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Opening Extract from...

Bestseller

Written by Alessandro Gallenzi

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1

Jim's destiny was to be a great writer, to write a bestseller. His first novel – little more than a long short story – was written about fifteen years ago, under the encouragement of his creative-writing tutor, a retired university lecturer who had ended up committing suicide a few months later by tying a plastic bag around his head.

Just before the sad event, the man had recommended his student to a notoriously sharkish London literary agent, who had immediately decided to take him on and represent his next work, which they agreed would be a thriller called *Appointment with Death*. Unfortunately, writing under commission to a deadline wasn't the same as dabbling with words for an hour or two in the afternoon, and the thought of the high stakes on the table – and the agent's huge expectations – grounded Jim's flights of inspiration. As a result, *Appointment with Death* was somewhat lame, so that the agent asked one of his henchmen to chop it back, cut it up, sort it out and then put it back together – in other words, to rewrite it from scratch. "You see, Jim," his agent had said, wrapping him in a huge cloud from his cigarillo, "style is all very well – but we need to get to the nitty-gritty, y'know: less description, more death and a bit of bonking. How many copies do you want to sell? A hundred or a hundred thousand?"

Strangely, for all his wisdom and influence, the agent failed to place the eviscerated script – and so it was on with the second novel, this time a murder mystery set in Paris, *The Woman with Three Faces*. And after five months of painful silence, the agent had called to give him the good news: an American publisher – not one of the biggies, admittedly – had shown interest. Well, the advance wasn't great, in fact it barely crested four figures, but – everybody needs a springboard, right?

Jim could distinctly remember the day when he had received the black-and-white catalogue of the Pink Hippopotamus Press, with his happy, smiling young face on page twenty-four, where the book was announced for release in the following autumn. He took that catalogue everywhere – to the café, to the library, to the toilet – and looked at page twenty-four for ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Sadly, two weeks later the Pink Hippopotamus Press was declared bankrupt. That was the end of *The Woman with Three Faces*, and his agent stopped returning his calls.

But Jim wasn't overly disheartened: he immediately set himself to write two more works, a science-fiction book with a telepathic robot as the main protagonist, and a historical novel set during the Time of Troubles, *The Warrior of Kiev*. With great hope and enthusiasm, he sent out manuscript after manuscript to agents, publishers and renowned authors, confident that an opportunity would soon arise. But the agents answered in unison that they were not interested in taking on any new authors; the publishers lamented that their programmes were already overstretched and that the work in question did not "fit in" with their lists, and suggested that he should contact an agent; the renowned authors didn't bother to reply.

At this point there was something of a hiatus in Jim's literary career, a pause that coincided with a series of weekly meetings with a Belgian doctor at a private psychiatric hospital. At the end of this difficult period, Jim's primal impulse was still to write – perhaps out of spite, revenge, anger, or maybe just as a sort of cathartic tool. The works written during this time – two free-verse poetry collections, a very short semi-autobiographical romance, a humorous novelty book and an experimental play – bore "all the marks of the author's deep emotional and mental turmoil". At least, that was the judgement of the Belgian doctor, who was still keeping an eye on Jim at three-month intervals. These books – coming as they did from Jim's tormented period – were never loosed upon the teetering slush piles of agents and editors, but remained stuffed in a drawer, underneath Jim's socks and underpants.

It was the run of subsequent novels that rekindled a glimmer of hope in Jim's faltering career. He felt he was entering upon his mature, creative prime, and that his latest works carried a new authority. And every now and then, in reply to all the manuscripts he sent out, a slightly more authentic letter of rejection would crop up. Jim would extract the titbits of encouragement from these letters and attach all of them, in detail, to every new proposal and submission that he sent out. One day he would get published, he was sure about this.

With his tenth novel, a naturalistic work à la Zola, he adopted a more proactive submission technique, following up the initial proposal with a phone call to editors and editorial directors. In a short time, he became a well-known figure in every publishing house. Although the editors and editorial directors were always busy in some meeting or other, or

on a lunch break even at four in the afternoon, sometimes there was a secretary or assistant he could talk to about his publishing history and current situation. Little by little, he began to exist in the collective mind of the book industry as a well-defined, three-dimensional, slightly unpleasant entity: a kind of blowfly that no one can be bothered to shoo out or swat.

Jim's next novel remained unfinished, and his visits to the Belgian doctor, who issued a total ban on "any kind of artistic-creative-compositional activity", took on their former frequency. It was suggested to him that he should go on a long trip abroad, which he immediately did – though not forgetting to take a notepad and pen with him. The result was a travel book entitled *Grand Tour*, nearly three hundred pages long, which agents and publishers turned down with much more vehemence than any of his previous works.

