

Smokers' Writes

Four Short Stories

by a Non-Smoker

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Non-smoker

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After Apartheid

Nchoko woke from his fitful sleep and, wiping his eyes, crawled to the end of the pipe, gingerly poked his head out and looked around. There was no one in sight. Crawling back down the disused sewer, he fished around in the blackness for his rucksack, grabbed hold of it, and dragged it to the end. Climbing out, he looked around, pulled his rucksack onto his back, dusted himself down and made his way out of the deserted yard.

It was less than three miles to the white man's house, but he dare not have travelled during the daytime. He would have stuck out like a sore thumb, far better to risk breaking the curfew. Furtively he made his way out of the old industrial centre, down the hill and into the town of Mandela. He remembered Comrade Mandela, the promises he had made about democracy, liberty, equality, fraternity, and prosperity. None of these promises had ever been fulfilled, indeed, the exact opposite of what Comrade Mandela had promised them had happened. Their civil liberties, which ironically had increased somewhat under the last days of the white *racist*, Imperialist, apartheid regime, had been taken from them one by one, and always under the pretext of the common good.

"We have terrible problems," Comrade Mandela had said, "terrible problems. The legacy of apartheid has left our people poor, weak, disease-ridden, and spiritually sick. What they need is strong government by a strong man. Kumalo is that strong man. Kumalo will be the saviour of black South Africans." Almost as an after-thought he had added "And white South Africans."

Then Mandela had stepped down. This had not been a popular move, but he was old and tired, and wanted to end his days peacefully, he said. Nchoko understood. Mandela had been through a lot, first with his having spent twenty-seven years in jail, then with the scandal over his wife and the Mandela United Football Team, then with the disgraced "Mother of the Nation" dying of AIDS. This wouldn't have been so bad, but she had contracted the disease from a white man, and to even her most devout ANC apologists, this had been the ultimate heresy.

As he trudged carefully through the darkness, Nchoko thought again about Mandela's words and realised for the first time that they contained a fundamental contradiction. They had fought all their lives to destroy the *racist*, Imperialist, apartheid government precisely because it had been strong. A government couldn't oppress its people unless it were strong. Yet now here he was calling not for the abolition of government but for the imposition of an even stronger government, and that was what they had got.

Kumalo had been not only strong, but paternal. Nobody ever did anything he disapproved of. That covered everything from reading subversive literature like the

Christian *Bible* to drinking alcohol in his presence. Big Brother Kumalo hated, detested and despised alcohol. He had been a member of the Temperance Society in England where he had been educated. One of his first acts when installed as President for Life had been to ban the production and import of all alcoholic drinks including beer. This had met with severe protest which he had put down ruthlessly. Over seventy people had been executed as a result of the Soweto Beer Riots, including fifteen bootleggers.

In the end though, Kumalo's temperance crusade had come to nothing; he had ignominiously backed down when the United Nations had brought to his attention the results of his misguided though well-meaning policy. It was thought that over the length and breadth of the nation, the *Prohibition of Alcohol Act* had resulted in some three thousand deaths from causes as varied as shoot-outs between bootleggers and the police to people dying of alcohol poisoning. It had been impossible to stop people brewing the stuff in their bath tubs, and just as impossible to prevent it being smuggled in from Zimbabwe, (what was left of Zimbabwe), and other places.

Most of Kumalo's other paternalistic policies had not been well received either. True, his pledge of a free national health service for all, something he had based on the British model, had been announced with much fanfare and greeted by loud applause even in the underground press. But it had been in operation for barely a week before the hospitals had been literally swamped under the crowds of people lining up for free tests and body scans. It was this that had prompted him to bring in the new *Health of the People Act*, and it had been this particular piece of legislation that had led to Nchoko coming to the attention of the authorities.

He was nearly there now, the old man's house was around the corner. He was the only white man who had ever lived in this town, indeed the only one who had been allowed, either under apartheid or under the new Freedom Government. Nchoko turned the corner, and, much to his surprise, saw that the old man's living room light was on. He held his watch up to his face, it was nearly 3am. He hoped the old man would not be too afraid to open the door. Several elderly whites had been murdered in these parts in recent months. He walked up to the window, pressed his face against it and tapped gently on the glass.

Through the thin muslin curtain he could see the old man sitting in his chair, reading. Nchoko tapped on the window again, and this time he looked up. The old man's hand reached instinctively for his thigh and settled on the large bush knife which had become *de rigeur* in these parts since the *Confiscation of Firearms Act*, and not only for whites. He stood up and moved over to the window. Drawing back the curtain, he saw two rows of sharp white teeth staring at him like a Cheshire cat, and was instantly taken aback.

"Master Bob!" called Nchoko, "Master Bob, it is I, Nchoko Ndzeema."

The old man's brow creased into a frown, not of disapproval, but of concentration.

"Master Bob, it is Nchoko: David Ndzeema's eldest son."

The old man's eyes widened and, closing the curtain, he hurried to the front door, unbolted it, and let his unexpected visitor in.

