



Part One

*'All this is a dream. Still, examine
it with a few experiments.'*

MICHAEL FARADAY (1849)







Aadam ascended the basement stairs to meet his clients. Rounding the top his eyes fell on an overcast Wigmore Street, yet he still smarted at the natural light. Basements truly sucked. Outside a horn blew and some loose words were exchanged, but by the time he reached the doors all evidence was gone. Vehicles shunted forwards in batches, like sections on a caterpillar's body. Aadam smiled. First rain drops smacked into windows and his smile broadened. He observed the human stream, rippling as scarves got adjusted and brollies opened up. Aadam's heart did a little dance, for today he was immune – the short days and early nights, the cold that would only get colder and the rain that would not relent – today they couldn't touch him. For tomorrow, *tonight* ... the fasting would end and the feasting begin. All troubles would be put aside and the good things indulged in. This innocuous dying day, for Aadam, heralded renewal.

'Hi Sarah,' he said, smiling as he propped himself up by the front desk. The receptionist drew near, her aura light and pleasant. 'I'm expecting some people – from the Capital Actions project. Looks like they're late.' Absentmindedly he looked back outside.

'The Capital Actions project?' She straightened her spine, hands braced for action. 'Which meeting room are you in?'

'Oh, none – they were all gone.'

She looked alarmed and began checking the bookings.

'Relax,' he said. 'It's OK. We'll hold it right here.' He gestured towards the foyer. 'I'm going there now. Bring them over, would you?'



‘Of course, Aadam,’ she demurred.

‘Oh, and buzz George once they’ve arrived. Some teas and things would be nice.’

He dropped onto the settee, upholstered to the ostentatious demands of a West End lobby. It squeaked as he adjusted, sinking slowly, one arm resting on fine leather and the other holding meeting notes. He checked his watch and planned the day’s end: discuss the project, write up some notes and then straight home. He’d be in another world come this time tomorrow.

He looked up at a widescreen above the mock fireplace, constantly tuned into BBC news. The volume was off but there were subtitles as well as looping headlines: another American soldier had been killed in Iraq. His curiosity roused, Aadam nevertheless changed channel; he fancied a nibble of the story while he waited, but not when served up for the British palette. For this morsel, a dollop of American pathos would go down nicely. He kept flicking, looking for something more *laissez faire*, current affairs US-style, cut for the man on the street. He stopped on seeing some anchorman flirting with a weather-girl, the dainty love giggling dutifully. Meanwhile a banner flashed on-screen to present the next item, which Aadam reduced to: ‘Would Eid herald an increase in terrorist activity, in the new colonies or the Free World?’ *Bon Appetite ...* Sitting behind a front desk that resembled a Möbius strip, the anchorman introduced the debate, along with two pundits seated either side.

‘Sir, can we expect the lull in militant operations that we witnessed over Ramadan to now end, and end violently?’ Anchor threw the opening gambit to the spokesman from the Department of Homeland Security, who deftly ignored it.

‘Before we begin, I’d like to extend our deepest condolences to the family of Private Archer. We mourn every one of our departed servicemen and women, and hope that his loved ones are comforted in knowing that his death was not in vain.’ The spokesman looked back at Anchor who expertly took the baton.

‘Well I’m sure that all of us here as well as those watching at home, echo those earnest sentiments. Our thoughts and prayers are with Private Archer’s family and friends.’ It was delivered with such decorum that when Anchor turned to the other pundit to ratify the consensus of the civilised, the man could only oblige with an





‘Absolutely’. He paused just a little before affirming, though, and Aadam wondered whether he was thinking of the wedding party that the Americans had blown up, just the day before.

Prayers. Thoughts and prayers. Aadam breathed deeply and took a long look at Anchor. He wasn’t young – definitely over forty – but he wore his age well: his shoulders were broad, his features firm and his muscles still defined. But if you looked hard enough, you could see so much more. Behind him was his wife: past her prime but way off menopausal and, crucially, still desirable. And to the right were his kids. There was giddy, young Jessica, full of energy and ideas, a bud just waiting to blossom. And Jake, that chip off the old block: working hard, thinking of the future and determined to stay on the team. Anchor was an anchor, the heart and soul of America. *But when did he actually last pray?* This morning before he put on his crisp, linen shirt? Last night as he kissed his children, fast asleep in their beds? Maybe it was at Thanksgiving, as he praised the Lord for his bounty. No? Still further back? And what of his thoughts? *A penny for your thoughts, Anchor.* Was he thinking about what he’d have for dinner or who’d win the game at the weekend? Maybe he was preoccupied with that girl from the typing-pool that he’d love to nail. Or maybe, just maybe, he was thinking of Private Archer’s mother, sitting alone on her kitchen floor and clutching a picture of her son, aged five, blowing out the candles on his birthday cake. Maybe ... Human suffering in all its density, spirited away by civil words, technology and that fucking Möbius strip. Thoughts and prayers indeed, *ya cunt.*

‘A penny for your thoughts?’

