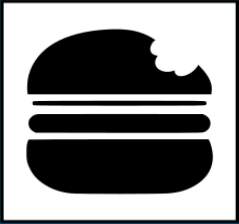


Number



Eight →

Crispy



Chicken

Sarah Neofield

NUMBER EIGHT CRISPY CHICKEN

Sarah Neofield

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ONE

Peter shoved his way to the front of the queue, and with a flash of his Priority Clearance card, tossed his luggage onto the belt. As the X-ray machine swallowed his bag, airport security eyed Peter's cardboard tube.

'You'll have to open that up,' the agent prodded at the sticky-taped plastic lid.

'It's just plans.'

'Government regulation.'

Peter peeled off the tape, his stubby fingernails scraping against virgin cardboard. The plastic lid popped, like on a bottle of soda.

'See?'

'You'll have to remove the contents.'

'This is ridiculous!' The new security measures meant Peter had needed to arrive a full three hours early to be metal detected, swabbed, patted down, and sniffed. Surely his Priority Clearance status should afford him better treatment. He'd have to ask Percy when he got back to the office.

'Government regulation,' the agent repeated, bearing his yellowed, broken teeth, rivered with cracks. The sight almost made Peter wish he hadn't voted against the Dental Care Act.

He tipped the tube up and patted the still secured end, willing the paper to come out. It echoed with the hollow percussion of an empty can of potato chips. The more Peter hit it, the more stubbornly the rolled paper clung to the sides.

'Come on, come on!'

A baby wailed.

Decades had passed since Peter last sat next to a crying child on an aircraft. Not since he was a junior assistant minister.

Oh, how he anticipated the tranquillity of business class.

Finally, the cylinder of rolled paper emerged from the tube.

‘Happy?’

The security agent peered into the tube as if it were a telescope, then turned his attention to the paper cylinder. ‘You’ll have to unroll that,’ he motioned with his dirty gloves.

‘The bloody worst I could do with this is give someone a paper cut!’ Jets of saliva exploded from Peter’s mouth.

The security agent wiped some of Peter’s errant spit from the corner of his eye. ‘Was that a threat?’

Peter sighed and began to unroll the blueprint.

It was the first time he’d seen the plans in full.

Until now, all Peter had seen were 500-page proposals, itemised tenders, and presentations featuring digital mock-ups. He’d glanced over the specifications, wined and dined over the pricings, but he’d never seen the whole thing, so gloriously illustrated.

It was beautiful.

He ran a finger over the electrified Courtesy Fence.

‘What’s this?’

Peter reluctantly tore his eyes away from the blueprints.

‘Is this a plan of the airport?’ The agent’s gloved hand moved towards the little radio device on his shoulder. His uniform, Peter noted with both satisfaction and a twinge of fear, appeared sufficiently militant.

‘No, nothing like that.’

‘I’m gonna ask you one more time,’ the dirty-gloved agent said. Peter knew that pointless narration was one of the de-escalation techniques covered in all government training, but he’d never been on this end of it before. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s the new Offshore Detention Centre.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s where illegal immigrants-’

‘You mean asylum seekers?’

Peter sighed. Bleeding heart liberals like this idiot were part of the problem.

‘No. Boat people. Queue jumpers. It’s where they’re held for processing.’

‘A detention camp?’

'Not a camp. It's a detention *centre*.' Peter took pains to emphasise this last word. It had, after all, been his idea to change the name from 'camp' to 'centre'.

'Then what are those tents for?' Dirty Gloves stubbed a dirty finger in the middle of the plans. Peter was afraid he'd smear the ink.

'They're not tents,' Peter spat. 'They're temporary canvas housing units.'

'Whatever you say.' Attention now waning, Dirty Gloves motioned for Peter to re-roll the plans.

He struggled to reassemble the tube. Thanks to the contact with Dirty Gloves' dirty gloves, the sticky tape was no longer sticky. Peter was not particularly handy at the best of times. He'd had his assistant Percy buy the tube and roll up the blueprints that morning.

Peter let out a few choice swearwords.

'Do you mind?' The parent of the noisy child shot Peter a disgusted look, apparently offended by his colourful expression. Really, it was nothing worse than you'd hear during parliamentary question time.

'Acts of verbal aggression will not be tolerated in this airport,' chimed in Dirty Gloves.

'Don't you know who I am?' What was the point, Peter thought, of making public appearances and giving press conferences if even the people in the government's own employ didn't recognise him?

Dirty Gloves stared at Peter's face, then glanced at the name, and more importantly, the logo emblazoned on his tube. His face coloured.

'Thank you for your cooperation, sir.'

Peter strode past Dirty Gloves, bypassing the roped-off queues of sheep with another flash of his Priority Clearance card, and had his passport scanned.

Clearing security always made Peter feel as if he had entered a special, protective bubble. Stepping through the metal detector felt like going through a portal into another world.

If Peter had his way, he'd add full body scans, brain wave monitoring, facial recognition, backscatter X-rays and

cavity searches as well. Not for Premium Registered Advanced Trust Travellers with Priority Clearance cards, of course. But for everyone else.

The airport was a crush of squeaky suitcases and glistening luxury stores, of shops selling dry sandwiches at seven times the supermarket price (not that Peter ever purchased his own sandwiches) and news stands filled with magazines flown in from across the globe.

Pausing in front of the departures board, a sense of infinite possibility washed over Peter.

What if, instead of the boarding pass he currently held, he possessed a ticket elsewhere? Somewhere with palm trees. And cheap drinks. And easy women.

Not the barren, overly-religious, stiflingly humid, mosquito-infested shores of Pulcherrima Island.

His ticket to Pulcherrima was of a much flimsier grade of paper than Peter was used to, and had a logo that looked like a cross between a pigeon and a vulture. He squinted. The bird appeared to be wearing a crown. Peter shuddered.

Bloody Percy had left the booking until the last minute, and business class on the only Flight Alliance Premier flight was sold out. Royal Turgistan, Percy said, had been the only airline with a business class seat to Pulcherrima left. A window seat at that. Peter definitely preferred the aisle, now his bladder wasn't what it used to be.

Only two airlines serviced Pulcherrima. The island's remoteness, adrift in the Ultimate Ocean, miles from anywhere civilised, was both its key attraction to Peter, and in this instance, its main downfall.

He almost regretted not taking an economy seat on the Flight Alliance Premier flight. But it had been years since Peter's ample rear had graced the restrictive confines of an economy seat, and he wasn't about to change that. Even if it meant foregoing the aisle. And missing out on Worldwide Air Network Customer Engagement Rewards points. Not that Peter ever spent his points anyway. He never travelled other than for work, and of course, all his work flights went on the department credit card.

His points were one of the few possessions Peter had managed to retain in his divorce. Leaving them untouched allowed him to savour this victory. He'd even had Percy pin his latest points statement above his desk.

Peter took a closer look at the ticket. The pinkish hue made reading difficult, but he could make out the word 'Turgrael'. His blood chilled.

It wasn't a direct flight.

There would be a stopover.

He checked the departure and arrival times. The digits were faint, but the conclusion was unmistakable.

The journey was going to take more than double the usual flight time from Furtivus to Pulcherrima.

Peter's fingers automatically reached for his phone and dialled Percy.

'What the bloody hell is this? Turgrael?'

'I'm sorry sir, it was either a stopover, or flying economy on a direct route, and you said-'

'Percy, I'm well aware of what I said! But Turgrael? Where the hell is that?'

'It's the capital of Turgistan, sir. One of the busiest transit hubs in the region and-'

'I don't want a bloody encyclopaedia entry!'

'Sorry, sir. I know it's a bit out of your way, but-'

Peter sighed loud enough to cut Percy off. 'What's the travel advisory?'

'Orange, sir. But that's only because of the whole tariffs debacle-'

Peter felt his spine relax a little. Quite a few countries were orange. Especially ones that had irritated the Furtivian government in some way.

'It's only a short stopover, sir. Enough time to change planes-'

Peter re-examined his ticket. Around two hours. He'd survive.

'Fine. We'll discuss it when I get back.' That would give Percy something to think about.

It would be alright, Peter consoled himself as he headed in the direction of the lounge, passing a restroom that smelled

of industrial-strength cleaner, and something billed as a 'multi-faith prayer room' with much the same aroma. There would be time to down a few cheeky drinks and go outside for a smoke in whatever the name of that place was before the second leg of his journey. And he'd still arrive in time for the breakfast meeting on the first day. Peter was quite looking forward to the breakfast meeting. He hadn't had a decent breakfast since his ex left.

He opened the frosted glass door. These small touches were what he most liked about the lounge. The complete isolation from the outside world. The fact that the milling masses couldn't see in – and couldn't be seen.

Peter used to dream of what lie beyond doors like these. The truth wasn't all that exciting. Magazines that were a bit less wrinkled. A selection of drinks and potted plants. Really, Peter thought, brandishing his well-worn FAP member's card, it was the door you were paying for.

'Sir?' The suited man at the front desk smiled at Peter, who had already begun to mentally prepare his drinks order.

He inhaled the glorious scent on the air. Some sort of pastry? He'd have to sample one – or more – of whatever those were. After all, like everything else in this room, they were free.

'Are you a member of our Lounge Access Members' Experience program?'

Peter held out his FAP card.

'I'm sorry, sir. We aren't part of the Flight Alliance Premier scheme. You'll need to sign up for membership to our exclusive program.'

'Fine,' Peter reached for his credit card.

Technically, it wasn't his credit card. It was the property of the Furtivian Federal Government. But it had his name on it, and was a lovely golden colour that shimmered as the suited man swiped it.

Peter's Platinum Gold level Patriot International Express card had arrived in an envelope of thicker paper than the usual correspondence he received from the bank. He could still remember tearing open the envelope, breathing in the heady aroma of the gold-leaf infused plastic, feeling the weight

of the card as he peeled it off its sticky backing, and running his fingertips over the embossed numbers.

The card's credit limit was so enormous, Peter needed no other. And the reactions of waiters and shop assistants to this rectangle of gilded plastic were so precious to Peter, he'd cut up all of his personal cards. After all, why should he spend money he didn't have when he could spend money the government didn't have?

'Welcome to the program, sir. You'll find a list of our amenities in this brochure. Is there anything else I can assist with today?'

'You can point me to the drinks!'

'Certainly, sir.'

Peter selected a demi of red, then grazed over the rest of the offerings. There were sushi rolls – the fancy kind with the fish on the outside, and the seaweed on the inside. Not that he'd be eating any of that.

A selection of cold cuts caught Peter's eye next, followed by some chilled mousse-based desserts. And, of course, a fruit platter, which contained an assortment of fruits no one in their finest attire would dare to consume.

Peter grabbed a cranberry and white chocolate cookie. Then, a pistachio and dark chocolate one. He didn't bother with a plate. He took a seat on a cushioned chair nestled into a circular table, the lattice partition swaddling him in a cocoon of solitude.

Moving aside a vase holding a sprig of orchids, Peter hefted his monogrammed bag onto the table and took out his computer. With the press of a button, he fired up the enormous machine. Its powerful fans let out an almighty roar.

Peter's computer was the latest Neon Donkey gaming laptop, kitted out with the most powerful graphics card and processor available, hugely unnecessary for the mundane spreadsheet-grazing and low-resolution pornography-viewing he subjected the machine to. But it was the only device on the market with a price tag high enough to max out his computer allowance.

The partition obscured his view of the other patrons, but it was important that, even if no one saw him, they at least hear him sound productive.

Peter was no workaholic, but he was addicted to the illusion of being one.

