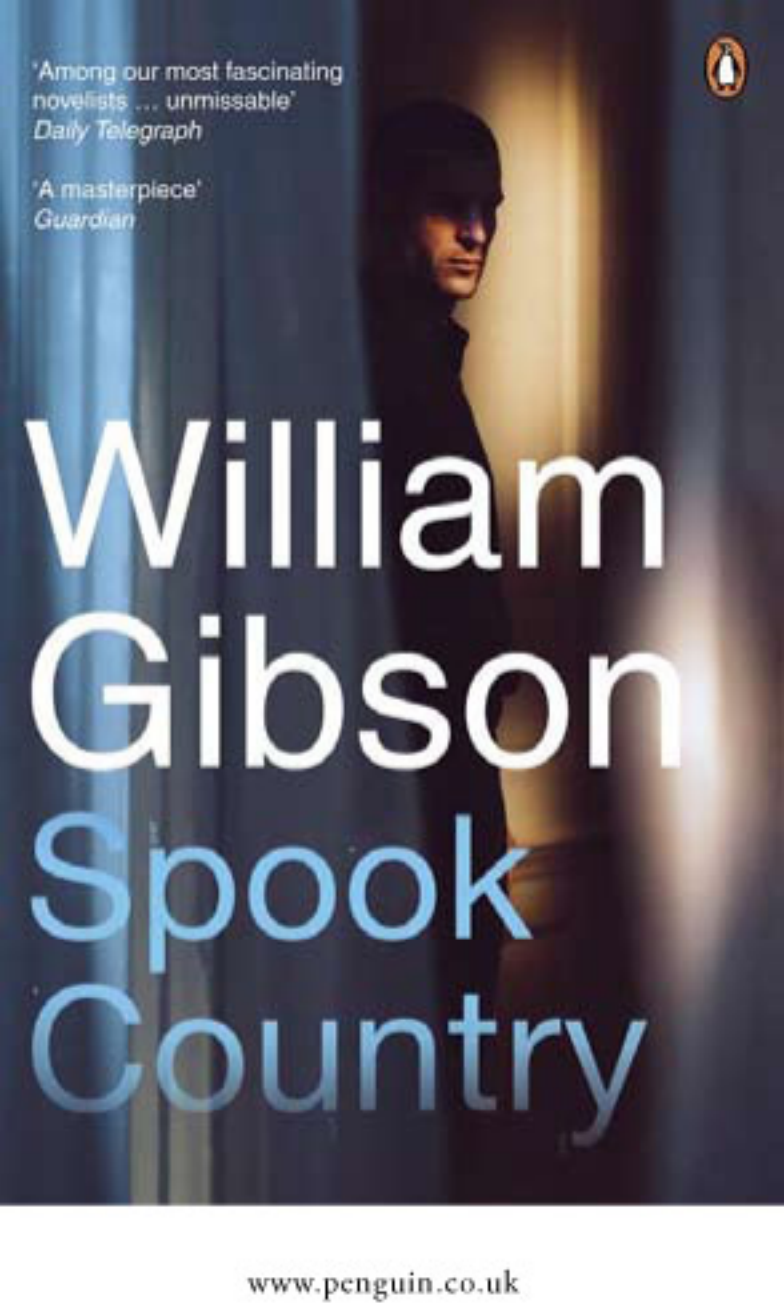


'Among our most fascinating
novelists ... unmissable'
Daily Telegraph

'A masterpiece'
Guardian

A blurred, vertical photograph of a person, likely a woman, is the background of the cover. The person is wearing a dark top and is looking towards the right. The background has a soft, out-of-focus light source, creating a bokeh effect.

William Gibson Spook Country

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Spook Country
by
William Gibson

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I *White Lego*

'Rausch,' said the voice in Hollis Henry's cell. '*Node*,' it said.

She turned on the bedside lamp, illuminating the previous evening's empty can of Asahi Draft, from the Pink Dot, and her sticker-encrusted PowerBook, closed and sleeping. She envied it.