As he stepped over the threshold, the old man threw his arms around him, "Nchoko! My God, I thought I'd never see you again. I'd given you up for dead. Come in, come in."

"Thank you, Master Bob."

The old man closed the door behind him, bolted it, turned to his surprise guest and said, "I was just going to make some tea. You'll join me?"

"Thank you, Master Bob."

"Or perhaps you'd like something a little stronger. I've just got some whisky. From Scotland."

"Whisky, Master Bob?"

"Yes. I expect you'd like some of that. You must be in trouble calling on me at this hour."

He led Nchoko into the living room. The young man apologised, "I am sorry, Master Bob."

"Oh don't be, you don't need much sleep when you get to my age. I seldom turn in before three, sometimes I stay up all night. Got to make good use of the little time I've got left."

Nchoko grinned, "You will be with us for a long time yet, Master Bob. You have already long outlived most of my friends."

The old man ushered him to a seat and said, "Yes, nasty business that, wasn't it, the ANC counter-coup?"

"It is terrible up north, Master Bob. More people have been murdered by the state in the past five years than under the previous thirty. Already some of the older men talk about the good old days of apartheid. Can you imagine that?"

He poured his guest a whisky and said guardedly, "It's not for me to comment on the government."

"Of course not, Master Bob," said Nchoko. He didn't pursue the matter, the few whites who had remained in South Africa after *liberation* were mostly elderly, and they all liked to keep a low profile.

"Here."

"Thank you, Master Bob." Nchoko knocked back the whisky in one swig. "How is the school?" he asked.

"I still teach there two days a week. But you didn't come here to talk about me. Who is after you, the army?"

There was a total state of non-co-operation between the various arms of the state. The army was the least feared of the security services.

"No, Master Bob, Azania Security Headquarters."

The old man gasped, "ASH! My God, what have you been involved with?"

"Smuggling, Master Bob."

"Contraband?" he asked hopefully.

Nchoko shook his head.

"You mean...?"

"Yes, Master Bob, drugs."

"*Ganja*?"

"No, worse than that."

"Oh dear," the old man's face fell, "Tobacco."

"I will leave if you wish, Master Bob."

"No. I'm too old for them to do anything to me now," he said philosophically. "What do you want me to do?"

"There is a man in the village, Moketsi, I want you to go to him and arrange a passport for me. I cannot go myself, there are government spies everywhere, but if you go to him and tell him that I sent you, he will make a passport for me."

"How are you for money?" asked the old man.

"I have plenty. Do you want some?"

"No."

Nchoko reached inside his jacket and took out a wad of notes, "Take it," he said.

The old man put his hand over Nchoko's, crushed the notes and pushed them back towards him, "You keep that," he said, "you may need it. Come on, I'll fix you up a camp bed."

They slept late, and when they arose, the old man made them a meal of coarse oats and goat's milk. Then, after talking about old times, he told Nchoko to wait in the bedroom with the curtains drawn until he returned from the village. He left about one o'clock, and, walking briskly, it took him a good half hour before he arrived at the run-down prefabricated hut which was James Moketsi's home.

Although he frequently visited Nchoko's birthplace, he had never heard of Moketsi, who was apparently some sort of local underworld figure. He knocked on the front door and waited. After a while it was opened by a thickset man in a khaki shirt whose eyes opened wide in surprise.

"What can I do for you, White Boss?" he asked sarcastically, his lop-sided smile revealing one gold tooth and several rotten ones.

"I have business with James Moketsi," he said curtly. It always paid to be firm when dealing with this type of man.

"What sort of business?" he asked.

"I need some papers," the old man said, "a friend of mine is going on holiday and his documents are not in order."

Nchoko had briefed the old man well; the doorman's smile became a broad grin and he stepped back beckoning him to enter.

"Through de door on de right," he said.

"Thank you."

The old man walked through the door and, sitting behind a large oak desk was a gaunt, middle-aged man he took to be James Moketsi. Moketsi looked up from behind his papers and, seeing a white man standing there, said, "Yes Boss."

"Mr Moketsi, I was sent by a friend."

"What sort of friend?"

"A friend who needs some papers to go on holiday."

Moketsi grinned at the euphemism, "Come in, Boss."

The old man did as he was bid. Moketsi stared at him intensely and said, "You are a schoolteacher?"

"I was," said the old man, "I still do a bit, but officially I'm long since retired."

Moketsi's eyes lit up with recognition, "You are Master Bob!"

"Yes," said Master Bob.

Moketsi nodded his head, "Yes, you taught my son, Robert."

"I may have done, I'm afraid my memory is not what it used to be, and I did teach so many children."

"And we all look alike, huh?" grinned Moketsi, but straightened his face as soon as he realised the joke had fallen short, "So, your friend wants papers, Master Bob. Is he one of your students?"

"He was. Nchoko Ndzeema."

Moketsi nodded his head in recognition, "He have some trouble with the army, huh?"

Master Bob hesitated for a second, then replied nervously, "Yes, with the army."

