Bad Idea

The Anthology

Edited by

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Extract

Out Of The Ordinary

Short Struggles With A Malevolent Universe

Pub Quiz Hotshots • Hindu Life Advice When Dad Dies • Sexual Hairdressing Batman & Robin • Bye Bye Baby • Brian Wilson

Death, Respawn

Nikhil Gomes

We sat hunched on the sofas, transfixed on the TV. Laser, Winker-with-an-A and me. It was gone one in the morning and we'd been out for a quiet drink in The Champ, which had dice-rolled into a few cocktails in the Maypole.

We were drunk. Silent, teeth gritted, eyes focused on the screen, our thumbs rapidly hammered away at the undersized *GameCube* pads in our hands. We'd only got a *GameCube* because Laser loved *Zelda*, but ever since we discovered *Smash Bros.* we'd all become addicted.

An ultra-fast platform fighter in which classic characters from Nintendo's past beat each other across and off the screen, it was a game constructed around a gluttony of death, and beat drinking six *Red Bulls* mixed with a crushed packet's worth of *Pro Plus*, chased down with an espresso.

"Do you ever wonder whether all this death devalues the real thing?"

Winker-with-an-A was losing. He only chatted when he was losing, an attempt to distract us. I didn't reply – Laser was winning and I always had to be better than him.

"No really, it's just death, respawn, death, respawn, a pointless, endless loop."

Laser laughed. "That's only because you're playing so badly that you're not getting any kills."

That shut Winker-with-an-A up, and he unleashed his strongest attack upon Laser's screen persona, allowing me to nip in and kill them both. My character was alone on screen and so taunted his dead opponents. And in those short seconds where my character belittled death, it struck me that maybe Winkerwith-an-A was right. We're the generation that has grown up with death as an inconvenience, an automatic kickback to the last save point from where you could run headlong into death

again, the generation for whom ideas of everlasting life through computer coded selves inhabits the gap between science and fiction, the generation whose parents will live long and fairly healthily while we choke our arteries with fat, the generation that killed Captain America but brought back Bucky, the generation who believe Kurt, Tupac, Richie Manic and Biggie are all still alive, the generation for whom suicide bombings are no longer worth putting on the evening news. Death means nothing to us.

I opened my mouth but Laser smashed my pixelated body far off the screen and only obscenities coloured the air. As I waited to respawn I remembered that the US army uses first person shooters to entice new recruits.

Pub Quiz Hotshot

Leesha McKenny

His name was Alan. He was an electrician with a passion for restored cars and mini golf. He was trying to give up smoking. I was pretending to start. I don't think we would have stopped to speak to each other otherwise. Alan and I only ever met at the pub down the road, and only ever on Wednesdays. He told me how his team, The Dirty Half Dozen Or So, hadn't gotten anywhere near the top teams in weeks and there was talk of quitting. I told him about They Might Be Onto Something's embarrassing tendency to get completely drunk by the end of the eigth round and then fall asleep. I soon found myself looking forward to the weekly trivia, but especially toward our hurried meetings out the back by the cigarette machine.

Before long we were meeting up between rounds to compare answers. We would discuss the periodic tables in passionate, husky

tones one minute, only to return breathless and guilty to our teams shortly after. If They Might Be Onto Something noticed anything they said nothing. When I told them I was up to a pack a day they only gave me money for more. But before long, Alan began to resent our success.

"Do you know who won the 1976 Ashes series or not?" I asked.

"What does it matter? We're too far behind to catch up now," he replied.

"We don't have time for this," I snapped.

I was impatient. He looked hurt. He accused me of only wanting him for his answers. He had "made me" he said, and he demanded to know why I still refused to break away and start our own team. He was right, but it was more complicated than that. Things had started to go well with They Might Be Onto Something. We had stopped drinking so much. We were winning rounds. And besides, I needed them for a lift home. But Alan looked past me and into the glow of the Winny Blue cigarette machine.

"We can't do this anymore," he said.

"The other teams are beginning to suspect anyway."

He left before I could respond. More than ever, my walk back to They Might Be Onto Something felt cheap and lonely. I was over trivia. Nothing could be worth the emotional turmoil and eventual remorse and shame.

But then, we did win the meat tray.

Attack Me, Big Boy

James Daly

Richard and I must have been eight years old. He had a beautiful big house in Wimbledon: much bigger than mine, because his father was the regional manager of a popular chain of restaurants. We were upstairs playing in his room when we both started to feel peckish, and decided to go downstairs and ask his mother (an extraordinary, glamorous woman with long dark hair and a striking figure whom I would later develop a painful crush on) if she would make us some sandwiches. At the top of the large staircase, which square-spiralled around all four walls down two storeys to the main hallway, I held a piece of silly putty over the edge of the banister and, giggling like a girl, let it go. After a few seconds listening for a thud, I looked over the banister and saw Richard's sister Hannah lying on the floor laughing, having been struck by the putty.

