

PART I

Fragments of a puzzle from a forgotten past

Thursday January 3, 2008

The first thing that leaps to my mind after waking up as if after a long sleep, is that my hands are bandaged. The bandages are wound thick. I peer at the dimmed lights in a room I instinctively know I've never previously visited. While attempting to define my surroundings, I become aware that I'm looking through the slits of yet another bandage. This one is tied around my head. When I try raising my hands to touch it, I'm unable to do so because my arms are secured to my bed by straps. As these facts filter into my consciousness, they make me both worried and slightly curious. Whatever took place, at least there must be some relief in the fact that I'm alive. Still, although I rack my brain for clues, I've no idea how or why I've ended up in this room.

Feeling panic mounting, I go over the facts again. I'm lying in a bed that isn't mine. My head and hands are heavily bandaged. I can barely move or feel my bandaged limbs because I'm strapped to this bed.

Then, little by little, I see signs that I'm confined to a place that surely must be a hospital, and I'm able to tell that it's a luxurious one to boot. It's a refined, discreet kind of hospital for the very rich.

I'm alone in a room that is large enough to be a suite at the Ritz in Paris. The works of art on the walls have been carefully selected and are of utmost taste – early twentieth-century artists like Chagall, Modigliani, Utrillo, de Chirico and the like. I'm too far away to see whether they are copies or not, but my instinct tells me that they're originals. It worries me that I know these names – of the hotel and the artists – while I'm unable to understand who I am.

A nurse enters the room and notices that I'm awake. When I try to speak to her, I can only grunt. She immediately turns and leaves the room. My guess is that she's going to inform someone that I've come to my senses, of sorts. I'm right, because it doesn't take long before she returns with a grave-looking man in his fifties dressed in a white coat.

"I'm glad to see that you're awake," a voice says with a distinct German accent. "I'm Dr Sternmacher."

"Why ... why am I here?" I manage to say in a hoarse whisper.

Dr Sternmacher pulls up a chair and sits down next to me.

“You’ve been comatose for seven days”, he replies, “but during this time you have been well looked after, I assure you. Tell me, how does your head feel? Do you have a headache? Do you feel your temples throbbing?”

I’m so tired. I doze off again before the doctor is able to extract a reply from me. As I drift into merciful sleep, I feel a needle entering a vein in my arm. I feel like protesting, but I’m too weak, and it doesn’t take long before I return to that deep black hole that not even dreams can penetrate.

Next time I wake up there’s a nurse standing by my bed preparing another syringe. I now know the answers to the doctor’s questions. I feel a terrible throb in my temples, and there’s a dull pain in the back of my head. The nurse pushes the needle into my arm, and it doesn’t take long before the throbs and the pain subside. I begin to float towards the ceiling, and then the weariness is gone. I can see the room clearly for the first time. The nurse smiles pleasantly at me before she presses a button next to a door. The door opens and she disappears.

The nurses work in three shifts, two nurses per shift. Without exception they are in their thirties or early forties, attractive, and very skilled at making my pains disappear. I remain awake for longer spells while I’m hovering weightlessly, pleasantly, in the large room. Two of the doctors come to visit me with regularity, with Dr Sternmacher indisputably being the one in charge. Everybody avoids my questions, and I don’t think it’s because of the painful efforts it costs me to pronounce them. I know that my words come out mumbled and not very comprehensible, but it’s become obvious to me that no one has the least interest in deciphering what I’m trying to communicate. Although they address me in English, which is my native tongue, their pronunciation is thick and their grammar appalling. Eventually, based on the accent of most of the staff, I deduce that I must be in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. I don’t know how I know this, but I feel certain that it’s a country I haven’t visited since my childhood – and yet, here I am.

The nurses fuss over me, constantly expressing their professional joy that I seem to be recovering. When I finally make them understand that I wish to know what I’m recovering from, they become evasive and reluctant to talk. Finally I persuade one of them to inform me, and I can see how her eyes light up when she thinks she has come up with the perfect answer – that is, telling me some half-truth without telling me anything.