'Hello, Philip.' *Node* was her present employer, to the extent that she had one, and Philip Rausch her editor. They'd had one previous conversation, the one which had resulted in her flying to L.A. and checking into the Mondrian, but that had had much more to do with her financial situation than with any powers of persuasion on his part. Something in his intonation of the magazine's name, just now, those audible italics, suggested something she knew she'd quickly tire of.

She heard Odile Richard's robot bump lightly against something, from the direction of the bathroom.

'It's three there,' he said. 'Did I wake you?'

'No,' she lied.

Odile's robot was made of Lego, white Lego exclusively, with some odd number of black-tired white plastic wheels underneath, and what she assumed were solar power cells screwed across its back. She could hear it moving patiently, however randomly, across the carpet of her room. Could you buy white-only Lego? It looked right at home here, where lots of things were white. Nice contrast with the Aegean-blue table legs.

'They're ready to show you his best piece,' Rausch said.

'When?'

'Now. She's waiting for you at her hotel. The Standard.'

Hollis knew the Standard. It was carpeted in royal-blue Astroturf. Whenever she went there she felt as though she were

the oldest living thing in the building. There was a sort of giant terrarium, behind the registration desk, in which ethnically ambiguous bikini-girls sometimes lay as if sunning themselves, or studying large, profusely illustrated textbooks.

‘Have you taken care of the billing here, Philip? When I checked in, they still had it on my card.’

‘It’s been taken care of.’

She didn’t believe him. ‘Do we have a deadline on this story yet?’

‘No.’ Rausch sucked his teeth, somewhere in a London she couldn’t be bothered imagining. ‘The launch has been rolled back. August.’

Hollis had yet to meet anyone from *Node*, or anyone else who was writing for them. A European version of *Wired*, it seemed, though of course they never put it that way. Belgian money, via Dublin, offices in London – or, if not offices, then at least this Philip. Who sounded to her as though he were seventeen. Seventeen and with his sense of humor surgically excised.

‘Plenty of time,’ she said, not certain what she meant, but thinking, however obliquely, of her bank balance.

‘She’s waiting for you.’

‘Okay.’ She closed her eyes and clamshelled her phone.

Could you, she wondered, be staying in this hotel and technically still be considered homeless? It felt like you could, she decided.

She lay there under a single white sheet, listening to the French girl’s robot bumping and clicking and reversing. It was programmed, she supposed, like one of those Japanese vacuum cleaners, to keep bumping until the job was done. Odile had said it would be collecting data with an onboard GPS unit; Hollis guessed it was.

She sat up, a very high thread count sliding to her thighs. Outside, wind found her windows from a new angle. They thrummed scarily. Any very pronounced weather, here, worried

her. It got written up, she knew, in the next day's papers, like some lesser species of earthquake. Fifteen minutes of rain and the lower reaches of the Beverly Center pancaked; house-sized boulders coasted majestically down hillsides, into busy intersections. She'd been here for that, once.

She got out of bed and crossed to the window, hoping she wouldn't step on the robot. She fumbled for the cord that opened the heavy white drapes. Six floors below, she saw the palms along Sunset thrashing, like dancers miming the final throes of some sci-fi plague. Three-ten on a Wednesday morning and this wind seemed to have the Strip utterly deserted.

Don't think, she advised herself. Don't check your e-mail. Get up and go into the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, having done the best she could with all that had never been quite right, she descended to the lobby in a Philippe Starck elevator, determined to pay its particulars as little attention as possible. She'd once read an article about Starck that said the designer owned an oyster farm where only perfectly square oysters were grown, in specially fabricated steel frames.

The doors slid open on an expanse of pale wood. The Platonic ideal of a small oriental carpet was projected across part of this from somewhere overhead, stylized squiggles of light recalling slightly less stylized squiggles of dyed wool. Originally intended, she remembered having been told, to avoid offending Allah. She crossed this quickly, heading for the entrance doors.