Richard and I ran downstairs: from staircase to landing to staircase to landing, all around the centre of his huge house. Hannah, who was a year younger than us, still lay on the floor laughing. She had pulled her knickers around her ankles and lifted her skirt around her chest.

I stopped at the second or third step up from the hall and stared. Richard was behind me. She looked at me.

"Attack me!" she shouted.

"What?" I asked, confused and not a little scared.

She spread her legs apart and repeated what she had said.

Richard ran on into the kitchen, laughing, completely unsurprised, while I stood on the stairs, shocked. I had no sisters, you see.

Hannah laid her head back, not looking at me anymore, and slid her bare feet along the wood floor, bending her knees.

"Attack me," she said, not shouting this time.

After a moment I joined Richard in the kitchen with his

mother, who wore a black and white check skirt and smelled of what I now know to be *Chanel No. 5*. She made me a sandwich – lettuce, tomato, cucumber and wholegrain mustard: diagonal cut – and poured me a glass of pineapple juice, with ice cubes that came out the front of their enormous refrigerator with a wonderful rattling noise.

My Left Breast

Jean Hannah Edelstein

All of my friends are doing it.

"Life-changing," Leah declares. "Turns out I'm a 34C. C!"

"30F," Melissa says. "I'm a 30F. Now I have to get mine from a speciality shop. You have to go."

I gaze down at my own pair, remembering the birthday party a few weeks ago at which, after a few cocktails, it occurred to me that my cleavage was a handy spot to stash a small bottle of *Bombay Sapphire*. Maybe I have outgrown my 36B.

Indeed, it's high time that I, too, pay a visit to the Selfridges free bra-fitting service. When I get there, the man (man?!) behind the desk checks a chart and hands me a number.

"Wait in a cubicle," he says, "and take your top off."

The dressing room is pink and black and satin and velvet; it's a little brothel-y. I strip off my shirt and too-small bra and stand, half-naked, shivering in the chill of the air-con. Then my personal bra-fitter arrives.

"I'm coming in," she cries, in strong Essex tones, and then sweeps back the curtain before I have a chance to cover my cold-hardened nipples. She leans in, stares, and without warning takes one breast in each hand for a thorough grope, manipulating them

with the delicacy of a randy 16 year-old.

"This is so weird!" she exclaims, mouth slightly agape.

"This boob is so much bigger than the other one. It's freaky!"

I try to keep smiling as she hands me something in an E-cup.

"I mean, usually you try to fit the larger one," she says, forehead creased with consternation. Are my breasts her greatest professional challenge?

"But in this case…"

My smile is tighter than a 30A bra on a 42FF chest.

"Imagine," I think to myself, "If I were a man, and these kinds of comments were being made about my penis: 'Dude, your cock totally bends to the left!' Inconceivable!"

But just as I am getting a little worked up, a little inclined to storm out of there, Miss Personal Bra-Fitter presents me with a black lace 32DD number. I slip it on, and there it is, magic: my brand new, perfectly supported, perky silhouette.

"I guess that will have to do," she says, shaking her head.

No matter: demeaned, mortified, officially a freak, I walk out of that cubicle a new woman, able to smile smugly with the knowledge of my impressive dimensions. On the left side, at least.

No Future for You

Nikesh Shukla

While the women toil in the kitchen, the men toil in front of the television, wincing as another wicket falls and as their beers edge to the bottom of their cans. I've asked the women if I can help. They've all laughed and told me to sit with the men.

They appreciate the offer but kitchen-work is their Hindu boon in life and they can handle it. It doesn't stop them having a dig at

me for being a man though.

"Go and sit with all the men. Go on."

I sit with the men. My dad and uncles are engaged in serious cricket watching. It's an India–Pakistan grudge match, so their eyes are glued. India aren't doing very well.

My grandfather recognises my ambivalence towards cricket and asks, "So, what is your job at the moment?"

"I'm a writer, grandfather. I write. I've just written a novel."

"What about money? You can't work for no money."

"I get paid, grandfather. Making loads of money doesn't bother me."

"That's nice. You could be a well-paid lawyer right now. Instead of being unemployed."

"Money isn't everything."

"Money is God. Are you a communist?"

"No, I just want to make enough money to be happy."

"You sound like a communist."

"Why?"

"Just making sure you're not living like a vagrant. I worry about your money. Would you like to borrow some? I haven't got much, but I would gladly give you money."

"I'm fine."

"No you're not. This is not a good career for you. No future. Not like a lawyer. You could make much money, you could buy a huge house for everybody."

"I'm fine, grandfather. I get by and I'm doing well. I am happy."

"So, all these concerts you do, how do you come home?"

"By taxi or bus or whatever."

"What precautions do you take from being attacked?"

"I'm careful."

"No you're not. You don't know what people are like these days. They're just after your money."

"Granddad, we live in leafy Middlesex."

"Just make sure you keep your money in your sock or make a

special secret pocket in your jacket. And always offer them your watch first. That way, you don't lose any money. If they say no, then offer them your jewellery or phone. If they say no, they can check your wallet and it will be empty."

