it will endure the passage of time,’ one art student replied.

‘Whether the work of an artist will endure the passage of time is not for us to decide. The mission of an artist is not to measure time. Time destroys everything, even the most stubborn of human creations.’

‘Art is timeless,’ one student comment.

‘The human need to produce art might be, but we cannot guarantee that an art piece will be everlasting,’ Gabriel had a gentle sip of water before saying, ‘I agree that this is a difficult concept to understand,’ and another sip of water followed.

‘How can an art agent spot dysfunctional talent in modern society?’

‘Like in any business, if things were easy, we would be surrounded by millionaires and quite obviously we’re not. The road to success is only for the patient, tenacious and ambitious person.’

‘Would you share your personal experiences with us?’ another student asked.

‘What sort of personal experiences?’

‘About being the agent of Jake Ford, for example.’

‘As I said before, and in the case of Jake more than ever, a good art agent is pivotal in acting like a buffer between his art and society.’

‘Did you know from the beginning that Jake Ford was going to succeed as an artist?’

‘His work resonates with people, what do you expect happens to artists like that? However, if you ask me if I believed he would make it this far, I admit, I never thought he would.’

‘Why not?’

‘Jake’s process of creation comes through a long period of destruction. Initially, I thought he wasn’t going to last long, but I’ve thought wrongly.’

‘What made you stick to him then?’

‘As I said, his initial work appealed to me.’

One hour later, Gabriel left the university and headed home.

At home, Gabriel played Mahler and prepared a mug of coffee. He called Jake, unsuccessfully.

XLIX

The following day, Gabriel assembled Steve and Lula at his office and the management of the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art on a conference call.

'We need to make sure we don't lose him this time,' Gabriel murmured to Lula. When the time was right Gabriel placed the call.

Jake didn't answer. Three more attempts were necessary before Jake would dare to pick up his phone. 'How are you, Jake?'

'Good, why are you calling?'

'What have you got for us?'

'Two sketches.'

'What do you mean by two sketches? You promised a fully developed bulk of work last time we talked.'

'I'm not quite there yet, but I'm not far off.'

'Can you email it to us?'

'Hold on a second.'

Strange noises were heard, as if Jake was walking over paper.

'You should have it by now.'

'Hold on, let me refresh the browser,' and as the email came through, excitement grew in the room; and across the continent. 'Let me open the files. Let me see it.'

Both sketches showed the decapitation of a human figure.

Gabriel, attempting to identify the character asked, 'Is it a pimp?'

'Yes,' Jake uttered.

'A pimp? Interesting,' the people in Japan commented.

'Who's talking?' Jake asked.

'Jake, I've organised a mini conference call so that we could discuss your work together. Lula is also here. I trust you don't mind.'

'I do mind, but it's fine.'

While the sketches were being forwarded to various email accounts, everyone wondered the same, 'Why a pimp?'

'This is only a work in progress,' Jake added.

'So we have noticed. When can we see something more elaborate?'

'Two weeks.'

'Two more weeks, are you out of your mind?'

'I'm sure what I'm about to produce is well worth waiting for.'

'What about Lula, can he work on this with you?'

'No, he has failed before.'

Lula, hearing his name being mentioned, argued in his defence, 'I told you, Jake, it cannot be done.'

'Can you give it another try?' Gabriel pleaded to Lula.

'You can't kill people in this business. I'm sorry. It cannot be done.'

'Why not?' Gabriel wondered.

'The realism Jake is demanding is completely impossible. On camera, anything is possible, but not in the way Jake was proposing.'

Gabriel, rather upset about the way the conference call was going, said, 'Listen Jake, I'll let you have two more weeks and see what you're able to produce. We're expecting the work of a genius, nothing less.'

'What I'm about to do will strike the art world like a thunderbolt.'

'That's the spirit,' Gabriel replied, but Jake had already hung up the phone.