As she opened one of these, into the weird moving warmth of the wind, a Mondrian security man was looking at her, one ear Bluetoothed beneath the shaven cliff of a military haircut. He asked her something, but it was swallowed by a sudden down-drafting gust. 'No,' she said, assuming he'd asked if she wanted her car brought up, not that she had one, or if she wanted a cab. There was a cab, she saw, the driver reclining behind the wheel, possibly asleep, dreaming perhaps of the fields of Azerbaijan. She passed it, a weird exuberance rising in her as the wind, so

wild and strangely random, surged along Sunset, from the direction of Tower Records, like the back-draft from something straining for takeoff.

She thought she heard the security man call to her, but then her Adidas found actual unstyled Sunset sidewalk, a pointillist abstract in blackened chewing gum. The monster open-doors statuary of the Mondrian was behind her now, and she was zipping up her hoodie. Heading, it felt, not so much in the direction of the Standard as simply outward bound.

The air was full of the dry and stinging detritus of the palms.

You are, she told herself, crazy. But that seemed for the moment abundantly okay, even though she knew that this was not a salubrious stretch for any woman, particularly alone. Nor for any pedestrian, this time of the morning. Yet this weather, this moment of anomalous L.A. climate, seemed to have swept any usual sense of threat aside. The street was as empty as that moment in the film just prior to Godzilla's first footfall. Palms straining, the very air shuddering, and Hollis, now hooded blackly, striding determinedly on. Sheets of newspaper and handouts from clubs tumbled past her ankles.

A police car whizzed past, headed in the direction of Tower. Its driver, slumped resolutely behind the wheel, paid her no attention. To serve, she remembered, and protect. The wind reversed giddily, whipping her hood back and performing an instant redo on her hair. Which was in need of one anyway, she reminded herself.

She found Odile Richard waiting under the Standard's white porte cochere and the hotel's sign – displayed, for reasons known only to its designers, upside down. Odile was still on Paris time, but Hollis had offered to accommodate her with this small-hours meeting. Also, evidently, it was optimal for viewing this kind of art.

Beside her stood a broad young Latino with shaven head and retro-ethnic burgundy Pendleton, sleeves scissored away above

the elbows. The shirt's untucked tails reached nearly to the knees of his baggy chinos. 'Vote for Santa,' he said, beaming, as she walked up to them, raising a silver can of Tecate. There was something tattooed in very bold and ultra-elaborated Olde English lettering down the length of his forearm.

'Excuse me?'

'À votre santé,' corrected Odile, dabbing at her nose with a frayed wad of tissue. Odile was the least chic Frenchwoman Hollis could recall having met, though in a kind of haute-nerd Euro way that only made her more annoyingly adorable. She wore a black XXXL sweatshirt from some long-dead start-up, men's brown ribbed-nylon socks of a peculiarly nasty sheen, and see-through plastic sandals the color of cherry cough syrup.

'Alberto Corrales,' he said.

'Alberto,' she said, allowing her hand to be engulfed in his other, empty hand, dry as wood. 'Hollis Henry.'

'The Curfew,' Alberto said, his smile widening.

The fan thing, she thought, amazed as ever, and just as suddenly ill at ease.

'This dirt, in the air,' Odile protested, 'it is disgusting. Please let us go now, to view the piece.'

'Right,' said Hollis, grateful for the distraction.

'This way,' Alberto said, neatly lobbing his empty can into a white Standard waste container with Milanese pretensions. The wind, she noticed, had died as if on cue.

She glanced into the lobby. The reception desk was deserted, the bikini-girl terrarium empty and unlit. Then she followed Alberto and the irritably snuffling Odile to Alberto's car, a classic Volks Beetle gleaming under multiple coats of low-rider lacquer. She saw a volcano flowing with incandescent lava, big-busted Latinas in mini-loincloths and feathered Aztec headdresses, the polychrome coils of a winged serpent. Alberto was into some kind of ethnic culture jamming, she decided, unless VWs had entered the pantheon since she'd last looked at this stuff.

He opened the passenger-side door and held the seat up while Odile slid into the back. Where there seemed already to be equipment of some kind. Then he gestured for Hollis to take the passenger seat, almost a bow.