“Since you were in a coma for a long time”, she replies in a whisper, “the doctors say it’s only to be expected that you can’t remember things.” She refuses to elaborate beyond this, but it gives me enough to add another small piece to the blank puzzle that is my mind.

I continue to ponder the meagre information I have until I receive the next visit from Dr Sternmacher. He lowers his head close to my bandaged face to understand what I’m – very slowly – asking him.

“Why have I been in a coma? I can’t remember anything.”

Dr Sternmacher nods sympathetically.

“Your concern is only natural”, he responds without addressing me by name. I find his remark disturbing without understanding why. Then I seem to recall that the Swiss, especially professionals like this doctor, never reply without adding the courtesy of the name of the person they’re talking to. It makes me feel that I’m a nonentity. It also provokes my animosity towards the

doctor.

“You’ve gone through a traumatic experience”, he continues after a long pause. “Your mind reacted by letting your body go into a coma. The glad news is that you’ve been improving every day since the tragic event. Please have confidence in me and my staff. We do feel a great sense of pride in what we’re doing here.”

Abruptly he leaves, not allowing me the courtesy to pose further questions. I’m tired anyway, and again I drift into sleep for countless hours.

When I finally wake up, it’s to the murmur of the hospital staff surrounding my bed. Apparently they’re unaware that I can hear and also understand them. It isn’t difficult for me to pretend that I’m still asleep. My eyelids feel heavy enough. Although I’m awake, I have to fight the irresistible desire to drift back into sleep. The voices are speaking in German – a language which I, with some surprise, realise that I understand to perfection.

“The time has come to confront him about his hands”, I hear one of the younger doctors say. “As you have seen, there is no more healing to be expected. No gangrene, no infection, perfectly healed from a medical point of view.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” I recognise Dr Sternmacher’s voice. “My concern is no longer the improvement from a physical viewpoint, it’s the psychological impact. This is not something that can be revealed little by little. It’s Dr Braun’s task to deal with this. I’m aware that the physical healing process is no longer the big question – now it’s about dealing with the shock of confronting a new reality.”

After interchanging a few more phrases seasoned with medical terms that I don’t understand, the doctors leave me alone with my bewildered thoughts. Psychological impact? I’m wrapped in more bandages than an Egyptian mummy, and yet the doctors’ major worry is how my mind will react when I’m faced with some awful truth. The thought scares me. Although my awareness by and by is improving, I still have a difficult time communicating. With my face bandaged and my mouth refusing to pronounce the words I wish to convey, I mostly get sympathetic nods when I try to say something. I can’t help suspecting that the people looking after me use my predicament to ignore the difficult questions that they intuit, but which I still can’t formulate coherently.

As the days and nights pass I find myself awake in longer spells – especially at night, when the corridor outside is silent and my thoughts are uninterrupted. I use these moments to try to grasp what happened to me, who I am and – more than anything – what is to become of me.

The more conscious I become of my situation and my surroundings, the more worried I am over the fact that I can’t seem to recall anything but vague impressions of what I know and who I am. I don’t understand why I have ended up here, or why the staff treat me with such deference. To find clues, I study the rich furniture and the beautiful artwork, the snow-capped garden beyond the two large windows, and the thick door leading to the corridor that is always kept locked – but there are none to be found.

My condition is one of total dependence and captivity. Even after waking up from my coma, I’ve been fed intravenously. I never feel hunger or satisfaction, but I long to put my teeth into something. Since I’m tied to my bed by four straps around my wrists and biceps, I can’t move freely.

It's been explained to me on several occasions that I'm secured to the bed to avoid infections in my wounds and to prevent me from damaging the tissues while they're healing, should I involuntarily touch them in my sleep. It's living hell. I can barely shift my body when I get tired of lying in a certain position, but there's always a nurse on watch, anyway, worrying about bed sores and bed pans and all the rest of the sordid details.

Three days and three nights after coming out of my coma, I do my best to again sum up what I know. My hands and my head are damaged. I don't have any memories. The obvious conclusion is that I must have been in some accident, and that those who care and cater for me are waiting for the right moment to tell me. They think I'm still not strong enough to absorb whatever terrible news there is. Yet, I don't feel terrified. I feel serene more than anything. And, perhaps more important, curious. What can be so bad when I'm very much alive, when I don't feel any pain, and it's obvious that I am being cared for in the best of possible places?

