



**FLORE VASSEUR**

**COMMENT  
J'AI LIQUIDÉ  
LE SIÈCLE**

Éditions des Équateurs

Roman

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 25, in English

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## Chapter One

The stench from the sewers mingles with the smell of diesel and cooking fat. The May sunshine blazes down on the asphalt of Madison Ave. McDonalds and Texaco: the worldwide smell. I have an hour to kill, a hole in my otherwise over-packed schedule. I try to get interested in the windows of the luxury stores. All I see is me, an angular face, a mere product of the global meritocracy. Sleek frames have replaced 99 cents lenses; Clinique has got rid of the acne. Whatever the millions I've made or the confidence I've gained, I look like a nerd in a body re shaped by Slow Burn, the latest gym routine that sculpts Manhattan's finest.

Working girls in gray suits march along the sidewalk. Stiff, assertive, masculine. With a lunch box in one hand and a sports bag in the other, they are post capitalism's warriors. And you can't miss Gisele Bündchen. The Brazilian top-model is spread across a billboard on the latest Victoria's Secret megastore, or more precisely, her bare back is. A tiny bikini dangles from her French-manicured fingers. It's the new bestseller from the number one retailer of affordable lingerie. In 1999, a few days before its IPO, the brand bought several pages in the Wall Street Journal. Gisele was lying on her stomach, two angel wings floating above her slim, golden shoulders. On the day of the IPO, she came in person to Wall Street. With her long-fingered hand, she rang the Wall Street bell. On the floor, traders were howling like wolves. Beating all records, the stock quickly became the darling of Wall Street. Thanks to Photoshop, the legs of one of the most paid girls on the planet have become the Dow Jones' best friends. Sex rules the world, drives the markets crazy. The opulence of the West hangs by the thread of a G-string.

I have an appointment with Mrs Krudson. She must be at least eighty years' old. She could have been one of those East Side Ladies that sip tea at five o'clock out of English porcelain cup while showing photos of their grand-children. Yes, she could have been one of those. Yet I feel like I am about to go ten rounds with Mike Tyson.

At Starbucks on the corner of 84<sup>th</sup> street, I notice some traders ensconced in fake leather armchairs. They hide behind the Wall Street Journal. Jobless, they now haunt the City. It is spring 2009. Manhattan has been devastated by the subprime crisis. A woman in a rabbit skin jacket and ten centimeter stiletto heels yells into her earphone: "Buy! Buy! Buy!" About to crack, she frenetically empties five sachets of artificial sweetener into her nine dollar *Cinnamon Dolce Latte with Sugar Free Syrup*. A woman in tattered clothes waits in line before me. Her odor, a mixture of stale tobacco and sweat, kills the aroma of ground coffee. Wrapped up under layers of dark clothes, she is carrying heavy worn-out Macy's brown bags. At the counter, she lowers her eyes and asks for a glass of water. The other clients stop to take in the scene. The waiter hands her a paper cup. In his Bronx accent and revealing his dental brace, he emits a mechanical *Have a Nice Day*. The homeless woman sits down at a table tucked away in a corner, close to the toilets. She puts her bags down between her misshapen skirts. Behind her, the slogan of the international coffee mega brand on the russet and ochre colored wall: "*Thanks to you, we are not only making great coffee. We are making a better planet.*"\* She takes a used free newspaper out, scans the small ads: wedding dresses and family jewelry are for sale by the bucket load. The other clients forget about her and the chatter resumes. Poverty finds its place in society. The crisis is here to stay. The waiter adjusts the hair net on his greasy hair. Beneath the counter, he switches

on the store's CD player and put the latest Starbuck's compilation on: *All you need is love*. The soundtrack of sugar-substitute America.

I walk west up on 84<sup>th</sup> street towards Central Park. I see diseased horse chestnuts, obese squirrels and blossoming magnolias. Further on, inside the park, sitting on its mini artificial ice floe, a bored polar bear moans for some kids who are throwing him M&Ms. What does Mrs Krudson want from me, a trader with an impeccable reputation? Tay would bring me back to earth, back to real life. Real life? From the plane, I have tried to text her: "Up in the sky, the sun shines as strongly as in my heart." Writing a cheesy message to an illiterate prostitute: is that all that is left of love at a time of peak oil?

1030 Fifth Avenue is a large Victorian building. A doorman in tails opens the glass door lined with French wrought iron, and nods towards a metal detector. I walk through it without batting an eyelid. A wide-beamed security guard with long black hair pats me down a little too thoroughly. Her powerful and well-rounded muscles bulge under her beige suit pants. She could actually have been part of General Gaddafi's security squad. She talks to her wrist watch, waits for instructions from her earphone. Then she escorts me to the private elevator.

Five deep breaths later, the doors open onto a dimly-lit, three thousand square feet big room. My eyes adjust. The air is cool, almost cold. There are blue tinted stained-glass windows. I notice some Byzantine designs and a strange, decapitated pyramid topped by an eye. Surrounded by her thirteen identical white Siamese cats - for the exact number

of ex-husbands - Mrs Krudson is sitting at a long, glass table at the back of the room.

"Come in", she grumbles from her chair.

I take a few steps forward. A series of photographs hang on the wall behind her: successive American presidents kissing her hand. I can't help but notice the amused look about her, a little repetitive, one mandate after another, from Eisenhower to Obama. All kissing her hand to say thank you: every future President has been to the annual Bilderberg meeting held a few months before the elections. Every four years, history repeats itself: without enthronement or consecration from the ballot box.<sup>1</sup>

She founded the Bilderberg, this secret transatlantic gathering, during the Cold War, in a five-star hotel in Osterbeck in the Netherlands. To protect herself, she has always stayed in the background. Publicly, David Rockefeller<sup>2</sup> claims paternity of the organization. She made the rules (an innermost secret), selects its members (from the business, military and media West elites). She set the agenda: to sort out the world's problems, considered far too complex to be left in the hands of diplomats.

Madame Krudson raises her eyes from her book, annotated with a fountain pen: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Gibbon.

"Do you know the lessons of History?" she demands.

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<sup>1</sup> According to D. Estulin, in ..., Bill Clinton was a mere unknown governor from Arkansas until his participation to the Bilderberg conference in 1991 in Baden-Baden, eighteen months before the presidential election.

<sup>2</sup> Honorary President of the Council on Foreign Relations, of the Trilateral Commission, of the Council of the Americas, of the American Society and former CEO of Chase Manhattan.

"Empires fall because of their arrogance and because the energy they were built on erodes."

"Perhaps I wasn't wrong about you after all. Sit down!" she orders.

