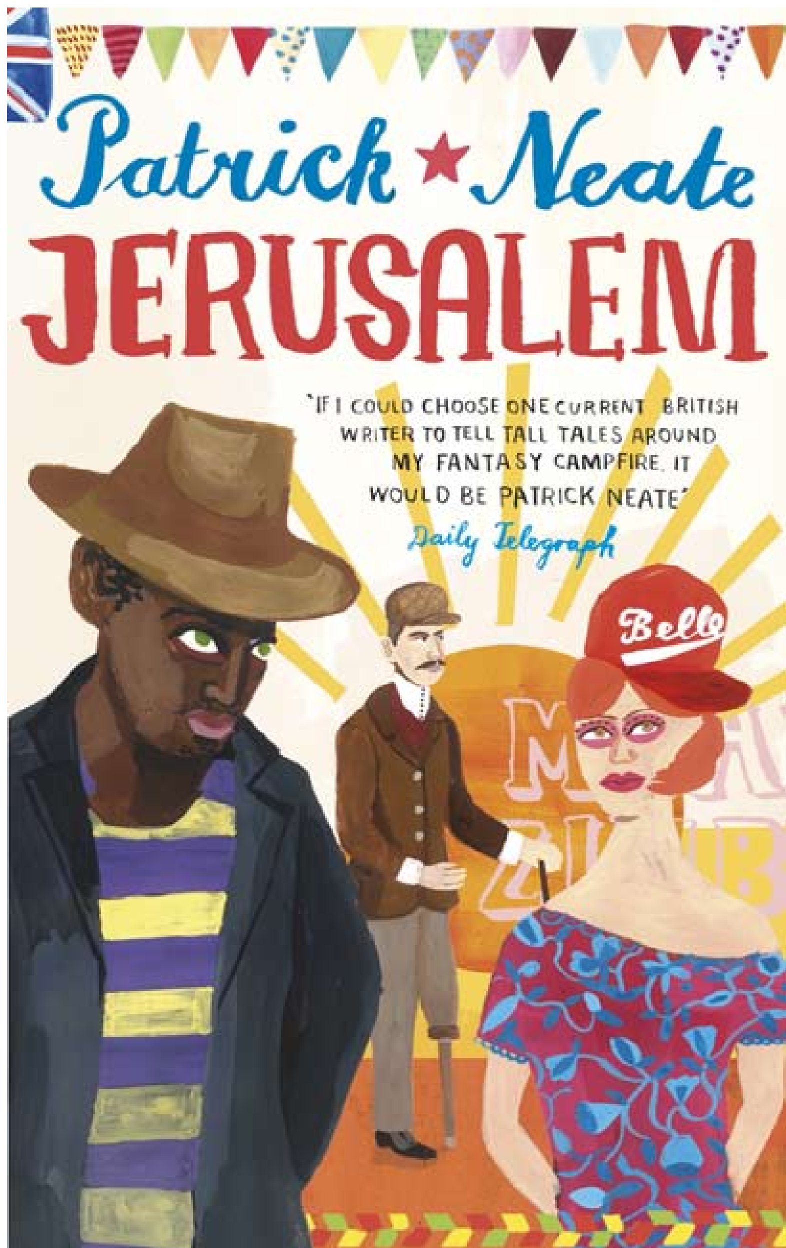

www.penguin.co.uk/tasters

Jerusalem
by
Patrick Neate

Copyright © Patrick Neate, 2009

All rights reserved

Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from
Jerusalem

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

Part one: And did those feet . . .

I

```
Insert document
'The diary of a local gentleman',
21 August 1900 (Empire Museum, Bristol), anon.
```

It is strange to me that I should feel compelled to begin a journal only on the eve of my departure from this God-forsaken place where, truth be told, no civilized man should ever have made his home (and increasingly, I fear, none did). How can I explain myself? Let me just say that this conflict has not lacked for chronicles and, for my part, I have been paralysed by the most peculiar funk.

Although I make no claims to valour, many have been made on my behalf. So, should my words be read at some future time by Mother, Father, Catherine or, God willing, my child or grandchild, it is important that they – that is to say, 'you' – should not consider me coward either, for this is not that sort of confession. You must believe that I have served Queen and country as I always meant to, with every muscle in my body, every facet of my wit and wholehearted passion. Ask any who served under me and they will tell you the same. Indeed, examine my record and you will see I was offered invalid's passage home three months since, but refused it that I might take up this grim post at Standmere.

For my actions at Paardeberg, some called me a hero. But they were not true military men who know the chaos of battle and the unpredictability of the desperate human spirit. Find a dozen sweats to tell you about a hero and you may be surprised to hear as many different descriptions. One may tell you about a fine fellow who was one of the first to fall to

a Mauser's bullet; another, a reckless type who hadn't the imagination to think himself a fool. But, should you ask a real old fundi, he'll tell you that bravery is short-lived, fear a constant companion and that the greatest challenge facing any hero is to leave heroism behind, to reject coarse lusts in favour of the subtle sympathies prerequisite in a man of God, science and peace.

For my part, of course, I can only tell you what I know, which is this: he is a hero who confronts the truth honestly, off the battlefield as well as on it, who looks terror squarely in the eye and is man enough to recognize the face that stares back at him as none other than his own. It would be remiss, and render this journal unworthy, therefore, if I did not admit that I have been fearful, impotent even, to record the true horror of this place and the dark reflection it throws upon myself, my superiors and the whole of Her Majesty's great Empire. To do so now is my only hope of respite and redemption.