She blinked at the sublimely matter-of-fact semiotics of the old VW's dashboard. The car smelled of some ethnic air-freshener. That too was part of a language, she guessed, like the paintjob, but someone like Alberto might deliberately be using exactly the wrong freshener.

He pulled out onto Sunset and executed a tidy U-turn. They headed back in the direction of the Mondrian, over asphalt thinly littered with the desiccated biomass of palms.

'I've been a fan for years,' Alberto said.

'Alberto is concerned with history as internalized space,' contributed Odile, from a little too close behind Hollis's head. 'He sees this internalized space emerge from trauma. Always, from trauma.'

'Trauma,' Hollis repeated involuntarily, as they passed the Pink Dot. 'Stop at the Dot, please, Alberto. I need cigarettes.'

'Ollis,' said Odile, accusingly, 'you tell me you are not smoke.'

'I just started,' Hollis said.

'But we are here,' said Alberto, taking a left at Larrabee and parking.

'Where's here?' Hollis asked, cracking the door and preparing, perhaps, to run.

Alberto looked grave, but not particularly crazy. 'I'll get my equipment. I'd like you to experience the piece, first. Then, if you like, we can discuss it.'

He got out. Hollis did too. Larrabee sloped steeply down, toward the illuminated flats of the city, so steeply that she found it uncomfortable to stand. Alberto helped Odile from the back-seat. She propped herself against the Volks and screwed her hands into the front of her sweatshirt. 'I am cold,' she complained.

And it was cooler now, Hollis noticed, without the warm blast

of the wind. She looked up at a graceless pink hotel that loomed over them, while Alberto, draped in his Pendleton, rummaged in the back of the car. He came up with a battered aluminum camera case, crisscrossed with black gaffer tape.

A long silver car glided silently past on Sunset, as they followed Alberto up the steep sidewalk.

‘What’s here, Alberto? What are we here to see?’ Hollis demanded, as they reached the corner. He knelt and opened the case. The interior was padded with blocks of foam. He extracted something that she at first mistook for a welder’s protective mask. ‘Put this on.’ He handed it to her.

A padded headband, with a sort of visor. ‘Virtual reality?’ She hadn’t heard the term spoken aloud in years, she thought, as she pronounced it.

‘The hardware lags behind,’ he said. ‘At least the kind I can afford.’ He took a laptop from the case and opened it, powering it up.

Hollis put the visor on. She could see through it, though only dimly. She looked toward the corner of Clark and Sunset, making out the marquee of the Whiskey. Alberto reached out and gently fumbled with a cable, at the side of the visor.

‘This way,’ he said, leading her along the sidewalk to a low, windowless, black-painted façade. She squinted up at the sign. The Viper Room.

‘Now,’ he said, and she heard him tap the laptop’s keyboard. Something shivered, in her field of vision. ‘Look. Look here.’

She turned, following his gesture, and saw a slender, dark-haired body, facedown on the sidewalk.

‘Allween night, 1993,’ said Odile.

Hollis approached the body. That wasn’t there. But was. Alberto was following her with the laptop, careful of the cable. She felt as if he were holding his breath. She was holding hers.

The boy seemed birdlike, in death, the arch of his cheekbone, as she bent forward, casting its own small shadow. His hair was

very dark. He wore dark, pin-striped trousers and a dark shirt. 'Who?' she asked, finding her breath.

'River Phoenix,' said Alberto, quietly.

She looked up, toward the marquee of the Whiskey, then down again, struck by the fragility of the white neck. 'River Phoenix was blond,' she said.

'He'd dyed it,' Alberto said. 'Dyed it for a role.'

2 *Ants in the water*

The old man reminded Tito of those ghost-signs, fading high on the windowless sides of blackened buildings, spelling out the names of products made meaningless by time.

If Tito were to see one of those announcing the very latest, the most recent and terrible news, yet could know that it had always been there, fading, through every kind of weather, unnoticed until today, that might feel something like meeting the old man in Washington Square, beside the concrete chess tables, and carefully passing him an iPod, beneath a folded newspaper.