Aadam whipped around. His boss, George, was commanding the ground right in front and next to him stood two others. He grabbed the control and searched desperately for “mute” before bolting to attention. George introduced the senior member of the delegation, followed by a much younger guy who wore a distasteful expression.

Was I thinking out loud? He shot a second look at the younger chap whose curled lip remained. Panic infested him, freezing him to the spot. The thought was *too* terrible. But soon George was singing Aadam’s praise and his generous smile and fatherly hand dismissed his fears. His boss gestured and the delegates took their seats, the delight in their plush surroundings evident.

‘Thank you, Sarah,’ said George pointedly, as the receptionist placed down tea and biscuits.



‘*You’re Adam? But ... We’ve been speaking on the phone, right?*’
The younger guy, Stanley, looked confused. He wore a traditional pin-striped suit and, unusually for his age, carried it with a style that lent weight to his sneering.

‘That’s right – you’re the trainee analyst, yes? Good to meet you.’
Aadam forced a smile.

‘What’s it short for then?’

‘What’s that?’

‘*Adam* – what’s it short for?’

‘Nothing.’

Stanley looked short changed.

‘You seemed far away back there,’ remarked Terry, the elder of the client party. He glanced Aadam’s way but was busy getting comfortable, stirring sugar into his tea and eyeing up the biscuits.

‘Err ... yeah, I was watching the news.’ He looked for a reaction but Terry was pre-occupied with a custard cream.

‘What’s the latest then?’

Aadam jumped towards Stanley whose stare was arresting.

‘What’s that?’

‘The news – what’s the latest?’

‘Errmm. Oh, another American soldier has been killed. Dunno the details.’ He gestured dismissively towards the screen, a mute Anchor looking animated.

‘I dunno what we’re doing over there, eh?’

‘Aha.’

‘I mean, why try and help those who don’t want to be helped? After all, you can take a horse to water ...’

‘Right!’ declared George and immediately the chatter stopped. ‘Thank you for coming, gentlemen. As you know, we at Realogica are developing a new suite of products, specifically targeting investment boutiques such as yours.’ He waved an open hand, like a *Padré* blessing his flock.

‘Capital markets are changing, gentlemen, and at speed. The challenge for niche operators is to carve out expertise, shout about it and then sell it.’ Aadam settled back, happy to listen to the preacher evangelise. Realogica had a lot of smooth talkers but no-one worked an audience like George. And for some reason – one that he still hadn’t figured out – he’d taken him under his wing. George was now Chief Operating Officer, and he’d ensured that Aadam had been involved in

every project that he truly cared about. Maximum exposure, maximum reward. There were others as good as him, *better* than him, but it's the breaks that count and George had ensured he'd got them.

'If there's movement on a key deal – anywhere, anytime, you need to know. Sure, everyone finds out eventually, but by the time young Stanley here is an experienced analyst, a difference of a minute will tell in millions. And that's where we can help.'

Despite the live show in front, Aadam was unable to ignore the one being played out on the widescreen.

'Sir, the American people need to know. Is Iraq today a more dangerous place for our boys than it was yesterday, and if so, what steps are being taken to bolster their security whilst they protect this country?'

Anchor was still on mute, with all his passion and no-nonsense gusto lost in the subtitles, but it mattered not: software he loved, watching George weave his magic he really loved, but *this* ... there was no word that stirred Aadam, like "Iraq".

'Every day we're losing more of our young men out there,' began the government spokesman, conceding the fact with almost moist eyes. *'But we're fighting the good fight,'* he continued, *'and this mission is not over until we've defeated the terrorists!'*

'Aadam?'

He turned sharply, with George's large frame snapping into focus.

'Sorry, George, I didn't quite catch that.' He felt the weight of his boss's widening eyes.

'Projections, Aadam – the Capital Actions system. When do you think it will be ready for a first pilot?'