He really couldn't understand these rejections, so he decided to delve even deeper into the mysterious workings of the creative process. For three months he moved into the British Library on a near-permanent basis, and devoted himself to reading and researching, making his nest at desk 372 of the Rare Books and Music reading room, where there were only a few bookworms and an air of hypnotic stillness. One late afternoon he fell asleep on a quantum-mechanics textbook, and the security guard had to shake him hard to wake him up. Another time he was caught underlining a passage with his pencil. It was his own book he was defacing, but he very nearly got ejected and banned from the library for life.

After this period of profound study, he began to spend long days in bookshops, browsing hundreds of books in a bid to answer this fundamental question: "What is the difference

between a published and an unpublished book?" Is it the quality and originality of its content? Is it the title? The author's fame? The fact that it is printed and bound? That it is sold and read by other people? Jim came to the conclusion that there's no difference between the books that get printed and the infinite number of works that remain unpublished. "The only variable is chance," Jim would argue with himself. "A manuscript landing in front of the right editor at the right time. Sure, it can help to have good contacts among the editorial mafiosi, but a bit of good luck is all it takes." And yet, despite this fatalistic vision of the publishing world, he would still devour the newspapers' book-review pages, drop by the library to read books like *The Writer's Bible* or *How to Grow a Novel*, and scan through the bestsellers' charts trying to draw some conclusions from them.

On the day the *Evening Standard* reported that the Belgian doctor had been extradited after being accused of giving teddy bears and cotton socks to five-year-old boys, something happened to Jim. It was as though all the years of experience, the months of studying and the deep-rooted questioning of what makes a successful book came together in a brilliant fusion of creativity. He locked himself in his room and started dashing off words, inspired by a new, unknown feeling of joy. He carried on for weeks on end, hardly pausing, rarely leaving his room.

And so it was that at 3.45 that morning – in a nondescript West-London flat swallowed up by rows and rows of terraced houses sheltering their sleeping occupants, in the tomb-like silence of his writer's dungeon – the last words of his masterpiece had finally blinked on the screen.

* * *

Jim sprang up in his bed as the front door was slammed shut. He looked around for a few seconds, perplexed, then decided to sink his head back into the pillow. It was probably Janet, his landlady, dashing off to a Tibetan yoga class. Or perhaps Tom, her boyfriend, coming back from his night shift at the post office. What time was it, though? He scratched the tip of his nose, eyes still closed, as a tentacular arm stretched towards the candlewick curtains blacking out the room. Light: there was light outside. He opened one eye and strained to look at his watch, but one of the hands seemed to have fallen off. Then he understood – it was twelve o'clock – and he stretched his jaws in a soundless yawn.

There was an unpleasant smell in the air, something like scrambled eggs. The tentacle gave another little tug at the curtains, letting a white strip of dust into the room. The dim light tentatively explored his figure lying crumpled on a folding bed, the cheap pine furniture huddled in the corners, and the piles of books scattered everywhere – on the floor, on shelves, even under the bed.

Then it all came back to him: his features twisted into a smile that cheese-wired his face in half, and his fists clenched so hard under the duvet that the bed gave off a sinister creaking noise.

"Yes!… *Yes!*…"

Writing "The End" always gave him an intense joy, but the night before, when he had tapped those words on his computer keyboard, he had the definite feeling that this was the novel that was going to yank him out of obscurity and into a successful writing career.

He got out of bed, yawning, and put his ear to the bedroom door. It sounded like no one was in, so he ventured out in his usual tracksuit-trousers and pyjama-jacket nightwear. His kitchen cupboard was as empty as his stomach, and when he opened its door that same rotten smell of scrambled eggs assailed his nostrils. He wondered whether he should check out the other cupboards, but he knew that Janet kept a detailed inventory of the food situation down to the last frozen pea, and that Tom did not take kindly to that kind of liberty. There was nothing for it: he had to get down to the corner shop. Since he was going out, he could also drop by at the post office and order the stamps, and maybe pay a little visit to the library and the bookshop.

In front of the bathroom mirror, shaving himself with a razor blade past its best, he grinned at himself and muttered.

"A bestseller, yeah… a chart-topper…"

Afterwards he sauntered about the flat in his underpants for a while, improvising a little jig and whistling *Aida*'s 'Triumphal March' as he cavorted into his room. He had not felt this happy, this perky, for months. He tugged at the curtains, allowing light to trickle in, and emerged from his room wearing worn-out jeans, a green mock-alpaca jacket and bright-red trainers.