Monday January 7, 2008

On this the fourth day since I woke up, a woman comes to see me. She tells me in a very gentle way that she's my wife. Her name, she explains, is Julia. If what she says is true, I have no doubt I married her for her extraordinary beauty. Although I really can't say I know her, I think I like her more for her genuine worry for me than for anything else. She chitchats about everyday life and pretends to not understand my mumbled questions when they become too awkward. It's clear to me that, like the doctors and nurses, she purposely holds back information she doesn't want to share with me.

For convenience sake, it's my wife doing the talking while I do the listening. From what she tells me, I deduce that we don't have any children and that we live in London. We have a penthouse flat near Hyde Park with a butler named Andrew. Somewhat carelessly she lets me know that money isn't a problem for us, and besides, you can tell by the way she dresses. Nice jewellery, expensive sunglasses, bespoke clothes – and of course the hospital bed I'm occupying doesn't come cheap. I do have a vague notion that some time in the past I must have known her, yet I have no clue about how we met or if it's true that we're married. Not that I really care about the finer details. She's a pleasant, attractive person who seems to genuinely care for me. I can't avoid feeling depressed when she leaves. Both because I miss her company, and because I feel so remote from what she's been telling me is happening in the outside world.

This private hospital, too, is beautiful – quiet, and beyond doubt quite expensive. Not that the expense matters. I shouldn't worry about such details, Julia has let me understand. The only thing I should worry about is getting well again. So, in conclusion I have plenty of money and a beautiful wife, and apparently I lead a successful business life in London. Then what am I doing wrapped up in bandages in a hospital bed in Switzerland?

The days pass. The straps are removed and I can move freely again. The tubes feeding me are detached and I'm given solid food that tastes wonderful. I'm being told I should start getting out of bed. The man who tells me I'm getting better and that I need to exercise more is a psychologist who comes to see me in my wife's presence. After presenting himself as Dr Braun, he interviews me

asking general questions before getting down to more delicate matters. For example, what are the last memories I have? I have to admit that I can't recall any at all. My wife looks very worried and averts her eyes.

"What happened to me?" I ask him.

He looks at me for a long time before he answers.

"You were kidnapped", he finally replies and pauses before adding, "and you were hurt. But – please don't jump to conclusions too fast. We are doing our best to set everything right."

He calls on a fellow doctor who comes in accompanied by two nurses. On his instructions one of the nurses begin unwinding the bandages on my left hand. Dr Braun looks at me intently. My wife has a sad, worried frown on her face.

With horror I look at my left hand as the nurse begins unwinding the bandage on the right one.

All my fingers are gone.

Wednesday January 9 – Wednesday January 16, 2008

I sometimes wonder if I'm locked up in a hospital for mad people. With a nurse assisting me, I'm told to walk around my huge room as much as I can before I get tired. When I try, I'm unable to stand up for more than a couple of minutes. My efforts, however, show that I'm improving every time I put my feet on the floor. Then, when I feel that I'm strong enough to take a prolonged walk and signal to the nurse that I want to go outside, she only shakes her head. I complain about this to Dr Braun, but he merely gives me a kind smile and says that I need to be patient – first things first. Soon enough I'll be strolling around the gardens, he promises. After he leaves I feel more depressed than ever.

I apologise here for the inevitable way my story must be presented. Surely anyone reading this will accept my apology upon realising that, emerging from my coma, my memories are non-existent. If I ever possessed a soul it has been replaced with a great void, a massive feeling of having neither a past nor a future. Perhaps a philosopher would argue that the present doesn't exist, and that we only live through the memories of our experiences and expectations of the future. Since I can't remember a past and don't know what to expect from a future, I live in a constant, eternal present. In other words, in a void.

The doctors argue that I suffer from a severe concussion and that, although nothing vital in my brain has been damaged, there are swellings that prevent me from accessing the parts in it processing memories. As much as they assure me that by and by I will get my memories back, I can only narrate them in the order I retrieve them. Perhaps this order won't be chronological, so please bear with me as you hear me out.