My initial intention for this journal is simply to record some of what I have witnessed. Perhaps that is all I will manage. My wound is festering and Nurse O'Brian – a fine Irish lass but no medic – fears the infection may spread with fatal consequence before I can reach a Cape surgeon. I must confess I am not unduly perturbed by this and I am prepared to abandon myself to Fate (for there's no evidence of our Lord's presence here) – such is my mind. Indeed, I have come to regard the state of my gammy leg as metaphoric of this whole bloody mess. As my wound is to me, so is this war to the Empire. It was initially painful but no more than that. Now, through a lack of care, competence and conscience, it may yet threaten life itself.

If Fate does indeed spare me, however, and carries me home on the breath of its mockery, I believe I must use this journal to begin a thorough investigation of the English nature. It was Kipling who wrote, 'What should they know

of England who only England know?' Never before have I felt the import of a general question so personally.

I am a proud subject of a great nation, a nation that has built the widest Empire man has seen and brought civilization, Christianity and prosperity to every territory it touches. Such achievements would surely not have been possible without the distinctive attributes of the English character: singularity of purpose, rigour of planning, compassion for the unfortunate and humility before God. And yet here at Standmere, I see no evidence of purpose, planning, compassion or humility, only chaos and inhumanity.

In my despair, I have spent some time considering the customs of the kaffir. For all his savagery and heathenism, there is much to admire. His society, for example, is organized on a principle he calls 'umbuntu', which means, I am told, 'we are people through each other'. I cannot express how painful it was for me to hear such simplicity! For I fear that in this place we have become less than human, less even than the Negro.

When I return home, therefore, I will

[Fire damage has rendered the following two pages of the journal illegible]

but it was the thirst that was most terrible.

I have always been the hardy sort and I managed better than many, though my throat was painfully parched and my tongue cracked and blistered. But some of my men were awfully afflicted with blindness and fever and some even took to drinking their own water, a copper-brown colour and noisome too.

If you thought about it an instant, this battle swiftly highlighted the absurdities of human conflict. There were Cronje's Boers on one bank of the Modder and here were we on the other, both sides half crazed with thirst as a thousand

gallons passed between us every second beneath the crack of the guns.

By the evening of 20 February it was insufferable. We had already lost more than a hundred men and the enemy about the same, but it was water that dominated our every waking thought and the increasing frenzy of our dreams in snatched moments of sleep. I had my men on half rations and they must have been hungry but none had the saliva to swallow even half an ounce of biscuit. Such thirst leads to a certain kind of mania and it was in such a state that I decided I'd prefer to die sated than shrivelled. I summoned Macintosh to my quarters and had him rustle up a dozen canteens. Honestly expecting failure, I did not tell the men what ruse I had planned, but my sergeant was keen as mustard from the off – the wholehearted, instinctive sort who seems perennially primed for a spot of derring-do.

The moonlight might have been daylight to Mac and me, the way our hearts raced, but we made it to the riverbank easily enough and began to fill the canteens one by one. We could hear the enemy on the other side, yapping in that guttural way of theirs. I was quite sure we'd be seen but Mac was calmness personified and we had those tins brimming in no time. Only then did we realize that lugging twelve up a steep ridge between the pair of us was a task to challenge Hercules.

Mac hissed that we should leave four behind but, in my crazed state, I could not agree. What was going through my mind was this: my men would be back in the thick of it at first light, killing and being killed, and I couldn't stand to see another fall in silence, the howl of his soul strangled in his dehydrated throat. If my men wanted to scream, they would scream.

We would have made it had I not tripped at the very top of the ridge and dropped one canteen that bounced noisily down the slope. Mac reached down for me and pulled me up

with those thick pig-farmer's arms that had spent a lifetime hauling swine from one pen to another. But the bullets were already flying and one bit into my left shoulder and another into my left calf.

As God is my witness, I would have happily lain down to die with nothing for company but a drink of water, but Mac dragged me up saying, 'Come on, sir. Not far now.' So, I stumbled all the way back to camp, still carrying five canteens, blind with pain but fearful that, if I fell, I must suffer the indignity of returning to my men under the arm of a giant Scotsman, squealing like a piglet.

The men made quite a fuss of us that night as they drank their fill. My sergeant recounted the story a dozen times, embellishing my bravery a little more and ignoring his own with each telling. The next morning I was stretchered out on the convoy for Bloemfontein leaving my chaps in the care of a well-intentioned but green young fellow by the name of Hay. I heard later that he was dead before sunset.

Before Paardeberg was won we lost a further

[Again, fire damage has rendered the following three and a half pages of the journal illegible]

It is true that Ackerman told me on the day I arrived here at Standmere that I could make any changes I saw fit. He told me this is his house, which is the only permanent building on the site and whose four walls I have rarely seen him leave. His exact words were, 'Policy is to leave the women and their tykes to get on with it and that's exactly what I do. If you fancy a tad of do-gooding, go and do good but, if you ask me, you're wasting your time. We call them refugees but frankly they're worse than kaffirs and they don't speak a word of English.'

He was right, of course, because I have been wasting my time, although not for the reasons he gave me. These

women and children – women and children! – have been treated like dogs, but there is nothing I can do. It was not my decision to build this camp on land that is no better than swamp where insects rule throughout the day spreading numerous hideous diseases. It was not my decision to house these people under perished canvas, rejected by the army, that lets the icy night wind whip through. It was not my decision to appoint one nurse for a thousand-strong population and to equip her with nothing but her own goodwill. It was not my decision to deny these people fresh vegetables and milk, and to provide meat that is already live with maggots. It was not my decision to assign the dregs of the British Army to police this Hades, or that they should have dug the latrines no more than ten yards from the sleeping tents. These were not my decisions but their consequences are unfolding under my jurisdiction and I am sickened.

I have made my protests through the chain of command and I have heard nothing. I have myself witnessed at least twenty infants under eight years old starve to death, twenty more who will do so within a week. And, for my pride and with my shame, I have turned away an American journalist who came to report on these terrible conditions. Was this the action of a hero?