He subscribed to his own version of the 80-20 rule. Eighty percent of his time, Peter spent channelling stress. He invented stomach complaints and phone calls. He perfected his sighs of exasperation. He popped antacids like they were breath mints, and antidepressants like they were antacids. This, he believed, helped to cultivate a picture of importance, so that the little work he did do in the remaining twenty percent of his time was taken seriously.

Peter slipped out of his jacket, the smooth silk against his skin making him feel important. Paired with his 100% silk paisley-patterned tie, Peter was one of the best dressed members of parliament. Thanks, he had to admit, to Percy's advice.

It was thanks to Percy, also, that Peter had chosen a navy blue suit instead of his usual black. He'd based this decision on several recent polls. The public, wary of the incestuous ties between government and corporations, had grown sceptical of black suits. Navy or charcoal grey were much better, Percy said. Navy, he assured Peter, conveyed importance, stability, and power, while remaining friendly.

Peter clicked on his email. There were a bunch of messages. One was marked with one of those pesky 'urgent' flags: 'GUANO DETAINEE W/ INFECTION REQ. MEDEVAC CLEARANCE. OTHERS ON HUNGER STRIKE. [SEC=CLASSIFIED]'

Guano Island was home to the first properly offshore detention centre – or 'processing centre', as Peter now preferred. Although there were still some detainees within Furtivian borders, offshore detention was far preferable. Once they set foot on Furtivian soil, it was much harder to get rid of them. And the Furtivian constitution still had a few too many human rights on the books. Rights which extended, even, to non-Furtivians.

With a population of only seven thousand, and no armed forces, Guano, like Pulcherrima, was discrete. Kilometres from anywhere. And with fewer than a hundred visitors each year, the island was one of the most remote countries in the world.

Even better, Peter reminisced as he unscrewed his wine, Guano had a Gross Domestic Product that made his own personal bank balance look healthy.

Things on Guano hadn't always been this way. Several decades ago, Guano Island's per capita GDP had been one of the highest in the world. This prosperity was thanks to phosphate, mined from the enormous build-up of bird poo on the island. A good part of this income was invested in a trust to provide for the citizens when the supply was exhausted. Yet, after a string of failed investments, including several luxury properties located in Furtivus, and the ill-fated musical production 'Oh, Michaelangelo!', which featured a fictionalised account of the painter's romantic obsession with a pigeon, the had trust dwindled. Peter chuckled as he took a swig of the wine.

With its phosphate depleted, Guano was barren – a narrow ring of greenery barely obscuring its hollowed-out centre, a coral skeleton picked to the bone. Like Pulcherrima, Guano was a nightmare to get to. Foreign institutions had repossessed the country's only airplane. Unemployment exceeded 90%. The national bank became insolvent.

But then, the Guanian government started looking for ways to turn a quick buck.

First, they sold passports on the sly.

After trust in Guanian passports plummeted, the country reinvented itself as a tax haven.

Then, they used their seat on the Union of Nations to barter for aid money, agreeing to recognise one breakaway state seeking international recognition in a financial aid deal, before changing allegiance when the other side offered more. Peter even heard Guano had agreed to build a listening post for the Unified States in exchange for vital infrastructure. He was sketchy on the details, but recalled a risky-sounding operation involving a sham embassy, and cars displaying Guanian diplomatic plates to ferry around defectors.

In short, the Guano government was desperate.

It was this desperation which had attracted Peter and his colleagues to Guano in the first place. They promised military protection, funding and some employment. In exchange, Guano permitted the use of a section of the island as a refugee processing centre.

For the most part, things were going well. Peter had been able to claim that they'd stopped the flow of illegal boat arrivals – a real election winner in Furtivus. Guano, and now Pulcherrima, Peter hoped, would be the first in a chain of similar centres throughout the Ultimate Ocean. He called it his 'Ultimate Solution'. After all, Furtivus was far from the only developed country with an immigrant problem.

Peter took another joyous swig, toasting his own future success before looking back at the computer screen.

It was true that, from time to time, little hiccups seemed to crop up. Like this request for a medical evacuation, which Peter assumed could only be about one thing: some uppity doctor trying to generate a media circus.

But it was nothing to be concerned about. Peter had developed a remarkably collaborative relationship with the people of Guano. Whenever things got out of hand at the centre, the local police needed only send out a text message to every Guanian citizen, requesting volunteers report to the police station to be 'deputised' to take action.

Volunteers weren't hard to come by. Given the wealth and income disparity between local and expat employees, the resultant inflation, and the perceived favourable treatment of the detainees, many locals were only too glad to have an excuse to rally.

It helped, too, that the detainees were terrified of the locals, thanks in large part to a rumour started by some of the H84CE personnel that they were cannibals. It had started out as a joke – so the workers claimed. But you couldn't really blame the detainees for believing the stories when they first set eyes on some of the local population, their teeth stained, red dripping down their chins. It was, of course, not blood on their faces, but the juices of the areca nut, a popular fruit wrapped in betel leaves and chewed by people throughout the

islands of the Ultimate Ocean for its psychoactive effects. One of the side-effects of the drug was profuse red-coloured saliva.

Peter remembered the first time he'd seen the pavements outside his hotel on Guano stained with the red spit marks, convinced it had been the site of a stabbing. Boy, had he given Percy a reeling out for booking such a place, until Percy explained the situation. The sight of red-tinged teeth must have made quite the impression on the new arrivals, Peter chuckled.

Stuffing his face with a cookie, Peter decided the Guano medevac email could wait until Monday, and clicked on the next.

Percy had re-sent a copy of Pulcherrima itinerary. He knew Peter could never find anything in his inbox unless it was sent to him in the last couple of days. That's what made Percy such a great assistant.

Meetings would start at breakfast on day one, and conclude with a site tour and dinner on day two. Peter hoped they'd carried out a detailed survey of the site this time. On Guano, staff dispatched to complete a visual sweep before the camp was set up had failed to notice a number of issues – including several unexploded ordnances. One was underneath the school tent. Thank goodness Peter only ever appeared to the detainees via video link, and not in person.

After a packed two days, Peter would leave early the following morning. Since it was a public holiday on Pulcherrima, Percy had booked him a luxurious-looking suite near the airport, with a king-sized bed, block out curtains, and hopefully, a jacuzzi. A good thing, too. Peter dreaded being caught up in whatever garish ethnic festival they were celebrating.

He took another swig of wine. There was another email marked 'urgent'. A reminder to Peter that his department's report on the inquest into government waste was long overdue. Swirling his wine in one hand, Peter obediently typed a reply reading 'Please see the attached report' with his other.

Of course, there was no attachment. Peter then took great pleasure in setting up his auto-reply message, explaining he would be in transit and out of contact for the

next day or so. This would buy some time for Percy to mash something together.

Peter glanced at his watch. He'd bought it with the bulk of his half of the proceeds when his ex sold what had been their home. It had not been his most financially prudent move. But Peter felt it had been politically prudent. Besides, it wasn't as if he needed the money. He always had his trust fund, and soon, Peter hoped, he would be coming into a large inheritance. Not quite as large as some of the other MPs, but a tidy enough sum.

The Triple Platinum Diamond Hubris Excalibur was the only element of Peter's wardrobe he had selected for himself, without input from his ex or Percy. He'd had it specially imported. It had precision movement, diamond studs, and gave the day of the week as well as the time. Of course, the days were all written in some foreign language, but that mattered little to Peter. He checked his watch not so much to see the time as to admire its glint on his wrist. But really, he should have been working on the updated assessment interview schedule.

Peter's department was finessing a 'Five Minutes, Five Questions' campaign, designed to expedite the processing of the illegals whose boats they managed to intercept. The goal was to process them at sea, without them ever setting foot on Furtivian soil, and to then ship them back more or less immediately to approximately where they came from. Of course, Peter would have to change the name for the press. The 'Illegal Boat People Enhanced Interrogation Act' was not the most politic name in this politically correct environment. But it had garnered Peter quite a few back slaps in the party room.

There had, however, been one minor setback. Some of the more liberal-minded types in the party protested, if they could process applications in five minutes on a boat, surely they could process applications on land much faster than the current three year average. Especially when the satellite phone connections Peter planned to use for the interviews were poor at best.

Perhaps the processing centres were not necessary at all, some had dared suggest. But closing them would mean an end to donations from H84CE, the company contracted to provide security at the centres. And that would mean a severe curtailing of the champagne fund-raiser and helicopter-tripping lifestyle Peter had come to enjoy. Paying H84CE public funds while accepting donations from them effectively allowed the Liberal Country Party to launder taxpayer money back into their own pockets.

Ever prepared, Peter had the perfect answer.

The centres were necessary, he argued, to send a strong message. They weren't only about keeping the nation safe through a vetting process. They were intended as a deterrent to those considering jumping the queue. And preventing people from getting into overcrowded, unseaworthy boats and risking their lives – and their children's lives – was of paramount importance. In fact, it was downright humanitarian.

And that was how Peter got the votes he needed to continue with his plans.

He double-clicked on his draft questions.

So far, Peter had come up with 'What is your name?' and 'Are you a terrorist?' but he struggled to think what other robust questions the interrogation officials could ask. He toyed with splitting the first question into two: 'What is your first name?' and 'What is your last name?'

Or, Peter realised, grabbing his remaining cookie, instead of 'What is your first name?' he could ask 'What is your Christian name?'. Chocolate melted across his hands as Peter dropped crumbs into the keyboard. That would allow him to get around those pesky religious profiling laws. Yes, Peter thought, as he smeared brown across the keys, that would do nicely.

Packing up his laptop, Peter made his way to the gate, rejoining the crass domain of row after row of horrible plastic chairs, screaming children, backpacked foreigners sprawled

across the floor, and stores that sold perfume, chocolates, cigarettes, and the same ten books over and over.

Peter wasn't much of a reader. He couldn't understand why anyone would want to read when they could simply see and hear the story when the movie came out. Yet, despite his aversion to reading, Peter was, without doubt, one of the greatest authors in Furtivian history.

What Peter specialised in was a genre called 'legal fiction'. Not the thrilling novels that filled airport kiosk shelves like these, packed with heroic lawyers and gritty crimes (though lawyers and crimes featured in Peter's fiction too).

Rather, Peter's was the sort that involved the rewriting of laws, and the bending of reality, for political convenience.

Peter had first come up with the idea of offshore processing when boats started rocking up on Nativity Island – a territory Furtivus had annexed some decades prior. Although remote and sparsely populated with fewer than two thousand inhabitants – many the descendants of indentured workers – Nativity Island had been well worth the \$20 million Furtivus had paid for it.

Like Guano, Nativity Island had rich supplies of phosphate.

Yet the island's proximity to some of the global community's more conflict-prone members made it a prime target for people smugglers. A little piece of Furtivus, floating unguarded in the sea, with all the rights and privileges that Furtivian territory afforded.

The answer was simple, Peter had realised.

The problem would disappear if Nativity Island was no longer a part of Furtivus.

After all, they'd already literally mined the shit out of it. And a later attempt to transform the island into a casino had been a non-starter.

So the government excised Nativity Island from Furtivus' migration zone.

With the stroke of a pen, the asylum seekers who had set foot on Furtivian soil were no longer in Furtivus.

Of course, it didn't take long for the people smugglers to set their sights on yet another Furtivian island – this time, a

little closer to Peter's home. The Arari Islands, just off the coast of Northern Furtivus, had a population slightly higher than Nativity Island. Most were Indigenous Furtivians, many of whom who didn't speak English as a first language. And many Arari Islanders had lent money to the local plantation, hoping this new industry would lift their community out of poverty. These two facts were to Peter's immense advantage, when, one day, the locals awoke to find that he had excised them from Furtivus, too. After all, hardly any media outlets bothered to interview remote second-language speakers of English, and those already out of pocket were hardly a threat when it came to mounting lawsuits.