"Why carry a wallet then grandfather?"

My grandfather laughs at my stupidity and hits me on the knee.

China Spy Showdown

Sorrel Neuss

Working as a journalist for the *China Daily*, I have all my needs attended to but have forfeited the right to choose my own home. In my decrepit Beijing apartment building, all the *lo wei* (foreigners) have been placed on the 13th floor. Wei Wei also lives on our floor, in a 1.5 metre squared window box, furnished with a ripped leather couch.

Unsubtly disguised as a lift attendant, Wei Wei's main job is to spy on us.

After a hard night's drinking, I come home at 5.30 am with a big bag of booze, my well-fed breasts bursting out of a nipple-stiffening top. I look up to find Wei Wei staring at them.

"Is so cold," she growls.

Without taking her eyes off my jugs, she swivels on her high chair and presses number 13. The lift doors close in, the lights spark, and we ascend at depressingly slow speed. First floor. Her eyes now roam over to my arse.

"You late today," she says, pirate-like.

'Was that a question, statement or accusation?' I think.

Looking down, I can see she has her usual scrap of the *China*

Daily clutched between podgy thumb and forefinger. She's always reading the paper and tearing out little bits of 'evidence': the floor of her window box is littered with them.

Fifth floor.

"Cutting articles out means you can't read what's on the other side of the paper," I squeak feebly.

Wei Wei's English is basic – there's no response. My Chinese can barely get me a packet of fags.

10th floor.

Raising a duster to the broken phone she barks, "You drink alone?"

I stall, imagine she doesn't exist, and look up at the numbers, desperately waiting for

13. When the doors slide apart, the rush of relief prompts my hangover to kick in. But even when safely locked in my flat I can hear her vicious cough. Feel her staring at me from her window box. I can't sleep. Got to stop her.

I throw my door open to find Wei Wei perched on the shitty sofa looking straight ahead.

"Look. I fucking hate you. Give me a break. I'm not boning the ugly toff next door. I'm not making bombs in my kitchen. I'm not plotting to overthrow the Party. So get out of my face… and stop gawping at my tits."

Wei Wei doesn't even flinch, and continues to sift through old scraps of the *China Daily*.

Tell It Like A Story

Dispatches From The Frontiers Of A Savage Age

New Rave MySexuals • The Honeytrapper
The Death Files • Iraqi Road Trip
Hurricane Katrina • Bobbies in Jamaica

New Orleans Lost and Found

Sarah M. Broom

"I decided to return here because I was afraid to"
– James Baldwin

It is a hard and treacherous thing sitting here trying to call up the right words for how your family is running from water, for how your family is fighting drowning even on dry land. So you tend toward forgetting. Your search for a haven finds you in Massachusetts, then Turkey and Berlin. It has you wishing you had the time and money to go farther. Papua New Guinea or South Africa, even. When books come out with such titles as *The Place You Love is Gone* and *Come Hell or High Water*, you sit them piled in your bedroom. You do this only for yourself, so that every now and then you can look toward that stack and practice saying "later" to it all. I never cared much for nostalgia, and so naturally would like to jump to the story's end, daydream this one to perfection. I want to write something less painful, fend off the return back there, to New Orleans, make this a piece about conquering this or that philosophical thing, but that city always begins any story I start to tell, and so I must go back there now, in memory, 10 months past the storm – and solidly so.

I. Memory

When you come from a huge, wild New Orleans family (a clan, really) and realise that your city is underneath so much water it cannot breathe, and when the other thing you know is that two of

your hardheaded brothers are somewhere *in* all of that mess, you simply try to get your legs to carry you through the way they did before: easy and glide-like.

In the day-to-day, you neglect serious consideration of any newspaper or broadcast except to scan names and faces of the missing – Broom, Michael, Carl, my brothers. Three full days past Hurricane Katrina and it was a Harlem summer day. On this kind of day when the humidity hangs low down to the ground, and the windows are up as far as they can go, when your loud-mouthed neighbors are out, and there is music touching air and those same neighbors are dancing happy on skinny sidewalks – on a day such as this, I can imagine being in New Orleans. Except that here in New York, trees blow back and forth with only innocent fury.

I sit cross-legged watching CNN on mute. See a headline underneath a picture of storm evacuees that reads "REFUGEES". It's a strange word. I wonder whether state-to-state moves will now be called immigration.

Right before my eyes a brown-skinned man wearing white boxers and with bare feet gets lifted from a roof. He twines chicken legs around the rescuer's bulk.

"It's Carl," I yell.

"That doesn't look anything like your brother," a visiting friend says. But I kept faith in that lanky man in boxers until the next day when there was no phone call. I spent the next nights watching again for a skinny man who maybe had a dog with him.

Imagine this being all you can do.

It is as paltry as it sounds.