Moketsi stared at him long and hard, then replied, "So, we must make sure that his papers are in order. Did you bring some money?"

Master Bob took out his thick, bulging wallet, and Moketsi smiled. Half an hour later, he showed the retired schoolmaster to the door, shook his hand and offered to have his bodyguard drive him home. Master Bob declined politely and thanked Moketsi again, then hurried home with the precious papers for his desperate young friend, in his pocket.

As soon as the door closed on the old man, Moketsi turned to his lackey and said, "You believe that story about the army?"

The man shrugged and said, "You tink he not tellin' de truth?"

"That old man have fear written all over his face. If his young friend is on the run from ASH like I think he is, then he's not going very far."

"You gonna grass him up?"

Moketsi's face went hard, he grasped the man by his lapels and forced him up against the wall, "Do not mess with me, Joseph!"

"Hey man, cool it!"

"Do not mess with me! Do you know what the penalty is for aiding health criminals? Ten years on Robben Island! Why do you think I am able to stay in business, to provide girls, entertainment, even travel documents? Because the police, the army and the social security turn a blind eye to me, and because there is a line over which I do not tread. That line is health crime."

"You think..."

"Of course, that old man wanted papers for Nchoko Ndzeema. He is a tobacco smuggler!"

Moketsi walked back into his office, picked up the telephone and dialled the special number.

"Yes," answered the voice on the other end of the line.

"I want to speak to Mr Robinson, please," he said, "I have a package awaiting urgent collection for him."

"Is it very urgent?"

"Yes."

"One moment, please."

When Master Bob arrived home, he found Nchoko sitting on his bed reading. The young man put down the book and looked up as he entered the room.

"No problem at all, like you said," he told him.

Nchoko smiled, "I knew it!" he exclaimed triumphantly, "he helped my father many years ago."

Master Bob remembered when he himself had helped David Ndzeema who had been on the run from the apartheid regime. He thought it ironic that the new regime was even more tyrannical than the old one. Many people had predicted this development of course, but not even the most die-hard of apartheid's apologists had imagined that the state would go to the extremes it had in passing and enforcing such Draconian legislation as the *Health of the People Act* and the *Anti-Tobacco Act*.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I will wait until night, then slip out of town. It will take me three or four days to reach the coast, then there will be no problems."

"You'll leave for good?"

Nchoko nodded, "America. That is where I want to go eventually, but I will have to make my way to Europe first."

Master Bob nodded in agreement, that seemed the soundest plan. "As long as you avoid Britain," he said, "that's where the likes of ASH began."

There was no way Nchoko could stay in Azania; the country was big in a geographical sense, but population-wise it was very small, especially after the white exodus, the AIDS epidemic, the civil war in the north and the massacres of the Pondos and Zulus. But the best laid plans of mice and men are forever being upstaged. As they sat eating together that evening, there came what sounded like an explosion outside, then the front door was kicked in and a dozen jackbooted soldiers stamped into the house.

The attack was so sudden and the two men were so startled that they were taken completely by surprise. Nchoko had barely risen from the table when he found himself staring down the barrel of an automatic rifle.

"Stand up straight and put your hands on your heads, both of you!" snapped the sergeant.

They did as they were told; Nchoko's heart was pounding and he broke into a cold sweat. Master Bob though, being very old and resigned to death, was not the slightest bit afraid for himself. But he most certainly was for the young man he had tried to help.

The soldiers stood impassive, their rifles pointing at the two men while outside a voice sounded, and a tall, well-built man in a black suit walked into the room. He paused on the threshold, then walked up to the old man and said, "Master Bob," then he turned to Nchoko and back to the old man.

"Master Bob, you should teach your pupils to uphold the law. What is the use of them learning to read and write if they have to spend the rest of their lives in prison?"

"He didn't know," said Nchoko.

"Silence!" snapped the civilian.

"He didn't know I had been smuggling tobacco," said Nchoko again.

The man turned to him again and slapped him cruelly across the mouth, "I said silence!"

Nchoko's lip was torn by the blow, but he held up his head and maintained a dignified silence. Then a second man appeared, he too was wearing a black suit, but he was a white man. He remained paused on the threshold.

"Come in, Mr Currie," said the first man.

The white man entered the room.

"This is Mr Currie from England. He has been assigned to ASH to assist us in our," he paused, "rehabilitation programme."

One of the soldiers smiled. The Englishman walked up to the old man, turned up his nose and said, "A relic of apartheid, now hard at work polluting the minds of the young with a new kind of poison."

"I..." he began, but the Englishman slapped him hard across the face, "Shut up!"

Then he turned to Nchoko and said, "And the lost generation. We have ways of dealing with the likes of you at ASH." Then, turning to the sergeant he said, "Take them away."

The soldiers dragged Master Bob and Nchoko out of the house, the old man subdued, trying to keep calm, Nchoko screaming and pleading that he would never do it again. As they were hauled off, the civilian turned to the Englishman and said, "Do we need to take the old man too?"