Minutes later, Jake text Gabriel, '*Vicissitudes of the Pimp.*'

Gabriel text back, '*If this is the title of the next exhibition, it sounds great to me.*'

Jake didn't reply.

L

After carrying out extensive construction work inside his apartment and installing a panic room in his living room, Jake decided to install several private cameras, also known as CCTV, above his front door and balcony. The Facilities Manager tried to stop him as soon he noticed the electricians working on Jake's apartment.

'This type of work cannot be carried out without permission, sir.'

'Why not?'

'Sir, if everyone in this building decided to do what they wanted without consent we would end up in a big mess.'

'It is my right to do so as a famous living artist.'

'Mr Schwartz your neighbour is no lesser famous than you and he seems to be quite happy with a security of this building.'

'Tell Mr Schwartz to send his portfolio to Mr X and we shall see what happens next.'

'But, sir, this building already has CCTV installed.'

'Can you grant me access to the system?'

'No.'

'In that case, either you accept my application or I'm going to sue you for being a liability to my existence.'

'Sir, we're already suing you,' the Facilities Manager said, his face looking serious.

'Good luck then,' Jake yelled before slamming his door.

Two days later, Jake had six screens installed in his kitchen, which he used to stalk his neighbours.

Jake made notes of who entered and left the building. He devoted special attention to anyone showing an awkward chest formation. He forwarded his report to Frederick Abbertine at the end of each day.

Gabriel flew to Tokyo to negotiate the details of the *Vicissitudes of the Pimp*.

'We like it,' Seng Ming, the main curator, told Gabriel. 'However, we hear rumours that you're losing control of your artist.'

'I'm not. There's nothing unusual about his behaviour. He's working.'

'We need to be confident we can open on the day planned for this project.'

'You have my word on it that Jake will be ready.'

'Gabriel, your word enough, if Jake doesn't get his act together we can't risk it.'

'Trust me, Jake is sound and working. You can start making all the necessary arrangements to bring him here.'

'You need to show us progress first. We need to see something first. We need to see the *Vicissitudes of the Pimp* first before committing to anything.'

'What do you need to see?'

‘An elaborated idea will get the ball rolling at this stage.’

‘Consider it done,’ Gabriel said. Handshakes followed before he was escorted to the exit. Minutes later, Gabriel was walking down the main road of the Ginza district towards Harumi Dori. At the road junction, he turned left and entered the Mitsukoshi department store.

Gabriel used the escalators to reach the rooftop and experienced a glimpse of the monumental architectural overdose that is Tokyo. He let himself indulge in the healthy and sophisticated dishes of dim sum at the Dim Joy before heading to the international airport.

Two days after returning to London, Gabriel had lunch at the Ivy with Steve.

‘I won’t allow having Lula talk about Jake’s obsession with Sansovino on the documentary. I’m sorry but I won’t. It gives the impression that Jake is out of this world.’

‘Not at all, I picture this in a totally different way. It makes me think that there is more to Jake than we have been able to see.’

And on the exact moment Gabriel was about to answer, his mobile phone beeped. A text message had just come through.

Messages from Jake had a special beep. Gabriel grabbed his mobile frantically and read, ‘*Art ready to ship. If you are so dying to see it drop by my place tomorrow evening for a view.*’

Gabriel’s first reaction was to show the message to Steve, who rejoiced upon reading the text.

‘This is great news,’ he said, ‘we finally have a breakthrough.’

Lula rang Gabriel minutes later to respond to his text message.

‘I got it too,’ Gabriel confirmed, ‘Who else do you think is invited?’

‘I reckon it’s just the two of us.’

‘We shall know more about it towards the end of the day. I will call you later. I have a few things to organize before going to see Jake.’

The Demon

It was a crisp winter day when Lula and Gabriel met. People were walking in and out of Liverpool Street Station.

Leaves were swinging, some falling tenderly to a delicate breeze blowing from the east.