The day before the storm came, my mother, my sister Karen, her two teenagers, and my brother Troy packed a bag apiece and drove to Hattiesburg, Mississippi. In the rush, my nephew forgot his eyeglasses. As they were leaving town, I sat wearing a wide brimmed hat in a New York park listening to jazz. While I was tapping my foot, my brother Carl gathered up his family to go to

a shelter. He had his green motorised boat with him in the back of his pickup. At the shelter, Carl told them to go on in, said, "I'll be all right," then turned around and went back home to wait for the hurricane.

Something to know about growing up in New Orleans: during the months of hurricane season, you might evacuate three, four, five times for naught. You'd pack your most important possessions and drive as far as gas money would carry you. When you've lived this way for most of your life – every single summer thinking, "Is this the big one?" – you forget the wrath of Hurricane Betsy. You get careless.

When I called my chef brother, Michael, to make sure he was leaving, he claimed he was crossing the Texas border at that very moment.

"I'm out of there, baby," he said to me.

This, it turns out, was the lie you tell your nosey younger sister who you know would come straight through the phone and strangle you if you said the truth.

Carl and Michael swam for their lives in Hurricane Betsy, the 1965 storm – a lady compared to Katrina. But Carl, who loves fishing – especially at night – never demonised the Mississippi the way I did. I never trusted it. It was and still is a mean, ugly river that only pretends calm; growing up near it made me dislike big bodies of water, made me terrified of waves – even at the beach, with sand and all.

I think about the Hurricane Betsy stories we tell at Christmas when we are together. Everyone was asleep. Someone yelled, "Get out of bed." My oldest sister, Deborah, put her feet on the floor and felt water. Mom yelled, "Get the baby."

Everyone remembers charcoal blackness and the rush of water into the house. They swam through live wires and snakes to get to higher ground.

The dogs swam too.

My mother calls from Hattiesburg on Monday – the day Katrina hits – and says, "Water is coming into the house. We're

calling for help." The phone goes out right as she's talking, so that's all I have to go on for three days. Those two lines keep replaying in my head – during half-sleep, at dinners where I appear to have it together, at each and every still moment.

This is all I knew about my mother, Ivory, and the six of my 11 siblings who called New Orleans home.

Still no word from the boys, but it is early on and phone lines are out. When your mobile phone rings, you sprint from wherever you are to answer, and when it's a friend "just checking in", you are mightily disappointed.

On the Wednesday after Katrina, my mom calls and says she's safe. The water had buried her car, but she and her group were okay. By Friday, they are in Dallas. On Saturday, they fly to Vacaville, California, where my brother Byron lives. This is the first time my brother Troy has flown, so we have to talk him into it.

I leave New York for Vacaville, where on the first night Herman, a 34 year old who lived next door to where we grew up, and whose feet are swollen up from dehydration, has a house-waking nightmare.

Herman's dreams are scary because during the storm he sat one whole day on the second-storey roof of my childhood home until it split in two under him.

Herman-the-storyteller swears he saw Carl in a boat helping people near the Superdome.

This sounds like exactly the kind of thing Carl would be doing, so most everyone believes him, except for me. I keep saying I need to hear from him. Whenever Herman repeats his Carl-the-rescuer tale, I look to him angrily, stone-faced.

Neighbours have brought over piles of used clothes, and so my family, whom I have never seen ask for a thing, slowly look for things they like, though it is mostly about need now. They are a prideful people, but when you have one pair of pants to your name that is no longer a trait you can rightfully claim. My mom was going around in a pair of uncomfortable gold shoes. When I asked her why, my mom, in her soft voice, said, "My good ones got

messed up in all that water." Those were brown suede, and her favourites. So there are these moments that poke fun at what little your family has now – and all of a sudden! And that leads you to think of your two brothers you haven't yet heard from. You hope that the water has not had its way with them.

There are 10 of us in this three-bedroom house. When your displaced family is not stocking up on underwear or acting like clowns to help the forgetting, you are all watching news and yelling curse words at the TV. Attitude helps you through. Or you eat red beans and rice with smoked sausage. I imagine that for Troy, who until now has never left New Orleans for more than a day or two, this blue California sky must seem strange. I notice too that my niece and nephew have the knowing eyes of grown people now.

Exactly one week after Hurricane Katrina, we hear from Michael. He's in San Antonio with 15 others. He calls New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina "a disgrace to humanity". Says he will never go back, and this hurts my heart because Michael has always loved the city with all his might. He was the one to show it off to me, the one who helped me fall so deeply in love with it. But I believe him because I do not hear any play in his voice.

Two days later I am driving my mother to the grocery store, where we have come looking for coffee and chicory, when, like a good rhythm, Carl calls. I yell his name in a drawn-out bayou drawl.

I am sappy; my words run off without me.

Carl starts talking nonstop:

"I fell asleep, and when I woke up water was coming through the doors quick. The front yard looked like a river. I got up in the attic with a meat cleaver and knocked out a hole in the roof big enough to get my shoulders through at an angle.

"The dogs beat me out. I was on the roof for three days with two gallons of water – I'd pour some on my head when it got too hot. You couldn't stay in that attic. It felt like 200 degrees in there. Mostly I was sitting on tarpaper. When people saw that water, their eyes started getting big, they started sucking on five, six

cigarettes in a row. People didn't think that thing was gonna do what it did. Nobody had a chance."