It was a decent day outside, at least by London standards: mild but overcast. Jim hated the English weather, and was sick of the city's eternal pall of cloud. He'd much prefer to live in the south of France or on the Costa del Sol, tapping away on a laptop under the shade of a beach umbrella, sipping at some exotic cocktail on the seafront – but London

was the place to be for an aspiring writer like him, the place where one could make useful contacts and, above all, the centre of the publishing universe. So he didn't plan to move abroad until he had established his name as a writer, which he hoped would be very soon.

Until then, he had to endure the situation a little longer, renting the dismal little room in Janet and Tom's flat. Shepherds Bush was an up-and-coming area, they'd said – well, maybe so, but Jim knew he didn't belong in a place like *Shepherds Bush*… His natural habitat was only a few hundred yards away – beyond the huge roundabout which divided the rich and the poor – in the elegant villas of Holland Park and Notting Hill. So many famous writers lived there – and with a bit of luck he'd soon be catapulted into one of those sumptuous, high-ceilinged houses, among the braying grand people, the glossy posse, the chamber-music quartets, the crystal glasses warbling with Cordon Rouge. Janet and Tom had said that they intended to get married soon, in July or August, and wanted him out. They'd been repeating the same old thing for three years now, but this time it looked as if they were serious, because he had seen them writing invitation cards. God willing, he would be turning his back on the two Irish love birds and Shepherds Bush by the end of the summer.

He put the manuscript in his rucksack, unchained his bicycle from the wrought-iron fence and set off for the Fulham Post Office. On the way, he mulled over which strategy he should use this time for the proposal to publishers and agents.

* * *

Charles Randall, the editorial director of Tetragon Press, had had a dreadful weekend. The head of a small but prestigious independent publishing house that had somehow managed to survive – even if in a state of continuous near-bankruptcy – for thirty years in a fragile shell of literary quality despite the crushing advance of the corporate giants, he had decided to take some work home over the weekend: a handful of submissions to read, a script to be edited and a couple of galleys to be proofed. But once he'd got home, the mere sight of piles and piles of books, papers, catalogues, letters, bills and other rubbish had drained his will to live.

His lank figure had collapsed into a dusty old sofa, also covered with unspecified paper trash, and his gaze had wandered into the void as he looked through thick lenses encrusted with little white dots. He had retraced the entire arc of his existence, and had lingered on a distant, slightly blurred point, from which emerged the image of a young university student with long hair and an unkempt beard, a poet full of dreams and ideals who used to print political flyers and poetry pamphlets with an old hand-cranked cyclostyle. Then the beard disappeared, the hair became shorter and withdrew around the temples, and a pair of black-framed glasses sprang up onto his nose. Now he was sitting behind a desk in a tiny room in the basement of a run-down property in South-East London, surrounded by heaps of paper and books, with an ancient telephone that rattled the furniture when it rang. Newspaper clippings began to float around him: the first reviews, the first interviews. Then a femme fatale with long auburn hair, a volcano of sensuality

and passion, entered the scene. And all of a sudden his desk flew into an elegant Mayfair reception room, papers and books disappeared, to be replaced by dozens of hunching, tottering figures who were gossiping whilst sipping wine and champagne in the dim smoky light. Some of those figures lit up momentarily with a halo of sanctity, showing the faces of famous poets and novelists, Nobel Prize winners, journalists and critics of a generation now forgotten. The auburn-haired woman was then spirited away by a Paris train, and a grey-haired forty-something reappeared in a dark office on the Southbank, submerged by cardboard boxes, books and other clutter, which sedimented around him. After that, a lanky figure began to run from the door of his flat to the station, catching the train at the last minute, arriving at the office, gulping down a cup of instant coffee, and then proofs, manuscripts, coffee, deadlines, phone calls, coffee, meetings, invoices, book covers, coffee – and the same lanky figure put on his coat and ran to the station again, for ten years in a row, until his hairline receded to reveal a shiny bald pate, his remaining hair went hoary, the lenses in his glasses thickened, his clothes got shabbier and mangy.

When he came to on that Friday evening, he found himself holed up in his lower-ground-floor London flat, surrounded and oppressed by the printed word. So he had grabbed a bottle of Cabernet and… had descended into a calamitous bender, waking up on the Monday morning with three-day stubble, his shirt tails flapping over his open flies and his tie lapping his back. One hour behind schedule, he had just enough time to shave and force himself under a cold shower, then he dashed off to the station with long, desperate strides, his briefcase bulging with books and paperwork.