"Yes, we can release him after a day or two, but we must set an example to the locals. If word gets out that a tobacco runner was found at his house and he's arrested, even if he's not charged, they'll think twice before they give other fugitives shelter. It's basic psychology."

"I see."

"You needn't overdo it with him. Slap him about a bit, keep him cold and hungry for a few days, then send him home. It's always a problem dealing with the older generation, but we had far worse problems in England, believe me. We have another

problem there too, the courts are very restricted in the sort of sentences they can hand out. When the first anti-tobacco act came in the maximum sentence was fifteen years at hard labour, but it had to be reduced because juries would never convict, so the most we can give persistent offenders is three years, but it serves to deter all but the most foolhardy."

"We have no such problems here under Big Brother Kumalo's military democracy," the black man grinned, "anyone who poisons the minds of the young with this filthy Imperialist habit can..." he made a cut-throat gesture.

"Of course," the Englishman looked slightly uncomfortable, "but don't let's forget the object of our being here," by *our* he meant the British Bureau of Racial Hygiene, by whom he was employed. Six of their officers had been sent to the new *democratic* Azania by the British government.

"Yes, inspector," said the black man deferentially.

"It's not just PR, although obviously it will go down well with the United Nations. In the final analysis it's no good just locking the criminals up, you have to reform them; that means teaching them to put the common interest before self. The only way to do that is with a mixture of carrot and stick. If you never give them incentives for good behaviour, you just turn them into psychopaths."

"Yes," said the black man, and although he didn't say so, he thought, just like Big Brother Kumalo.

Very Moral People

The buzzer rang on the Minister's desk, he reached for the switch and said, "Yes, Janet."

"He's here, sir, the Ambassador."

He straightened his tie, coughed nervously and said, "Show him in."

Standing up, still straightening his tie, he walked towards the door and waited for the secretary's knock. When it came, he tugged open the door and came face to face with her. Standing just behind her was the gaunt, ascetic figure of the Sheikh. He was dressed in traditional garb as he had been the last time the two men had met. The Minister grappled with his nerves, the last time he had come here, he'd spent close to three hundred million pounds. This time it was possible they would clinch a deal for double that, an act which would virtually guarantee him the Foreign Secretary's job when Hammond retired next month. He had to be extremely careful though, the Sheikh was an ultra-orthodox Moslem and was extremely easily offended by the slightest discourtesy or manifestation of *Western decadence*.

"Excellency," said the Minister, "good to see you again. I hope you had a pleasant trip? Thank you, Janet."

His secretary curtsied and departed; the Sheikh swept into the room, his briefcase in his left hand, and, turning on his heel, he held out his right.

The Minister closed the door behind him, and the Sheikh said in his perfect English, "Yes, thank you, Sir James. I actually arrived the day before yesterday."

"Oh, you should have given me a call, I'd have had the executive suite reserved for you at the..."

The Sheikh interrupted smiling, "No Sir James, you are most kind but it is imperative that I make my own arrangements. It's more than simply a matter of security."

"Oh yes, of course," Sir James led the Sheikh to his seat and said, "I'd expect you'd like a drink, lemon tea if I remember?"

"Actually, if you have any Brazilian coffee?"

"Of course," he said, and picking up the intercom he barked into it, "Janet, coffee and biscuits, please."

"Yes sir."

"Brazilian!"

"Yes sir."

He sat down behind the desk and laughed, "And how is your leader, I believe there was another attempt on his life on the ninth?"

The Sheikh raised his eyebrows, "You are well informed, Sir James. It was only with great difficulty that we kept that out of the press, even the Americans don't know."

"Well, the Americans don't know everything, they only think they do."

"He is fine, I spoke to him just before I left, naturally."

"Naturally."

"He is very sad that he cannot visit your country himself and has asked me to convey that message to you."

"Thank you. Please thank him."

"It is a terrible shame about this Kurdish situation."

"It is indeed."

"It is most hypocritical of the UN. Especially in view of the continued Zionist atrocities in the Occupied Territories."

The Minister had to tread a fine line here as his department had just negotiated a ten million pound sale of security equipment to the Israelis. He was relieved when the Sheikh went on to condemn South Africa, and switched the subject. South Africa was always a convenient whipping boy; you could slag it off to almost anyone and receive a standing ovation. Sir James genuinely loathed apartheid and always voted against selling arms to the Republic. In fact he was opposed on principle to all trade with South Africa, except where it was of a purely humanitarian nature, and for that reason alone he had purchased shares in an American multi-national which shipped medical equipment to the Republic. Well, he hadn't actually purchased them, they had been more of a gift from the company's CEO for his sterling PR on their behalf. In a private capacity of course.

The Sheikh though had come to do business rather than talk politics, which suited Sir James down to the ground.

Sir James poured the coffee and asked rather weakly, "Milk, Sheikh?"

"Black, thank you."

Sir James tittered to himself.

"Is something the matter?" his guest asked.

"Milk shake."

"No thank you."

"No, I meant, milk shake. It's a pun."