'I have a feeling it's going to be just us two.'

Gabriel and Lula arrived at Jake's apartment at dusk.

They were welcomed by an unshaven Jake with oily hair and the strong smell of sweat.

'Jake, you look tired. What happened to you?'

'A mix of indolence and insomnia, but please come inside,' Jake replied.

Gabriel and Lula immediately noticed the unwashed crockery on the kitchen benchtop, a toilet without walls and a single bed directly opposite.

'What have you been doing here? What happened to the partitions?' Gabriel was compelled to ask.

'I've turned my apartment into show room for my installations.'

'It sure looks like one,' Lula commented.

'What about those carved Xs on the walls? What is that about?'

'The Xs are not part of the installation, just leftovers from a previous life.'

'What's that?' Gabriel asked, pointing at a metal box the size of a London toilet, in the middle of the apartment.

'That is the reason why you're here.'

'Great, can I see it?' and without waiting for an answer, Gabriel walked towards it.

'Wait, please be seated first,' Jake said.

Lula and Gabriel sat down on a leather couch. 'Do you want something to drink?'

'Water, please,' Gabriel replied.

Jake opened his fridge and poured water into a glass.

'Here. What about you, Kabugi?'

'I'm fine.'

'Hold on a second then,' and Jake walked towards his bed and suddenly disappeared underneath it.

'What are you looking for?' Gabriel asked.

'I need to fetch my axe,' Jake shouted.

'This is starting to sound interesting,' Gabriel murmured to Lula.

'I'm sure it will be,' Lula answered and yawned.

Gabriel faced Lula and said, 'You and I need to have a conversation.'

'About what?'

'About your resignation.'

'There's nothing to discuss.'

'I'm of a different opinion. I'll take care of your salary going forward.'

'It's not about the money. I'm not tailored for this kind of lifestyle anymore.'

'Why are you here then?'

'I'm curious. We may be about to experience a turning event in the history of art and I wanted to be present, nothing else.'

'We should discuss your leaving later. Come to my office tomorrow morning,' Gabriel said.

Seconds later, Jake appeared in front of them wearing a bespoke black suit and holding an axe.

Gabriel chuckled and asked, 'When did you get changed?'

'While you two were talking.'

'You look completely different.'

'But you smell the same,' Lula commented.

Jake didn't laugh. He put on a serious face and started walking slowly around the couch. After walking one full circle he stopped and asked, 'Who thinks we should die for the sake of art?'

'Definitely not me,' Lula was quick to answer.

'Why not?'

'I don't give a shit about art anymore.'

'Don't you think art should transcend us?'

'I couldn't care less, but why do you ask? You should know the answer better than anyone else,' Lula commented.

'My installation, my latest creation, is about dying for the sake of art.'

'Please, Jake, not again, it's totally impossible.'

'It's not, I've accomplished it,' Jake argued.

'How?'

'You shall see in a second.'

Jake walked around the couch one more time. When another full circle was completed, his axe swung a half-arc in the air before striking the timber flooring. He regressed into silence and melancholy afterwards, but as the silence stretched on, both Gabriel and Lula smiled.

'Can you tell us what this is all about?'

'It's merely a teaser,' Jake replied.

'When does it start, then? The show.'

'It starts right now,' and Jake started walking towards the entrance door.

'Where are you going?'

'Relax, I'm turning off the lights. I can't kill you both with this amount of clarity. It will be pitch-black pretty soon,' and as Jake finished his sentence, darkness filled the apartment.

'Jake, where are you? We can't see a dick in here.'

'Don't worry about it. Look at this first,' and as Jake turned on another switch, a neon light started blinking above his bed.

WHAT IF, IF NOT, it read.

'What is this? Is this why you wanted me to call Helen Hamilton? So that you could fabricate that piece of shit?' Gabriel asked furiously.

'What makes you think this is a piece of shit?'