As I become stronger, my blank mind becomes a constant worry. I strain to remember something, anything. These efforts are short-lived because I tire quickly. On top of these, there's the question of how the doctors and my wife treat me. A lot of small details make me notice something is terribly wrong.

There's either a nurse or my wife helping me do simple tasks like brush my teeth or change

my pyjamas or put on my slippers. Dr Braun has advised me that I'll go through a phase of deep depression before coming to terms with my handicap. He is right. I've lost all interest in my surroundings and other people. I find them all, and that includes Julia, staring at me as some freak they pity.

Twice a day I'm given a shot in the arm. When I try to refuse, I'm told it's to prevent me from feeling pain. Although it's true I don't feel any, I suspect the shots are antidepressants.

I'm encouraged to watch the news on the telly, although I can't muster much interest in doing so. All considered, I'm encouraged to do a lot of things – to snap me out of my apathy, I presume. The one thing I'm not allowed to do is to walk around alone, unaccompanied. There's always some evasive pretext or other for not letting me do so.

I'm finally let outside my hospital room, with two male nurses accompanying me. Although there are patches of snow on the ground, it's warm and pleasant in the sun. As I explore them, like Dr Braun promised that I one day would, I find the hospital grounds larger than I had imagined. The two nurses walk behind me at a respectful distance, but they're never too far away. I feel sure they've been informed to watch out for me. I'm a man who's constantly mulling over the fact that I've been kidnapped and no longer have any fingers.

In my daily talks with Dr Braun, he does his best to stimulate me to start reminiscing. Anything, he says, helps. Small things, like childhood memories, the names of flowers and fruits, geographical points of interest, music, anything. I tell him sadly that I'm a hopeless case – I can't recall any of this, no matter how I try.

But I'm lying to him – slowly I do begin to remember things. Things I don't tell Dr Braun or the woman who claims to be my wife. I'm taking his advice that I should search my mind for fragments of memories to see if I can connect them and understand what happened to me. In bits and pieces, very slowly, the great mosaic that so far has been my life is beginning to become clearer.

And, since I've always been a methodical man, I will start telling you from the very beginning.

Saturday August 12, 1972 – Friday October 11, 1991

I was born thirty-five years ago. My paternal grandfather was a brilliant industrialist, inventor and businessman, who became very rich. He was a hardworking, intelligent man who laboured even harder after his wife died in a car crash. My father, who was their only child, was six at the time.

My grandfather never remarried. Instead he dedicated himself to creating an empire that spanned the globe. My father was sent to private schools in Switzerland and the UK. It's fair to say that for lack of parental care he became a rich, spoiled child who never took interest in anything but pleasures at the spur of the moment.

Eventually my grandfather, who was born in Wales but lived most of his adult life in Switzerland, realised what was happening and unsuccessfully tried to keep his son on a shorter leash. Then, at eighteen, my father made a girl pregnant, and I was born out of wedlock. My father was not interested in raising a brat like me, since all he wanted was to

spend his youth and my grandfather's money on fun things. So, during my first five years my British mother raised me on her own, before dying of cancer in the pancreas.

My grandfather preferred caring for my upbringing rather than leaving me with either my irresponsible father or with my other (poor middle-class) set of grandparents. In hindsight I think that he wanted to make amends for the bad job he'd done with his own son. He spent time with me, teaching me to sail his boat and ski, until he started having health problems.

My grandfather hired a nurse and a tutor for me during the first years, and then I was sent to a nearby Swiss private school, where the majority of the subjects were taught in German and the remainder in English. I met my grandfather regularly, but I rarely saw my father. When I did, I couldn't find that my father and I had anything in common beyond the skill of exchanging polite phrases of no importance.