Carl remembered the life jacket in his boat, but that was underwater with a shed atop it. He dove down twice for the jacket and then used its reflectors to signal a rescuer. Which is how he got off the roof of the house with his two Pekingese dogs, Mindie and Tiger. Later, from the convention centre, he and "some dude" struck out on their own in a paddleboat, heading toward the interstate. But the paddleboat only got them so far because of the downed trees. They had to swim 30 yards through debris and dead bodies until they got picked up and taken to the airport. "There was so much despair in that place," Carl said, which is why he left and walked the miles to a cousin's house in Kenner, Louisiana, where he slept for three days straight.

I'd never heard my brother Carl say *despair* before.

II. Movement

When each and every one of your 11 siblings are accounted for – and no second earlier than that – you let yourself mourn the city of your birth.

I was in New Orleans two days before the storm. I sent bragging, languorous emails to friends: "I am at an outdoor café drinking *café au lait*. A brass band has just gone by me."

Even when you have left New Orleans for better things, the city does not let go of you, so when you're back it feels as though you are returning to an old lover, the one who always takes you in no matter how far you've wandered.

I wish I could help you understand what it means to feel homesick now. I do not yet have the kind of imagination I need to understand this violation, all the world watching as my city drowned. I have known New Orleans in the same way I've known my name. I have loved it hard, the hardest of any one thing outside of family – and fanatically. I couldn't help it. My grandmother Beulah was a tough Creole woman who spoke

French. My father, Simon, played the banjo and the trumpet in Doc Pauline's brass band. You learn to move around the world in a certain, wide-eyed way when you are born into all of this richness of spirit.

In quiet moments, you wonder about those street musicians you came to know with their voices of gold. Theirs was an audience of passersby, and you paid by dropping a dollar or two in a hat. I am remembering one trombonist who had the eyes of my brother Carl. He looked like a hard man, looked as though he could fight for his life. But for those eyes and for all that he put into his horn, I gave him 5 dollars. And the man in the wheelchair who, when there was a citywide blackout and you were stranded together on the sidewalk, took out his lighter, pretended it was a flashlight, and sang the blues to calm your nerves. You hope he made it out.

I wish you could hear the sounds our brass bands make, wish you could know the kind of drumbeat that sends you dancing exuberant midstreet, sends you strutting and second-line dancing so hard, you start to believe your life depends on this movement.

And perhaps it does.

Now, these many months past the storm, I have only three immediate family members in Louisiana: Mom, Carl and Eddie. They are half an hour from New Orleans.

To get there via highway you have to first drive down a narrow swamp road where if you had to describe the mossy water on both sides, you would say it looks like the ancient trees rose from the water to do an emphatic jig, then collapsed, every which way, in exhaustion.

I wish I could write the sound of deep sadness in voices of grown men I've known all my life.

Carl wakes at 4 am every day now. Once, when I woke then and stumbled to the bathroom, I caught him by surprise, and he acted like he was cleaning up. One day I watched him in the

backyard sitting on a swing. Alone. Quiet.

Carl the grown-up-fisherman is now living at my grandmother's house after his own was destroyed; when we tried getting him a FEMA trailer it turned out to be too long to fit on the property. Michael is still living in San Antonio, Texas, where he's signed a one-year lease and had a cooking job that he quit after too little pay. He tells me it is still "a much better life". Says next time he's in New Orleans he will flee at the hint of rain.

The California group is still out there. Troy is unloading boxes from a Wal-Mart truck for US $8 an hour after building furniture most his life. Another sister, Valeria, is in Alabama starting anew. Working at Burger King. Beginning again at 50 years of age.

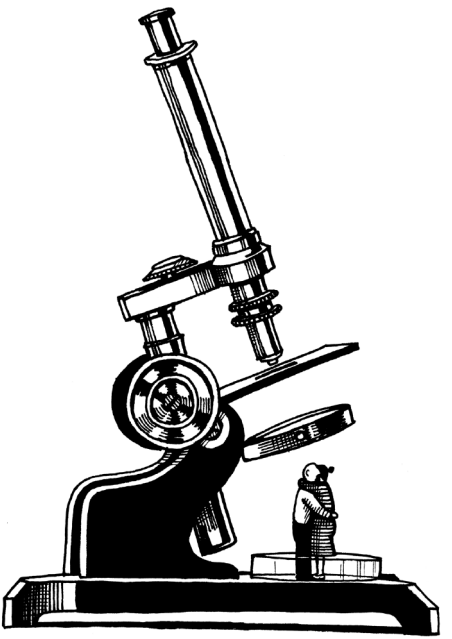
We are everywhere and *nowhere* together.

This Thanksgiving, I called my mom in California close to 15 times. "I could just sleep all the day," she said. Carl cooked fried chicken and eggs for his holiday dinner.

There is, you see, no neat ending to a story like this. And that would not feel right anyway.