'Please, Jake, please, Dan Flavin started working with florescent lights in the 50s. In the fucking 50s!'

'I'm fully aware of that, but are we done yet?'

'What do you mean? Isn't this what we came here to see?'

'Of course not, this is just the introduction.'

'Blind me. For a moment, I thought this was it. The last weeks haven't been easy you know. But to be quite honest I'm not sure how we are going to ship your work to the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art, this installation doesn't fit in any exhibition room I can think of.'

'I'm sure you will find a way.'

'So, what's next?'

Jake didn't answer and Lula, somewhat intrigued by the neon light, asked Jake, 'What if, if not, what is that supposed to mean?'

'It can only be decoded if you decide to die for the sake of art.'

'You can't be serious.'

Gabriel, without trying to hide his anxiety, cut across them and said, 'What's going on? It is not important, not at all, if that sentence has meaning or not. My concern is that we're going backwards. Investors crave new ideas, new forms of representation and to be quite honest,' and Gabriel turned his head around to face Jake, 'what you have produced so far is a lot of rubbish. It may lure the press, but they will soon find you lame.'

'Gabriel, do you have something else to say?'

'Go on. Dazzle us!'

‘In one minute. I need to polish my axe first,’ Jake said and fetched a napkin from his suit that he ran back and forth across the axe’s blade.

‘Enough of this bullshit, let’s carry on,’ Gabriel shouted. ‘Where is the rest of the installation? A meaningless sentence won’t cut it, Jake. What’s next?’

Jake laid his axe in front of him. With the head of the axe resting on the floor, the top of the grip pressed against his chest.

‘Who wants to put his head on the floor?’ Jake asked suddenly.

‘What for?’

‘So that you can die for the sake of art.’

‘What do you intend to do?’

‘Chop your heads off, what else?’

‘And why should I let you axe me?’

‘Why not?’

‘Let’s just say,’ and Gabriel started, with a serious voice, ‘that I wouldn’t mind to lay my head on the floor for the sake of art, but that’s obviously assuming you were producing ground-breaking art, but are you? Are you Jake?’ Gabriel asked, rather irritated.

‘I think I am.’

‘You must be kidding me.’

‘Don’t you fancy being able to pick the day and the time to die?’

‘What for? What difference does it make?’

‘I difference may look subtle, but rest assure it runs deep. If you die naturally, you’re letting the creator rule over you. However, if you plan your death instead, you’re putting an important message across. You are letting the creator know, that his creation is a great piece of shit and you’d rather cease to exist.’

‘Jake, seriously? Why are we having this conversation in the first place? Why are we talking bollocks? I thought I was coming here to see a great piece of art.’

‘This is not bollocks. We’re discussing the cornerstone of my installation. My art is about offering people the right to die for the sake of art.’

‘And how do you intend to achieve that?’

‘You’re both here, aren’t you?’

‘We are, but what do you intend to do with us? Axe us?’

‘Indeed, I am.’

Both Gabriel and Lula started to laugh, but they laughed alone.

‘Jake, why would you kill your friends?’ Gabriel asked.

‘Friends care for each other. You only care for your bank account.’

‘Jake don’t be naïve. If it was about the money I would be better off trading shares rather than trying to find a buyer for your distorted art.’

Jake didn’t answer. He turned off the neon light instead and the apartment turned pitch black. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Think. Act,’ Jake said.

‘Jake, what the heck are you doing?’

‘You can leave if you want.’

‘I think I’m going to do just that,’ Lula said.

As Gabriel and Lula tried to get used to the lack of light, they soon realized they could hardly find the main entrance.

‘What have you done? How do we get out of here?’

‘You don’t. You now part of my installation.’

‘You must be joking.’

‘I’m not.’

Gabriel, after a loud laugh, asked, ‘What’s next?’

‘The first human death for the sake of art.’