Each time the old man, expressionless and looking elsewhere, pocketed another iPod, Tito noticed the dull gold of his wrist-watch, its dial and hands almost lost behind the worn plastic crystal. A dead man's watch, like the ones jumbled in battered cigar boxes at the flea market.

His clothes were like a dead man's as well, cut from fabrics Tito imagined exuding their own chill, a cold distinct from the end of this uneven New York winter. The cold of unclaimed luggage, of institutional corridors, of steel lockers scoured to bare metal.

But surely this was costume, the protocol of appearance. The old man could not be genuinely poor and do business with Tito's uncles. Sensing an immense patience, and power, Tito imagined that this old man, for reasons of his own, disguised himself as a revenant from lower Manhattan's past.

Each time the old man received another iPod, accepting it the way an ancient and sagacious ape might accept a piece of some not particularly interesting fruit, Tito half-expected him to crack its virginal white case like a nut, and then to draw forth

something utterly peculiar, utterly dire, and somehow terrible in its contemporaneity.

And now, across a steaming tureen of duck soup, in this second-floor restaurant overlooking Canal Street, Tito found himself unable to explain this to Alejandro, his cousin. In his room, earlier, he had been layering sounds, attempting to express in music these feelings the old man woke in him. He doubted he would ever play that file for Alejandro.

Alejandro, who had never been interested in Tito's music, looked at him now, his brow smooth between shoulder-length, center-parted hair, said nothing, and carefully ladled soup, first into Tito's bowl, then into his own. The world outside the restaurant's windows, beyond words in a red plastic Cantonese neither of them could read, was the color of a silver coin, misplaced for decades in a drawer.

Alejandro was a literalist, highly talented but supremely practical. This was why he had been chosen to apprentice under gray Juana, their aunt, the family's master forger. Tito had lugged ancient mechanical typewriters through the downtown streets for Alejandro, impossibly heavy machines purchased in dusty warehouses beyond the river. He had run errands for their inked-cloth ribbons and the turpentine Alejandro used to wash out most of their ink. Their native Cuba, Juana taught, had been a kingdom of paper, a bureaucratic maze of forms, of carbon copies in triplicate – a realm the initiate might navigate with confidence and precision. Always precision, in the case of Juana, who had herself been trained in the white-painted subbasements of a building whose upper stories afforded narrow views of the Kremlin.

'He frightens you, this old man,' Alejandro said.

Alejandro had learned Juana's thousand tricks with papers and adhesives, watermarks and stamps, her magic in improvised dark-rooms, and darker mysteries involving the names of children who had died in infancy. Tito had sometimes carried, for months

on end, decaying wallets bulging with fragments of the identities Alejandro's apprenticeship had generated, prolonged proximity to his body removing every trace of the new. He had never touched the cards and folded papers the heat and movement of his body sueded so convincingly. Alejandro, removing them from their stained envelopes of dead man's leather, had worn surgical gloves.

'No,' Tito said, 'he doesn't frighten me.' Though really he wasn't sure; fear was a part of it, but he didn't seem to fear the old man himself.

'Perhaps he should, cousin.'

The strength of Juana's magic had faded, Tito knew, amid new technologies and an increasing governmental stress on 'security,' by which was meant control. The family relied less now on Juana's skills, obtaining most of their documents (Tito guessed) from others, ones more attuned to present needs. Alejandro, Tito knew, was not sorry about this. At thirty, eight years older than Tito, he had come to regard life in the family as at best a mixed blessing. The drawings Tito had seen, taped to fade in sunlight against the windows of Alejandro's apartment, were a part of this. Alejandro drew beautifully, seemingly in any style, and there was an understanding between them, unspoken, that Alejandro had begun to carry the subtleties of Juana's magic uptown, into a world of galleries and collectors.

'Carlito,' Alejandro named an uncle now, carefully, passing Tito a small white china bowl of greasy, scented warmth. 'What has Carlito told you about him?'

'That he speaks Russian.' They were speaking Spanish. 'That if he addresses me in Russian, I may reply in Russian.'

Alejandro raised an eyebrow.

'And that he knew our grandfather, in Havana.'

Alejandro frowned, his white china spoon poised above his soup. 'An American?'