The Sheikh frowned, "Ah yes, I had forgotten your, er, English sense of humour." He frowned and the Minister cringed.

After briefly adding his voice to Sir James' about the evils of apartheid, Sheikh Hussein turned to the virtues of his own government, in particular the virtues of its highly moral leader, President for Life Saddam Hussein, who was totally unrelated to him.

"Over the past three years, President for Life and Spiritual Leader of the Islamic People His Excellence Saddam Hussein has become a great admirer particularly of France, in spite of the moral sickness which seems to be sweeping Western Society. It is my understanding that he is beginning too to look with favour upon the many excellent qualities of the British, in particular their fastidiousness and their integrity."

"I am very pleased to hear it," said Sir James, naturally I will convey this to the Prime Minister."

"There is though a problem with two of the technicians you provided for the Islamic Cultural Centre."

Islamic Cultural Centre was a euphemism for the nuclear research facility the British and the French had finished building for the Iraqis two years previously. It was rumoured that the Prime Minister herself had thought this up. This was the first Sir James had heard of a "problem" with any of the fourteen technicians, who had all been thoroughly screened. And with two of them, he wondered what on Earth it could be.

"Er, problem, Sheikh? Not with security, I hope."

"No, no, it is more of a personal nature."

"Oh."

"As you know, President for Life and Spiritual Leader of the Islamic People His Excellence Saddam Hussein is a highly moral person, no less so in his private life than in public."

"Of course."

"His Excellence is a devout husband and father, he has never committed and would never commit adultery, he has never gambled, and with Allah as my witness, alcohol has never crossed his lips."

Oh dear, thought Sir James, he hoped the two technicians hadn't been brewing alcohol in their apartments.

"Of course, Sheikh," he said.

"Two of your technicians are", the Sheikh paused, "cigarette smokers."

"Oh," said Sir James, heaving a sigh of relief, "er, is that a problem?"

The Sheikh smiled, "Cigarettes are not illegal in my country, and President for Life and Spiritual Leader of the Islamic People His Excellence Saddam Hussein has no intention of banning them, even though smoking is a foul, obnoxious, anti-Islamic habit."

"Quite," said Sir James, "obnoxious," and prayed the Sheikh wouldn't notice the cigar box on his desk.

"It would certainly be within His Excellency's power to ban cigarettes, but he has ruled this out. He is not after all a dictator as some of your newspapers have made out."

"Of course not, Sheikh, and I must apologise for the contemptible attacks on your leader, but I am afraid that the press in this country is largely out of government control."

"Of course," he said, "we too have a free press."

"Er, yes," said Sir James.

"His Excellence has progressively increased the tax on tobacco, in line with your own enlightened health policy if I may say so."

"Yes, you may."

"He is a great admirer of your Mrs Currie, as I am sure you know."

The last thought that had ever entered Sir James' head was that anyone admired Edwina Currie, much less the leader of Iraq, but he was far too diplomatic to say so.

"Er, yes. Does er, the Islamic Cultural Centre have a smoking ban?"

The Sheikh smiled and said, "No, but as smoking is the single greatest preventable cause of death in Iraq, as indeed it is in Britain, it would be totally irresponsible to allow anyone working in such a sensitive position to smoke. It sets a terrible example."

"Of course, Sheikh."

"These two technicians, Harris and Smedley, they must be replaced." The Sheikh's face hardened, "At once."

Sir James sat staring stupidly at the Sheikh for several long seconds before he realised that "At once" meant "At once!"

"Yes, of course," he said, and picked up the phone.

It took him a good twenty minutes to get through to the person responsible in the relevant department, and another ten to arrange for the substitution of two non-smoking technicians. When at last Sir James put the phone down, having worked up a considerable sweat, the Sheikh gave a satisfied smirk, reached into his briefcase and took out a slim portfolio.

"I have always liked doing business with the British; they are not only the most diplomatic of races but the most pragmatic. We had the same problem with a couple of German nursing auxiliaries last year."

"You did?" asked Sir James.

"Yes. The German government said it could not interfere with individual liberty and refused point blank to recall the men. Obviously the Iraqi government could not continue to buy drugs and hospital equipment from a country which promotes sickness among its medical workers."

"Of course not," Sir James gulped. So that was why Mayer had lost that two hundred million dollar contract to supply the Iraqi army with its medical supplies.

The Sheikh removed a thick folder from his briefcase, put it on the desk and said, "I have the provisional order here, Sir James; if you would care to take a copy."

"Yes, of course," he said. Taking the list from the Sheikh, his eyes ran down then up then down the list again. Bingo! he'd hit the jackpot.

Nerve gas precursors for making tabun and sarin

Gas masks

Protective clothing

Antibiotics

Field equipment

Ammunition

Rifles

Hand guns

Mortars

Land mines

Missile launchers

Land Rovers

Plutonium

Military support vehicles and so on, typed in small letters in three columns, and, right at the bottom of the list, ten of the new *White Lion* fighter jets.