Few Furtivians were aware of just how effective – and how prolific – an author of legal fiction Peter was. The country had shed hundreds of islands in this way. Each time another boat landed, Peter could just slice that island off the Furtivian map with a flick of his wrist.

Sometimes, he considered cutting the whole damn country off.

As he walked past the duty free stores and play areas that smelled of tobacco and soiled nappies, over floors polished to a sheen you normally only saw on news presenters' teeth, Peter switched his heavy bag and cardboard tube to his other hand. His fingers were lined purple and white where the laptop bag had cut off his circulation. Thank goodness for the additional hand luggage allowance of business class. The combination of Peter's monstrous laptop and its power brick easily exceeded the maximum weight permitted in economy. As it was, all he'd had room for aside from the Neon Donkey and its charger was a pamphlet outlining the detention centre's facilities, and a couple of bottles of pills.

'Ladies and gentlemen', Peter heard as he reached Gate 53, 'Flight TU668 has been delayed approximately thirty minutes due to weather conditions. Royal Turgistan Airlines apologises for any inconvenience and thanks you for your patience.'

Peter swore. The fingers on his other hand were now striped purple and white. It had taken him almost twenty

minutes to get to Gate 53. There was no time to lug his luggage back to the lounge.

'What's going on?' Peter shook his tube at one of the uniformed staff.

'Sorry sir, the flight has been delayed thirty minutes.'

'Isn't that just what you say when you don't know how long the delay will be?'

'Sorry?'

'Something your customer relations team cooked up? Thirty minutes is the longest people will wait without getting aggressive? Come on!' Peter revealed a mouth full of over-whitened teeth and silver. 'What's really going on?'

A more senior attendant waltzed over.

'How can I help?'

'I was just asking him,' Peter pointed at the attendant on the counter, 'what's going on?'

'Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to refrain from pointing at airline personnel.'

'Pointing!'

'Yes, sir. Pointing is classified as a form of threatening behaviour according to the new regulations.'

'This is ridiculous!'

'Is there something I can help you with sir? Or am I going to have to ask you to step away from the counter?'

Peter handed over his ticket. The attendant looked at his name, and reddened.

'I'm terribly sorry sir. We'd be delighted to compensate you for your troubles with a complimentary flight.'

Peter grunted. 'I'd like an aisle seat.'

'Certainly, sir,' the attendant smiled, clacking away at the computer. 'As it turns out, the passenger next to you did not show up for check-in. I'd be happy to reissue your ticket for the aisle.'

Peter grabbed the new ticket as it emerged from the printer.

'Is there anything else I can assist with today?'

'Where's the bar?' Even if he couldn't make it back to the lounge, at least he could get a drink.

'I'm afraid there is no bar in this part of the terminal, sir,' the first, insolent attendant replied. 'But there is a McKing's just over there,' He flaunted his authority by not only pointing, but by doing so with his fingers in the shape of a pistol – something an ordinary citizen would have been handcuffed for. He knew this, Peter realised as he spotted the familiar lights of McKing's Burgers, because he had supported the relevant legislation last year – the 'Threatening Hand Gestures and Offensive Shadow Puppets in Airports Act'.

McKing's was crowded with a range of people in clothing whose nylon content offended Peter. He set down his cardboard tube and bag on the sticky top of the only vacant table in the establishment. Then, thinking the better of leaving his things unattended in a public place, he carried his luggage to the King's Koffee counter. He hadn't realised McKing's did coffee these days. Peter only ever set foot inside restaurants the LCP had an account at, and they invariably had tablecloths and wine lists that ran over several pages.

'A macchiato with two sugars,' Peter's power drink. Dark and sweet, it was calculatedly masculine and complex enough to intimidate his underlings, yet not so complicated as to mark him as high maintenance to his superiors.

'The sugars are over there,' the aproned barista pointed to a caddy stocked with sachets and straws. 'Name?'

'Peter,' One of the most popular names for babies deemed to be of the male sex in any given year, it was the kind of unremarkable name, shared by millions around the globe, that was perfect for Peter. Of course, Peter's parents had not been so callous as to simply select his name from the top of the list. Even that would have required an affinity for research and planning they did not possess. Instead, like many others, they had chosen the name of someone they knew – a name that had been popular in their youth, thus perpetuating its cyclical place in the 'best-seller' list of names.

Scraping the last of the coins from his pocket, Peter paid for his coffee. Normally, he'd pay on card, but Peter hated to carry around shrapnel at the best of times, and the currency would be useless while he was away.

As he waited for his coffee, Peter watched the corralled masses queuing for their mass-produced slop.

What a business! A paragon of organisation and efficiency. Muck compressed into patties, slapped between two pieces of white bread, served with the perfect balance of carbonated sugar and salted oil to send customers' pitiful minds into paroxysms of delight. The scent of the oil and the salt, mixed with the acidic syrupy sweetness of the soda, was intoxicating.

The addictive trinity of fat, sugar and salt, packaged into an international franchise.

Ever since his success with Guano, Peter had been scouting other impoverished backwater nations to start up new detention centres. According to his team's research, there were dozens of potential locations already. As rising sea levels and increasing salination of previously arable land made survival difficult for low-lying, small island nations, dozens more would soon be added to the list of conceivable franchise locations. And that was exactly how Peter viewed the whole enterprise – as a franchise.

Currently, the system of building offshore processing centres was expensive and inefficient. Sure, occasional savings were made by isolating troublemakers in shipping containers with a loaf of bread and a ration of water. But the typical detainee cost well over \$100,000 a year to warehouse offshore.

Peter had been surprised that the cost of detaining illegals offshore worked out to roughly double the cost of onshore detention in Furtivus – and quadruple the cost of community-based detention. After all, everything was so cheap in places like Guano and Pulcherrima. Hell, it was part of the reason he chose them. But most of the money went not to facilities, but to H84CE and the other private companies like Bludgeonshak the government awarded contracts to.

Surely all this expense was normal, Peter reassured himself. International expansion was complex. And all start-ups are inefficient in their initial stages. Even Colonel McKing had slow beginnings franchising McKing's Burgers. But in the end, when it came to licensing out the patent-worthy

deterrence systems Peter was developing, along with the rights to the name, logo, and slogan he'd been toying with, it would be pure profit.

Besides, the bigger the government's payments to H84CE, the bigger the donations they could afford.

Then there were the other potential revenue streams, like the forced labour in Bludgeonshak's Unified States-based jails.

This was how Peter planned to build his own new super-portfolio. An 'upsized' department, to use McKing's parlance.

The Department of Homeland Security.

It sounded so warm. So strong. So powerful. So inarguably right, marrying the concepts of home and security.

Peter knew the multi-billion dollar detention centre contracts, handed out to H84CE, its partner OmniPurview, and Bludgeonshak were sweetheart deals. He'd helped write the contracts, modelled on the very successful electricity deal Paul, a former colleague, had put together several years back, when the government went through a particularly successful period of privatisation.

The trick, Peter's predecessors had realised, was to identify the most profitable, or potentially profitable segments of the government's purview, and sell these off. These were often, uncoincidentally, the most vital parts of the government's operations. Basics, such as utilities.

It was exactly the opposite approach to that which someone wanting long-term revenue and growth would adopt. But these parts were much easier to sell, allowing the government to turn a quick buck and deliver budgetary surpluses just in time for election season. Of course, this meant the government would soon be left having to service the less profitable yet still essential services, without the revenue from the bits they'd sold off. The government's position, however, was that this was something the opposition could deal with when they gained power.

As he waited for his coffee, Peter watched one particularly hefty woman carry a fully laden tray away from the counter, her arms wobbling with the jolt of every step. Peter wouldn't mind a Crispy Chicken burger himself. He'd already had a chicken and lettuce sandwich for lunch, but he couldn't

remember the last time he'd enjoyed a burger. Certainly not since his ex had first started going on at him about improving his health. Nowadays, Percy largely took that role, buying him sandwiches with salad in them, of all the awful things.

Paul never had to put up with that sort of garbage from his assistant.

The contract Paul had orchestrated in selling off his state's electricity to Offshore Equity Co. NLC was a particularly tricky bit of business. After decades of neglect, the infrastructure was old, ill-maintained, and in desperate need of upgrade. He'd sweetened the deal by promising to reimburse the successful bidder for their investments in structural upgrades, not only in full, but up to 110% of the total cost. In effect, this meant they stood to receive a profit of 10% on any expenditure. Such as the recently completed Coalwood Plant.

Of course, the Coalwood Plant still wasn't actually hooked up to the grid. It might never be. It had been built in an area far from civilisation, where the land was cheap. The cost of connection would be astronomical. But Paul, Peter was given to understand, had received a very nice bonus indeed. After he'd left the government, Paul walked straight into a lucrative position at Offshore Equity. Peter hoped to wrangle such a deal with H84CE. He knew he'd never make Prime Minister. Not if the electorate had any say in the matter – his only hope was a leadership challenge. Even then, Peter didn't have the hair. His chin was too weak. And without Percy, he was hopeless at selecting ties. But if his plans for a mega Department of Homeland Security, combining Furtivus' intelligence, police, and immigration forces, didn't work out, Peter thought, private enterprise would be just the ticket. He'd be a captain of industry. A capitalist. The backbone of the country.

He'd swivel in his leather chair, and make notes on his leather desk pad with his leather pen. He'd have one of those earpiece things attached wirelessly to his mobile phone.

He'd be a consultant.

Peter liked the sound of that. Much better than 'The Member for Northwind'.

Privatising services like utilities was one thing, but Peter believed the future of the government was in outsourcing responsibility.

For refugees. And welfare. And waste.

For undesirables generally.

One such undesirable, an unshaven man with a pudgy belly and a balding head, dressed in a stained shirt and tracksuit pants that looked more like pyjama bottoms barrelled forward to retrieve his tray of burgers.

Peter didn't feel particularly hungry any more. He wasn't even sure whether he'd be able to stomach his coffee.

Still, McKing's Burgers was proof of the explosive potential of mass production.

Although the government pushed the issue of immigration as one uniquely threatening Furtivus, much to Peter's commercial advantage, it faced all developed nations. And, it seemed, he'd discovered a way to mass-produce detention centres.

At first, Peter had thought Guano Island – a country built economically and literally upon a pile of bird shit – was a special case.

Then his team found Pulcherrima, the island Peter was due to land on in less than 24 hours.

Pulcherrima was named after the breed of snails endemic to the small island, popular for jewellery. Thanks to over-harvesting, the snails were now facing extinction, and the island's GDP was even lower than that of Guano.

Snails and bird shit.

These were to be the humble building blocks of Peter's empire.

He would be the Colonel McKing of detention centres.

'Peter!'

His drink was served in one of those plastic-lined disposable cups with a plastic lid. Peter didn't mind disposable cups. He enjoyed the visible mark of a store-bought coffee, even if it was just from McKing's. During Peter's early days in office, back when he and his ex were still paying off the mortgage on what eventually became her house, he'd secretly

refilled the same disposable cup over and over when he couldn't afford to buy several a day like everyone else.

What bothered Peter was the name scrawled across the lid in permanent marker: 'Peta'.

Getting someone's name right was a basic form of human respect. His father, Peter senior, had taught him that.

Peter juggled the coffee, his tube, and his bag back to the sticky table.

It was now occupied by a gaggle of teens.

'Excuse me,'

'What?'

'That's my seat.'

'I don't see you sitting in it,' one of the youths retorted. Suddenly Peter felt thirty years younger – in a bad way. His tube began to slip. Peter fumbled. As his grip on the cup tightened, the lid popped off, and a flood of warm brown liquid spilled over the front of his pants.

'Shit!'

The gaggle giggled even more.