Tito nodded.

'The only Americans our grandfather knew in Havana were CIA,' Alejandro said, more softly now, though there was no one else in the restaurant other than the waiter, who was reading a Chinese weekly on his stool behind the till.

Tito remembered going with his mother to the Chinese cemetery behind Calle 23, shortly before he had come to New York. Something had been retrieved from an ossuary there, one of the small houses of bones, and Tito had delivered this elsewhere, proud of his tradecraft. And in the reeking toilet behind a Malecon restaurant he had flicked through the papers, in their mildewed envelope of rubberized fabric. He had no idea what they might have been, now, but he knew they had been typed in an English he'd scarcely known how to read.

He had never told this to anyone, and now did not tell Alejandro.

His feet, in black Red Wing boots, were very cold. He imagined himself slipping luxuriously into a deep Japanese bath of this same duck soup. 'He looks like the men who used to stand in the hardware stores along this street,' he said to Alejandro. 'Old men in old coats, with nothing else to do.' The hardware stores of Canal were gone now, replaced by cellular shops and counterfeit Prada.

'If you were to tell Carlito that you had seen the same van twice, or even the same woman,' Alejandro told the steaming surface of his soup, 'he would send someone else. The protocol demands it.'

Their grandfather too was gone, the author of that protocol, like those old men along Canal Street. His complexly illegal ashes had been flung, one chilly April morning, from a Staten Island Ferry, the uncles shielding ritual cigars against the wind, while the vessel's resident pickpockets hung well back, away from what they rightly perceived to be a most private activity.

'There has been nothing,' Tito said. 'Nothing to indicate any interest.'

‘If someone pays us to pass this man contraband – and by the nature of our business we pass nothing else – then someone else is surely interested.’

Tito tested the joints of his cousin’s logic, finding them sound. He nodded.

‘You know the expression “get a life,” cousin?’ Alejandro had switched to English. ‘We all need lives, Tito, eventually, if we’re to stay here.’

Tito said nothing.

‘How many deliveries, so far?’

‘Four.’

‘Too many.’

They ate their soup in silence then, hearing trucks rumble over metal, along Canal.

Later Tito stood before the deep sink in his single tall room in Chinatown, washing winter socks with Woolite. Socks were no longer quite so foreign in themselves, but the weight of these, wet, still amazed him. And still his feet were sometimes cold, in spite of a variety of insulated insoles from the surplus store on Broadway.

He remembered the sink in his mother’s apartment in Havana. The plastic bottle filled with the henequen sap she used as a detergent, the pad of coarse fibers from the interior of the same plant, and a small can of charcoal. He remembered the tiny ants, speeding along the edge of his mother’s sink. In New York, Alejandro had once pointed out, ants moved much more slowly.

Another cousin, relocated from New Orleans in the wake of the flood, had spoken of seeing a swarming, glittering ball of red ants in the water. This was how ants avoided drowning, it seemed, and Tito, hearing the story, had thought that his family was like that as well, afloat in America, less numerous but

supported by one another on their invisible raft of tradecraft, the protocol.

Sometimes he watched the news in Russian, on the Russian Network of America, on his Sony plasma screen. The voices of the presenters had begun to acquire a dreamlike, submarine quality. He wondered if this was what it felt like, to begin to lose a language.

He rolled his socks, squeezed water and suds from them, emptied and refilled the sink, put them back in to rinse, and dried his hands on an old T-shirt he used as a towel.

The room was square, windowless, with a single steel door and white-painted plasterboard walls. The high ceiling was raw concrete. He sometimes lay on his mattress, staring up, and traced the edges of vanished sheets of plywood there, fossil impressions dating from the pouring of the floor above. There were no other live-in residents. His floor-neighbors were a factory where Korean women sewed children's clothing, and another, smaller firm, something to do with the Internet. His uncles held the lease here. When they required a place to do certain kinds of business, Tito sometimes slept at Alejandro's, on his cousin's Ikea couch.