The government had feared that this was to be a white elephant. The plane had been developed at a staggering cost, and so far not one foreign government had expressed the slightest interest in it. Now the Sheikh had put in an order for ten!

Sir James drew a deep breath; his source had been spot on, he'd hit the jackpot all right, this must be a five hundred million pounds sterling order. And if he hadn't made that phone call when he did, it was quite likely that he would have lost it to the French! The Sheikh was like that: capricious, temperamental.

"Well, Sheikh Hussein, I don't know quite what to say?"

The Sheikh smiled and looked at his watch. "I have another appointment."

"Yes," Sir James hurried, "I'll just photocopy this. You will be at the dinner tomorrow night?"

"The British-Arab Chamber of Commerce? Of course. We can finalise the deal then."

Sir James rushed off the copy and handed the original back to the Sheikh.

"Oh, I do hope there will not be any trouble with the Kurds, like there was last time?"

"No problem," said Sir James, "the area will be cordoned off. The Foreign Office is in any case shortly to issue a statement on human rights in Kurdistan."

The Sheikh bid him farewell. "Till tomorrow night then."

They shook hands and Sir James showed him out.

On the way back to his desk he resisted the temptation to jump and click his heels in mid-air. He reached for the cigars; this called for a celebration. Lighting up he drew in deeply and savoured the flavour of the rich, sun-cured tobacco. Pity about those two technicians losing their lucrative jobs at the nuclear plant, he thought. Well, that was tough. They knew all about Iraq's highly moral leader President for Life Saddam Hussein. No fornicating, no drinking, no smoking, that was his policy. No fun too, thought Sir James, but if you don't like the rules, don't play the game. There were far worse things in life than giving up a few fags, like losing a half billion pound order from one of the most ruthless dictatorships on the face of the Earth.

Crime Doesn't Pay

Guv'ner, 'ere, guv'ner, what's 'appenin' about my brief?

Leave it out.

'Ere, guv'ner!

Thanks f'nothin'.

Right, what was I sayin', John? Your name is John, en it? Yeah, well, like I was sayin', John, me an' this geezer Ted, we wuz in the back garden like tryin' t' ump this whackin' great fifty inch screen TV set over the wall when the car pulls up an' catches us bang t' rights. That was the last time I ever did an 'ouse. Got a three f' that, I did. They don't like 'ouses see, especially if yer goin' not guilty like. Yer 'ave a jury then, not like this one. Three years the judge said. Well, 'e actually gave me eighteen months an' I says to 'im, I'll do that standin' on me 'ead, so 'e says, well in that case Mr Tracy I'll give you another eighteen months t' get back on yer feet. No, not really John. 'Aven't you 'eard that one before? Seriously though, judges don't like 'ouse burglaries either because they live in 'ouses too, some of 'em, but juries is worse. I remember back in '84 I was up on a burglary rap an' the judge virtually told the jury the police 'ad made up me statement, verballed me like, an' that the evidence was only circumstantial an' they should acquit me, an' they still found me guilty. Well, you can't do anythin' about that, but if yer stick t' offices, not only 'ave yer got less chance of gettin' caught but if you do go not guilty the jury's not against yer. Yer see, most of them works in offices an' generally they ain't too fond of their employers either, but if yer screws 'ouses, well, that upsets them that. I'm not expectin' t' walk this time, maybe I'll get a two, it's not that serious this one, yer see, plus I've been out of trouble f' a bit. What are you up for?

Smugglin'? What, you mean the er, yer know, up yer nose? Oh, right, yeah, well, probably yer lookin' at a four f' that, not like that poor bastard next door.

What? I reckon 'e's goin' down for at least seven, maybe ten. Well, they caught 'im bang t' rights, yer see, an' 'e wuz carry in' the 'ard stuff. Yer know, tobacco. Yeah, they don't like that, see, the 'Ealth Police.

A Question of Priorities

Mr Andrews sat in the waiting room coughing into his handkerchief; this was a fine time for his smoker's cough to return, he hoped he didn't have to see the same doctor as before. His wife fished a clean handkerchief out of her handbag and passed it to him sympathetically.

"Here you are, dear," she said, smiling.

"Thank you, Rose," he took it, screwed the other one up and put it back in his pocket.

"I was just thinking," she said, "our Frank would have been forty today."

He finished coughing, tucked the handkerchief into his sleeve and looked at her.

"Yes," he said, "it's hard to believe he's been..." he hesitated, "gone for ten years."

She smiled, "We're not getting any younger either."

"We're lucky," he said, "we've been very lucky."

Indeed they had. Their son had been one of the founders of the Martian colony. It was a strange world, Mars, they'd heard a lot about it but they would never visit it, not now, they were too old. But their grandchildren might emigrate there, indeed, they almost certainly would. The project had cost the governments of the world a staggering amount of money, some estimates placed it as high as three trillion dollars. Most of the bill had been footed by the American taxpayer, but, increasingly, Europeans and Japanese had been forced to dig into their pockets.

"The doctor will see you now, Mr Andrews."