My own fever is now rising and I must stop writing before my nightly delirium overwhelms me. My left leg is numb and I am too fearful to look beneath the dressing. I leave at dawn and it cannot come soon enough. I conclude, therefore, with one thought: this – this *nightmare* – is now all I know of Empire and, for the first time in my life, I am loath to call myself an Englishman. May God forgive me.

2
Prisoner 118

Queenstown, Republic of Zambawi, 2008

The guards frog-marched the new recruit along the dark corridor, their boots echoing a portentous rhythm on the concrete. The shift captain took the lead and four of his men boxed the recruit in a tight formation. The recruit didn't resist, but there was a slight catch in his stride as if he couldn't quite keep time or, perhaps, he was tempted to break rank at any second and run for it. Each man marched with his left arm ticking and his right hand fixed to the ball of the knobkerrie at his waist. None of them spoke. Nothing could be heard but the regular beat of their footsteps, the syncopated jangle of the heavy bunches of keys on their hips and the occasional drip of water from the ceiling.

The four old hands could easily be identified by their scruffy uniforms. But even if you'd caught only the briefest glimpse of their faces, you'd most likely have recognized a commonality: their expressions were like blank pieces of paper, the only distinguishing feature a slight but perceptible sleepiness at the eyes. The new recruit, on the other hand, was pristine. His grey shirt was buttoned to the collar beneath his clean navy tie with the initials 'ZPS' stitched in silver, his shoes were mirror polished and the creases in his trousers marked both his eagerness and uncertainty. His mouth was dry but his lips were wet and shiny and his expression wide-eyed. He looked as if he'd just been unwrapped.

Half an hour ago, the recruit had stood to attention in the governor's office while the others loitered outside, peering through the frosted glass, smoking cigarettes and discussing

their new colleague. 'He looks English, this guy,' one remarked. 'Full of good intentions and bad ideas.'

Another shook his head. 'He'll learn.'

The recruit was twenty-one years old and had only recently left the technical college with a mediocre diploma in education. He had applied for two dozen posts in schools across the country but, due to government cutbacks, there were now far fewer vacancies than teachers qualified to fill them. The only alternative then open to the young man had been to try the NGO schools, but these were almost exclusively staffed by foreigners. These foreigners were either recklessly overqualified and recklessly overpaid in foreign currency into foreign bank accounts, or they were volunteers with mediocre certificates but, it seemed, no need of a living wage. Typically, the only position open to locals, therefore, was to teach the foreign teachers how to say 'please' and 'thank you' and 'no, I don't want any'.

Such a position was never going to provide adequate income for a young man who was the only breadwinner at his parents' house and had a new wife who was eight months of the way through a problematic pregnancy. So, eventually, this young man had applied to the prison service, which, though similarly afflicted by cutbacks, had not enjoyed the same influx of helpful foreigners. His acceptance had been a relief and he was determined to make the best of it.

The guards stopped outside the iron door at the far end of the corridor. This wing of the prison wasn't like the others the recruit had seen on his brief orientation tour the previous week. Whereas the rest were made up of large, communal units with forty or fifty inmates crammed into each, this one consisted of a dozen two-person cells designated for 'special cases' (typically miscreants held by presidential decree). At present, only two of these cells were occupied. At the other end of the corridor, the first on the right held a short, fat, bald *musungu* who showed few signs of losing weight despite a diet

that consisted of little more than righteous indignation. The second was this last cell, which held . . . Well, if the rumours were true, it held a one-time national hero whose name had long been synonymous with the Second Revolution and the President's own.

The recruit's heart was drumming so hard and so fast against his chest that he wasn't sure he could hear anything above it. The air at this end of the corridor was thick with some odour that he was struggling to identify. There was the usual stink of sweat and shit and piss, of course, but mingled with this was something else; something he couldn't name and which was, therefore, terrifying. He turned to the shift captain (whose bright idea this initiation had been) and asked, 'What's that smell, sir?'

The captain, a great bear of a man with dark skin and pinprick eyes, spoke flatly: 'You'll find out soon enough.'

The next thing the recruit knew, his colleagues had grabbed him by the arms and shoulders and thrust him against the cell door. Then the captain reached in front of his face and, with one huge, fleshy hand, grasped the handle of the steel hatch and pulled it back while the other pushed the recruit's face towards the metal grille. 'See for yourself!' the captain whispered.

The recruit looked. His breathing was quick and shallow. The cell was gloomy and his eyes struggled to adjust. The mysterious smell was stronger than ever and filled his nostrils, making his eyes water. The light from the hatch cast a stripe across the cell floor but at first, outside that narrow sector, he couldn't see a single thing.

Then, slowly, he began to make out what had to be a human form: the prisoner, squatting in one corner. The recruit struggled to free himself but the hands and the weight of the bodies against him held him in place. A strange object protruded into the narrow strip of light that bisected the cell. The recruit stared at it. He couldn't make out what it was but

it was a rough oblong shape and it was filthy and it appeared to be attached to a thin stick. The recruit tried to lick his lips but his tongue was heavy and dry.

Then the prisoner spoke: 'Have you a good view, Simeon Matete?' The voice had a deep and musical quality.

The recruit blinked. 'How do you know my name?' he asked. By comparison his own voice sounded thin, high-pitched and insubstantial, like the whistle of a half-blocked nose.

His question provoked a rumbling chuckle from the cell. 'I know lots of things,' the prisoner said. 'Many of them for reasons that you would not understand. In this case, however, Captain Makuvitse was kind enough to furnish me with your details. Despite appearances, the captain is a decent man who likes to keep me abreast of the situation. I suspect he is following orders. I suspect our president, although he has no intention to forgive me, does not want his old friend to rot in this hell-hole. Indeed, were it not for Makuvitse's ministrations, my poor wounded foot would have turned gangrenous and dropped off by now.'