With her chin, she indicates a Napoleon III chair opposite to her. Silence follows. My heart is pounding in my temples and I feel like that's all I can hear. We stare at each other, both adjusting our breathing to each other. Her emaciated chest rises painfully as she inhales, as if her pearl necklace weighed a ton. Madame Krudson had been a professional swimmer, a fencer and horse-back rider. She had been a *force de la nature*. At thirty-five, she was diagnosed with diabetes. Her staple diet has been birch juice since then. The illness gradually eats away her handsome body, now shriveled up in a wheelchair. A toe, a foot...all amputated when the illness takes hold. Madame Krudson is as heavily guarded as the Sultan of Brunei. Yet now she is no more than a poor little thing in a dust-cloud of Caron face powder. A small bell tinkles behind me. Round One I wonder? A man in liveried attire enters the room with two red portfolios. He takes two sheets of A4 from each one. 5pm: he reads out the closing prices of the Dow Jones and the day's consolidated reports from Merrill Lynch and Citigroup. She bailed them out during the subprime crisis and took a majority stake in them through various pension funds. For the last twenty years, Western bankers have come to her, cap in hand, every time there's a bust in the boom and bust cycle. They come to see her in person, at 1030 Fifth Avenue. They go through the same ritual: Krudson squashes a blueberry scone from Dean and DeLuca in the palm of her hand. They watch them as they nibble from her hand and lick around her wizened, ringed fingers. Literally, eating from her hand.

"Good for nothing!" she sighs, "You stop Merrill Lynch from going under and what do they do? Award themselves a billion dollar bonus!"

She waves away the guy who brought in the papers.

"What did you learn from our last meeting in Greece? It seems to me that you didn't have much to say."

I had been invited to the Bilderberg annual gathering, a three day conference behind closed doors on the state of the world. Heads of government, senior managers, secret services and captains of industry from the western world were there. During a break, I was handed a sealed envelope: the summons to this meeting.

"I understood that the transatlantic relationship was dead, that the dollar was dead and that the economies of West are going to collapse. They will face deflation and impoverishment. No politician has the courage to come out and say it."

She stares at me but says nothing.

"The party's over."

"And you think I don't know that already," she scoffs, "What are you thinking? I am the invisible hand of it all!"

To rule the world, Madame Krudson and the Bilderberg invented the American Way of Life. They created - and then globalized - the three pillars of a totalitarian system of domination: credit, advertising and mass media. It promises individual

freedom. It organizes the confusion between happiness and consumption, manipulating the masses.

"Now tell me what you really think?"

I don't answer. She yells.

"Now, I'm waiting!"

Madame Krudson has spent her life dictating to people. It doesn't work anymore. American imperialism is challenged by the enormous ferocity of the Asian tigers and the rise of social unrest. Creaking under the weight of useless objects and antidepressants, Western populations won't let themselves be fooled much longer.

"1929 saw the birth of Nazism and resulted in 65 million dead. The same could happen again. I think Madame that you have lost control and that you are scared. Your belief in growth as a source for peace has become a reason for war."

"Not bad," she responded, her steely blue eyes staring straight into mine, "Capitalism has gone too far," she continued as if talking to herself. "But does that mean we should refute it?"

"Well, it's just that..."

"The Chinese have got us by the throat and the Russians control the energy supply. Even that puppet Chavez doesn't need us anymore. He gets his weapons from Moscow and lunches with Jin Tao. Al-Qaida has infiltrated our surveillance networks and..." she slams her fist down hard on the table,



"the United States of America is drifting into some kind of Afro-socialism! That is not leadership!"

She yells. Her cats freeze.

"The sovereign funds have yet to understand what they can do with their money: bring us to our knees, knock us to the ground. Don't be fooled. By "us" I mean our civilization, our idea of happiness."

She pauses, leans on the back of the wheelchair and looks me up and down.

"Do you know what the 1,180 billion dollars of the Chinese stimulation plan are for?"

"Public works," I reply, thinking of newspaper articles I had read in the plane.

"Public works? You idiot! So ignorant. It's all for the media!" she is getting wound up again. "The money goes to military expenditure. The Chinese want the capability to plan ahead, to invade another country. They want military power projection<sup>3</sup>. I cannot let that happen, you hear me?"

She flattens her scrawny hands on the glass desk top. She bends her head forward and breathes in through the nose:

"We Americans will always do the best for Humanity."

"America has failed, " I interrupt.

"The Empire is failing apart, trapped in its own sense of immortality and invincibility"

"Shut up!"

She turns and glances nostalgically at the pictures of her presidential embraces, then flings back at me in a rage:

"We are and shall remain the only Empire, do you hear me?"

"But.."

"Anything but be forced into second place. Anything but submission to China, and the carnage that will come with it. America is a THE Nation, the greatest, the one and only Empire. It all must stop. Government interventions across the Western world are putting off the final explosion. We must dismantle the system before it gets into the wrong hands in order to liberate the people. *Mort aux cons*, as you say in France. De Gaulle was right though, a daunting task, isn't it? I think he's the only one I would have got along with from your little country. Him and Aznavour of course. Ah, the two Charles..."

So that was it: fear of the red peril? But what is she getting at exactly?

"What does this have to do with me?"

"I ask the questions, you answer" she yells.

I had promised myself not to ask any questions, remembering my father's advice all too well:

*'If your silence is worth more than what you have to say, then don't say anything.'*

"I give myself insulin injections twice a day. My plasma is changed every month. This illness gives me no peace."

It was Madame Krudson had made the whole world obese. Now she was going to die, poisoned by her own blood sugar. A Siamese cat padded over and brushed against its mistress. A diamond hung from its leather collar.

"The Arabs thought they would impress me with their ornamental city and their private clinic in Switzerland. They offered me a pancreas transplant. But the totipotent embryonic stem cells will come too late. My body, or what's left of it, is far too decayed to resist cryogenics. I will die anytime soon."

Still curled up on her knees, the cat licked between its legs with relish.

"Mrs Krudson, I..." I begin, clearing my throat.

"I told you to shut up!" she shouts, slamming her hand on the table.

Breathing with difficulty, she pursues, in a lower voice:

"I need someone that nobody takes any notice of, in this world where we all spy on one another. I have chosen you for my very last project. Nobody would suspect you, you're such a talented trader. An unbeatable track record at Crédit Général, no insider dealing or bending of the rules whatsoever, an outstanding performance... For many, you are a genius."

She takes a small object from her pocket and slides it across the table with her bony fingers. I reach out to take it but Mrs Krudson sharply slams it down, hiding it under her hand. The honeymoon is over already:

"Don't fool yourself here: others were not up for the job. And I got rid of them."