'Well I need to sit down with one of you guys – perhaps yourself, Stanley – so I can capture your needs.' Stanley nodded tightly, like his movement was restricted. 'We already have most of the data. The question is in what form do you want it, and how do we push it through?'

'Any ideas?'

'Sure – I'm looking at an ETL solution.'

'ETL?' queried Terry.

'Extract, Transform, Load. There's a new platform that I fancy leveraging but ...'

'First pilot?' impressed George.



‘Two months.’

‘That’s fine with me,’ assured Terry, and George nodded his approval.

‘... but surely with your methods you are aggravating terrorism, rather than pacifying the situation?’

The subtitles disappeared as soon as the sentence was complete, but for Aadam it was transcendent. What care was there for software in the face of such a question?

‘... and we’d like you to second one of your analysts to us.’

‘Depends for how long, really. And what you need him for?’

‘We’ve adopted an agile approach here,’ interjected Aadam, ‘which means you get the final product in stages – and that makes your involvement more important.’ Terry seemed impressed and a little lost. Perfect.

Anchor swivelled to usher Homeland Security back in but he was already there.

‘We gave peace a chance,’ he gestured boldly, holding his challenger’s gaze. *‘We gave peace a chance for ten years and we got 9/11 for our efforts. Well we aren’t making that mistake a second time, Mister. America will never be seen as weak again!’*

9/11. 9-fucking-11. Would he live to see another day, Aadam wondered, when he wouldn’t have to see, hear or read about someone, somewhere, still bleating on about it? So many lives touched, torched in an instant – and here was the young widow, heavily pregnant and reliving the exact moment she heard the news. And the mother being helped out of a hearse, on her way to bury her son. And then there was little Johnny, just way too young to understand. But Aadam wasn’t feeling for them, for any of them – cause no-one was even counting the fallen, faceless wogs.

Aadam was visualising the film; the inevitable film about Private Archer – this Private Archer or some other Private Archer – that he’d find impossible to blot out when it came swaggering into town. He was picturing our hero lying in the dirt, in the desert, all alone. He was in pain but he was still struggling, though now it was hopeless: his life-blood was ebbing away. In his hand was a picture of Little Johnny and somewhere in the ether a string arrangement was playing,



accompanied by someone who sounded like Enya. In life he looked dashing, but now, in death, he was bettering that: he was looking noble. Private Archer was breathing his last with dignity, and there wasn't a dry eye in the house. Despite the blood loss he'd taken on an ephemeral glow, no doubt a gift bestowed upon God's special children. And the Iraqis? Oh, they'd be there too. Shouting constantly and barking orders through twisted faces. And they'd drop dead like flies, accompanied by some sinister sounding Arab techno. No moms or Little Johnnies for them.

'... and it does look awful outside.' Terry turned back wistfully before consoling himself with one last custard cream. Following his gaze, Aadam saw that it was getting dark – the sun had finally set on the month of Ramazan, 2004. Hastily, he poured tea into his hitherto empty cup. Terry looked on, bemused.

'It'll be cold now.'

'Actually, I've been ... I prefer it like this.' He threw Terry a brief, big smile before beginning his clandestine break-fast.

'Right, we must be going.'

'We'll be in touch,' glowed George, shaking hands firmly. 'Aadam here will organise some sessions. They'd be most instructive for young Stanley.' Young Stanley looked unconvinced. George's baritone chuckle conducted the atmosphere and only Stanley snubbed the closing chorus.

Aadam switched off his workstation and checked the contents of his overcoat: phone, coin wallet, travelcard – he was good to go. Buttoning up, he marched swiftly towards the stairwell but, as he was about to ascend, George spotted him.

'Aadam.'

He jolted to a halt on the first step, cursing silently.

'Hi, George. I was just ...'

'I know – a minute of your time, please.'

He made his way to his boss's office, closing the door behind him.

'It's Eid tomorrow, isn't it?'

'Yes, George. That's right.'

'Spending the day with the family? Taking the wife out?' He was sounding pleasant but his gaze made Aadam nervous.

'Family tomorrow, George – I guess Nazneen and I will do something over the weekend.'



‘Good, good. Do give her my regards.’

‘I will,’ he said, trying to mask a growing unease.

‘How do you feel about working with Stanley?’

Aadam swallowed hard.

‘Fine. I reckon I can capture everything within a week and then ...’