His own room had a sink and toilet, a hotplate, a mattress, his computer, amp, speakers, keyboards, the Sony television, an iron, an ironing board. His clothing hung on an ancient wheeled iron rack, rescued from the sidewalk on Crosby Street. Beside one of his speakers stood a small blue vase from a Chinese department store on Canal, a fragile thing he had secretly dedicated to the goddess Ochun, she whom Cuban Catholics knew as Our Lady of Charity, at Cobre.

He cabled his Casio keyboard, added warmer water to the rinsing socks, pulled a long-legged folding director's chair close to the sink, and climbed up into it. Perched in the tall, unsteady chair, from that same Canal Street department store, he settled

into the sling of black canvas and lowered his feet into the water. With the Casio across his thighs, he closed his eyes and touched the keys, searching for a tone like tarnished silver.

If he played well, he would fill Ochun's emptiness.

3 *Volapuk*

Milgrim, wearing the Paul Stuart overcoat he'd stolen the month before from a Fifth Avenue deli, watched Brown unlock the oversized steel-sheathed door with a pair of keys taken from a small transparent Ziploc bag, exactly the sort of bag that Dennis Birdwell, Milgrim's East Village dealer, used to package crystal.

Brown straightened up, fixing Milgrim with his habitual look of alert contempt. 'Open it,' he ordered, shifting slightly on his feet. Milgrim did, keeping a fold of overcoat between his hand and the knob. The door swung open on darkness and the red power indicator of what Milgrim assumed was a computer. He stepped in before Brown had a chance to shove him.

He was concentrating on the tiny tablet of Ativan melting beneath his tongue. It had reached that stage where it was there but not there, merely a focal point of grittiness, reminding him of the microscopic scales on the wings of a butterfly.

'Why do they call it that?' Brown asked, absently, as the uncomfortably bright beam of his flashlight began a methodical interrogation of the room's contents.

Milgrim heard the door click shut behind them.

It was uncharacteristic of Brown to ask anything absently, and Milgrim took it to indicate tension. 'Call it what?' Milgrim resented having to speak. He wanted to concentrate fully on that instant when the sublingual tablet phase-shifted from being to not-being.

The beam came to rest on one of those director's-chair barstools, standing beside some kind of janitorial sink.

The place smelled of someone living there, but not unpleasantly.

‘Why do they call it that?’ Brown repeated, with a deliberate and ominous calm. Brown was not the sort of man to willingly voice words or names he found beneath him, either for reasons of their insufficient gravitas or because they were foreign.

‘Volapuk,’ said Milgrim, feeling the Ativan finally do its not-there trick. ‘When they text, they’re keying in a visual approximation of Cyrillic, the Russian alphabet. They use our alphabet, and some numerals, but only according to the Cyrillic letters they most closely resemble.’

‘I asked you why they call it that.’

‘Esperanto,’ Milgrim said. ‘That was an artificial language, a scheme for universal communication. Volapuk was another. When the Russians got themselves computers, the keyboards and screen displays were Roman, not Cyrillic. They faked up something that looked like Cyrillic, out of our characters. They called it Volapuk. I guess you could say it was a joke.’

But Brown was not that sort of man. ‘Fuck that,’ he said flatly, his definitive judgment on Volapuk, on Milgrim, on these IFs he was so interested in. IF was Brown-speak, Milgrim had learned, for Illegal Facilitator, a criminal whose crimes facilitated the crimes of others.

‘Hold this.’ Brown passed Milgrim the flashlight, which was made of knurled metal, professionally nonreflective. The pistol Brown wore beneath his parka, largely made of composite resin, was equally nonreflective. It was like shoes and accessories, Milgrim thought; someone does alligator, the next week they’re all doing it. It was the season of this nonreflective noncolor, in Browntown. But a very long season, Milgrim guessed.

Brown was snapping on a pair of green latex surgical gloves he’d taken from a pocket.

Milgrim held the flashlight where Brown wanted it, savoring the perspective being afforded by the Ativan. He’d once dated a woman who liked to say that the windows of army surplus stores constituted hymns to male powerlessness. Where was Brown’s

powerlessness? Milgrim didn't know, but now he could admire Brown's surgically gloved hands, like undersea creatures in some fairyland aquatic theater, trained to mimic the hands of a conjurer.