Peter could feel the wet patch spreading, turning the navy fabric of his suit an even darker colour. He wished he hadn't followed Percy's fashion advice after all. His old black suits were much better at hiding stains.

Peter sought refuge in the men's room. At least there was still one safe space he could escape those meddlesome girls. And when he got his 'Sex and Gender Confusion Public Restroom Segregation' bill passed, if one of them so much as set a pink glittered sneaker into this hallowed place, he could have them fined.

There was a shelf in the cubicle, on which Peter placed his remaining coffee, cardboard tube, and laptop bag. He felt sick. It wasn't so much the thought of germs on this bathroom surface that nauseated Peter, but the utter indignity of having to carry all of his belongings into a public restroom. A bag like this, made of the softest leather and embellished with the largest logo Vindaria bags produced, deserved better.

If he'd still been in the lounge, Peter could have left his things at his well-appointed, well-guarded table. The cubicle

would have been a good deal more spacious. And smell a good deal less of industrial solvent mixed with pungent urine.

If Peter had still been in the lounge, he would have gotten to drink a proper coffee from a proper coffee cup, or better yet, had another half-bottle of wine, and none of this would have happened.

Peter dropped trou and inspected the damage. Everything seemed much as it had that morning, though perhaps slightly more ruddy. His underpants, already yellowed with age – laundry having been his ex's domain – were now stained brown.

For once, Peter was glad the drink had not been particularly warm. Usually, he liked his beverages piping hot. At least that's what he told Percy – primarily because it struck him as the sort of behaviour one would associate with someone of his position.

Peter absorbed some of the dampness with a handful of toilet paper – a much lower ply than he was used to. He was glad he didn't actually have to bring it into contact with his rear. Then, he threw the wet paper into the toilet bowl and looked for the flush button.

'By installing this water-saving dual flush, this airport has demonstrated its commitment to protect and preserve the environment.' Peter did not consider the installation of a toilet flush a particularly extensive or impressive commitment, but then, who was he to judge?

'For this system to work, we need your help. Please take a few moments to familiarise yourself with the diagram below and push the button which best suits your needs.' Peter snorted. He doubted most people would need more than a single moment to interpret the diagram. The engraving depicted two buttons, one inscribed with a single droplet, captioned 'liquid waste'. The other had three dots, an ellipsis, captioned 'solid waste'.

Anyone whose waste was accurately represented by this diagram should likely seek medical advice. Peter made his selection.

Nothing more than a slight trickle occurred in the bowl.

Once the trickle died away, he pressed again, more decisively.

Again, a thin trickle of water petered into the bowl. Peter swore.

This time, he pressed the button designated 'solid waste' with ferocious intensity, anticipating a tidal roar of water.

A stronger trickle dribbled into the bowl, swirled the contents in a slow waltz, then died away. Even the most powerful flush lacked the determination required to rid the bowl of this, the thinnest of papers.

He slammed the lid. As he exited the cubicle, he could still feel the wetness of his trousers with every step. He looked around for a hand dryer. A minute or so under some hot jets of air and he'd be sorted.

But there were no hand dryers.

'Capital International Airport is working towards a more efficient tomorrow, today. We've replaced our old hand dryers with AirShard appliances for your comfort and hygiene.'

Peter looked at the sleek contraption affixed to the wall. The double-edged dryer had a narrow gap at the top to insert one's hands into.

With no other option, Peter strode up to the device and attempted to feed the front of his trousers into the machine. If he stood on tiptoe like a ballerina, he could just reach.

The machine sprang into action, blowing jets of hot air onto Peter's trousers. He could feel the liquid evaporate. In just a few minutes, he'd be on the plane, glass of wine in hand, a few hours of bliss to look forward to.

Over the AirShard's blast, Peter heard footsteps. Not the heavy sort he was used to, of a well-heeled pair of leather brogues against tile. Nor the horse-like clop-clop of a female assistant's heels.

It was a softer, rubberised sneak.

Peter looked back. He caught a glimpse of pink. There was someone there. Someone staring at him. Or more specifically, staring at his crotch, pressed against the AirShard, with an inch of damp fabric inside the slit.

TWO

Peter couldn't move. He hadn't frozen like this since his ex found him with his secretary.

The one before Percy.

Only at moments like these did Peter regret being a somebody, a figure in the public eye. His mind raced through what would happen next; the photo, the viral post, the nightly lampooning on the so-called comedic news programming.

But with a squeak, the rubberised soles turned and left. Peter sighed with relief.

Pants still not completely dry, he decoupled himself from the AirShard. Then, Peter waited until he heard the last of the footsteps before grabbing his luggage and what remained of his coffee to leave.

Cardboard tube jammed under one arm, he traipsed back to the rows of plastic seating at Gate 53. All of the seats were now filled. The best he could do was to perch on a windowsill. It was most undignified.

He took a sip of his too-cool coffee.

There was no sugar in it. He'd forgotten to grab the little sachets on his way out of McKing's. Percy normally handled these things for him.

Peter finished off his cold, bitter coffee, scrunched up the cup, and tossed it onto the window sill.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Peter strained to hear the announcement. 'We are now inviting rewards program and business class passengers travelling on board Flight TU668 for priority boarding.'

Finally, things were beginning to look up. As he pushed through the crowds, Peter imagined the seat that would soon welcome him. An aisle seat, even. He thought of the food. The drinks. All free – or at least paid for by his government-funded

ticket. And the blissful sense of isolation and contentment that inevitably accompanied air travel.

By the time he reached the gate, the line for priority boarding was already twice as long as the regular queue. There were the usual polished shoes and attachés. The shiny heels and wheeled black cases.

But there were also sneakers. Cartoon character suitcases. And worst of all, sandals.

The flamingo-lacquered toes of one pair of feet particularly offended Peter. They were the sort of feet, he thought, that would belong to an owner getting fat off the government's teat. Milking their entitlements for all they were worth. Living large on the hard-earned dollar of the taxpayer. Always looking for a handout; a meal ticket. Peter could feel these glorious words rolling around his mouth. He relished the delicious images of outrage they brought to mind, as ripe as if he were about to give an interview.

Peter missed the frequent coverage he'd enjoyed as the Minister for Social Welfare, Drugs and Fraud Investigation. Every time a current affairs program exposed a welfare cheat or a layabout, he was there to give an interview. His favourite episode had involved an elderly woman found guilty of unlawfully receiving \$7 worth of heating credits a few winters back.

'I don't want to seem cold-hearted,' Peter had said – he'd been practising that line all day, 'But this cycle of dependency and deception must be stopped. For too long, the taxpayer has been called upon to support these racketeers and extortionists. For too long!'

He could say the same of many of those in this line. This, Peter reflected, was the only downside of capitalism. To boost profits, airlines now offered priority boarding to any Tom, Dick, or Harry with \$150 left on his credit card and a desire for a plastic luggage tag.

Peter remembered his own first rewards program luggage tag. Although he was now ashamed of the fact, he'd even left the tag on his work bag for a few weeks after his first trip, pretending he'd 'forgotten' it there. Of course, he was beyond all that now. His monogrammed laptop bag was

unadorned. Aside from the large leather logo which proclaimed its maker on the front. But then, what was the point of buying a thousand dollar bag if no one knew what brand it was? His ex was driving the Luxxari, and Peter's laptop bag logo was now the only logo he had. Some little shit had stolen the ornament (which looked like a half-squashed mouse) from the grill of his second-hand Soviet Crio.

He must get Percy to chase up his government car application.

The flight attendants were busy, beeping tickets with their scanners, sorting the wheat from the chaff, directing them down the appropriate channels of the skybridge or asking them to wait. Peter shoved his ticket underneath the scanner, and pushed his way through the ugly cases and even uglier outfits.

Soon, he would be in his happy place.

'Welcome aboard, sir.'

Three simple, almost magical words.

The atmosphere of the cabin was more calming than any corporate retreat. Almost as relaxing as a glass of red, or a cigarette. Peter forced himself not to think about the four precious white sticks in his pocket as the stewardess stowed his cardboard tube in the overhead bin.

'May I offer you a hot towel?'

Peter liked her uniform. The veiled hat-thing she was wearing, presumably a throwback to some oppressive regime, reminded him of a television show about a genie he'd watched as a child.

He tossed his heavy laptop bag on the empty seat next to him. As Peter took the towel, he felt the blood return to his carrying hand.

A couple of bright purple cases lumbered through the cabin, destined for economy. One smacked into Peter's chair. An enormous backpack passed, then a suitcase with a broken

wheel. It made a horrible scraping sound against the low-pile aeroplane carpet.

It was worth it, Peter thought, wiping his face with the hot towel. Worth the extra cost. Worth the stopover. Even worth the doubled flight time, to be able to sit here, in business class, with the most attractive hostesses, and more importantly, away from the likes of them.

Inane but inoffensive music played in the background as the staff went about their business. Peter watched their methodical choreography as he wiped the towel across his ruddy forehead.

'Excuse me?' The voice was too husky for a woman, but rose at the end. Peter removed the towel from his face and looked up.

There stood what Peter could only describe as a man, albeit grudgingly.

Thick-rimmed glasses. Hair that was not only too long, but asymmetrical. Stubble far longer than even Peter knew was trendy. A shirt too tight for anyone not a large-breasted woman or a muscular-chested man. Last, and most disturbing, was some sort of garment perhaps best termed a cardigan.

A pink one.

He looked like the unfortunate victim of a hurricane in a thrift store.

'Economy's back there,' Peter tried to swallow his horror, jerking a thumb toward the back of the plane.

'This is my seat.' There was no rising intonation this time. Cardigan let his voice drop like a bomb as he stood there with his own wet towel pointing to 8A.

Peter stared at him.

'Do you mind?' Cardigan motioned towards the seat again.

Unfreezing, Peter moved his bag. The pink cardigan clambered over him, first stepping over his knees, landing his buttocks dangerously close to Peter's nose. Then, he swivelled so his crotch was at Peter's eye level. Finally, he rotated again, following through with his other foot in a complicated ballet, pausing mid-air, his shoe millimetres from Peter's cheek.

Peter stared at the rubberised sole.

Maybe Pink Cardigan hadn't recognised him.

'How're your trousers?'

Shit.

'Fine,' Peter gave Cardigan the power stare he'd learned in a seminar. It was intended to intimidate his question time opponents into submission.

That might shut him up.

Instead, Cardigan laughed. 'Pretty sweet hey?' he gestured around the seat with his now cool towel. 'I don't often fly business class.'

'Really.'

'I guess whoever booked this seat didn't show, so they bumped me up from super economy.'

'What,' Peter asked, regretting every syllable as it came out of his mouth, 'is that?'

'Oh, it's a new class they created to allow for an expanded business section on these airliners. Basically, it's economy, but with seats that don't recline. No tray tables, 50% less legroom, and they've removed the armrests to seat five instead of four abreast.'

'It sounds hellish.' Almost as bad as having to sit next to this chatty moron.

Cardigan shrugged. 'I'm just glad I could afford a ticket! Most of my work's pro bono.'

Pro bono were two of Peter's least favourite words.

He hated them etymologically. Peter often expressed how pretentious he found Latin, although the truth was, he only said this because even his private schooling hadn't included any real foreign language training.

He hated them phonologically. Peter found it hard not to giggle at words that sounded, to his ear at least, like 'pro boner,' which threatened to expose his lack of refinement.

But most of all, he hated them semantically. The concept of working for free was not one which appealed to Peter in the slightest.

'Beverages?' The tightly-bunned, severely lipsticked hostess reappeared with the long-awaited silver tray. She handed Peter a glass, and a small bag of peanuts.

This was more like it.

Closing his eyes, Peter took a sip of the amber liquid. He let it wash through his mouth and over his tobacco-deadened taste buds.