‘Go on, dazzle us. I’m curious to see what has become of the *vicissitudes of the pimp*,’ Gabriel said rather indifferently. ‘If the work is good, the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art will be interested to host it.’ Jake polished his blade one more time.

‘What happens after we open in Tokyo?’ Jake asked while striking the axe two times into the timber flooring.

‘Why are you questioning me? You know the drill, or do you want to start donating your art?’

‘Do you think Mr X will be interested in the *vicissitudes of the pimp*?’

‘Most likely, but so far I haven’t seen anything of interest to buy. Even if you axe Lula in front of me, I doubt it will make this installation look any better.’

‘Why not? Everyone likes a good killing.’

‘Don’t think so. It will damage your reputation as an artist and most likely the value of your art,’ Gabriel said, and after two seconds in silence he shouted, ‘Jake, enough of this bullshit, what’s going on here?’

‘I have developed a loathing for the likes of Mr X.’

‘Jake, there’s nothing you can do about it. You should consider yourself lucky that he found interest in your work.’

‘He’s only interested in my work, so that he can profit from it.’

‘Jake, we can both turn him down, but what are we going to do about third parties, appointed agents and so forth? He can buy as much art as he wants

without you knowing. We can't stop him. Best for us to profit rather than someone else.'

Jake sighed.

'If you say so.'

'Jake, what are we waiting for? Where is that beautiful piece of art you mentioned in your text message? I'm starting to have a feeling there's nothing here to see.'

'Inside that box,' and Jake pointed at the panic room in the middle of the apartment. 'Can you see it?'

It was pitch black, but both Gabriel and Lula, after their eyes acclimatized to the darkness, were able to recognize a blurred box in the middle of the apartment. Gabriel, reacting hysterically, ran towards it. He tried to open the door, but it was locked.

'What, do I need to beg to see it?'

'No, hold on a second,' and Jake unlocked the door.

Gabriel swung the door open, walked in, but found nothing inside.

'What do you mean? Where is it?'

'Hold on,' and Jake went inside the panic room to turn on the lights, transforming the panic room into a beacon of light.

Jake exited the panic room and Gabriel went back inside.

'Is this another colourful meaningless installation?' Gabriel shouted.

'Look up,' and as Gabriel turned his head towards the ceiling he felt something whiz by him. As Gabriel turned around, he was met by a pair of striking eyes, who seconds later axed him in the chest.

Gabriel fell to the floor outside the panic box, spewing blood like a fountain and groaning.

Lula, who didn't show much enthusiasm for Jake's work so far, reacted enthusiastically.

'Fucking alleluia, how did you do that? This is going to shake the world of art like a thunderstorm.'

Lula took his digital camera out of his jacket, approached Jake and the body of Gabriel, flashing the pool of blood with every picture taken.

'This is fucking unbelievable. How did you manage to create this without me? Is it the darkness that makes the blood look so real?'

'Gabriel is dead,' Jake uttered, emotionless.

Lula started to laugh, 'Dead, my ass, you can't fool me,' he said.

Lula took more pictures and approached Gabriel for a close-up. Seconds

later Lula noticed Gabriel's weak breathing. He laid his hand on Gabriel's neck. He couldn't feel a heartbeat and panic started to grow within him.

Suddenly, the atmosphere became thicker than concrete.

'What are you doing, Jake?

'Being creative, what else?'

'Do you know you're going to jail for this?'

'I'm an artist. I axed Gabriel for the sake of art.'

'For the sake of art? I'm sorry, Jake, but you are not making sense. Anarchy is not legal in this country.'

'I was put into this position by Gabriel, or should I say, Mr X.'

Jake looked at Lula, his face looking inquisitive.

'Are you going to kill me too?'

'Most likely,' Jake said and started polishing his axe.

'Why me?'

'Why not?'

'What have I done against you?'

'Nothing.'

'Why kill me then?'

'You are part of my installation. You have thirty seconds to run for your life, looking for the exit, before I axe you.'

'Have you gone insane?'