Not until later did I understand that my rejection of having something in common with my father wasn't based on facts. As I grew beyond adolescence I gradually became aware of two things that I indeed had inherited from my father – his name and his good looks. To my great misfortune, both were to haunt me in unforeseen ways. He had women fawning all over his handsome face. When I emerged out of puberty, people started remarking how I looked just like my father – light brown hair, green eyes, a straight nose, and a charming dimple on each cheek. Besides being frustratingly impractical, the stupid family tradition of naming the son after the father also turned out to be dangerous. My grandfather, my father and I all shared it – Matthias Callaghan.

I didn't mind discovering that I was considered handsome, but it irritated me that people always compared me with my no-good father. As always with young people, my vanity was on the centre stage. However, when I emerged from puberty this vanity of mine was replaced by the discovery that my intellectual powers were by far more important than my looks.

Saturday October 12, 1991 – Tuesday August 12, 1997

When I was nineteen my grandfather died. He left the bulk of his estate to be shared between me and my father, but I wasn't allowed to dispose of my inheritance before my twenty-fifth birthday. My grandfather had been a great businessman, but his biggest mistake in life turned out to entrust his son, rather than his grandson, with his inheritance.

During his last years my grandfather had been bedridden, and realising that my father was unfit to run his group of companies, he had hired an external CEO – a certain Mr Stettinger. While Mr Stettinger ran the corporation, my father jetted across the globe chasing skirts and an easy, sybaritic life. A year after my grandfather's death, acting as the principal stockholder (he was also voting my share then, since I was still under the age stipulated in my grandfather's will to do so) he fired the very competent Mr Stettinger. My father had somehow been led to believe that he would be able to run the company on his own.

I was sent to Oxford with a generous allowance – in remembrance of my father's own youthful escapades, no doubt. So far I had been a mediocre student, but I found studies in this university town to be more than fascinating. The vibrant life full of students from all over the world, many of them brilliant, stimulated me. One of those brilliant students was Allan.

Allan was my first encounter with genius. He studied mathematics and computer science. We became good friends, and he taught me things about what a computer can do that I wouldn't have imagined possible.

Within a year of getting to know each other, we began hacking into company servers. I can honestly say that we started doing it only to test the limits of our imagination and our skills. I was the one who came up with the ideas, and Allan was the one who executed them. First we did easy things, like looking up our teachers in Scotland Yard's register. We had a peek at NASA's space program. Crowning our achievements, although we didn't understand an iota, we cracked into the Russian politburo's server.

Allan was so brilliant he had a full scholarship. I later learnt that he came from a poverty-stricken family, and there were of course certain things lacking in his manners. He suffered a lot for this from other students who were blessed with pedigree backgrounds. I was his only friend at Oxford.

Allan told me that he had been raised in Brixton, where his parents still had a semidetached that they struggled to pay the mortgages for. His father was a mechanic who didn't mind dropping in at the pub on his way home. Allan's mother was a seamstress and, apparently, the one who kept the family's economy from collapsing. Every year Allan had come out top of his class, and he was the pride of the family. In his teens he began compensating his awkwardness in social situations by exploring the potential of the Internet. Whatever money he earned working weekends and holidays he spent on computer equipment. Although I'm not familiar with the particulars of why he had got a scholarship, it wasn't difficult to understand that he deserved it.

While I was studying at Oxford, unknown to me my father was putting in his utmost effort to squander both his and my inheritance. After a couple of years he had got tired of playing CEO and wanted to go back to being a playboy. He sold the company far too cheap, got rid of our houses in Switzerland and in the south of France so he wouldn't have to bother with their maintenance, and decided he would use the cash he received alternating between a rented yacht and luxury hotels.

Despite the indisputable fact that my father was living off my inheritance after his own had dwindled, he somehow forgot to fit me into his new lifestyle. I was two months away from my twenty-second birthday when I was told I no longer had a home to go back to over Christmas. Three years later I learnt that the greater part of my inheritance had been lost or spent during my father's lavish life during the past six years. Yet, when I finally came into what was left of my inheritance I received eight million Swiss francs, so I wasn't poor either. Putting together what my father had done to me, I became furious with him and at first considered suing him for fraud and mismanagement and a lot more. I

decided against it, though. It was unlikely he would be able to pay me, anyway. I didn't want to waste my time chasing him around the world with court orders. I had better things to do.