The Broom clan may be a displaced people with far fewer possessions than before, but wherever there is ground, there can be dancing. We don't even need a drum; we've got our hands for that. And a wild, big New Orleans family spread out around the country is a dangerous and wonderworking thing to behold – like our city itself. New Orleans will resurrect, it will, just as all mighty things do, but it will take its own sweet, slow moving time. Just the thought sends your legs moving again, gets your heart burning hopeful the exact moment you think it.

Cultural Revelations



Specialise In Something Until It Specialises In You

London Quiz Mafia • Hard Drive Enema
Cricket Life Metaphors • Günter Wallraff
Gourmands vs. Foodies • Dubai Sex Traffic

The Invisible Journalist – Part One

Jack Roberts

Cologne, Germany. It's spring, 2007, and Günter Wallraff is halfway up the 15 ft rope tied to the bough of a tree in his garden. Demonstrating his fitness, he shimmies up to the top and back down in seconds. He's dressed in casual jogging gear; a black zip top with a red piped V collar and well-worn trainers. His hair is shaved short and his grey moustache is precise.

At 64, he's training himself for his latest undercover investigation; the topic is confidential, but he needs to pass for a 50 year old so that his prospective employers won't become suspicious. It's going well, and today he looks a good 15 years younger than his age.

Wallraff has been in the subterfuge game 38 years now, in which time he's become a master of reinvention. His successful ruses rate amongst the most astonishing feats in 20th century journalism. Posing as the secretary of a non-existent German fascist group in 1975, he negotiated a fake arms deal with General Antonio de Spinola, exposing his plans for a military coup in Portugal. As Levent "Ali" Sinirlioglu, a Turkish immigrant *"gastarbeiter"*– a project for which he spent two years in a wig and face make-up – he was exploited, discriminated against, and robbed of his wages by opportunist sub-contractors, all to uncover and publicise the maltreatment of immigrant communities.

Of all his roles though, his infiltration of the tabloid *Bild-Zeitung*, Germany's equivalent of *The Sun* newspaper, is perhaps the most high profile and controversial.

Wallraff spent four months working as a journalist at the

paper, and after publishing his book, *Der Aufmacher* (Lead Story), which documented their manipulation and deception of their readers, *Bild* attacked him with a litany of court actions, challenging the legality of his method. Although ultimately vindicated by Germany's highest court, Wallraff spent more than six years in trials, and it was only *Der Aufmacher*'s bestselling success that saved him from financial ruin. Despite the setbacks, he has always maintained his techniques are justified.

"Role-playing is the best way of acquiring new insights and knowledge, and getting close to people whom you otherwise don't understand," he tells me.

"If more people got involved in role-play this would be a much more open, humane society. We've forgotten how to play."

It's spring, 1977, and Günter Wallraff, 34, is researching a television documentary on *Bild*. Their circulation is topping five million, and their influence is enormous. They're easily Europe's bestselling newspaper, and as an institution are powerful and untouchable. *Bild* styles itself as "the peoples' paper", but the journalists who actually produce the tabloid describe it as an "excellent vehicle for employer's interests", and its readers as "thickoes".

In the past, Wallraff has written reports on how the newspaper consistently twists, sensationalises, and suppresses facts in its articles. In one investigation he discovers a woman who has left her abusive husband for a Turkish man, and whose reputation has been destroyed by *Bild*; the paper ran a "mother wanted" campaign on their front page, branding her a "heartless wife", and printed a letter she left for her husband declaring, "I have no further interest in my children." In reality, she was forced to write the letter at knifepoint by her husband, who threatened to kill their kids if she didn't. The woman was subsequently sacked from two jobs and fled to the Dutch border to escape tabloid reporters.

This time Wallraff is looking to produce a more in-depth work.

Alf Breull, 28, is a journalist at the newspaper and one of his key sources. Breull is "the poet", the rising star of *Bild*'s editorial team, but he has scruples, wants to leave the newspaper. The company that owns *Bild*, The Springer Group, is offering him more money and a new contract, but he is not enthusiastic.

"I wouldn't even work there for 10,000 DM a month. Working there, I have lost every shred of self-respect."

Breull has an idea for Wallraff.

"Why don't you get a job here yourself? That way you'll find out much more."

"But they know me already – they think I'm one of their enemies. I don't think I'll succeed."

"They're so full of themselves – they don't think anyone can touch them."

A plan is hatched: Breull gives notice to his employers, and puts his trusted friend "'Hans Esser" forward as a replacement. Now Wallraff must become "Hans Esser", 30, a former military man – officer in the department of "psychological warfare" – turned ad copywriter, turned tabloid newshound.

He shaves his straggly hair down to a close crop and wears coloured contact lenses. Looking in the mirror, Wallraff is unconvinced by his disguise though: he has wrinkles, and his nose is too distinctive. He contemplates plastic surgery.

A plastic surgeon friend at the University of Cologne advises against a facelift.

"This surgery is much too serious. Besides, you'll feel like a stranger to yourself for years afterwards."