Lifting her hand away, she reveals a gray USB key with a bizarre white cat on it. It's Hello Kitty, the Japanese children's character.

"Here's your last equation, Mister King of Quant. Tell your employer, Crédit Général, that it comes from your team. Tell your team you stole it from Goldman Sachs or that the idea came to you during the night. Tell them what you want. You know how to do it. Put your Merlin hat on. Launch this program on the markets and impress me with the jackpot. Leak it to the hedge-funds. They are about to collapse, stuffed by the American government with all those toxic assets. The Geithner plan wanted them to transform this waste into gold. They will be served. This is the boom of the century, the last one. The funds will be tripping over themselves to get their hands on your product. Let them think they are the only ones to have it."

I try some humor:

"That has always been the best recipe to sell ketchup"

"They will think they are saved, stronger than ever. They believe they are the masters of the universe. That will be the end for them. Get this program out there. Infiltrate those

heathens. You are going to start a systemic crisis for me, a real one this time."

I remember Lehmann brothers, AIG, the panic on the markets a few months ago, the queues of anguished people outside the collapsing banks, the riots in Argentina in 2001...Madame Krudson goes on:

"Too big to fail!<sup>4</sup> so they say. We'll see about that! Governments can't afford to save them again. Bailing the banks out plan has bled them dry. They won't be able to do anything this time."

"Madame Krudson, I ..."

"Enough already! You don't have the faintest idea to what extent this is beyond you and your little life."

"But why would I want to do this?" I ask, trying to gain some control of the situation.

"I've been watching you for a while. You are disgusted by the system, your life is a disaster. You're about to understand: you are worth nothing, you are nothing. A grain of sand, merely a cog in the machine, at the most. Deep down, you already know that money won't buy you anything. You are meaningless. This is your chance to become meaningful, to shape your destiny so it matches your talent. Until now, you have hardly made it. Thanks to me, you are now going to something of your life."

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<sup>4</sup> Phrase globally used to denote the idea that these financial institutions are so important to the world economy that they cannot be allowed to fail

Intrigued, but against my better judgment, I ask:

"What will happen?"

"Get this program onto the markets and quick. That is all that I need you to do. Just jump with the bandwagon. Now, get out before I change my mind. If you get out of the elevator alive, consider it a good sign."

I cross the blue-colored loft space reluctantly. The abduction of opponents, economic turmoil, media manipulation...For fifty years, Madame Krudson had been getting rid of anyone who dared to challenge her. From the elevator door, I look again, one last time, at this tiny waif-like woman. She shouts so loudly that her whole body trembles like a leaf;

"I said: Get Out!"

She puts her oxygen mask on, and glares at me one last time with her steel eyes.

The doors of the private elevator look like open jaws. So, other candidates for this capitalist jihad had been here before me? And Madame Krudson just got rid of them like she was swatting away a fly. Why and how, I wonder, stepping into the elevator. I press L for lobby.

The elevator starts to go down. Everything is normal. A thin line crosses the floor of the cabin. A trap door? I imagine agonizing bodies impaled on the elevator's machinery, after a fall down fourteen floors. The cabin stops and opens onto the first floor. The Gaddafi woman stares at me darkly, her thighs ready to spring.

An armored candy-pink Rolls-Royce is waiting for me as I step outside. One of Madame Krudson's drivers is waiting to drive me to JFK. A fire truck hurtles down Fifth Avenue, followed by another, sirens all on, several blocks behind. At the corner of Fifth and 84th, some guys from Pricewaterhousecoopers skip through a red light in running suits. Every week, they train for the marathon while dreaming about their bonus. In New York, like everywhere else, nothing is lost, everything is transformed: those specialized in debt restructuring make billions out of the banks collapse. They have only one objective in mind and are convinced that this is making sense. Just as I was, until a few minutes ago.

Before getting into the Rolls-Royce, I walk over to a hot-dog stand. I need to eat something. The guy hands me a boiling hot sausage in a bun leaking oil and sweet mustard sauce.

"If I were you brother, I wouldn't do that," he says handing me my change.

I am not sure I heard him right. The guy carries on as normal, his gaze lowering to the dollar note he is holding out to me. His thumb is placed in the middle, his nail pointing to the truncated pyramid topped by the floating eye featured on any dollar bill. The same that was on Madame Krudson's stained glass windows. I take three steps back.

"Yeah, you would not want anything to do with that." He continued.

Further along, I can see couples on the steps of the Met, their arms around each other. The subway is right next to them. I am trying to work out the distance to see if I could escape when Madame Krudson's tigress, her muscular body guard,

comes out of the building. She stares at me, her arm inside her jacket as if she was about to pull her P22 on me. I came out alive from Madame Krudson's apartment. She is not going to leave me alone. I get in the pink colored Rolls Royce. The bored Central Park polar bear is still moaning.



## Chapter 2

Madame Krudson's Rolls Royce heads towards JFK. Inside, on the white leather seats and sealed off from Manhattan, its noise, sunshine and craziness, I try to recover my 'comfort zone'. I spend my life in cars and planes, from parking lots to airports. The fuselage of a plane, computer screens, complex equations, are my shields against real life. I am thirty-seven years' old. I have 40 million euros in a Cayman Islands bank account. I am a Brownian math junkie. A guy paid to flirt with fractals and cover-up risk.

I bet on the Asian collapse, surfed on the internet bubble. In 2008 I watched the dazed and reeling Merrill Lynch employees become servants of the state. I am in charge of quantitative trading at Crédit Général Bank. I write quantitative analysis programs, models with fifty variables. Thirty guys line up miles of code for me, looking for Alpha, the perfect equation. I press enter and launch software programs onto the financial markets. Like an Aladdin's magic lamp, it spews forth two figure ratios. I don't even have to pick up the phone. Algorithms calculate the optimal position in real time, computers send orders within a nanosecond. Today, 70% of daily transactions are made using systems like mine. Every single day, the future of the world is negotiated by ultra-intelligent machines. These are the drones of finance.

On the trading floor, while the smooth-cheeked traders slave away on the telephone, I sip green tea while reading *The Story of My Life* by Casanova. I shoot a cursory glance at the performance curve which develops by itself. Sometimes I go watch a movie at the UGC theatre in the La Défense district while waiting for the Stock Exchange to close. As soon as a program runs out of steam, I launch another one, straight from

the computers of my team of physicists specialized in fluid mechanics. The bank dresses it up in a marketing package and calls the whole thing 'investment products'. The communications department publishes an official report and organizes opulent conferences on the treasures of financial innovation. Nobody has a clue what I'm doing.