‘Do you have any apple juice?’ Cardigan asked.

‘Certainly, sir,’ the stewardess gestured at a line of darker glasses.

Cardigan grinned as the stewardess left to serve another row. ‘I hear Turgistan is famous for its apples! I always like to try the speciality of a region, don’t you?’

Peter stabbed the call button.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Another glass,’ Peter said, switching his now empty flute for a full one from her tray.

‘Certainly, sir.’

‘So what brings you to Turgistan?’ Cardigan drained the last of the juice from his glass and returned it to the hostess.

‘A stopover.’

‘Me too!’

In an attempt to dissuade Cardigan from talking any more, Peter opened the in-flight magazine. After no fewer than four watch advertisements (each of which served to make Peter feel even more smug about his Triple Platinum Diamond Hubris Excalibur), he finally reached the contents page.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ the speaker blasted. Cardigan straightened his spine, sitting bolt upright as if a great show was about to be announced. ‘The captain has turned on the fasten seatbelt sign,’ Peter glanced up. He always thought the illuminated sign looked like nothing so much as two square-headed snakes in a stand-off.

‘If you haven’t already done so, please ensure your carry-on luggage is safely stowed underneath the seat in front of you, or in an overhead bin.’

Cardigan fussed with his bag. It looked remarkably like Peter’s own. But one side was covered with stickers that had an alarming number of words like ‘citizens,’ ‘for the people’ and ‘justice’ on them. And Peter had a feeling it wasn’t the kind of ‘justice’ he campaigned for.

'Campaigned' was a strong word actually. Despite his lengthy political career, Peter had never really campaigned for office. He'd never kissed a baby at a sausage sizzle. Never debated an opponent in front of a live studio audience. And of course, he'd never put on one of those reflective vests and plastic hats and pretended to care about mining or forestry.

That was the sort of thing the opposition did.

The opposition party in Furtivus' two-party political system was currently the National Labor Party. Contrary to their name, the NLP wanted to reduce working hours and, in spite of their Unified States-style spelling, were virulently against US imperialism.

The other major party in the Furtivian two-party system was Peter's, the Liberal Country Party. Contrary to their name, the LCP produced policies that curtailed civil liberties, and few which addressed the needs of rural Furtivians. So unpopular were the LCP among country voters, they had to form a coalition with another party, the Rural Patriotic Front, in order to even make it to government.

Of course, neither the NLP nor the coalition ever won anything like a majority. Voting in Furtivus was mandatory. This had its advantages for the people – elections were held on a weekend. People were given ample opportunity to vote via the postal system. In short, it was difficult for the powers that be to suppress voters. But the system resulted in an additional consequence. One that served Peter and others of his ilk particularly well.

Where voting is optional, candidates have to excite voters enough for them to bother to show up and cast their ballots.

In Furtivus, where everyone had to vote regardless, people did not so much vote for a particular candidate or party. Instead, they voted against the candidate or candidates, party or parties they least liked.

Thus, in many electorates, the best tactic was not to work on name recognition. It was not to inspire the people with improved policies, or hear what their constituents had to say.

The strategy Peter, and many others, utilised was to keep quiet and trade preferences.

In theory, preferential voting allowed voters to rank candidates. In practice, most simply selected their number one choice, and relied on the politicians' own rankings – which typically prioritised strategy over ideology.

Peter had first risen to glory when the party set him up in a safe seat. This allowed them to move the more popular incumbent from his district to a swing electorate. The LCP then pledged to throw an obscene amount of money behind Peter's campaign. So much, in fact, he ended up running uncontested by candidates from either the other major, or any of the minor parties.

Aside from that lunatic dressed as a chicken nugget with a boot on his head.

He'd gotten an embarrassingly large number of the votes.

'Please fasten your seatbelt, and make sure your seat is in its full, upright position.'

Cardigan gave the belt around his hips a little tug. Peter envied him that tug. The belt around his own middle was at full capacity. The seats in business class should be more forgiving of the stomachly well-endowed.

In the following election, he'd had a little more competition. But this time, his people had made some very favourable preference deals. Despite securing only 13.5% of the primary vote, Peter won a handy majority once all the preferences from the Libertarian Gluttony Party, the Religious Conservative Party, the Sex, Drugs and Alcohol Party, the Nationalist Military Offensive Party, the Oil and Motor-Heads Party, the Fiscal Responsibility and Austerity Party, the Environmental Conservation Party, and the Pacifists' Party flowed through.

'Passengers are reminded that under aviation law, this is a non-smoking flight.' Just hearing the word was enough to make Peter's fingers twitch. He fingered the four slender cylinders in his pocket, proud of not having smoked today's yet. He'd rationed out exactly one for each day of his trip. Not that he ever carried cigarettes in their pack any more, thanks to some ridiculous legislation introduced by the opposition—who were, at the time, he had to concede, the government.

Peter always thought of his own party, the LCP, as the true government.

Furtivian law now required all cigarettes be sold in 'plain packaging'. In truth, the packaging was anything but plain. To dissuade young people in particular from taking up smoking, all manufacturers were obliged to package their product in a drab brown pack. Research showed this was the least attractive hue to all demographics. More effective were the gory photographs of corpses plastered across each pack in place of branding.

'Smoking is prohibited throughout the aircraft. Smoke detectors are fitted in the lavatories.'

Peter did wish they would stop saying 'smoking'. And why call the toilets 'lavatories'? The word seemed neither modern nor refined enough for use in announcements. It brought to Peter's mind the latrines in his grandparents' stables. Grandmama had always called them 'lavs'.

'Tampering with, disabling, or destroying smoke detectors is prohibited. If you have any questions about our flight today, please do not hesitate to ask one of our flight attendants. Thank you.'

The inane music resumed.

Peter unbuttoned his jacket, then leaned down, the pressure on his stomach and bladder excruciating, to unlace his shoes. They were new, the first pair he'd bought since the divorce, and the big toe on his left foot was beginning to sting. He longed to take them off, but was afraid of the stench they would release.

Cardigan pulled an inflatable U-shaped pillow from his bag, and proceeded to noisily blow it up. Presumably such devices were necessary in 'super economy'.

Peter envied Cardigan his stamina. His unpallid face. The very capacity of his lungs.

'You know, you can adjust the headrest,' Peter said, unable to take any more of the sound of Cardigan's wet lips huffing into the flaccid pink plastic.

'Thanks.'

The pathetic pillow lay half-inflated in Cardigan's lap while he fiddled with the seat back. Condensation from his hot

breath had accumulated in the bladder. It clung to the pillow's transparent walls like some sort of revolting hot house.

Peter felt unwell. He rifled through his seat pocket until he found the airsickness bag. Not that he intended to vomit. That would be most undignified – unless, of course, one was at a boozy post-meeting party. He would just keep it on hand in case he needed something to breathe into.

As Cardigan deflated his pillow, pressing the air out of its narrow valve, it made a loud, flatulent sound, not unlike Peter's own regular emissions, ending with a salivary splutter.

Peter studied the advertisements on his airsickness bag, trying to block out the trumpeting of the cushion. One was for photo printing. The other was for a local SIM card available for tourists arriving in Turgrael. The prices of the various gigabytages were printed in some sort of inscrutable currency.

Peter was glad he'd be able to bypass all this nonsense. He would transfer straight to his next flight. Then, he would land on a tropical island which, while barren, had all the necessary ingredients: an open bar, and unlimited use of the departmental credit card.

'Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the captain and the entire crew, I'd like to welcome you aboard Flight TU668 to Turgrael. Please make sure your seat belt is correctly fastened.'

Peter knew his seatbelt was correctly fastened. Not only had he been reminded twice already, but every breath he took was a reminder of its tight embrace around his middle, pressing into his stomach, squeezing his kidneys.

The stewardess turned to close the curtain, separating Peter from the swarming masses. The barrier, more symbolic than physical, immediately calmed him.

'Cabin crew, doors on automatic, cross-check and report. Thank you.'

Peter looked around the cabin. Beige walls, beige seat backs, beige tray tables, and beige overhead bins. The only

break in the monochromatic vista was the rainbow of documents in the magazine pocket.

And the pink cardigan of course.

Most of the other seats in business class were filled with people Peter would describe as 'foreign investors' - born overseas but confirmed in their devotion to the fine nation of Furtivus through their willingness to sink large sums of money into the local economy.

One of the initiatives Peter had recently gotten passed through government was the Wealthy and Affluent Investment Visa Expedition Regime. According to this program, those willing to invest a million or more in local business and had not been convicted of any crimes the government considered 'serious' were offered a four year stay. Around the same amount of time as an election cycle. Or the average time an asylum seeker spent in detention.

Instead of having to pay a million dollars to keep a foreigner locked up, the country received a million dollars.

At least, there were a million fresh dollars in the economy for as long as it took the applicant to get their permanent residency approved. What happened after that was nobody's business.

But it certainly looked good on paper.

The screen in front of Peter flickered to life. A grotesquely cartooned aeroplane was depicted soaring merrily through a cloudy sky.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we now request your full attention as we demonstrate the safety features of this aircraft.'

The lipsticked air hostess – or flight attendant, as Peter grudgingly supposed she was called – popped up from goodness only knew where, hands behind her back. Already, one of the strands of her bun had sprung loose underneath her veiled hat. It stuck straight upwards, as if to defy gravity.

Although he'd seen the demonstration a hundred times, Peter never turned down the opportunity to ogle a uniformed woman under the guise of safety consciousness. He paid attention to the woman who gave the sexual harassment seminars at Parliament House in much the same way.

'When the seatbelt is illuminated, you must fasten your seatbelt low and tight around your hips.'

Cardigan confirmed for the umpteenth time that his belt was appropriately fastened.

Peter did nothing. It had been years since there was anything low and tight in the vicinity of his hips, aside from his own ill-fitting trousers.

A short belt appeared in front of the attendant by sleight of hand, while a 3D representation appeared on screen.

'Insert the metal fittings one into the other, and tighten by pulling on the loose end of the strap.'

Both the attendant and the video did so. The belts, real and virtual, clicked into place physically and ephemerally in the most satisfying manner.

On a train, or in a taxi, Peter mused, it is assumed that passengers know how to operate seatbelts. This level of care, the infantilisation of air travel, was comforting.

Maybe it was the distraction from the unsettling taxiing motions of the plane.

Maybe it was the reassurance of having the simplest of actions spelled out in minute, synchronised detail by a bevy of attractive women.

Or perhaps it was merely the orgasmic level of bureaucracy involved.

No matter how many times Peter saw it, the safety demonstration never failed to captivate him.

'To release, lift the upper portion of the buckle, which should be facing away from you. We suggest you keep your seatbelt fastened throughout the flight as we may experience unexpected turbulence.'

The attendant released the belt and, spiriting it away, re-emerged with a mask. She was a magician. A goddess.

'In the event of a loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks like these will appear automatically from the panel above your head.' The lipsticked goddess gestured broadly at the overhead panels, in the manner of a game show assistant, as though the masks were some kind of grand prize. Which, Peter supposed, in a way, they were.

‘To start the flow of oxygen, pull the mask down sharply, place it firmly over your nose and mouth, and secure the elastic band behind your head.’

‘I’d like to place her firmly over my nose and mouth,’ Peter lent over to nudge Cardigan, ‘and secure her elastic,’ he continued, before realising his stab at innuendo didn’t make much sense.

Avoiding contact with her lipstick, the attendant held the round yellow plastic cup-like mask a few centimetres from her face, as if it smelled bad. She pulled the elastic strap just far enough to indicate how it should be utilised, but not so far as to further upset her bun.