Wallraff thinks it over: he can't afford 12,000 DM for the operation anyway. The surgeon advises him to change his body language if he wants to seem like a tabloid newsman.

"You need to be snappy, hard, smart, quick on the uptake. Not so reflective, defensive, and introverted. Show confidence. Where you feel insecurity, show yourself to be strong. Remember, you feel incredibly secure with the knowledge that you have this

massive, powerful corporation behind you. You believe you are untouchable."

Meanwhile, Breull organises a meeting with Thomas Schwindmann, his editor at *Bild*, in the newspaper's Hanover bureau. On the morning of the meeting, Wallraff wears a large gold signet ring, borrowed from an aristocratic friend, and liberally coats himself with *Aqua Brava* perfume. He sprays it on his new 500 DM suit, and also under his armpits to hide the smell of sweat, of fear. Looking at his face in the mirror, he sees a different face looking back at him; it's the face of a successful manager, a face that has been trimmed for corporate convention – for a career. It's a face he has always hated when he has seen it on other people.

Driving up to *Bild*'s offices in Bemeroder Straße, Wallraff is given the impression of approaching a fortified military compound: the printing presses and editorial building are secured by a fence, and there is a guard patrolling the perimeter with an Alsatian.

Breull leads him up to the fifth floor, and walks him through the office doors, into the newsroom. Wallraff's pulse is racing. His throat feels tight.

Flash forward: Esser makes a great impression on Schwindmann, who approves his appointment. It is agreed Breull will oversee his transition to the workplace.

Schwindmann approaches Wallraff and Breull after work one day at 11 pm.

"Come back to my place so we can get to know each other a bit."

It is more of an order than an invitation; Wallraff and Breull are reluctant, but Schwindmann is the boss.

"Thank you very much Herr Schwindmann."

Leading the way in his BMW, Schwindmann races ahead of them to his penthouse apartment. Wallraff struggles to keep up in his worn out Peugeot *304*, but manages to stay in sight of the editor's distant taillights. The pursuit ends in one of Hanover's typical satellite suburbs, where they park.

Breull and Wallraff take the lift up to Schwindmann's living quarters. As they enter they are shocked to see that the apartment has been converted into a shooting gallery, starting in the lounge and stretching across a long corridor into the bathroom, where a large bullseye target has been erected. Schwindmann reaches into a draw and pulls out a gun, which he places in Wallraff's hand.

"Now show me what you've learned in the army."

Problem: Wallraff, the conscientious objector, has never handled a gun in his life.

"I'm kaput Herr Schwindmann. I no longer have a steady hand."

Schwindmann pays no notice.

"Doesn't it feel wonderful to have a gun in your hand? You feel like a different person…"

"I have a problem with my eyesight – an astigmatism. That was the reason I ended up in the psychological warfare department of the army. Next time I'll bring my own gun with me, one that has specially adjusted sights."

"The main thing is you shoot the target, and don't destroy my bathroom mirror." Schwindmann loads his weapon and takes aim at the bullseye.

The shooting match lasts until 3 am, although Schwindmann is a good marksman and easily defeats his opponents.

"You just have to imagine who your target is, then you're much more accurate."

A dark look of rumination crosses his face; any number of enemies could be ghosting around his imagination – Wallraff decides to leave him be.

Bored by the lack of competition, Schwindmann suggests they play "blitz chess". Blitz chess is a variant of chess in which players are given mere seconds to make a move; the trick is to react fast, to make something out of nothing. Schwindmann challenges Wallraff and sets the clock.

"You now have seven minutes."

Although Wallraff is a good chess player, Schwindmann wins

the first six games with ease.

"You have to learn how to do it! Blitz chess is like producing our newspaper. You can't shilly-shally around and think things over. Sometimes you have to hack out an article in a few minutes. You're under constant pressure to produce."

Schwindmann breaks to open his drinks cupboard for his guests.

"Cognac, gin, schnapps, or whisky? Your choice."

"Whisky," says Wallraff.

He hates whisky, but consciously chooses it over the other spirits. A manly drink might mitigate his repeated losses in his boss's eyes.

One drink follows another, and the games continue into the night. Wallraff starts to win blitz chess games, challenging Schwindmann's tally of victories, but the newspaper editor will not rest until the series is won outright. The competition continues in grim silence, until Schwindmann's eventual victory and the morning sunlight compels his guests to return to work.

Wallraff settles into the work at *Bild*. One day, he is sent out on assignment to report on a family in Celler. Their child is the victim of a fatal sex crime. Normally Schwindmann sends *Bild* photographer Heribert Klampf on such assignments: Klampf is a specialist at extracting family album photos from relatives of those who have recently died or been murdered. His methods are notorious, "If you don't give us access we'll use shots from the mortuary, and that wouldn't look too good." This time Schwindmann wants to test Esser.

"Get the photograph. We've set up space for it in the paper – and get a move on."