Next to him, Simeon the recruit heard one of the other guards murmur, 'He's lucid today.'

Even if he'd had ears like a bat, the prisoner surely couldn't have heard this. Nonetheless, he now addressed the guard who'd spoken as if it were a conversation. 'Edwin Vumba! My friend! Your ongoing concern is endlessly touching. But you needn't worry. I am always lucid. Even in the dark a mirror reflects, you know.'

Suddenly Simeon saw a hand emerge into the shaft of light, holding what appeared to be a paintbrush. The strange smell intensified again. The hand started to dab gingerly at the rough oblong shape at the end of the stick. Suddenly, in a simultaneous rush of understanding, Simeon identified the nature of the smell, the stick and the rough oblong shape: the smell was iodine, the stick was an inhumanly wasted lower

leg, the rough oblong shape a toeless foot. Suddenly Simeon could make out the tiny bud-like stumps where the toes had once been. His throat constricted and he gagged, spluttering loudly.

'Simeon Matete!' the prisoner exclaimed, amused and derisory. 'You'll have to toughen up if you're to work in a place like this. With or without toes, my foot is still my foot and still attached to my leg. Although I wish the flies and rats would get the message.' Then, to the shift captain, 'Makuvitse! Is this now the benchmark for your recruits? It's a bad sign, my friend.' Then, to himself, 'Iodine is a colonial miracle. Are we expected to pretend otherwise? I said as much to the –'

The voice cut out as if someone had hit the off switch and the leg and foot retracted into the shadows. The abrupt silence caught Simeon by surprise and he pressed his face harder against the grille to try to make out what was going on. No sooner had he done so than he tried to pull away again but there were still hands forcing him to watch. The prisoner had now leapt to his feet and begun manically to stalk the cell in small circles, his damaged foot thrust out to one side.

Every second or two, the prisoner passed into the shaft of light by the door and Simeon caught sight of his face in momentary glimpses through the dreadlocks that whipped about it. Simeon spotted wild eyes, thick lips, gaunt cheeks and a peculiar flawless, almost childlike complexion. 'What's he doing?' Simeon murmured.

But before any of the other guards could choose to answer, the prisoner began to speak again, only this time the voice that emanated from his mouth was indisputably not his own. This voice came fast, clipped and insistent. Most of all, though, it came speaking an arcane English that Simeon struggled to understand.

'Look here!' the prisoner declared. 'Read for yourself! "The danger is not less real because it is imaginary. Imagination acts

upon a man as really as gravitation, and may kill him as certainly as a dose of prussic acid!" Read it! Read it!'

Simeon watched, terrified but transfixed. He recognized possession, of course, and he'd heard of mediums giving voice to any manner of totem ancestor. But to witness a spirit medium (not only that, but the most famous *zakulu* in the country) speak like this was incomprehensible. What could it mean?

With the final 'Read it!', the prisoner had buckled at the knees and collapsed beneath the door so that he was obscured from Simeon's view. The hands that had been holding him in place finally relaxed and he was able to take a step back. He turned to look at the shift captain. Makuvitse's expression was inscrutable. Simeon said, 'That's Comrade –'

'*That*,' the captain interrupted, 'is Prisoner 118 and that is the only way he is to be addressed: "Prisoner 118" or simply "118". This is a penal institution, Matete, and there's a lot of madness. Some of our guests are here because they are mad and some are mad because they are here, but that is precisely why we have regulations that apply to all men equally. Prisoner 118, however, is a special case. He will tell you all kinds of strange things and it is your duty to report them to me. That's the order from the governor and it is, shall we say?, the exception that proves the rule about our rules. Are we clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then we'll get back to work.'

With that, the captain spun on his heels and made to march back down the corridor.

Simeon turned to the cell door to close the hatch but he found the prisoner's face now pressed up against the grille. 'Simeon Matete!' Prisoner 118 hissed. 'I have something to tell you.' His own bass tone had returned and the sound of his voice had stopped the captain in his tracks. 'Come close!' he insisted.

Simeon hesitated, but at Makuvitse's signal he pressed his

ear to the grille. The *zakulu*'s voice was like hot wax slowly filling his head. He closed his eyes and listened.

He stood like that – eyes shut, a little stooped, head inclined – for a full five minutes. Then he opened his eyes, stepped away from the door and slid the hatch shut. He stuck an index finger in the ear that had been pressed to the grille and gave it a quick wiggle. He looked as if he'd just woken up.

Makuvitse was watching him with his eyebrows raised. 'Well?'

'Sir?'

'What did he say?'

'He asked for a book, sir.'

'118 wants another book? No surprises there. What book?'

'*The Golden Bough*, sir. By a man called Frazer. He says it's an old book, sir.'

The captain produced a small notebook from his breast pocket and jotted this down. 'And?'

'And he wants some painkillers, sir. He said the iodine may stop the infection but do you realize that he's in agony? He says he wants some high-strength ibuprofen, which you can buy in the expat pharmacy at the Alliance Française on Machel.'

The captain wrote this down too. 'And?'

'And what?'

'He was talking to you a long time, Matete. What else did he say?'

Simeon took a deep breath. 'He said that my wife has gone into labour, sir.'

'I thought she was still a month away.'

'She is, sir. Or, at least, she is supposed to be. But Comrade . . . sorry . . . Prisoner 118 said that I'm going to have a son. He said that my wife will be scared because he will be born small and short of breath. He said I must reassure her that this is only because the child is eager to get on with things and it's generally a good sign. He said . . .' Simeon hesitated.

'Yes?'