After a prolonged silence Jake answered, 'You can't be the judge of that,' and started walking towards Lula.

Lula, feeling his heart beat increasing, found nothing to throw at Jake. He faked an attempt to escape from the left wing and the axe whizzed past him. In an act of despair, Lula ran inside the panic box.

When Jake reached him, Lula successfully pressed the panic button and the door slammed closed.

'Are you out of your mind?' Lula yelled from inside.

'It was either him or me,' Jake argued in his defence.

'Gabriel was your agent, for God's sake.'

'He was Mr X.'

'Who? Gabriel? No way!'

'I know he was. I have the means to prove it.'

'Mr X is a consortium of three pension funds and one investment bank. It was announced last week. Don't you read the news?'

'No, I don't, and neither do you. You're lying to save your ass,' and Jake

started to axe the panic box frantically.

'Jake, stop this madness. I'm going to call the police.'

'You can call who the fuck you like,' Lula heard from the other side and the smashing kept going.

Anxiously, Lula dialled triple zero and when the line came alive, Lula started shouting, 'Help me! Help me! I am on 166 Bethnal Green Road at the apartment of Jake Ford! He's trying to kill me! Please send the police right away, you bloody, old cow.'

The panic room was almost indestructible, but Lula worried for his life nevertheless.

The banging went on incessantly.

'Yes, yes, keep going. Kill me like crush a cockroach,' Lula said, 'after all these years working my ass for you this is how you treat me. I knew you were a freak, but this transcends anything I thought about you.'

'Shut up,' Jake shouted.

'No, you listen to me freakzoid, if I'm going down here, I would like to go with some dignity.'

'As long as you die,' and the smashing kept going on.

'Jake, please stop this madness. The police will be here soon. One body should be enough. What can you potentially achieve with one more killing?'

'Let's say I have acquired a taste for it,' and a strong bang was heard.

'What are you doing?'

'You shall see,' and Jake started to axe the wooden floor around the panic box instead.

'Can you please stop this insanity?' Lula asked before breaking down in tears.

The smashing kept going on.

'You are such a fucking, selfish, distorted son of a bitch. I worked my ass for you without a word of appreciation, ever. You should rot in hell,' Lula said, tears running down his face.

Jake reacted with a stronger bang.

'You should know one thing before you kill me.' Jake ignored Lula and kept axing the floor.

'Listen to what I have to say, you son of a bitch.'

'You're lucky, Lula, this timber flooring is made of hard wood, but it will start cracking soon,' Jake said.

'Jake, I'm going to be a father,' Lula shouted desperately.

Jake stopped the smashing for a moment.

'How can you be so sure you're the father?' Jake asked and restarted his plan to make the panic box fall into the floor below.

Lula became infuriated.

'You are such an idiot. I wish I knew the word in Korean for fucking dickhead.'

'You don't!'

'You don't, either. Moron.'

Suddenly Lula decided to grab his notebook from inside his jacket. He opened it, drew a quick sketch against the wall, took a picture and emailed it to Jake.

Seconds later, a beep was heard in the room. Jake ignored it, but Lula said, 'I've just emailed you something that you should see.'

'What could you potentially email me in your desperate hour?'

'Go on and read it. I wanted to tell you this for a while.'

Victim of his own curiosity, Jake stopped axing the floor and walked across his apartment to pick up his phone. The icon of a new message was blinking on the screen. Upon reading it, Jake felt differently.

'JAKE, YOUR KOREAN SUCKS, PERIOD.'

A short sentence, but large enough to inspire Jake to laugh.

'What are you laughing at?'

Jake didn't answer immediately, he sat down on the floor instead. His voice seemed to have deserted him.

'Sorry, Jake, but I can't hear you,' Lula said.

'Kabugi,' but before Jake was able to continue, the floor under the panic box tore apart and the box fell into the floor below, and seconds later, into the floor beneath that one.