From a pocket, these had produced a small transparent plastic case, and from this they were cleverly extracting a tiny thing, palest blue and silver, colors that Milgrim thought of somehow as Korean. A battery.

Everything needs batteries, Milgrim thought. Even whatever spooky little unit Brown's cohort was using to grab the IF's texting, what little there was of it, both incoming and outgoing, out of the air in this room. Milgrim was curious about that, because as far as he knew it shouldn't be possible, not without actually having a bug in the IF's phone. And this IF, Brown had said, seldom used the same phone, or account, twice. He bought them and tossed them on a regular basis – which was no more than Birdwell did, now he thought about it.

Milgrim watched as Brown knelt beside a rack of clothing, feeling with gloved hands beneath the wheeled, cast-iron base at one end. Milgrim wanted to check the labels in the IF's clothes, some shirts and a black jacket, but he had to keep the light on Brown's hands. APC, maybe, he judged, squinting. He had seen the IF once, when he and Brown had been sitting in a magazine-and-sandwich place on Broadway. The IF had walked past, beyond the steamed window, and had actually looked in. Brown, taken by surprise, had lost it, hissing codes into his headset, and Milgrim hadn't understood, at first, that this mild-looking little guy with the black leather porkpie turned up at the front was Brown's IF. He'd looked, Milgrim thought, like an ethnic version of a younger Johnny Depp. Brown had once referred to the IF and his family as Cuban-Chinese, but Milgrim would have been unable to make an ethnic identification. Filipino, in a pinch, but that wasn't it either. And they spoke Russian. Or texted in an approximation of it. As far as Milgrim knew, Brown's people had never intercepted any voice.

These people of Brown's, they worried Milgrim. Many things worried Milgrim, not the least of them Brown, but he had a special mental folder for Brown's unseen people. There seemed to be too many of them, for one thing. Was Brown a cop? Were whoever did this text-tapping thing for him cops? Milgrim doubted it. Brown's people had fed written all over their MO, it seemed to Milgrim, but if that were the case, what did that make Brown?

Brown, as if in answer to this unvoiced query, made a soft, worryingly satisfied grunting sound, from where he knelt on the floor. Milgrim watched the green-gloved hand-creatures reemerge, into their limelight, bearing something matte, black, and partially covered in equally matte and black tape. It had a six-inch rattail of matte black wire, with its own bit of tape, and Milgrim guessed that it might be using this old Garment District rack as an additional antenna.

He watched Brown swap in the fresh battery, careful to keep the beam on what Brown was doing, and out of his eyes.

Was Brown a fed of some kind? FBI? DEA? Milgrim had encountered examples of both, enough to know them as very different (and mutually antagonistic) species. He couldn't imagine Brown as either. These days, though, there must be feds in flavors Milgrim had never even heard of. But something about Brown's apparent IQ, not terribly high, as Milgrim judged it, and the degree of autonomy he seemed to be manifesting in this operation, whatever it might be, kept niggling at him, right through the hard-bought perspective of the Ativan he needed just to keep standing here without screaming.

He watched Brown replace the bug beneath the rusty base of the old rack, head down, intent on his task.

When Brown stood up, Milgrim saw him knock something dark from the crossbar of the rack. It made no sound when it hit the floor. As Brown took the flashlight and turned, playing it once more over the IF's belongings, Milgrim reached out and touched a second dark thing that still hung there. Cold wet wool.

Brown's flashlight's uncomfortable brilliance found a cheap-looking little vase, made of something nacreous and blue, that stood beside one of the speakers for the IF's sound system. The amped-up blue-white diode light lent the vessel's lacquered surface an unreal translucence, as though some process akin to fusion were beginning within it. When the light went out, it was as though Milgrim could still see the vase.

'Out of here,' Brown announced.

On the sidewalk outside, walking briskly toward Lafayette, Milgrim decided that Stockholm syndrome was a myth. Going on a few weeks now, and he still wasn't empathizing with Brown.

Not even a little bit.