'He said I must call the child John Kipling Matete that I might never take him for granted, but never be afraid to let him go. He said that, in the long run, Sibongile and I would be quite OK.'

'Sibongile?'

'My wife, sir.'

'Never be afraid to let him go?'

'That's what he said, sir.' The shift captain wrote all this down. 'And that was about it,' Simeon concluded.

'What do you mean "that was *about it*"? I told you, Matete, I need to know exactly what he said.'

'Exactly?'

'Exactly.'

'Well, sir . . . *Exactly* . . . that is to say, exactly as I recall . . . he said, "The first illness John will suffer as an infant, Simeon Matete, is a nasty dose of glue ear. When that happens, it will be cured immediately if you spit in his ear like this." '

'Like what?'

'Then he spat in my ear, sir.'

Makuvitse looked at Simeon steadily for a moment and said, 'Very good,' closed his notebook and returned it to his breast pocket. Then he smiled broadly. It was the first time Simeon had seen his superior's teeth and they were horribly misshapen and crooked, jutting from his gums at all sorts of angles. But, in Simeon's opinion, the expression made him look almost like a human being for the first time. 'You have a son,' Makuvitse said, as if he'd never heard anything quite so surprising.

'That's what he said, sir.'

The captain nodded briskly. 'Congratulations, Matete. Congratulations.'

3
Authenticity™

London, England, 2008

The Authenticity™ core team was gathered around the table in the timber and canvas yurt that acted as a meeting room in the company's open-plan office in Old Street, London. They were all talking at once, but their boss wasn't listening, which was unusual.

Preston Pinner, a.k.a. '2P™' a.k.a. 'Tuppence™', often said that he'd made his fortune 'just listening and watching'. This was euphemistic and an attempt at self-deprecation. Because Preston didn't just listen: he devoured variations of accent and dialect, chewed on nuances of tone and vocabulary and, frequently, knew what someone meant a whole lot better than they did. He didn't just watch: he dissected expressions, peeled away mannerisms (whether cultural, contextual, culturally contextual or plain vain) and picked apart fashion. Preston had a party trick: he could look at anyone in any context and tell you exactly where they'd bought each item of their clothing, how much they'd paid and, even, their motivations for the purchase. He didn't just watch and listen, he *engaged*.

The use of the word 'engage' to mean 'connect with a person or idea' is thoroughly modern. Ironically, perhaps, this usage often accompanies the absence of the practice. People didn't 'engage' before 1990, they listened and watched. Now, however, they claimed to engage precisely because they did neither. It was the new rule of engagement, and Preston was the exception that proved it.

In fact, when Preston founded Authenticity™, the slogan 'We engage so you don't have to' was printed across the first

batch of company stationery. Only later was this replaced by the more nebulous, not to say, meaningless, 'Authenticity™: keeping it really real'. In fact, he had a couple of mottoes. One was, 'The guy with a good idea is only half as important as the guy who recognizes it.' The other, 'Don't worry about what *you* think they need, engage with what *they* think they want.'

It is safe to say, therefore, that Preston recognized the value of listening, watching, *engagement*. But he wasn't engaged right now – or, at least, not in the way he should have been.

Jodie was talking about 'The Game', the nationwide 'urban talent' competition that Authenticity™ had been running in partnership with a mobile-phone network. Regional heats were due to culminate in a televised live final, the winner to be awarded a place on the A-List™, have their track distributed as a downloadable ringtone and be granted the opportunity to perform within the Authenticity™-programmed slot of 'Africa Unite', the government-sponsored music festival that was planned for the climax of the year-long African Authority project.

The Game's early rounds had been a triumph of media exposure, but now it seemed Authenticity™ had hit a snag. According to their partners, Jodie explained, some of the regional winners – MCs, vocalists and producers – were just 'not urban enough' while others were, frankly, 'too urban'.

This provoked a lot of laughter around the table and then a heated discussion as to what exactly the sponsors could mean. The hubbub rose and the meeting was in danger of splintering into half a dozen separate discussions until Errol cut to the chase. 'Fuck it!' he spat. 'We all *know* what they mean. They mean that the white kids what won is too fucking white and the black kids what won is too fucking black, you get me? Urban? It's bullshit, man. Total racist bullshit. Press? Tupps? Tell 'em, bruv.'

The round table was silenced by Errol's impassioned out-

burst. Unfortunately Preston wasn't engaged. The yurt's canvas was rolled back and his attention was fixed on the muted, big-screen plasma HD on the far side of the office. It was showing twenty-four-hour news and his dad, the junior Foreign Office minister, David Pinner, appeared to be addressing a press conference. There was a standfirst bar across the bottom of the screen that he could barely make out. He had to strain his eyes and read it a couple of times to make sure he'd got it right – 'Prominent UK businessman arrested in Zambawi'.

Zambawi? Preston had barely heard of the place. He racked his brains. Was that the one famous for blood diamonds or weed, for genocide or famine? Frankly, like most non-Western places, it only existed for Preston in the broadest brushstrokes, coloured in by GCSE geography. It might as well have been one of those rogue Middle Eastern states Hollywood invented so the latest muscle-bound action hero could go and rescue it from some or other oppressive regime, or one of those Bosnian towns with names like bad Scrabble hands in which his old man had taken such interest in the mid-nineties. Though Preston had made his fortune engaging, he rarely engaged with the serious news.

He watched his dad now. He couldn't lip-read but he was sure he could follow every word. He watched the minister's mouth form the word 'outrage' and then, surely, the phrases 'strongest possible terms' and 'highest possible level'.

Preston blinked. The language might have been predictable but he was fascinated nonetheless; fascinated especially by his dad's extraordinary equine features, which, as he fielded questions, managed simultaneously to convey utter conviction and a certain wounded vulnerability.