Mathematics and codes have given us power. Complexity is the most potent weapon, the '+' sign the golden rule. The planet is a Monopoly game, companies merely reduced to a list of stock exchange symbols and workers the infantrymen of all-powerful capital. The world works for us but we are never seen. We bankers, we live leveraged, massively in debt. We bet one, borrow one hundred, earn one thousand. GDP, cash-flow, currencies, we bet on anything and everything. We hardly know how to read a balance sheet. Most of us have never even set foot inside the doors of a company, the rat race ultimate treadmill. We couldn't care less about what they do, the number of people they hire. Finance was invented to make grand projects happen, to raise people out of poverty. These days, we are betting against humanity, an extremely volatile security. Finance causes catastrophes then prospers by re-absorbing them. Our profits are your losses.

Politicians, left way behind, publish lengthy diatribes about the excesses of capitalism. These are written by advisors who were born just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. They call us terrorists. They were the ones who supplied us with our arms, targets and plan of attack. Just like with Bin Laden. The politicians' anger is for cameras only. Twenty years of gluttony and collusion have produced a system riddled with crooked practices. With the subprime crisis, we have ruined entire populations. At worst, I lose my job and find one with another bank who will double my package. Or, I could do

something else, like buy a lousy football club, like a Russian oligarch. I could watch men run after a stupid ball having already fixed the match in the changing room. No matter what we do, governments all over the world are falling over themselves to help us. We will never be punished. Barack Obama advocates reform. He appointed two of the disaster's masterminds to reform the system. Tim Geithner and Henry Paulson are to siphon off the resources of households for generations to come. From the very heart of Obama's administration, those two stooges are still working for Goldman Sachs. Thanks to them, the firm will complete its takeover bid of the world. Billions come out of no-where, banks are bailed out, the people taken hostage. This is the hold-up of the century, the biggest case of insider trading in history. The media are coming down like a ton of bricks on our bonuses. We must not expose the lie: for sixty years, life on credit has been a massacre. Finance has revealed its meanness. It controls the world through the Stock Exchanges, devastating society.

The worst gangsters on this planet are like me. They fund the fight against malaria, build schools in Africa, invest in wind turbines. They invite Nelson Mandela to their birthday parties. They listen to Bono like he's the new Messiah, would love to shake hands with Angelina Jolie. They spend their weekends in their Bionic, a luxurious individual submarine. They escape the real world by flying over it in a private jet. Thanks to their PR advisors, they appear in newspapers behind the wheel of a Toyota Prius. They seek redemption in art and invest in just about anything. I am a child of Western fascism. I want to hit the escape key. I can buy everything. I take out Mrs Krudson's USB key. I want to buy myself back.

### Chapter Three

My relationship with the Bilderberg Club began last January. A laconic message printed in English lettering on a heavy coated card was sent to my home address:

The Bilderberg Club requests the honor of your presence at our next meeting scheduled for May 14th to 16th. Information on the precise location will be provided at a later date. The conference will examine policy overlaps and differences in the West under the theme of:

'The global crisis: threat or opportunity for a new world order?'

Yours sincerely,

Robert J. Legall

RSVP

I was informed of the precise location exactly five days before the conference. This was to prevent intrusions from the Press and anti-globalization activists. Like every other participant, I undertook never to breathe a word about what I was going to see and hear. Cell-phones and Dictaphones were strictly forbidden, nothing can get out. Before leaving for the conference, I got in touch with the few French figures who had been invited to take part in the past: business leaders and former Prime Ministers like Jospin, Fabius and Rocard. Their names had been leaked on the internet. None of them would speak to me.

At Athens airport, a car was waiting to drive me to the Astir Palace in Vouliagmeni. The limousine, with tinted windows, had a huge letter B on its windscreen. The car sped along behind two officers on motor cycles from the Astinomia, the national police force. They sounded their horns as if I was the singer Demis Roussos coming back home. The Palace had been emptied out. CIA and MI6 agents had led a thorough investigation into the background and political affiliations of the staff, from the guy who washes dishes to the hotel manager. Virtually all the suites on my floor were vacant. Before the conference began, I noticed, from my balcony with a sea view, the snipers and NATO patrols that were sealing off the perimeter. A fleet of helicopters dropped off those participants who had arrived in private jets. Above them, an F16 was surveying the area. Greek military dinghies were supervising maritime traffic. One had just stopped a speedboat full of journalists. They had tried to reach the shore. They would be spending a few days in a police station.

There were one hundred and thirty of us in a conference room with a view over the Mediterranean. Seated in rows, in reverse alphabetical order, the crème de la crème of Western self-importance waited quietly. Those in control of the economic power (Tim Geithner, Lawrence Summers<sup>5</sup>, the CEOs of JP Morgan Chase, Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank, KKR Private Equity, North-American oilmen, the directors of western central banks), military and intelligence agency chiefs (Secretary General of NATO, the Secretary of State for Defense, the Director of the NSA and of MI6), press barons (Rupert Murdoch, Eric Schmidt<sup>6</sup>, Peter Thiel<sup>7</sup>, Martin Wolf<sup>8</sup>), European monarchs

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<sup>5</sup> Secretary of State for the Treasury under the Clinton Administration and Director of the White House National Economic Council under President Obama.

<sup>6</sup> CEO of Google

<sup>7</sup> Member of the Board of Directors of Facebook

<sup>8</sup> Editor in Chief of the Financial Times

(Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, Prince Philip of Belgium and Queen Sofia of Spain), as well as the bosses of big international organizations (like Robert Zoellick<sup>9</sup>). Grim faced, they all shook hands ,all too proud to be there. I noticed a few women but not a single Asian, African, Arab, nor South-American.

A huge videoconference screen was switched on and the meeting began. Madame Krudson appeared in front of a black background. She led the discussion from her Manhattan penthouse:

“Should we favor a long period of depression, forcing people into long-term poverty or a brutal, short-lived crisis which would give rise to a new world order?”

In their respective fields, each participant is a master at manipulating the masses and usurping the truth. With her, they were like little boys. Richard Holbrooke<sup>10</sup> and Henry Kissinger<sup>11</sup> argued about Iraq. Given the seriousness of the global situation, members of Obama’s team were allowed to take notes. Obama had been elected with an agenda for change. The Bilderbergers were all over his administration. Western statesmen had stayed at home to avoid suspicion from the press. They appeared one after the other on the screens, sometimes altogether. Gordon Brown, Angela Merkel, Dominique Strauss-Kahn were all berated for their inability to avoid the derailment of the Western economy. From his presidential office, his shoulder permanently twitching, Nicolas Sarkozy, adjusted his tie at least a dozen times. She dictated a list of decisions to be taken in each country or institution. In prophetic mood, she added:

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<sup>9</sup> Director of the World Bank

<sup>10</sup> Special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan

<sup>11</sup> Special envoy to Russia, former Secretary of State and national security advisor

"Since you are so incapable, try at least to calm the masses down. Failing which, prepare to be wiped out."