The mask looked spectacularly uncomfortable. Surely business class should afford him a more ergonomic solution. In a world in which most everyday items are moulded to the part of the body with which they interact, the oxygen mask looked unlike anything else from the modern era. It reminded Peter more of a wartime gas mask than a medical oxygen mask. Not that Peter had ever seen combat. His knowledge of battle was limited to the interminable museum and memorial visits he had to make.

‘Only when you have secured your own mask should you help others.’

The screen transformed into a map of the plane.

‘There are several emergency exits on board this aircraft.’

Peter looked back at the attendant, who was smiling through her lipstick, hands behind her back, poised and ready. This was his favourite part.

‘There are two exits at the forward,’ her hands extended out front, then gestured to the left and right, like a gymnast completing a manoeuvre, ‘two exits at the aft,’ the same again, ‘and two exits over the wings.’ A broad gesture now, her triumphant dismount.

‘Please take a few moments to locate your nearest exit.’

Cardigan looked around in a panic, obviously unused to the clearly marked and easily accessible exit of the business class. He was the sort who, on the Titanic, would have been locked somewhere inside the bough when it went down.

'If we need to evacuate, floor level lighting will guide you towards the exit.' More gesturing. 'Each door is equipped with an inflatable slide which may be detached and used as a life raft.'

Peter could feel his own middle inflating, his bladder coming under increased pressure as the belt dug into his flesh.

'For your safety, there is a life jacket stowed in a pocket under your seat, or between the armrests in business class.' Peter was relieved. If there was one thing that would make an emergency landing worse, it would be having to reach down and retrieve a life jacket from a hard-to-reach place.

'When instructed to do so, please remove this vest from its pocket, and place the jacket over your head.' This time, the attendant actually did so, donning the bright yellow vest without so much as bumping the bun. 'Bring the straps to the side of the jacket.' She turned to the side, giving Peter a pleasing view of her profile. 'Clip and pull to secure around your waist.' Another two firm tugs.

'To inflate the life jacket, pull firmly on the red cord.' There was something so reassuring about words like 'firmly'. While the life jacket cords, like the tubes of the oxygen masks, seemed so delicate, the announcement made them sound terrifically robust.

'There is a mouthpiece for further inflation.' Her lacquered nails tapped the mouthpiece over her breast in what might otherwise be an obscene gesture, but here, was part of a carefully engineered, reassuring display. 'There is also a light, which comes on automatically, and a whistle to attract attention.'

'I'd like my whistle to attract her attention!' Peter felt more successful this time.

Cardigan appeared not to have heard. 'How much help will a whistle be in the middle of the sea?' he laughed nervously.

'In the event of an emergency, please assume the bracing position. You will find this, and all of the other safety information, in the safety card, which the captain invites you to read before take-off.' Somehow, even the sheet of cardboard

seemed more substantial in the attendant's hands as she gestured down the length of the page. Cardigan immediately retrieved his own copy from the magazine rack.

'At this time, your portable electronic devices must be set to airplane mode until an announcement is made upon arrival. We wish you an enjoyable flight!'

The flight attendant spirited the card away to wherever the demonstration belt and mask had gone, but walked up the aisle still wearing the glaring yellow life jacket, the mouthpiece sticking out like the straw on a juice box. The woman had the ability to wear what amounted to a rubber duck costume with more poise and dignity than Peter's ex ever managed in her designer labels.

Cardigan bent over the brightly coloured safety card, studying its contents, divided into panels like a comic book. Only, Peter noticed, the flames and explosions were much smaller than in comics. Nor were they accompanied by any sound effects in the style of 'BOOM' or 'CRASH' or 'POW'. There wasn't any dialogue either, come to think of it. This seemed highly unlikely in the event of an emergency. Cursing, hastily uttered prayers, shouted messages to loved ones – surely there would be some form of locution?

The characters' faces were also oddly inexpressive, with blank, staring eyes and fixed mouths. A woman, wearing a pink very similar to Cardigan, looked positively bored by the development of the masks dropping from the ceiling.

The last two images on the card were of the airplane in emergency exit situations. One was clearly at sea – the plane floating calmly on an invitingly blue ocean, rippled with small waves. A man was depicted opening the aircraft door and sliding down the inflatable raft with as much excitement as a robot. The background of the other image was rendered in grey, with no attempts at detail or texturing. Both aircraft were perfectly intact, devoid of any obvious damage or hazards.

Quite why the passengers saw any need to evacuate at all was difficult to fathom.

'Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are second in priority for take-off, and should depart in about five minutes. Cabin crew, please take your seats for take-off.'

Peter settled back into the leathery cushions of his seat. It wrapped around him like a baby capsule so that when he leaned back, he was visually protected from the sight of Cardigan. Or at least, from the sight of most of him. Peter could still see his denim-clad legs over the centre console. And he could still see those cardiganed arms when they darted forward to replace the safety card, and then to jab at the entertainment unit or check something in that bag of his, which Peter increasingly suspected must be counterfeit.

He wished he was on one of those airliners with a 1-2-1 seating configuration in business, so he would not have to sit next to anyone at all. That was Peter's ideal seat – one angled slightly towards the window so he could enjoy the view without having to see any of the other occupants of the cabin, but whilst still enjoying full access to the aisle.

The Cardigan began to jiggle his left leg up and down. With each micro-movement, Peter glimpsed another colour on Cardigan's rainbow-striped socks. He fought with himself, willing his arm not to reach out and slap the irritating man. The last thing Peter needed was to be kicked off the flight, causing a public scandal and missing his meeting with H84CE.

Of course, were Peter to be forcibly ejected from the aircraft, like that doctor somewhere overseas who'd been dragged, battered and bloodied up the aisle, after the airline double-booked his seat, his escort would likely be a H84CE contractor. H84CE already had contracts to provide the Furtivian and other governments with not only detention centre management but prison and hospital security escorts, financial transaction monitoring, data protection, investigative services, air traffic control oversight, probation monitoring, and missile maintenance. They provided such services to over half the countries on the globe. All those that could afford them, in other words. H84CE made almost fifty times the total income of a country like Guano every year. In fact, were H84CE a country, it would rank ahead of seventy-eight other nations in terms of income.

Peter wanted a piece of that.

With a few more jabs to the entertainment screen, Cardigan selected some sort of nature documentary.

Presumably unaware of the high quality noise-cancelling headphones in the little cupboard to his left, he withdrew a pair of earbuds from his sticker-covered bag and inserted them in his tiny ears. As Cardigan became immersed in the plight of the dolphins on the screen, his jiggling subsided.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Peter's tooth began to ache as the air rushed past his lips. As the plane approached its cruising altitude, his tooth throbbed even more with the pressure. The pain spread throughout his jaw like a red-hot saw. He must get Percy to call his ex and get the number of the dentist he'd been avoiding for months. At least he'd packed his sensitive toothpaste in his suitcase – a jumbo tube of the stuff, bigger than the 100ml permitted in hand luggage. Peter couldn't wait to land.

He fixed his eyes on the seatbelt sign, willing it to turn off. He was desperate for a piss.

THREE

‘Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned off the fasten seatbelt sign-’

Peter immediately released the buckle and felt his stomach gurgle in relief. For too long it had been bisected. He was sure he’d have a big red mark around his middle. Peter was convinced the wine and nuts had stayed in the upper portion of his gut, unable to reach the lower half due to the rubber-band like constriction of his belt. If this was what lap band surgery was like – something Percy had been begging him to consider if he wanted to get ahead politically – Peter would certainly give it a miss.

The rest of the announcement bypassed his ears as little more than background noise as he jolted out of his seat and made his way to the toilet.

Peter edged into the small cubicle sideways, shoving past an elderly man and closing the door. As he slid the little lock shut, the light sprang on, illuminating a faux walnut interior. A row of lights lit up the mirror, like a movie star’s.

In the bright lights of this room, Peter could see the disparity between the navy blue of his suit and the brownish stains on his trousers more clearly. At least the cabin lighting was reasonably dim. Perhaps no one else would notice.

He removed himself from his coffee-stained trousers.

Although he could feel the constant, sharp need to piss, Peter could not produce a drop.

He waited.

Three drops of acid. That was all.

Stinging, Peter gave up.

When he was younger, Peter would have slashed a powerful stream across the bowl – and a good deal out of it, if he were honest – zipped up, and left.

These days, he washed his hands, even lathering up with the almond-scented soap. Just to feel like he'd accomplished something.

When he was younger, Peter had sprayed himself with PumaSpeed ChocolateLure antiperspirant six or seven times a day, in the hopes it might make him more attractive. The advertisements, he remembered fondly, were an orgiastic series of images of women grinding against a bespectacled man who had recently applied PumaSpeed.

These days, Peter's use of cologne was mainly to disguise the scent he sensed of himself rotting from within.

He sat back in his seat just in time for the lipsticked flight attendant's return. She handed him a menu, and offered a basket full of red and grey amenity bags. Peter chose a grey one, even though he had no intention of using any of it, and Cardigan eagerly selected a red one, which he immediately opened to sort through the contents, tucking a red eye mask, red toothbrush kit, red pen, and some red earplugs into his stickered bag. Peter noted the shoddy quality of the razor, looked wistfully at the comb, shampoo and conditioner, and scathed at the ugly red-and-grey-striped pyjamas, and the even worse design of the folded slippers.

Bending down, Cardigan untied his rubberised shoes and replaced them with the Royal Turgrael branded slippers. Peter turned his pair over in his hands, staring at the thin foam soles. The even thinner polypropylene upper. The airline's garish logo looming large on each foot.

His own feet were still stewing in their respective shoes and socks. Peter had been wearing the same footwear since he'd gotten dressed that morning for work. But he wouldn't be caught dead using such flimsy, crass slippers, even if they were supplied in business class. He tucked the amenities bag into the seat pocket, and turned to the menu.

Unlike his flimsy ticket, the menu was printed on a heavy card stock which pleased Peter in the most tactile way. A spray of blossom across the front and a tasteful depiction of grapes whet his appetite.

He turned first to the wines. The red was described as 'An unapologetic, sexy nose of cappuccino, leather, and

cherries, with charcoal undertones.’ The white, it seemed, was ‘Flirting with perfection, crisp with wild notes of apple, grass clippings, tennis balls, and hints of the ocean.’

The red was Burgundy Creek, the white, Winter’s Estate. Peter was unimpressed. Only cheap wineries would select such prestigious-sounding names. Modern, expensive wines, he knew, had names such as ‘Half-Rabid Dog’ or ‘Flea-Bitten Goat’.

A third option, the airline’s ‘Wine of the Month,’ was described as ‘easy to drink’. Hardly a glowing endorsement. ‘Minerally incipient and buoyant with flecks of filigree,’ the description continued, ‘and rendered with determined ultraviolet penetration with a long, tertiary finish after-burn.’

He would stick with the red.

Now, for the food.

‘Royal Turgistan Airlines is proud to introduce its new range of wholesome meal choices on select flights. Each meal is thoughtfully curated for your well-being and includes a hearty salad, revitalising main course, and even, a guilt-free dessert packed with essential nutrients.’ The corporate waffle, engineered at least as precisely as the aircraft itself, flowed into Peter’s veins.

‘Canapé: Mediterranean Salad, with feta cheese and braised pumpkin seeds.

Appetiser: Sliced Smoked Salmon, with sour cream mousse and herbed radish.’ Peter read.

Cardigan was fossicking around in his bag again. As he straightened up, Peter saw him going through the largely empty folds of his wallet, then removing a purple-and-pink-striped card.

Peter had never seen a purple-and-pink credit card before. What kind of hellish sub-level of credit must that indicate?

Cardigan cleared his throat.

‘Do they take debit?’

‘Debit?’

‘Debit card. For the meal,’

Peter laughed. ‘It’s complimentary.’