‘He seemed hostile. You can handle him though, right?’ Again, those scrutinising eyes.

‘Sure.’

George moved towards the window and tweaked the blinds, revealing an empty pavement, a bare hedgerow and a dusk shroud.

‘Do you know how long I’ve been here?’ He paused for just a fraction before continuing. ‘Twenty–seven years. I was the first employee who hadn’t been to Oxbridge, apart from the tea lady. I’m from Hull myself, though the years down here have washed away my accent.’

Aadam made to respond but his throat caught.

‘You won’t know this, but when I was a boy, journalists interviewing politicians used to finish with something like: “*Minister, is there anything further you wish to say to a grateful nation?*”’ He gestured theatrically before turning to gauge the reaction. Mute and with his head down, Aadam gave few clues. George turned back to his view – nobody passed, nothing blew by – he might as well have been gazing at a still. He tweaked the blinds shut again but otherwise didn’t move.

‘These are difficult times, Aadam, especially for you – I can see that. But what the hell did you think you were doing back there?’ ‘Sorry, George – I’m not sure I ...’

‘Gawping at the bloody widescreen, Aadam. Don’t play the innocent with me.’

‘No, of course not. I was just ...’

‘*Just* nothing. You think the Iraq war has a place in this company? What if it was Terry that you’d put off instead of Stanley? You’re damn lucky he was more interested in the bloody biscuits – otherwise we’d be nearly £1m worse off right now.’

‘George, I didn’t mean ...’

‘I don’t care. This is where you work. We don’t pay you to be preoccupied with the War on Terror? Understood?’

‘Absolutely. It’ll never happen again.’

‘You’re damn right. I have my views and no doubt you have yours, but when you’re here, stay focussed. You *will* stay focussed, OK?’ He finally turned around, demanding a response.



‘Of course, George. My work’s very important to me.’

‘I know it is, son, I know it is. And despite impressions to the contrary, this is an egalitarian country – you mustn’t forget that. Don’t waste your chance. You belong here.’

Aadam remained rooted to the spot – arms straight, head still down.

‘*Eid Mubarak*, son.’ And a speechless Aadam shook George’s extended hand.





Right here, right now. This was his prize: just him and her. Meditating on the deliciousness of anticipation realised, he suddenly felt giddy. He took a step back to find the bed's edge, but hit the cabinet instead. Disorientated, he stalled. Seconds passed and the only movement was from his heel, slowly coming to rest on the carpet – sweat denying his foot purchase. Moisture around his buttocks coalesced, forming beads of sweat that trickled downwards, tickling his clammy skin. Finding this amusing he came to, allowing him to regain control – he wanted this to last.

He remembered how long he'd waited for this, this precious time. He had the whole evening with her, and he inhaled purposefully whilst holding the thought. Convinced once more of his mettle he looked at her through fresh eyes, drinking in her languid body. She was absolute perfection: trim waist, shapely thighs and buttocks that were tight, unblemished and fleshy, though not large. Her auburn hair was straight and past the shoulders in length with a few wisps resting on her chest, contouring the rise of her breasts. And her taut skin, though flushed with excitement, hinted at a Mediterranean heritage. Perfect tones.

Slowly and deliberately he sat on the bed, his eyes moving down to her hips – slim, but naturally so. She smiled at him, such a carefree smile, and all of a sudden he felt jealous. Jealous of her toned, svelte form, convincing himself that it hadn't been achieved but was merely a gift: a gift from the gods, from the lottery of conception. '*One should choose one's parents with great care,*' a Sri Lankan doctor had once



jovially advised him. It was a cute line and it had stuck in his mind, but he didn't appreciate it at the time.

He snapped back, noticing his shallow breath, the product of wan thoughts. Inhaling deeply with intention his discipline again floundered, getting lost in harmonic motion, the gentle swaying of her hips. She was teasing him, looking him in the eyes and grinning as she moved in time to some music in the background, fingering the lace of her knickers. He gave up his battle with himself. He slumped back against the headboard, his body arched – one leg on the bed, the other dangling. He closed his eyes and felt semen working its way out – it was a pleasant sensation. There was a knock on the door and she was startled out of her idle play in front of the mirror. Jolted back into reality, she forgot her robe as she cantered to the door, which made the strapping plumber on the other side grin.