Mrs Krudson was convinced she was on the side of the people. Yet she despised them. They badly lacked self-determination and courage and therefore should be controlled. Her aim was to establish a form of global socialism from the top. It would gradually be implemented, not by force, but through subtle propaganda, gradually winning over opinion. During times of crisis, whether genuine or otherwise, the idea was to reinforce the alienation. Madame Krudson had resurrected an old method: infiltration. Politics, real politics, was all about influence. International organizations should be infiltrated in order to manipulate their directors. Bolshevism, with which she shared an objective, was her pet hate; the class struggle and revolution, sheer lunacy. Combined with the power of the media, capitalism was her strongest ally. Together, they would standardize dreams, towns, lifestyles. Conformism and materialism would lead to global apathy. They would give birth to a flat world over which they would reign. Their decisions, laws and public policies on economy and education would remove the remaining obstacles. National governments would be powerless. Originally an instrument against the communist upsurge to liberate the people by the people, the Bilderberg Group soon became the strong-arm of the ultra-liberals. Since 1954, it has defined the economic policy of the Western bloc. If a government rejected its recommendations, the supervisory board - a small group of ten people including David Rockefeller, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski and the directors of the CIA, MI6 and NATO - would provoke a coup d'état. They would organize a cash-flow crisis or destabilize the balance of trade, thereby causing the population terrible suffering. The

IMF and the World Bank were their favorite instruments, operating, as they were, from behind the veneer of noble, post-war ideals. Ever since the establishment of this secret world government, Madame Krudson had taken part in every G8 meeting via videoconference. She drew-up the agenda, prepared the conclusions and wrote the communiqués. She made the black list of the tax havens to close down at the last G20 meeting. The flag of democracy had been unfurled everywhere. It was the fancy dress an ideology obsessed with power.

In the hotel corridors, the atmosphere was tense and faces were expressionless. At the end of the three-day conference, a sententious Madame Krudson concluded:

“What has brought us this far is today striking us down. We are the victims of our own success. We must kill the temptation of evil. Only the end of global consumption will preserve our domination. Be ready.”

The screen suddenly blacked out. The stunned participants were free again to do as they liked after having been scolded like little children. They began cursing and haranguing each other. I had not understood a thing.



/.../

## Chapter Twenty five

I am the Master of Ceremony at Madame Krudson's party. I arrive around 8pm, with Tay on my arm, to welcome the guests. Before entering the New York Public library, privatized for the occasion, I take her to the park next to the East coast's biggest library, on 42nd Street. The first winter chill blows in off the Hudson River. The sky is clear, Christmas lights twinkle in the trees. Alongside the park on 6th Avenue, dark downtown skyscrapers dominate, block after block. The finance industry survivors live here, perched on top of these miradors. On Avenue of the Americas, they are scanning the land as if chasing their next prey: the bank opposite, the company next door, public services sold for scrap by near bankrupt States.

We get to the steps of the building. A red carpet has been meticulously laid out from the magnificent entrance to the gutter of 5th Avenue. It is ready to lure in the guests as they step out of their limousine. They won't have to dirty their Italian leather shoes on Manhattan's tarmac. Earphones in place, Herculean security guards wait on the sidewalk, ready to open doors, check invitations, protect the VIPs. Mayor Bloomberg has had the streets cordoned off for three blocks. Snipers are in position on the roof. Statesmen, CEOs and bankers are going to be walking past. Laughing, Tay goes up the steps, softly lit from below. Her small, dark feet in a pair of Jimmy Choos skip along the red velvet. Two life-size marble lions guard the entrance. Inside, there are tropical flowers everywhere. Each bouquet must be worth 2 000 dollars. Tay is in awe.

"Can we take a bouquet back to Paris, querido?"

"Sure we can, honey. I'll have one delivered to our room."

Waiters are standing behind the buffet tables prepared by Daniel Boulud, the New York chef. In the annex, next to the kitchen, I see stacks of white plates. Caterers are putting a whole shelled lobster on each one. They are so huge, they must be at least 80 years old. In another room, small, greasy-skinned Mexican women are wrapping gifts - a Tiffany charm - to be given to each guest. I look closer: it's a white gold cat, with diamonds for eyes. In the main room, the musicians, the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, are setting up in silence. The two Lilliputian contortionists in leotards from the Cirque du Soleil are doing the splits. They are twin sisters, and made up as cats, which makes them indistinguishable from each other. Tay can't believe her eyes:

"But...is this what you do for a living, querido mio?"

"No, it's all just for show. Make the most of it, I have a feeling it's going to be the last time."

The guests arrive, twenty or thirty people at a time. At around 9pm, smiling men in tuxedos and their face-lifted wives in evening dresses flock into the room. The Blue Chips, recognizable by their low-cut necklines and cellulite-free legs, mingle with the others. Emirs drink bourbon with the Chinese. Rob, who I gave HK 2010 to, so he could sell it to brokers on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, is whispering to the boss of the Bank of China. File under his arm, and keeping a sharp eye on the crowd, he nods his head now and again in agreement with who knows what. Rob's face lights up as he sees me. He was struggling in his movie business. Thanks to HK 2010, he's now a king in Hong Kong. Abramovich, the Russian

oligarch pounces on the foie-gras, closely followed by his cohort of silicon-filled models. François-Henri Pinault and Salma Hayek, Mittal and his sons, Bill Gates and his wife...The world of global capitalism is burying the crisis like it was just a bad dream. The Dow Jones has just passed the 10 000 mark again and JP Morgan has just announced mega bonuses. Hank Paulson, Tim Geithner and Larry Summers head into the ballroom together. Suddenly, the noise and the orchestra stop. In the space of a year, these swindlers have pulled off the biggest heist in history. Three pure products of the WASP establishment: Harvard or Yale, then an investment bank, then a government position. Game, set, match. Everybody who's anybody in finance owes them everything they've got. They get a two minute standing ovation.

Eva and Frédéric arrive, tanned and in love. When he sees the room, Frederic marvels, "Sacré Pierre, sacré Pierre...". These last few weeks, Eva, an M&A queen, has never worked so much in her life. In the Spring, the cash flow of big groups had been siphoned off by the crisis. Their stock prices hit rock bottom during the summer. They were easy prey, selling to the highest bidder. Survivors of the subprime funds paid peanuts for anything going, with potentially astronomical profits to be made. She kisses me on both cheeks.