In the media, David Pinner's appearance was frequently compared to that of an English film star, not any film star in particular but different ones by different journalists at different times, suggesting there was something archetypal about him.

He was granted epithets like 'elegant' or 'dashing', presumably because he was tall and slender and allowed his thick mane to grow long. Preston, who was shortish and thickset and cropped his hair to zero, couldn't see it, perhaps because any genes he and his father shared seemed to be concentrated in their faces.

When Preston considered his old man's long, thin nose, therefore, he saw something preposterous that only supported his reservations about his own appearance. He had once read that a man's nose kept growing into adulthood and he was terrified that this was the monstrosity he might soon expect. More than that, though, he was worried that he'd inherited his dad's mouth, with those peculiarly motile lips and tombstone teeth. As far as Preston was concerned, the minister resembled a horse, and not some noble beast like Red Rum or Black Bess but a nag that poked his head dopily over a five-bar gate: his dad was Mister Ed.

'Tupps! *Tupps!*'

'What?' Preston looked at Errol.

'What do we do?'

'About what?'

'About The Game, man. The winners ain't urban enough. The winners is too urban. Like I said, man, it's racist bullshit.'

'Yeah, Errol,' Jodie interjected. 'That's great. But the point is, what do we tell the man? What are we supposed to say? "That's racist bullshit"? They're fronting the money, blood. So what do we tell them?'

Preston blinked at Jodie. Her use of the word 'blood' wasn't working and she knew it. She was trying it out like a little girl tries her mum's lipstick or a mum tries a Top Shop mini. Its failure was only compounded by her evident embarrassment. He glanced around the table at his employees. Apart from DJ Jonny Swift™, the laptop (and in-joke) that sat in the place on his right, they were carefully selected personifications of cool, graduates from some of the best universities, and he liked every one of them. Thinking for themselves, however, had

not been one of his prime recruitment requirements. They were all watching him. He let the moment hang. Eventually he said, 'Who's got the power here?'

The team looked confused.

Juice, a scrawny twenty-two-year-old Scouser and the latest addition to the company (bringing vital expertise in skinny jeans and nu rave), spoke up: 'What do you mean?'

'I mean who's got the power.'

'Well,' Jodie said. 'It's their money . . .'

This was what Preston had been waiting for. 'Money? Who gives a shit about money? Everyone's got *money*. Haven't you been following the slump? Money isn't worth shit. It's our kudos they're paying for and if we pull out they're fucked. And we go to the press and tell them why we've pulled out and then they're more fucked and we've got more kudos than ever. Urban? We *own* "urban"! We delivered our side of the bargain, Jodie. We lent them our name, fulfilled our contract and got them more publicity than they know what to do with. Shit! You know what? Errol's suggestion works for me.'

'Which was?' Jodie asked. She looked as if she already knew the answer and she didn't like it.

'Tell them it's racist bullshit,' Preston said. 'Tell them to fuck off.'

The Authenticity™ team exchanged glances before, one by one, they began to look at Preston, to nod and laugh. This was a man at the top of his game. This was why they worked for him. This was why he was who he was.

But the man himself wouldn't meet their eyes. Instead he sat back and contemplated the roof of the yurt and considered, one by one, the reasons he wanted to scream.

4
Of suspicion (1)

Queenstown, Republic of Zambawi, 2008

'My brothers and sisters, today, the anniversary of our independence, is a day of celebration. It is a time to recall the heroic endeavours of those, my father among them, who fought for so many years to secure our freedom from colonial oppression.

'It is also, however, a time for us to reflect soberly on the progress we have made as an independent nation, our current situation and future prospects. It is painful for me to tell you that we face difficult times ahead.'

Even on the ancient television affixed to the wall in the guards' mess at Gwezi prison, Enoch Adini, the recently if controversially re-elected third-term President of Zambawi, cut quite a dash. The image on the screen might have been fuzzy, the lighting unflattering and the flag behind the podium hanging at a distracting angle but Adini had something about him, some quality that made it hard not to watch. He was good-looking, of course – young for a president, tall and slim with broad shoulders – but he'd always been good-looking and the presidential picture that hung on the wall of every hotel in the country was famous for the admiring glances it drew from international visitors. So, this quality was something else: a new gravity that lent intensity to his gaze and determination to his jaw.

Until recently he'd been the popular schoolteacher, perhaps, or the middle manager who flirted with the secretaries, or the affable uncle, but now he was the headmaster, the CEO, the father of the nation. He looked like he meant business. He looked truly presidential. Whether or not this

was a welcome development depended on your viewpoint. But it certainly made him watchable and it seemed to have developed in direct response to the challenges of the last few months.

Adini addressed some of those challenges now. He attacked the independent observers ('so-called') who had decried the Zambawian election as 'fundamentally flawed'. He attacked the international community ('so-called'), who had subsequently pressed for a new vote and then imposed sanctions that sent inflation spiralling to a crippling 300 per cent. He attacked his opponent, Joseph Phiri of the Democratic Movement, whose campaign had been, he claimed, entirely funded by the 'white gentlemen's club'.

Increasingly, Adini's speeches were heavy with inverted commas and italics in a way that made them both thoroughly specific to his audience and unfailingly ironic. For example, the United States (Phiri's chief financier) was usually referred to simply as *they*, while Great Britain, the former colonial power, was typically 'that drab little island in the north Atlantic'.

'Who are *they* to tell us about democracy?' Adini asked. '*They* had an election that was neither free nor fair and was ultimately awarded to the loser. And as for that drab little island in the north Atlantic, if the "international media" is to be believed, the Prime Minister may soon subject himself to his people's will. If so, in the spirit of reciprocity, I will happily despatch a team of Zambawian independent monitors to ensure their election is subject to the most rigorous democratic standards. In fact, I have sent exactly such a missive to my counterpart and have yet to hear a response. But the offer stands.'