He shut his burning eyes and cursed. Pornography had come a long way in recent years, yet he had been flogged some rubbish from ten-odd years ago. He couldn't even get buying porn right. The film continued playing and the guttural exchanges in German between Bored Housewife and Plumber just cranked up his frustration.

'What you looking for?' the wide-boy pirate had asked him over the phone. Imtiaz was in the mood for a treat – no squinting at a low-quality stream on his laptop tonight; only a DVD would do.

'Oh, something modern, and American or British. No foreign stuff.' *This is a clinical, discreet business transaction*, he'd assured himself, and there was no need to become nervous – *just state what you want*.

'I'll be round in forty minutes,' assured wide-boy, and for the next seventy he paced his small flat, getting excited: a whole evening alone – him, a couple of drinks and some porn. He wandered from room to room, working himself into a state. Scenes from past movies flooded his mind and he began rubbing his penis from the pocket of his trousers. A steady trickle of pre-cum had begun leaking out and his pants were already damp.

'Proper stuff, this,' wide-boy declared confidently on arriving.

'Great, thanks,' muttered Imtiaz, and he handed over some notes before shutting and locking the door. He sprinted round to his bedroom and tore the DVD out of its plastic case. His mouth was parched but he dropped the thought, focusing solely on inserting the disc. Once in, (and it had taken a few seconds to steady his hand), it began playing ...

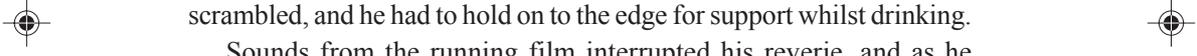




And there she is, alone. Bored. Considering herself in front of a mirror. There's some music in the background – anodyne, contrived – and her slim hips sashay in time. She undoes a clip and releases wave upon wave of auburn hair, flowing, undulating in slow motion. Adjusting her garter belt she puckers suggestively, mocking her absent lover.

Imtiaz was under a spell. Outside of space and time there was no distraction – just a focal point, a flickering flame on which to meditate. But then a *ding-dong* and the illusion was shattered – for him and for her – and she cantered to the door, forgetting to put her robe back on.

* * *



Ripped out of the moment, the weight of disappointment pinned him to the spot. *Water*; he eventually thought. *I need some water*. But for the moments it took to fill a glass his mind became a canvas; a smorgasbord of pornographic imagery. Standing at the sink he closed his eyes and saw nothing but flesh: pink flesh, splayed flesh, sweat, movement, rhythm, sighs and screams. His mind was saturated, scrambled, and he had to hold on to the edge for support whilst drinking.

Sounds from the running film interrupted his reverie, and as he walked back he glimpsed how this would make him feel. He'd pay back for this, and with interest. Mentally he'd be low, physically he'd feel sluggish, and this would last for days. The price was high, too high – all this had long stopped being a simple pleasure. And besides, Bored Housewives and Plumbers? *Oh purleese ...* Even he had more refined tastes. But then he was drowned out. First a whimper – speculative, contained, but then a howl – a low, prolonged shiver of animal satisfaction; a bolt of pain, washed away by pleasure. *No*, he ordered himself, *turn around, walk away. You can do this*. But inevitably ...

Imtiaz stood still, watching his TV screen with childlike wonder. She was perched on top of the washing machine, heels supported by corners. The plumber was bent down in front, pleasuring her with his tongue. Imtiaz's eyes bore into her, burning their way through. A feverish sweat precipitated on his brow, with every pore of his body open, begging to absorb – be absorbed – to dive into his TV. But still he hesitated, and dreamed – of walks in the park, hand-in-hand on a sunny day. Happiness ... It was still possible. *Was it still possible?* And of course tomorrow was Eid-al-Fitr, the festive day celebrating



the end of Ramazan, and he was going to his mother's for the feast. Everyone would be there. So many people and it just got harder and harder – he had nothing to say. The thought made him shudder, but that was tomorrow – another day. And, as inevitable as it was, this was now, and there was no force strong enough to prevent him from indulging.

Imtiaz gazed at the Event Horizon. In front of him, nirvana: suspension of sorrow, extinction of self, immersion in bliss. And behind? A sad, lonely and simple man, with nothing to look forward to and no answers left. But still he hesitated, still he dreamed – *Switch it off. Change your life ...* But just then the plumber entered her – slowly, cautiously, measure-by-measure. She buckled, bringing herself a little closer and opening herself up wider to ease his passage. Imtiaz was powerless and conceded defeat. *The more I sink into fantasy, the further I get from reality.*