"When I saw you in London, I thought you were a total loser. But you are a STAR! I was wrong for once."

"Let's have a drink to the markets," I reply.

"Yes, let's drink to you, Pierre," says Frédéric, winking at me, "to the fantastic gifts you gave me. Don't hold back next time, I love surprises."

Not wanting them to say too much, I change the subject with blandishments about how well they look.

"We got into kite surfing," Frédéric explains, "We go to Brazil every month. It's amazing and so easy too. When you fly back from a weekend down there, you can sleep in the plane!"

Behind the bar, Bertrand is busy preparing cocktails.

"Incredible party," he says, shaking the bottles, "Can I get you anything?"

"No messing around, Eva and Frédéric are with us..."

"No worries man, I'm saving my magic potion for you-know-who."

I scan the room looking for Geraldine. I sent her an invitation to the party along with a plane ticket. I didn't have her home address so I sent it to her editorial office at Le Temps in Geneva. She didn't bother to get back to me.

I spot Madame Krudson in her wheelchair. People are waiting in single file to greet her and kiss her skeletal hand. When she sees me, she gets rid of the CEO of Boeing and gestures to me to come over. I apologize to Tay, uneasy about leaving her alone among the jackals. She is far more beautiful than all the Blue Chips put together. I expect Eva and Frédéric to keep her company. As soon as I leave, Eva drags Frédéric off to watch the Cirque du Soleil. Eva knows she can't compete with Tay, so hates to be around her. When I reach Madame Krudson, she gazes suggestively at ma belle and murmurs:

"Does paying her make you feel better?"

"That's just the way it is."

"She's not going anywhere, she loves you. You're just a little boy, stuck in the anal phase. As usual, you're climbing up the wrong tree: the most beautiful things in life can't be possessed.

I hadn't even had time to say hello to her. We watch this hothouse of highly-charged go-getters, cynical bankers and politicians celebrating the end of an economic lent. The schnozzle in the caviar, they're all Madoffs in the making. The world of finance thinks it is invincible, protected by its own sophistication and machines. 70% of daily trades are made down to the nearest millionth of a second by ultra-powerful computers. For the moment, they systematically send huge quantities of buy orders. Like sheep, the others blindly follow the trend, bulling the market. The guests have never been so convinced of their own genius. By selling HK 2010 to their contacts, Rob, Paulo and Frédéric have infiltrated them. Their reversal of fortunes depends on lines of programmed codes written to trick them. A virus with a cat's head is going to destroy them. Madame Krudson changes the subject:

"Do you know Galbraith?"

"The economist? Not my cup of tea."

"I didn't trust that old socialist for the longest time. We fought a lot. I even led a smear campaign that he was mad. But he'd understood everything after all!"

"Marx too, Madame."

"How dare you even mention his name to me," if looks could kill I'd be dead. "I spent my life fighting Marxism."

"Madame, I might be anal, but there's nothing wrong with my brain. You fought for yourself. Communism was just a bogeyman to convince the masses to buy into your system. There would have been no America without the Soviets. So let's stop kidding ourselves, shall we?"

She swallows hard. I go on:

"So what about Galbraith?"

"His vision of finance: 'the pathological weakness of its memory, a mass escape from reality'. Just look at them! Such a pathetic lack of grey matter between their ears!"

"Between bankruptcy and depression, don't you think the crisis weeded out the worst of them? Survival of the fittest, Darwin at work and all that."

She looks around, takes a deep breath then bangs the arm of her wheelchair:

"A man, a real man dies at his desk or puts an end to it himself. Doubt, depression, unemployment are for the weak and for women!"

Incognito in a curly wig and baggy dress, and persona non grata for a crowd of neo-cons, Naomi Klein is taking notes for her next book. The guests don't suspect a thing. She looks like Susan Boyle, that British singer who could be a farmer from the sixties. The journalist Arianna Huffington pours out her thoughts on Twitter. Her editorial team transforms every

tweet into columns and relays them to CNN. Reporters from the Wall Street Journal, just beyond security on the street corners, are green with envy. They couldn't get in. "Has-beens", decreed Madame Krudson, striking them off her press guest list.

"Would you just look at this line of morons waiting to greet me? You and I, we're hurricane Katrina. We're about to strike and these losers think they can go around playing golf, half drunk."

An infatuated fifty-year old is talking to Tay. He's virtually drooling. I leave Madame Krudson to her ravings. Annoyed, I hear her say from behind, "Be ready." That will be her very last instruction.

I make my way back to Tay who kisses me on the mouth. The man slinks off.

"He was about to give me his number," she tells me, "all in the time it took his wife to go get him a drink. Can you believe it?"

"Yeah, well, if you want to know what I think, it's even worse. She's known what he's like for a long time now. She probably even left him the time to do a little deal with you. That's what it costs to keep the mansion in St Cloud, the villa in St Tropez and the staff too. And, these guys are hungry, sweetheart. Tonight, it's like they've come back to life. For them, it's like the light at the end of the tunnel. Nothing and nobody has changed the rules."

The waiters make their way through the crowd carrying Baccarat glasses filled with champagne on silver trays. On the main



staircase, fresh-faced thirty somethings throw their empty glasses on the marble steps. The guys from Goldman Sachs are beaming all over their faces. They joined the firm like it was a religion, for the whole experience and only after getting through twenty interviews. They work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and never take a vacation. They sleep at the hotel opposite the Wall Street head office. The firm books rooms there all year round so its employees never waste a single minute. The adage goes: 'if we need you, be there. If we call and you don't pick up, we won't need you much longer. And if we don't call, it's that we don't need you anymore.' They are reviewed and coached every day by those they work with. Salaries are astronomical, they work like dogs but careers are short. In its October 2009 issue, Rolling Stone magazine said about Goldman Sachs: 'The world's most powerful investment bank is a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money.' For the party, a few of the firm's traders had a squid tattooed on their hands. Lloyd Blankfein, CEO and chairman of Goldman Sachs, is overjoyed. With 68 million dollars in yearly income (plus the 500 million worth of shares in the company), he really is a happy banker. In a recent interview with The Sunday Times, he said: 'I'm just a banker, a blue-collar guy, doing God's work.'