'Oh!' Cardigan laughed too, a funny sort of almost honking laugh that made Peter's ears ache, and put away his wallet. Peter turned back to the menu.

'Main course: Seared Beef with vegetable puree -or- Pan Seared Chicken Breast in rosemary jus.

Dessert: Passionfruit Tiramisu with hand-crafted chocolate seashell.'

Still thinking of the Crispy Chicken burger at McKing's Peter decided upon the chicken just as the attendant rolled along.

'Chicken or beef?'

'Beef, please.' Cardigan, bolt upright and evidently salivating over the prospect of a free meal, put his menu away in the seat pocket.

'Chicken,' said Peter, unfolding his tray table. He was secretly glad to have chosen a different meal.

Cardigan struggled to move his bag out of the way, which he'd somehow got tangled up in the seat belt still fastened tightly around his waist. Then, he fumbled with the tray table, trying to prise it open without unlocking it first. The attendant leaned across, her breasts almost touching Peter's face, to unlatch Cardigan's table. Her skin smelled of coconuts, vanilla, and just a hint of cinnamon. A tiny diamond necklace sparkled inside her blouse, a hidden piece of jewellery only Peter could see. For the first time, Peter was glad to have such an uninitiated dolt in the seat next to him.

Eventually, they got it straightened out, and the attendant leaned across Peter's face once more to spread a white linen tablecloth across the tray table. There, she placed a roll of cutlery and a series of small white trays. She smiled at Peter's already folded out table, making him feel like a schoolboy, and set out the same for him.

With his food on a tray in front of him, strapped into his seat, Peter felt almost as if he were an infant in a high chair. His meal, he couldn't help but notice, as he pulled off the foil lid, looked considerably better than Cardigan's off-grey meat chunks.

'And to drink?'

'Red,' said Peter, without hesitation, while Cardigan ordered another apple juice.

As Cardigan scrabbled about, lifting up dishes and then the table cloth, looking for a circular indent in which to place his juice, Peter flipped down the flute holder next to the touch screen. Once more, the attendant leaned across to do the same for Cardigan, and Peter uttered a silent prayer of thanks for Cardigan's incompetence, as he breathed in her warm vanilla scent.

When the attendant left to serve another row, Cardigan peeled the paper band with the airline's horrifying logo off the linen napkin, and unwrapped his cutlery.

'Wow,' he said, hitting the edge of his knife against one of the trays. 'Real metal!'

Peter rolled his eyes and shoved a piece of chicken into his mouth. It was bland, but palatable – marginally better than the chicken salad sandwich Percy had bought him at lunch. Like all airline food, the chicken and vegetables were soft, bordering on puree, the sort of thing he'd watched his ex spoon-feed their kids when they were infants. Even the cutlery – the fork with its short prongs and the rounded edge of the knife – felt babyish.

Cardigan tucked into his beef with gusto, shovelling the vegetables onto his fork like an earthmover. Peter used to eat like that, and, as he carefully balanced a sliver of chicken on the back of his fork, which immediately slid off again with the lubrication of the jus, the sight disgusted him. He was relieved when the lipsticked goddess returned to clear their plates.

'Excuse me,' Cardigan had unclipped his belt, and was once more trying to manoeuvre past Peter. 'I need to use the facilities.'

Keen to avoid another groin-to-the-face incident, Peter folded away his tray table, and got out of his seat. It felt good to stand up. He moved back a little in the aisle and did some stretches. Peter attempted to hold his stomach in, in case the

vanilla-scented attendant was nearby. He did a few twists, knowing that when he rotated his spine, his flab distributed itself more evenly around his middle. This gave him an, if not muscular, an at least more barrel-like physique.

It was the best impression he could currently hope to make.

'Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned on the fasten seatbelt sign, as we are now crossing a zone of turbulence. Please return to your seats and keep your seatbelts fastened.'

Peter took his seat, and with much greater difficulty than before dinner, refastened his seatbelt. The pressure on his bladder was excruciating.

Just as Peter closed his eyes, Cardigan returned from the toilet in a fog of complimentary cologne and the ridiculous airline pyjamas.

'Did you know they have moisturiser and perfume in there?' he grinned.

The pyjamas appeared flimsy. Peter could see from the stack of clothes folded under the man's arm that he was not wearing any underpants underneath. A pair of purple chessboard-patterned briefs hung precariously from the pile. Peter certainly wasn't going to allow this man to climb atop him now.

Irritated at the necessity to move again, yet glad for the excuse to release his girth from the seatbelt, Peter got up and allowed the now cardiganless man through.

'Shall I make up your bed?' the flight attendant asked as soon as Cardigan had sat back down and the seatbelt light dimmed. Peter could have screamed at her. Once more, he stood to allow the cardiganless man out, and the flight attendant in. The pyjamaed idiot stood there agape as the cinnamon goddess transformed his seat into a bed, handing him a pillow and blanket.

'And for you, sir?'

Peter smiled at her, implying he was far too busy and important to relax at a time like this.

'No, thank you.'

He walked back up the aisle to the toilet, locked the door, and stared at his enemy once more.

This time, Peter was sure of a steady stream. His bladder was swollen and distended with the wine and the altitude. His muscles were ready. He could feel the urine burning through him.

Peter was practically sweating with anticipation.

Like magic, a brief ribbon of dark yellow cascaded into the bowl. The diuretic effects of the alcohol had worked their wonders. He offered up a silent prayer to the gods of wine and flow.

When Peter returned to his seat, Cardigan was already asleep in his seat-bed, his eyes covered with the satin eye mask.

Peter never slept on planes. The idea of people seeing his mouth open, salivating over the pillow, hearing his snores, and any other nocturnal emissions he might make, appalled him. Besides, he found it difficult enough to sleep most nights in his bed at home. He was sure he'd be unable to sleep cramped up on a strange car-seat-like contraption, with limited leg room. Especially if he had to wear a strange-smelling eye mask to block out others' reading lights and screens.

Besides, men like Peter had no need of sleep.

For they had drugs.

Peter had gotten a whole bottle of Melatone Ultra from the Minister for Arts, a frequent traveller. It combined the jet-lag easing effects and circadian rhythm corrections of melatonin with an instant stimulant and a delayed release ultra-strength sleeping pill, regulated by a carefully timed second dose.

Melatonin on its own was, of course, perfectly legal and available over the counter in most countries (although notably not Peter's own). But its combination with both a party-grade stimulant and a horse tranquilliser was not yet approved anywhere.

Swallowing the experimental drug with the final gulp of red wine in his glass (something which would certainly have been contra-indicated had the pills come with any safety warnings), Peter tried to visualise the superior premier

executive deluxe suite he'd be sleeping in tonight. His favourite style of pillow and wine would be waiting for him. His favourite newspaper in the morning. Then, he'd take the second pill. That would wake him right up, and he'd head downstairs for the breakfast meeting, with his favourite kind of eggs. He could almost taste them.

Peter donned the high-quality NoiZ-E noise-cancelling headphones from the little cupboard by his head and settled back into his seat.

The rest of the world disappeared.

Cradled by his chair, soaring above the earth, Peter was both god and infant.

The touch screen presented an assortment of options. Peter scrolled through the list with a stubby finger, looking for a movie he hadn't seen. There was always too much comedy and romantic drama on planes. For some reason, whenever he watched romances on a plane, he ended up crying.

Peter wanted something with action.

'Intergalactic War Delta'

'The Ultimate Battle for Supremacy'

'Spider Attack at 30,000 ft'

'Tornado Hunter 2: Goin' for Another Spin'

'Operation: Desert Blood'

That sounded good.

Peter loved movies, although he mostly enjoyed them at home or on planes. He'd taken his kids to the cinema once, but found it in turns tedious and distracting. There were too many ads at the start. Not only trailers for coming attractions, but advertisements for local restaurants, hairdressers, and even a mattress manufacturer. So many ads, in fact, that Peter had finished his Mega Jumbo bucket of popcorn before the film even began. Eyeing the Ginormo Supreme bucket his kids shared in the flickering light of the movie's opening credits, Peter regretted having purchased the smallest popcorn on offer. Throughout the rest of the film, he'd had to listen to them, crunching on their salty snack, whilst he sucked on the burnt, unpopped kernels at the bottom of his bucket.

On the plane, there was a short advertisement for Royal Turgistan's frequent flyer program. Then, it was straight into

the movie. He couldn't hear anyone else, he couldn't see anyone else. It was like having the movie injected straight into his veins.

'This movie has been modified from its original format.' Peter hoped this only meant the dimensions of the screen were different. He'd heard horror stories from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, a man who took his job description a little too literally, who'd flown on some airline owned by a very religious prince. All of the naughty bits had been blurred out.

Peter pressed the call button.

'How can I help you, sir?'

Peter inhaled her scent.

'Some nuts please. And more wine.'

'Certainly, sir.'

The film opened with a young man, who looked like many of the illegals Peter dealt with. Of course, he didn't deal with them face to face, but he did see pictures in the news from time to time, when the powers of persuasion weren't doing their job.

Most asylum seekers these days were young males. After all, they were at the most risk of being conscripted into conflict. And at the most risk of being pre-emptively slaughtered as potential combatants.

This had been an enormous public relations boon for Peter's department.

Images of women and children, the elderly, and the infirm escaping war stirred all sorts of undesirable emotions in the public. Even if they looked funny, wore funny clothes, and spoke funny, the sight of a mother cradling her child, a little boy holding the hand of his grandfather, or a group of young people carrying an old woman to safety, invited all sorts of unwanted objections to Peter's policies.

No policy, Peter knew, was ever successful without a convincing narrative. This was where his skills as an author excelled once more.

Peter recognised early on in his portfolio that two stories were necessary. One, aimed at the public of Furtivus, said that boat people were dangerous and had to be stopped.

In order to strengthen this narrative, Peter planned to use the new Pulcherrima centre to house the single males who arrived by boat. While few Furtivians liked to see children behind bars, not as many were outraged by the detention of young men without families – even when they did have mothers, fathers, and in some cases, wives and children wracked with worry about them at home. The more upset the asylum seekers became at their detention, the more Peter's narrative was strengthened. The intensity of their emotions, the rawness of their desperation frightened the Furtivian public into trusting the government's depiction of these people as a threat. Besides, the more crazy detention made the asylum seekers, the less likely it was that anyone would believe them. This, Peter had learned as he studied the most oppressive regimes in the world, was why victims of torture are almost always branded as liars.

The other narrative, aimed at those seeking asylum in Furtivus, and exemplified by the centre on Guano Island which already housed men, women, and children, said something else entirely. It said, if you come here, this will happen to you. We will lock you up. We will separate you from your family. We will incarcerate children in centres that harbour sex offenders. We will call you by numbers, and classify babies born on Furtivian soil as 'unauthorised maritime arrivals'. Peter even had his staff select the youngest-looking children – nine, eight, some even just seven years old – to be transferred from their already harsh on-shore detention to the much more brutal offshore centre as an example.

While putting children behind razor wire was primarily aimed to send a message to those seeking asylum in Furtivus, and largely hidden from the Furtivian public, Peter had discovered a surprising additional benefit. Children made the perfect bargaining chips.

Every time Peter or one of his parliamentary pals needed to pass some unpopular new law regarding asylum seekers, they merely had to promise to let the children go – or threaten to lock even more up. Crossbenchers were then left with an impossible decision – to support legislation which would result in worse treatment of even more asylum seekers in future in

order to let the children currently incarcerated free, or to vote against it in the interests of future asylum seekers but to the detriment of those currently locked up.

It was perfect.

Peter paused the film as the tight-bunned attendant returned with Peter's nuts and wine. She leaned across him once more with her perfumed physique to set up his tray table.

Of course, Peter had to admit, if only to himself, there were occasional difficulties in managing his twin narratives.