Mr Andrews and Mrs Andrews looked around and saw the nurse standing there like an angel dressed in bright white. They had not heard her enter, they'd been so engrossed in their own private thoughts.

Mr Andrews stood up and walked awkwardly towards her. He held his hand to his chest; although the pain had subsided, he was still fearful that he would suffer another attack.

"He wants to see both of you," said the nurse, to Mrs Andrews.

"Oh." She stood up, looped her handbag on her arm and straightened her dress. Catching up with her husband, she pushed her arm through his and slowed down to help him.

"I'll be all right," he said.

"Of course you will, dear, so will the doctor." She smiled to reassure herself as much as him. Why did the doctor want to see her too, she wondered?

The door closed noiselessly behind them and the nurse padded up the corridor, looking as nimble as a gazelle to the old man. He remembered when he had been able to walk like that, and it hadn't been so long ago either. He'd been a dancer when he was younger, both of them had. It was strange how, in an age when most

people sat behind computers all day at work and had CD-ROM optical disks, virtual reality and all sorts of weird adventure games they could play that most of them longed for the simple, old-fashioned pleasures like ballroom dancing and outdoor pursuits. He shook his head grimly, remembering when he had gone mountaineering as a youth; he'd been a canoeist too, in fact, he'd done quite a lot of things now he thought about it. But there would be no more canoeing now.

The nurse held the door open for them, and Mr and Mrs Andrews walked in. The doctor was sat in his swivel chair with his back turned towards them and staring out of the thick, plate glass window.

"Mr and Mrs Andrews, sir," the nurse said and closed the door behind them.

The chair swivelled round and the doctor faced Mr Andrews; the old man felt his heart miss a beat, it was the same one he'd seen before.

"Take a seat, Mr Andrews," he said, pointing at the hard chair in front of the desk. "Thank you, doctor," said the old man.

"Mrs Andrews," he said, pointing at the old lady and indicating the other chair, which was stood up against the far side wall.

"I prefer to stand, doctor," she said, resting her hand on her husband's shoulder.

"I'd rather you sat down," he said.

"Oh."

She was taken aback, it sounded more like an order than a request. She walked over to the chair, dragged it over to her husband and sat down at his side. The doctor waited until she was ready then picked up the file on his desk. Mrs Andrews held her husband's hand, fearful of what was to come.

"Mr Andrews, you're sixty-three," he said.

"Yes."

He opened the file, flicked through several pages and looked up, "Of course you are, you're also a smoker."

"Yes," he said softly, then corrected himself loudly, "No! No, I gave up after..."

"After your last heart attack two years ago," the doctor completed.

"Yes," said Mr Andrews.

"And you've not had a cigarette since?"

"No. No doctor, not since."

"That was part of the condition of your treatment, wasn't it, that you were to give up smoking?"

"Yes doctor, and I have."

"He has," echoed Mrs Andrews, like a guilty sylph.

The doctor leaned forward in his chair, put the file down on the desk and said, "These are troubled times in which we live, Mr Andrews, Mrs Andrews. I needn't tell you that the government is having trouble balancing the budget yet again, and that more cuts are to be made to the space programme."

"No," they said in unison.

"Nor need I tell you how important the space programme is, another ten years and there will be as many people living on Mars as on Antarctica and the Moon combined. These are troubled times, exciting times, but troubled times."

"Yes," said Mr Andrews, wondering vaguely what all this had to do with his coronary bypass operation.

"The point is, that it is not only mineral resources which are becoming scarce on this planet but human resources. It takes nearly ten years to train a surgeon."

"I appreciate that," said Mr Andrews.

"I'm sure you do," said the doctor, "but what I don't think you do appreciate, Mr Andrews, is that it is not simply a matter of giving help where it is needed but of the optimal allocation of resources. We have to give help not only where it is most needed but where it is likely to do the most good."

Mr Andrews stared into space not knowing what the doctor meant. Sensing this, he explained, "Let me put it this way, there is absolutely no point in my prescribing expensive drugs to a patient when I know full well that that patient will not use them, that he will ignore the recommended dosage or not take them at all. Is there, Mr Andrews?"

Mr Andrews shifted uneasily in his chair and his wife squeezed his hand tighter. "I'm not taking drugs, doctor."

"I know," he said, "but there would be no point in my prescribing you drugs or any sort of treatment if I knew that you were going to ignore it."

"It's an operation I need."

"I know," said the doctor, "but if you remember, after your last heart attack, after your last treatment, you were told that you had to stop smoking."

"I know, doctor."

"But you didn't."

"I did, I haven't had a cigarette since I saw Dr Graham, last..."

Mr Andrews stopped talking when he saw the doctor shaking his head.

"He hasn't," said Mrs Andrews, springing to her husband's defence.

"I'm afraid he has, haven't you, Mr Andrews?"

"No, doctor."

"You were told that you must not have another cigarette, not one."

"I haven't, honest, doctor."

"Not one?"

"No." Mr Andrews tried to sound emphatic, but sounded instead like a guilty schoolboy.