Paulo avoids the broken glass as he walks up the stairs. Thanks to HK 2010, he has earned record amounts for his Chinese and Russian employers. They are small fry compared to Paulo and the money he brings in by selling on HK 2010 to intermediaries. In July, he couldn't thank me enough. He indulges himself with his first vacation ever: two months without email or phone calls. A radical attempt to wean himself off the game, a test of endurance. Slimmer, his chest puffed out, he makes his way up, accompanied by a girl wearing

no make-up and in a creased linen dress. For two months now, he's been besotted by her. He says he is under her spell, in love. As they get closer, I notice Paulo is barefoot and his white silk Kurta suit. Laughing, I say to him:

"Paulo! Great to see you! What on earth are you wearing? Did Air France lose your bags or what?"

"Hey, my hero," he hugs me, "So good to see you at last. Let me introduce you to Rebecca."

Small and buff, Rebecca has a square face and light brown, shoulder length hair. She's a yoga teacher at the Beau Rivage Palace Hotel in Lausanne where Paulo lives year round. I kiss her on both cheeks. She reeks of essential oils. As she greets Tay, she notices a pig roasting on a spit. It has an apple in its mouth and its ears are stuffed with parsley. At the sight of this, Rebecca winces. She is a vegetarian who believes in reincarnation. Paulo presses on with the introductions:

"Rebecca, this is my friend Pierre. I've told you so much about him. You know, I owe this guy everything. And this is Tay, his gorgeous girlfriend."

Rebecca, completely still as if in a trance, looks like a sheep that just realizes it is surrounded by wolves. Paulo hastily takes a little plastic sachet from his pocket. He takes a few grains from it and gently hands them to her:

"Here you go, sweetheart, take these."

Nervous, I snatch the sachet from him. I hadn't seen anyone use drugs yet. Paulo bursts out laughing:

"It's just a few sesame seeds!"

We move to one side while the girls get to know one another.

"Seriously though, Paulo, what the hell are you wearing? How could security have let you in?"

"Well apparently, on the guest list, I'm down as a VIP Premium."

"Ok, now I remember. Premium status, you get in even if you're butt-naked."

I had ranked the guests according to how much each one had contributed to launching the program.

"You were the first, at the Plaza, remember?"

"You bet I was. I thought you were a freak", recalls Paulo, "And you never told me what that cat logo was all about. I see it all over the place now!"

"It doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

"I guess not. And I told you, man, that I would stop, that this was the last deal. I promised even."

"Right, and I still don't believe you."

"Well I am afraid my friend you're wrong on this one!" his face lights up. "Look at me. Don't you think I'm a new man?"

"Listen, obviously you've cut down on the tiramisu, which is always a good sign with you. You're going around barefoot with

some yogi who stinks of patchouli and eats seeds. Yeah, I'd say you've changed."

"You have no idea: we just got back from Dharamsala!"

"In India? What were you doing in that godforsaken place?"

"Godforsaken? Come on, man, have some respect, it's where the Dalai-Lama lives!"

"You? And the Dalai-Lama?? Paulo, what are you on?"

"Ok, ok, it started off as a bet. More specifically, I wanted to impress Rebecca and show her that I was actually capable of living without all my toys."

"You're kidding me!"

Rob goes past, with a Blue Chip on his arm and a lustful look on his face.

"Rebecca took me to her ashram in India. She wanted me to detox. We get there, and it's full of Americans. The first thing that struck me was how they seemed so gentle, their gestures were so slow. Like slugs on LSD."

"You? In an ashram? But you're..."

"Wait, let me tell you the rest. The reason for this trip was to meet Rebecca's yogi, the grand master. So, we get to the ashram, and I can't keep still. Straight away, Rebecca goes directly over to this man and bows down in front of him like he was George Soros. I go over to the guy, I'm curious to see him and..."

"What?"

"Well, this guy, this guru, well..."

"Come on, what?"

"He used to be with Salomon Smith Barney, in the London office!" exclaims Paulo, pleased with himself. "His name is Mike, a guy who weathered all the crises. He was dealing in distressed securities. An utter vermin.

During the nineties, the IMF goofed up time after time, setting off one monetary crisis after another. Some of capitalism's newest recruits - Asian tigers, Russia, some South American countries - were decimated by them. Panicking, the governments and businessmen of these countries let industries and businesses go for nickels and dimes, relieved to have avoided bankruptcy. The 'big financial institutions', American ones in particular, cleaned up. They are known, in the industry, as 'vulture funds'. They buy up debt, restructure organizations, remove any barriers to immediate productivity: the less qualified, the not so young, better working conditions. A few years later, for sky-high profits, they sell the companies that they saved but bled dry. This financial sleight of hand is known as distressed investment. Paulo goes on:

"So, Mike was a real success in Hong Kong in 98. You know the guy, he told us he was retiring on his thirtieth birthday. Just after the Argentina crisis, remember?"

"No."

"Well, whatever. So, I'm in this ashram, five hours from New Delhi. We had taken a bus which stank of gas and had no brakes. And I see this Mike guy, hair down his back, body in great shape, looks like a play-boy. Even with the yoga pants, we recognize each other straight away. He comes over like he's floating on air, he's so supple and unfazed, he says to me: 'Welcome, my friend. I knew you would come one day. It was written.' I was just like, I don't believe this: I mean, he is a king over there."

"So?"

"Well, I think he's converted me!"

"What??"

"Mike took my hand, man."

"Bullshit, Paulo!"

"First, he had me lie down to listen to my deeper pulse."

"Your deeper pulse?"

"Well, yeah, you know, yin and yang. According to him, my energy was totally out of balance. Which is hardly surprising with all the Russians and Chinese in my life. He stuck pins all over me to get my yin pulse going again. Honestly, the next day, I was bouncing."

"I can't believe I'm listening to this."

"Listen! Rebecca and Mike persuaded me to do this long, silent meditation. It's a vipassana. Ten days without speaking! They told me it was the only way to reach a state of purification."

"You? Keeping your mouth shut to purify yourself? What a joke!"

Under the pretext of 'financial innovation', Paulo had spent the last fifteen years, arming rebels, laundering money, destabilizing the price of wheat. He goes on:

"I thought I was going to die: a gong wakes you up at 4 in the morning, you meditate till dawn, they give you tea and some disgusting cookie for breakfast, then meditation for the digestion - with nothing in your stomach, please note - it's long. Shower, more meditation, an apple at 10 am, meditation, a bowl of stale rice for lunch, meditation, another apple at 4 pm, soup at night, meditation again. All of that and you can't even look at anyone else. You keep your head bowed all the time, you live on the inside."

"So what do you do all that time?"

"Nothing, you sit and you don't move."

"Paulo, you can't even read ten pages out of the same book or have a conversation for longer than twenty minutes."

"I swear to you: you cut yourself off from all forms of stimulation and you listen. Even I could do it."

"Who? I mean who do you listen to?"

"Yourself, obviously! You hear all sorts of voices."