When Wallraff arrives at the house he sees the victim's brothers and sisters crying in the hallway. He's embarrassed to be there, but hasn't filed a story today and is under pressure to prove himself. Wallraff approaches the father, a butcher, offers his condolences, and asks for a picture of the child.

"You want to make money from our misery. You'll get at least 500 DM for the photograph from your newspaper," says the father.

It is the *Bild* reporter who responds, "There's nothing to it, it's a memory of your child, that's all."

The father makes it clear there will be no photo and Wallraff soon backs down, apologising profusely. Disgusted with himself, he is inconsolable for the rest of the evening – yet he is still under pressure to produce stories.

Soon afterwards, Wallraff's live-in girlfriend, a student, plans to give birth to a child at home, but it arrives unexpectedly early. There's a big drama; the midwife, Hanover's only home birth midwife, arrives late. Wallraff phones Schwindmann to explain he can't come to the office because he has been called in to provide first aid for a home childbirth.

"I can't work with you if you're not able to keep appointments," says Schwindmann, then, in a more measured tone, "… Home birth you say?"

At this time, home births are an extremely rare phenomenon in Germany.

"I think there might be a story for us in this. Interview the midwife and talk to the young mother – I'll send a photographer over."

Wallraff's girlfriend is completely opposed to the idea, but she's too weak to put up resistance and, in any case, Schwindmann has already put the phone down and dispatched a photographer. Later that day, when the midwife delivers the child, she holds him up for the obligatory slap on the backside. The baby is welcomed to the world by the *Bild* photographer's raging flash bulbs as his mother unleashes a curdling scream – her first of the day.

Wallraff leaves the room; the situation is too unpleasant to bear, and yet the sense of satisfaction he feels is undeniable.

"We got the photograph," he thinks to himself. "The story will stand up."

Back in the room, he reassures his girlfriend.

"Don't worry, you won't be recognisable, and newly born children all look the same anyway."

"Typical Esser," she says.

The story plays big in *Bild*, and the midwife later tells Wallraff that the piece led to a 100% increase in the number of Hanover home births – success.

Life at *Bild* grinds on though; Wallraff is again under pressure to deliver articles, having suffered three consecutive 'defeats'. His girlfriend decides to help him break the sequence of spiked articles with another taboo-busting personal interest story.

"*I'LL SUCKLE MY BABY WHERE I WANT!*"

Wallraff's *Bild* career is back on track, but he has recurrent nightmares in which he is found out, where the whole project dissolves in a cloud of smoke.

Back in the Hanover newsroom, journalists drink and puff cigarettes like world champions; most are incapable of filing copy without resorting to alcohol. Schwindmann is running illicit advertising "features" from casinos, nightclubs, and pubs in exchange for various "favours" One client is "Petra Breulla Herodus Meier", a sham-psychologist based at the Intercontinental Hotel. Meier claims that for 100 DM he can cure a smoker's addiction in mere seconds.

"The man is an idiot Esser, but do a nice positive story on him."

Wallraff meets Meier, notes his flashy props, and observes the snake oil act at close quarters. Returning to the office, he files a ludicrously positive story on Meier, and is offered a congratulatory cigarette by Schwindmann.

"No thanks. It really worked, I've stopped smoking."

In an attempt to look simpleminded and gain acceptance, Wallraff has decided to kick his habit. It works, and the exchange becomes a newsroom joke. Schwindmann will always offer Wallraff cigarettes after that.

"No thanks – I'm cured."

The other *Bild* journos have a good laugh at Esser's naivety – the man actually believes his own stories! Regardless, the

newsroom powers mark him down as "one for the future".

Then, on July 22, 1977, Wallraff receives a phone call from a friend in Hamburg. A magazine has printed a story exposing him as Hans Esser – inconceivable – and the Springer Group are all over the revelation. Wallraff immediately ceases his work. The next day, the following story runs in *Bild*:

THE UNDERGROUND COMMUNIST WHO WORMED HIS WAY IN

Günter Wallraff, who has previously sneaked into Gerling and other institutions, has managed to worm his way into Bild *using a false name. Wallraff… who would drink a shot of Ballantines whisky in the morning… and swore when he lost at table tennis… said he used to work at an advertising agency in Düsseldorf, and wanted to see if he could work as a journalist. This story was as false as the name "Hans Esser"… the name on his* Bild *press pass, which he used when working as a reporter. He played a despicable game with his colleagues, who thought he was genuine. Exactly a month ago, he left work with "stomach pains", then disappeared into the shadows from which he came. Now he's writing about what he claims he has experienced at our editorial offices. We worked him so hard at* Bild *that he actually stopped smoking...*

30 years later, Günter Wallraff is seated at the large wood table that dominates his sparse office: a small building that sits at the back of his garden. The décor in the room is minimal; smooth aggregated stone towers – self-made artworks – rise up from the corners like flowers, and a grand piano sits unobtrusively in the background. Answering my questions, he makes animated hand gestures, sweeps his arms, drums the table with long, bony fingers, and speaks in passionate crescendos.

So what happened at *Bild*?

He grins wolfishly, "I was betrayed…"