"He hasn't, doctor, honestly," put in Mrs Andrews.

The doctor sat back in his seat and said, "Mr Andrews, as a condition of your treatment, you signed a form agreeing that you would never smoke another cigarette as long as you lived. It was explained to you at the time that for a man of your age even to be considered suitable for treatment it would be necessary to prove to the allocation board that it would not be throwing money down the drain."

"I know, doctor, but I haven't had another cigarette since I saw you last. Or Dr Graham," he added.

The doctor shook his head sadly, reached down and pulled open the drawer then threw a file onto the desk. Opening it, he took out a large black and white photograph which had obviously been taken through a telephoto lens. It showed Mr Andrews walking round an indoor racing track arm in arm with his wife, and in his mouth was what could only be a cigarette.

"This was taken only last Tuesday," the doctor said, "only last Tuesday."

Mrs Andrews sat forward and, sounding a lot more defiant than she felt, snapped, "Have you been spying on us?"

She regretted it at once; the doctor sat forward and snapped back, "I don't spy on anyone, Mrs Andrews; I am in the business of saving lives, but the hospital is not in a position to allocate precious resources to lost causes. We have to economise; there just is not the money to go round."

"I'm sorry, doctor, I didn't mean..." she went on, but so did he.

"The truth is that it is always touch and go with a man of your husband's age, unless there is some mitigating factor, something that leans strongly in his favour, it's always heads or tails. I'm afraid that, in the case of your husband, that mitigating factor is the likelihood of the patient following the necessary regime. It's not a strict regime, it wouldn't take much to adhere to, just a desire to live."

"I want to live, doctor, I enjoy life," Mr Andrews hurried.

"But not more than your next cigarette."

Mr Andrews opened his mouth to speak but no words came. His wife stared at the doctor, "You can't mean...you can't mean..."

"I'm afraid, Mrs Andrews, that the cost of a bypass operation is nearly half a million EuroDollars, and we simply cannot afford that sort of money, not for a man of your husband's age."

Tears welled up in her eyes. The doctor slammed the file down and snapped impatiently, "There are other people waiting for the same operation. It's not just because they're younger, most of them, it's a matter of priority."

"Priority?" she repeated.

"Yes, priority. The relatively healthy have priority over the chronically sick; the young have priority over the old; non-smokers have priority over smokers. It's a matter of how many years we can save. I'm sorry."

Mrs Andrews sat staring into space; her husband, who had by now taken on a ghostly appearance, turned and looked at her, sighed and said, "Let's go, Love."

"I'm sorry," said the doctor, "believe me, I am."

At the main entrance, they signed out and were each handed a respirator.

"Got far to go?" asked the orderly.

"No, only to Newtown-on-Dearne," said Mrs Andrews.

"There's a sandstorm coming," he warned them, "I'd take the underground rather than a taxi if I were you. You could get stuck."

"Thank you," said Mrs Andrews.

"Thank you," said Mr Andrews.

"Are you all right, Love?" she said to her husband.

"Yes," he said, "I'll be all right. As long as I've got you."

She blushed like a schoolgirl, and Mr Andrews thought how lucky he had been in his sixty-three years to have spent the past forty of them with such a woman. He realised now that it didn't matter if he died tomorrow, he had led a full life, that was what really mattered. All the same, if only he hadn't smoked that cigarette.

He should have realised he'd get caught out, he'd read about such things before. Increasingly the medical authorities were applying stricter criteria to patients; there had been several well-publicised cases in which Special Branch had been called in to monitor the activities of lapsed alcoholics and people who had been addicted to hard drugs. The press had kicked up a stink about it, but you couldn't blame them really when so much money was at stake and resources were so scarce; it was a question of priorities.

Donning their respirators, Mr and Mrs Andrews passed through the air lock into the outside world. The sky glowed an eerie red as they walked the short distance to the underground station. He could just about remember when as a boy he had not needed to wear a respirator. Could it really have been so long ago? Now, man was spreading into outer space; Mars would be a good world, once they had melted the polar caps and built the pressurised domes under which the nascent colony would live. Although it was nearer, Venus would take longer to colonise because they would first have to lower the temperature of the planet by saturating it with algae. It was only a pity that they couldn't do anything for their own world, but the Oil Age had pretty well wrecked the atmosphere.

Of course, it hadn't just been oil; coal, nuclear power and pollution generally had played an enormous part. The carnage this had caused had been unthinkable, he remembered seeing footage of people dying in their thousands from the ozone layer blow outs. Fortunately, that had been in the Southern hemisphere; fortunately for people who lived in the northern, temperate zones perhaps, but not for the inhabitants of India, Africa, Australia and South America.

On account of all that had happened over the previous four decades, the decimation of world population and natural resources, the AIDS and other pandemics, one couldn't blame the government for putting smokers at the bottom of the list. Mr Andrews wheezed, even breathing pure oxygen he had trouble at times. Arm in arm, they stepped out into the grey-green fog and walked the short distance to the station.

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