At this point Adini paused for a moment, pursed his lips, and raised an interrogative eyebrow. This was to signify that he was making a joke, but it was hard to know whether the joke was that he might consider sending such a scandalous message or that he had actually done so. Certainly, in the

households of his supporters nationwide, they assumed the latter and laughed wholeheartedly at his bravado, while in opposition homes they shook their heads at this further sign that the President had lost it and the country was going to hell in a handcart.

In the mess at Gwezi, however, the four guards awaiting the imminent end of their shift hardly reacted at all. Captain Makuvitse and Officers Vumba and Masinga simply stared up at the screen, motionless and transfixed, as if watching the landing of an alien spacecraft. Only Officer Matete, the new recruit, showed any sign of life, his eyes flitting between his colleagues as he wondered whether it would be appropriate for him to make a comment. He decided not.

The mess television was of uncertain provenance. Securely attached to the wall with four heavy metal bolts, it had been there longer than any serving guard and, ancient as it was, appeared intent on outlasting them all. It was large and solid, and the impression it gave of obdurate permanence was only increased by the lack of much in the way of furniture. There was a battered row of a dozen metal lockers along one wall, but just one still had a door and boasted the lone coat hook. There was nowhere to sit, just two seat cushions against the opposite wall that hinted at the former luxury of armchairs. There was a rusty water fountain plumbed into thin air. And the great television watched over the room, a memento, one could only assume, of more prosperous days when smart, optimistic, well-remunerated prison guards hung their coats in the lockers and drank from the water fountain before settling back in those armchairs to catch the latest news or maybe a football match.

Simeon Matete checked his watch. He realized that their shift had in fact ended five minutes ago and he considered whether it was OK to leave. After all, he was eager to get home to his wife and newborn son and it didn't seem like the President would be finished any time soon.

Adini was currently attacking the IMF, the World Bank and the policy of 'Structural Adjustment' (so-called) that the 'white gentlemen's club' had imposed upon the nation: '*Their* development, historically speaking, was founded on the principles of protectionism. And yet *they* insist we must prostrate ourselves on the altar of private enterprise and the so-called free market. No!'

Simeon didn't quite know what 'Structural Adjustment' was, only that it had once been trumpeted as the answer to all Zambawi's problems, but was now considered the problem on which every answer foundered.

The new recruit cleared his throat noisily. It wasn't that he had no interest in what the President was saying and he certainly made for an impressive spectacle. But, independence day or not, it wasn't as if this speech was covering much in the way of new ground; neither was it unusual for Adini to appear on television. In fact, these days, it seemed like the President was rarely *not* on TV.

After his re-election, the President had introduced the policy of 'localization', which decreed that 75 per cent of programming on national radio and television had to be locally produced and the rest sourced from countries beyond the 'white gentlemen's club' that did not seek to 'pollute' the Zambawian mind.

The repercussions of this policy were various. The music industry, for example, was flourishing as radio DJs desperately sought out any homegrown tune to fill their airtime. However, filling the television schedules proved more problematic, especially when sanctions bit and the foreign-currency reserve was depleted as never before. The one terrestrial TV channel began to broadcast several new soap operas on patriotic themes, with shaky camerawork and even shakier dialogue, and a string of South American wildlife documentaries that ran back to back, without subtitles, as primetime viewing. Not only could many Zambawian schoolchildren now give a

reasonable account of Amazonian biodiversity, but they could do so in Portuguese.

And most nights, after these documentaries, before the nightly news, Adini addressed the nation for anything from ten minutes to two hours. The President described these spots as his 'contribution to the decolonization of Zambawian culture', while opposition supporters considered them an indicator of the nation's slide into totalitarianism. Most people, however, regarded them as signifying nothing more than the ongoing shortage of cheap programming.

Now Simeon began to look between the faces of his colleagues with increasing bewilderment. For all the President's charisma, it didn't explain the mesmerized reaction of his fellow guards. In the recruit's experience, politics was a matter of passionate debate between friends and family, neighbours and colleagues. Occasionally such discussions might overheat but most disagreements could be defused with a good joke.

Certainly such passion had been evident during the election campaign, with everywhere from neighbourhood bottle stores to the university's lecture halls humming with argument and counter-argument. Whether Adini had ultimately rigged the count or not, everyone could agree it had been a close contest between the 'staunch nationalist' and the 'western puppet', or the 'would-be dictator' and the 'progressive liberal' (depending on your viewpoint). Of course there had been occasional violent clashes but, for the most part, they had been quickly contained. And wasn't that just the nature of meaningful politics?

Simeon wanted to go home. Again he cleared his throat, louder than before, and this time, at last, he received brief recognition from one of his colleagues. Officer Vumba's eyes darted towards him and they were full of a mixture of indignation and fear. The look lasted no more than an instant, but it told Simeon all he needed to know and he felt his heart

quicken and sudden perspiration at his temples. Dear God, Simeon thought. They suspect I'm CIS!

In the last fortnight of the election campaign, a Democratic Movement parliamentary candidate called Precious Kampampa had been found gunned down in her home. A week later, DM party leader Joseph Phiri was arrested on some jumped-up corruption charge and beaten black and blue in a cell at Queenstown Central police station. More recently, a teenager, Alice Chipinge, had been battered to death by the cops (allegedly) when university students attempted to march on State House.