The minute he stepped into the office, he had to face the ghost-like appearance of Pippa, his new editorial assistant. This "great addition to the team" had been ratified from above… at the time when the *above* was created above him, a few months ago.

"Nick Tinsley has been waiting for half an hour."

"Brrnnff," grunted Charles.

"What?"

"Cof-fee!"

Pippa wrinkled her nose, turned round and waddled to the kitchenette, leaving a strange trail of garlic behind her.

"What the heck do these girls eat in the morning?" thought Charles, shaking his head and striding along the corridor towards his little room.

Nick Tinsley, aka the Shark, was waiting for him there, sprawling on a fold-back chair, absorbed in the sports pages of his *FT*. In front of him, on Charles's desk, lay a fuming mug of black tea.

"A-ha!" The publishing consultant sprang up and stretched out his hand. "Good *moorning*. How are we today?"

"Trrnff," replied Charles, turning over his hand and stretching out three fingers in a kind of Masonic greeting gesture.

Nick squeezed the three fingers for a second, then let them slip away and, performing a half-pirouette, sucked in his paunch to let Charles pass between him and the wall.

"Everything all right?" added Nick, folding his newspaper and putting it back into his briefcase, whilst Charles trudged past another fold-back chair and struggled to sit down on the black-leather chair wedged between his desk and the wall.

"Everything in the garden is lovely," Charles mumbled, letting his case drop heavily on the floor. "Lov-eh-ly," he repeated, pretending to sort out some heaps of paper scattered on his desk, without deigning to grant the Shark a single glance.

Nick mustered a strained smile. He'd grown inured to this kind of childish strop. Sometimes the directors of a company would be as meek as lambs, sometimes they would stamp their feet on the ground and shout and scream. It was natural. Sure, it wasn't nice having to announce to fifty people, or even to five people, that they would be losing their jobs within a week. And it wasn't nice having to sack the founder or the managing director of a company for being surplus to requirements. But that was part of his job. And there was no task which was too awkward for him. As he loved to repeat: "Shit always goes to the top". And this, perhaps the highest philosophical concept that he would ever express in his long career as a company butcher, had almost become his motto.

"Well, Charles, have you done your homework?" Nick's smile had turned into a grimace.

Their eyes finally met, and they stared at each other for a few moments. Charles and Nick were almost the same age, although the former looked at least fifteen years older than the latter. Yet the publishing consultant had a bad habit of talking to Charles with an openly patronizing tone, to emphasize the new hierarchies that had been put in place at Tetragon Press.

"No."

"What do you mean '*no*'?"

"No. I didn't have time, I had other things to do," Charles shifted his gaze onto an old submission, which after a quick

glance ended up in the bin under his desk. "Someone has to see the books through to publication… mmm."

"Look, perhaps I haven't been clear enough." Nick straightened up in his chair. "If you don't start engaging with the new situation, there will be no more publications, all right? From now on, everything must be approved by myself: from expenses to print runs and discounts."

"What about the titles?" Charles threw in casually, still looking away, and busying himself with pencil and sharpener.

"No, not the titles, for the time being – but the days of Hungarian and Chilean poets are over."

"Bolivian."

"You know what I mean. The idea is that we give you a little leeway with the editorial choices, and in return…"

"You give *me*? Oh, so who is giving *me* 'a little leeway'?… I thought I was still the MD of this company… I won't let an accountant and… and—"

"Then it's true," Nick interrupted him, "it's true what Roger says – you still haven't got to grips with how things work here…" and he snorted in irritation, turning his face to the wall for a moment. "It's very simple: if you want to keep the business afloat, if you want to carry on printing your nice little books, you have to let us do our job. We need cooperation. Is that asking too much? You should consider yourself lucky that with all the debts you've accrued you've found someone who's taking on the risk—"

"I am not going to pull Naruszewicz's book, that's for sure," said Charles. "And we are not going to print our books on toilet paper."

"We'll discuss this later."

"No, we'll discuss nothing."

"Listen to this: next week we'll sit around this desk – Roger, you and me – and we'll go through all the titles for next—"

"Next week I won't even bother to come to the office, and you'll have to do everything yourself… You'll sit here, on this chair, and you'll start reading the books, editing the texts and proofreading them…" And he slammed four fingers on the only empty space in front of him.