He explains, pleased with himself:

"So, it starts like a kind of bet. Rebecca told me, 'I'll give you two hours.' I try. I think of my Ferrari all the time, going to Flash Dancers, of you my friend. You, acting so strange around in the urinal on the Champs-Élysées. Most of all, I have wild dreams, about anything, panacotta, Chinese guys dressed in black, road accidents, mass graves. In a heightened state, my brain races and then I go through all the stages: challenge, boredom, exasperation, anger. After two days, I was crying like a baby. I hate every bone in my body. They have a special room for people who break down. You know, when you crack up, it's often the sign of a new beginning in life."

"Enough already ! I feel like I am listening to the stupid psycho-babble articles in my mother's magazines."

"Think what you want but on the fourth day, I empty myself out. I vomit everywhere. Blood is coming out of my ears. I'm panicking because I think I've caught Ebola or something."

"And what about Rebecca?"

"She was next to me but she didn't move."

"The bitch!"

"No, that's the rule. I was going crazy but I wanted to win my bet, you know me. Anyway, I'm in this room which stinks of feet...I'm sleeping on a plank of wood, surrounded by fifteen guys crying in their sleep, calling for their daddy. The



loudest noise ever wakes me up and my sheet is wet with tears."

"Tears?"

"I'm telling you, I emptied myself out. Then, on the seventh day, something happens. I'd already lost a lot of weight and still hadn't said a word. I start to really listen to the two or three mantras that the Master, Mike, gives us, like little droplets, every morning at dawn. He chooses them well; sometimes I spend the whole day on one phrase, one word even. And I just take leave of myself. I feel so good, like I'm soothed. Like I'm at one with existence..."

" 'At one with existence'...would you please listen to yourself? Paulo, I mean, please...I think I liked you better when you were behind the wheel of your Porsche Cayenne..."

"Sold it my friend! Like my other cars too. With Rebecca, we are trying to reduce our carbon-footprint."

"But Paulo...you can't live without taking a plane. You live in planes!"

"I'm telling you, I've changed. Anyway, back to the ashram. After another seven or eight days, I feel great. I form a whole with my surroundings. I think I stayed in this state for more than ten days and at the end I was just a happy slug. Then, one morning, Rebecca wakes me up chanting some mantras. She breaks the silence, she's so sublime, luminous. I can almost see her aura."

"Oh my God, Paulo..."

I move away to observe him. Even his chest hairs look soothed: they've kind of straightened out.

"No problem, man, you'll understand one day. Anyway, the Master comes down to the side of my bed and takes me in his arms. I was so moved, like a sissy. And then he told me."

"What?"

"The world is a zoo in the hands of selfish children disguised as adults. Now change it."

Smiling, Paulo opens his arms to the crowd. He adds:

"If it wasn't for you, we'd still be in the ashram. But I love you, you're my brother."

As he speaks these words, he hugs me. I hear Tay and Rebecca giggle behind us.

"So now Rebecca is the one for you," I said, changing the subject, "You've got rid of all your other girlfriends?"

"Yes. I talked a lot about that with Mike. In fact, what you discover, as life goes by, is that even when you're a couple, a happy couple even, you're always alone. When they feel alone, people think it's because their relationship isn't working. But really, you can change girlfriends a thousand times, experience the most intense relationship ever known to mankind. At the end of the day, you're always alone. People just can't take that idea. And because they can't abide the idea of being alone, they spend their lives leaving each other!"

I think about Tay and Madame Krudson's remark: my lovely Tay, would she love me too? I envy Paulo, with his sesame seeds and his non-transactional relationship. Irritated, I try to jibe him:

"Come on, man, it's just, what ...three, maybe four months top that you're together. And, if I follow you, one was spent in a slug refuge, from where you have come, believing yourself to be the new Mother Theresa!"

"Ok, you don't have to believe me. Now, Rebecca and I are going to open our own ashram for losers like me and you. And actually, I came to your little fiesta to look for clients. It's the business of tomorrow, dude. Right there, in front of us."

Once again, he sweeps his arm to show all of the partying businessmen.

"You, a hedge-fund junkie," I say, not believing him for a second, "you, who spends his time looting cocoa and starving the planet, you are going to be a nirvana grand master?"

"Not me, man, Mike's perfect for the job. We've already bought a hill in Dharamsala. I've bought fifty of Starck's ecological cabins, in do it yourself kits. We're going for luxurious but minimalist, like with bamboo and lily-pads. You and Tay will have a suite all year round. I owe you so much, my friend."

I remember Paulo in Portugal, a calf stuck in his chest; in New York in a steak-house the night before 9/11; in some brothel in Prague wearing a Saddam Hussein mask with some slutty Czech girl in Combloux; calling me, scared out of his wits because he thinks Al-Qaida are on his trail; then at the

Plaza five months ago, bloated from huge quantities of pasta with cream sauce. Ten years already. As if reading my thoughts, Paulo says:

"When you think about it, all that thanks to a USB key with a stupid cat's head on it."

Tay and Rebecca come over carrying glasses of carrot juice.

"All that, as you say, my friend, thanks to her." I nod towards Madame Krudson.

A long line of people wait in front of her wheelchair. Men want to be graced with some of her spirit, like during a religious procession.

"Who is she?" asks Paulo.

"She looks like Amma," remarks Rebecca, almost moved.

"Who, honey?" says Paulo.

"The Indian holy woman."

"Who is she?" asks Tay.

"She travels around, bringing peace," explains Rebecca. "Across the world, the faithful travel thousands of miles to see her. They wait to be taken in her arms, to receive some of her spirituality. I've done it a few times. You go up to her, she looks you straight in the eyes for a few seconds, then she holds you in her arms. It's just a quick embrace, but you are metamorphosed. She has embraced so many people her chest is just one huge callus now."

"Woah, Paulo, Rebecca," I guffaw, "you'd better lay off the sesame seeds!"

"So what's the difference between her and your old woman in the wheelchair then?" she jibes. "Amma is going to be in Paris soon. We're going to see her on our way back. Even Sarkozy is going."

"Querido," says Tay, extatic, "I want to see her. I want to be purified too. She will help me, for Sana," she adds. "She can give me her spirituality."

Just then, Justin Timberlake takes the microphone and starts singing his latest hit: a cover version of Michael Jackson's Thriller. The crowd in the New York Public Library goes wild. The bankers swivel their hips around the Blue Chips. A dress-related miracle has happened in the bat of an eyelid: their dresses are suddenly twenty centimeters shorter. Tay screams with joy. 1.5 million dollars was a bargain for the pop star's presence and a few of his songs.