Each of these events was shocking, of course, but, viewed in isolation, might have been dismissed as an aberration: a tragic consequence of difficult times. Considered together, however, they added up to something altogether more sinister, symptomatic, perhaps, of a state-sponsored descent into lawlessness and oppression. The policy of 'localization', which was quickly followed by the expulsion of all foreign journalists, only fuelled the rumours. Now that nobody knew what the international media were saying, they could only assume the worst. And those who did manage to track down reports on CNN or the BBC (on satellite television or the Internet) found that the international media, in their ignorance, were assuming the worst too.

Key among these rumours was that those who spoke out against the government were disappearing at the hands of the Central Intelligence Service, including a white British businessman, who'd been holidaying in the country, and a celebrated spirit medium, who was a vital figurehead in the coup that had brought President Adini to power more than a decade before. Like all the most successful rumours, this one's strength lay in the fact it suited various agenda. The government liked it, of course, because it discouraged opposition. But the opposition liked it too as it seemed to confirm everything they'd been saying about the government. Indeed,

some now claimed that Phiri's own son Benjamin was one of those who'd disappeared, an assertion that added a welcome glint of steel to the image of the Democratic Movement leader.

There were even more personal reasons why individual citizens might keep the rumour alive, the father whose son had forsaken the family homestead to find a job in the city, a wife whose husband had left her for another woman. After all, it was better to be a victim of political intrigue than social disgrace.

What was more, as the rumour propagated so its symptoms mutated. Where initially the supposed disappearances were openly discussed, soon such discussions themselves seemed to carry a risk. What if mentioning the disappearances actually constituted anti-government talk? What if the person you mentioned them to was actually a member of the CIS? Everyone knew the rumour therefore, but could only ever raise it with those closest to them; and there were now further stories – unsubstantiated and, of course, impossible to substantiate – of fathers turning in their sons and wives their husbands.

In the mess at Gwezi, it was these new symptoms of the rumour that were being played out as Simeon wondered if he could say something to allay the other guards' suspicions. After all, in the presidential election, he had, in fact, voted for Phiri so if, for example, he now made a joke at the President's expense, his colleagues would know he was trustworthy. He considered this and was about to give it a try when he realized what a dangerous tactic it might prove to be.

For starters, in his new job Simeon had discovered that the white Brit and the celebrated *zakulu* had indeed been arrested. And while a joke might demonstrate that *he* wasn't CIS, what of the others? What if he'd misread the situation and it was Masinga, say, who was the government agent? What if he said something and, before he knew it, found himself on the other side of the prison bars? Would Sibongile guess what had happened, or think he'd abandoned her and his son?

Instead, therefore, Simeon took the only safe option available to him: he said nothing and adopted the exact same pose as his fellows, staring up at the large television as if it held every answer. He quickly refocused his attention on the President's words. Fortunately, to judge by the tone and subject matter, the speech was building towards its climax. Adini's rhetoric was more forthright than ever as he navigated a route to what had lately become his favourite subject – his decision to default on all Zambawi's debts ('so-called').

'"No" is the key word of my third presidency,' Adini announced, thrusting an index finger skywards. 'We say no to unfair loans, to aid with strings attached, to the Western politicians who treat us like fools and the Western media that describe us as such. We say no to the fruits of those "cultures" (so-called) that boost their egos, pollute their bodies and delude their minds. And when the World Bank and the IMF cry to the "white gentlemen's club" that we are failing to service our so-called "debts", we will look them squarely in the eye and say: "No. It is you who owe us. Return the natural resources that you stole. Return the gold, oil, diamonds, platinum, uranium, copper and rubber that you plundered. Return the bodies of our ancestors whom you kidnapped and enslaved and, if their descendants want to bring them home, they will be welcomed with open arms." We say no, no and no again. '

The President paused and shook his head, as if what he had to say next were almost too troubling to address. Momentarily, he looked away from the camera, then, directly back into it. 'My brothers and sisters, we are involved in a new independence struggle. We are fighting for the independence of our very minds, because the alternative is a mental slavery every bit as pernicious as the apartheid our fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers struggled to overcome.

'The war has already begun. I have increasing evidence that

I cannot share with you now that our former oppressors, that drab little island marooned in the north Atlantic, are already engaged in a clandestine attempt to restore a new form of imperial rule. We must, therefore, be vigilant and resolute. When a pack of jackals circles the village every night ready to steal the children, no man sleeps until it has moved on. We must be the same.

'I will leave you with something that the Traveller, the Child of the Horizon, our founding ancestor, Tuloko, is said to have told his sons just before his death: "A true leader must be as many things as the people require." And this is what I intend to be. I will be strong, my brothers and sisters of Zambawi, and I ask that you are strong too: our independence demands it.'

Adini nodded abruptly and stepped back from the podium. The camera trained in on the crooked flag hanging at the back and the national anthem began to play. Instinctively the four guards stiffened to attention.

For his part, Simeon had quite forgotten any worries about the CIS, even his hurry to return home to his family. In fact, he'd have been more than happy for the speech to continue. After all, there is something about political conviction eloquently expressed, about playing the underdog on the moral high ground, about the adoption of negatives as philosophical principles, about building the facts into a mythological narrative, something that chimes with the uncertain majority who are used to injustice, familiar with taking 'no' for an answer and simply long to be part of the story. Right now, therefore, Simeon felt an affinity with his president like never before, if not with what he stood for then certainly with what he stood against.

It was Captain Makuvitse who broke the spell. The giant of a man sniffed voraciously before growling, 'Right, then, I'll see you lot tomorrow, six a.m. sharp.' With that, he retrieved his coat from the single coat hook in the only locker with a

door and left without a further word. The others followed. As they processed out, Simeon cast a furtive glance at Officer Masinga, only to find Masinga glancing equally furtively back at him. Whatever vague suspicions each might have had of the other were thus immediately confirmed and it was guaranteed that the President's speeches would continue to be watched in uneasy, frozen silence for the foreseeable future.