Pippa came in with a cup of coffee, a mock-polite grimace clotting her washed-out face. She left the cup on a book blotched by circular tea stains, and before leaving the room she made a sudden turn and hissed:

"Holly called this morning, she can't come in… She's got a migraine…" and making another sharp turn she waddled out of the room.

"Prnnfff," Charles grumbled, shaking his head.

"What's that?" said Nick.

Charles gave a shrug.

"What's wrong with the girls these days? What kind of names are these? Pippa… Holly… Where do you find them?"

The Shark seemed to smile for a moment.

"Right… can we start talking business here? We haven't made a penny since I walked in."

Charles stifled a curse.

Nick opened a slim folder labelled TP and pulled out a couple of sheets of paper. "So, for example…" he murmured, with a patient tone of voice. "I understand these are the expenses for last quarter's titles… mmm… what's this?" and he pointed to a minute box in a huge spreadsheet he had in front of him.

"What?" said Charles.

"What is *this*?"

"What, that?… I don't know… What's that?… What is it?…" Charles showed a sudden interest in the first sheet of paper he could get hold of. "That one is…" – he cast a sidelong glance – "that one is the expense for… second proofs of—"

"*Second* proofs?!" snarled Nick. "Second proofs? Are you joking? This isn't bloody Random House – we didn't publish Ruth Rendell or Dan Brown last month, did we?"

"Actually at Random House…"

"This is bad… this is really bad…" and this time it was the Shark who slammed his fist on the desk, making Charles jolt back in apprehension. "You must get it into your head that this is a company, not a charity… At the end of the day what matters is the bottom line, the sales, the costings, the forecasts, the budget, the cash flow, the margins…"

"The page margins?"

"Listen," Nick continued, after a good long shaking of his head. "Listen… I'm here to help you, all right? Is that clear? Someone else in my place would have kicked you out a long time ago, OK? I am your best friend here, do you understand?"

"Well, Nick…" – he pulled out his glasses and scratched the bridge of his nose – "…it doesn't work like that, you know? Not here…"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for good or for bad I've kept this business afloat for thirty years, you know? I've seen all sorts of things, I've seen a lot of people come and go… and you can't just turn up here with a business card saying 'Publishing Consultant' and expect me to spring to attention… I've published more

than five hundred books, including a couple of Nobel Prize winners, so I've got a little bit of experience myself. It's easy to come from God knows where and terrorize people with numbers and the spectre of bankruptcy…"

"Look, if I'm here today, it's not to advance your interests or mine. I'm here because I represent the interests of the majority shareholders, OK? I don't give a damn if you publish a book by Tom or Dick – or Harry. I don't give a toss if you win the Nobel Prize or an Olympic medal: all I care about is that at the end of the year I can go to Mr Goosen and tell him: 'The company has made such and such profits…' 'Who is the editorial director? What books have been published? Which paper was used?' 'I don't know, I don't give a damn – but here are the profits…' Do you understand?"

The telephone rang.

A few seconds later Pippa peered through the doorway and announced, raising her eyebrows:

"Craig Mortimer for you."

"Craig Mortimer?" Charles turned this over in his mind for a moment. The name didn't ring a bell.

"Oh *yes*, Craig Mortimer… yes, yes, put him through…" With an apologetic gesture, Charles picked up the phone and selected line one, under Nick's withering gaze.

"Hello?"

From the other end of the line emerged a confused stammering, and the story of a manuscript sent the previous week…

"Mm-uh, mm-uh…"

"I mean, I know you must be very busy… but, er… I just wanted to check… that you got it… that's all…"

"Mm-uh…" Charles's glance landed on a babel-like heap of submissions hidden in the corner of the room, then intercepted the bloodshot eyes of the Shark, who snorted ostentatiously, fished out his *FT* again and opened it.

"The novel… the novel I sent you… no hurry of course, but… when do you think you'll be able to… I mean… there may be interest from other publishers and…"

"Mm-uh, mm-uh…" Charles looked around again in despair: everywhere paper, paper, paper… Words, words, words… Money, money, money… Numbers, numbers, numbers… The struggle for survival… everyone for himself…

The Shark raised his eyes abruptly and produced a cracking noise as he snapped the newspaper wide open at a new page.

Charles signalled to him with his index finger that he'd be only another minute, just another minute… And as Nick, clenching his teeth, went back to his newspaper, Charles let his index finger fold back down whilst raising the middle finger at the same time, in a gesture of protest which had been used many years ago by the long-haired young man, that young idealist still lodged in some unfathomable recess of his soul.

"Turd," thought Charles.

"The fun is over, pal… time's up…" thought the Shark, pretending to read.

* * *