The most difficult week Peter ever experienced occurred when a small child drowned after one of the government's military ships refused to allow the sinking boat to come ashore. Of course, there had been other child casualties. The ten-year-old who hung herself. Numerous victims – alleged victims, Peter corrected himself – of rape and abuse. Traumatized kids who self-harmed. But all of that happened safely inside the centres, and for the most part, away from the media's prying eyes. Even better, on Guano, Peter thought with satisfaction, self-harm and suicide attempts were considered criminal offences. And anyone charged with a crime could be ruled ineligible for settlement in Furtivus.

Technically, the role of guardianship of all children seeking asylum fell to Peter – who was also, rather conveniently, responsible for implementing the policy of offshore detention without exception. Some do-gooders complained this should have disqualified him to act as guardian. However, Peter's guardianship was another masterstroke of legal wrangling, in that it magically ended as soon as the children left Furtivian territory. Once they set foot on Guano, they were the responsibility of the Guanian Minister for Justice.

The situation on Pulcherrima looked even more promising. With no equivalent guardianship arrangements, there would be no one to poke their nose into the cases of the unaccompanied minors who, Peter knew, would be transported there 'inadvertently'. He smiled as unpaused the movie.

Peter had learned his lesson when the little girl drowned. He'd had nothing to stand behind. And the media – particularly

the national broadcaster, the one outlet that should have been on what Peter's boss called 'Team Furtivus' – had made his life hell.

The optics of the incident were bad enough. But the icing on the cake was the fact that the little girl happened to be wearing a particular brand of socks with a pink cat on them.

Half the parents in Furtivus had bought identical pairs for their own children.

When her body was recovered, and her tiny feet captured on film by a journalist, the image went viral. Few who saw that photograph failed to see their own child. Their own little sister or brother. Their own niece or nephew.

It was hard to call a little girl in pink cat socks illegal.

That was when Peter had come up with the term 'boat people'.

Young men, like the one on the screen, speaking in some foreign tongue to his mother, were a much easier spin.

Peter still remembered the opening words from his most successful speech:

'The average boat person today is not a mother, fleeing war with her children. It is a young male, of working age. It is a man looking not to escape, but to seek economic advantage. Coming to the lucky country, in the hopes of taking Furtivian jobs. It is a man of fighting age, looking not for peace and stability, but to dodge his responsibilities to his homeland, or worse, to carry out attacks on our soil. It is an individual who is likely innumerate and illiterate in his own language, let alone in English. One who will clog up our social services, draining resources away from battling Furtivian families.'

Peter reached into the packet for some nuts. Salt encrusted his fingers as he watched the young man on screen kiss his mother goodbye.

Of course, some of the more irritating elements of the press had picked up on the fact that if these men were really unskilled and uneducated, they would be unlikely to take local jobs. And if they did take jobs, they would be unable to claim welfare. But Peter's speech had, overall, gone over a treat.

The fact that most of the illegals looked like the bad guys in movies like this certainly helped too.

Over the years, Peter had gotten better at dealing with journalists. After cutting his teeth on current affairs programs that usually covered stories about gangs committing shopping trolley thefts and neighbourly disputes over fence lines – programs Peter still had a fond nostalgia for – he had moved on to the big boys' news.

It was hard to prevent journalists from capturing images of sinking boats. Public beaches were, unfortunately, for the most part, public, although Peter wondered if there might be some potential in selling these off too. But the offshore ones were almost impossible to access. And they existed in a sort of murky no man's land, controlled by Furtivus, yet on foreign soil. This gave Peter's department an enormous amount of what every politician seeks.

Plausible deniability.

And it wasn't just journalists. Very few politicians wanted to actually visit these processing centres. Peter himself had been involved in a number of meetings at their proposed locations, but he never returned after they were set up. Who in their right mind would want to? Any time Peter needed to make an announcement to the detainees, he simply appeared via video link.

One senator, from one of the minor parties Peter couldn't be bothered remembering the name of, had once made a semi-official visit to the centre on Guano Island. Through some impressive coordination, the government and H84CE had managed to choreograph her stay, keeping a close eye on her the whole time.

Things had only gone awry, Peter reflected as he fiddled with the volume and contrast, on the last day of the senator's visit. She had deviated from the planned schedule and spoken to some of the illegals. And then, she'd discovered the hidden microphones and cameras the department had gotten H84CE to install.

What could have exploded into an enormous scandal, however, Peter had used to paint the senator all kinds of crazy. When she had gone to the media with her story of government espionage, Peter immediately went on air, calling

her a 'conspiracy nut' and a 'far-out political loon' with no evidence to back up her outrageous claims.

With no journalists on the ground in Guano to investigate further, it had worked beautifully.

Since then, they had tightened security at all detention centres. Employees of H84CE already worked under strict confidentiality agreements. But the government had placed an additional gag order on the few teachers and doctors who staffed the centres. These new security and disclosure provisions muddled the usual duty of doctors and teachers to report abuse. Any who now leaked information to the media faced up to two years' jail.

An existing ban already prevented anyone from referring to the boat people by name. On the rare occasion they were provided with any information at all, journalists were given only the ID numbers of those incarcerated. Sometimes, Peter wondered whether it might be more effective to use names after all. A lot of the illegals had foreign, terrifying-sounding names that would play right into his hands.

Peter licked his salty fingers and reached into the bag of nuts again. There was a whole group of similar-looking men on screen now, and he'd forgotten which was the main baddie.

In a supreme stroke of good luck, Peter reflected as he crunched on another nut, the Furtivian government's desire for secrecy coincided with the Guanian government's need for cash to keep the economy going. Negotiations were a breeze when Guano had a Furtivian-supplied Minister of Finance, too. And so, the Guanians had increased the price of journalistic visas.

To eight thousand dollars a pop.

It was an enormous fee in an age of dwindling print readership and television audiences. The national broadcaster, who were irritatingly persistent in reporting such matters, was even easier to influence, with staff switches and funding cuts.

Guano was already difficult and expensive enough to get to. Since the Guanian government's sole plane had been repossessed on the runway to pay off its debts, they'd had to downgrade to a much smaller one. It flew infrequently, making

passage to Guano limited. And the Guanian government reserved the right to refuse visas on arrival for any Furtivian citizen who might come snooping around.

More crucially, it also reserved the right to revoke them at a moment's notice. Peter was aware of at least one pesky aid worker who'd had their visa revoked and been deported all within half an hour of asking the wrong question. He smiled. Hopefully Pulcherrima would provide many of the same advantages. From his reconnaissance so far, all signs pointed to yes.

The scene on screen switched to an attack helicopter, loaded with soldiers, each brandishing a giant gun. Thankfully, they were the goodies, speaking English. Peter had been having a hard time keeping up with the subtitles. If he'd wanted to read, he would have brought a book. Then again, with his laptop taking up almost all of his cabin baggage allowance, even in business class, he didn't really have the room.

Peter observed the guns with interest. Each soldier gripped a Jeer & Narco M416. The very weapon that had been used to neutralise the world's most notorious terrorist a few years back. That claim to fame had given the M416 a huge consumer market in countries with more relaxed gun regulations than Peter's own rather restrictive nation. He hoped he'd be able to lay his hands on one of those beauties at his meeting with H84CE. Perhaps somewhere down the track he might start his own Furtivian Rifle Association, if the whole franchise thing didn't work out.

The Furtivian government was evaluating tenders for new weapons to arm their border officials and security enforcers across their detention centres. Peter had had his eye on the Jeer & Narco assault rifle for some time. The reports outlined a number of advantages: the short-stroke gas piston system reduced malfunctions. It came with ambidextrous, ergonomic controls to improve accuracy. There was an embedded silencer and flash hider, and increased ammunition capacity. And the bolt carrier's proprietary drainage hole pattern meant the weapon could be fired after submersion in water. Perfect for on-the-beach combat.

But what attracted Peter to this specific weapon was that it looked terrifying.

A number of accessories could be mounted onto the rifle, including a 20-inch bayonet and, Peter's favourite, an under-barrel pistol attachment.

After all, if there was one thing more terrifying than a gun with a knife on it, it was a gun with a knife and another gun mounted on it.

Peter dug into his little packet of peanuts, his eyes glued to the screen as the helicopter fired a series of missiles. As he watched cars, market stalls, and children's play equipment explode everywhere, Peter rued that he'd never had the opportunity to serve in the military. Of course, his profile on the department's website made a great deal of his 'days in uniform'. But those carefully worded paragraphs were really references to Peter's youthful membership of the Young Liberal Scouts, a paramilitary training group for those aged six to sixteen, offering badges in knot-tying, fund raising, tent assembly and speech-making. He'd made up for it though, running Operation Strong Threshold and Operation Refugee-Proof Fence. Peter loved militaristic nomenclature. Giving a policy a name apt for the armed forces made it sound patriotic, just, and inarguably right.

This, Peter thought, leaning back into the plush leather cushions, was his war. Defending his nation against the biggest threat of all.

He reached back into the packet for some more nuts. There was only one left. In the light of the screen, where he was watching the soldiers carrying their heavy weapons jump out of the attack helicopter and land straight on top of a passing tank, Peter saw the nut was greenish. He set it aside on the napkin, and pushed the call button again.

The lipsticked goddess, having anticipated Peter's needs, returned with a new packet of nuts and a fresh glass of wine. She leaned over to clear away the empty packet, the stale green nut, and Peter's old glass. He lay back, watching the tank open fire on a building with pictures of a cartoon mouse and a pink cat painted on the walls.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to begin our descent. Please ensure your seat backs and tray tables are in their full, upright position.' Peter moved to let Cardigan out to change out of those ridiculous pyjamas, and the tight-bunned, tight-lipped attendant moved in to reassemble Cardigan's bed back into a chair.

Since he had to get up anyway, Peter paused his movie to go back to the toilet. He constantly felt on the verge of needing to go, the pressing urge burning and stinging in his lower half.

Thankfully, the wine had worked its magic again. Peter was more than satisfied with the strong, if brief, stream of dark yellow he produced.

He looked into the mirror. His eyes were watery and swollen, yellow and bloodshot, his eyelids droopy. This was a side effect of the Melatone Ultra, at least in its early stages. When the time-release amphetamines kicked in, he'd be wide-eyed and bushy-tailed.

Otherwise, he looked fine. Hair in place, tie straight, collar still crisp.

Cardigan emerged from the cubicle opposite. He looked only slightly less ludicrous than in the pyjamas. Once more, he reeked of the airline's toilet cologne, which, on him, smelled cheap. Peter pushed past him, into the aisle, before realising he now had to walk past his seat to allow Cardigan back in. Unless he wanted to come face-to-face with Cardigan's groin or rear again.

After squirrelling his airline pyjamas into his bag, Cardigan pressed his face against the window, watching the land unfold beneath him. He had his entertainment unit switched to the plane view as well, a terrible waste of the system's 400 movie options.

Peter settled back into his chair. He tried to remove the pink cardigan from his sight once more, turning his attention back to his movie. The tank was taking aim at a pyramid of oil

barrels, and Peter was looking forward to the resultant fireworks.

Just as the explosion was about to light up, the movie froze for an announcement. The one thing Peter hated about watching a film on a plane.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we are clear to land at the New Shangi-Reskavich International Airport. Please make sure your seatbelt is fastened. Flight attendants are currently passing around the cabin to make a final compliance check and pick up any remaining glasses. Thank you.'

Peter imagined the smoke filling his lungs as he lit up that first delicious cigarette.

He turned his attention back to the film.

The screen went blank.

Peter swore.

'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to New Shangi-Reskavich International Airport in Turgrael. Local time is 10:07 AM and the temperature is 47.9 degrees Celsius.' Peter felt his blood pressure rise in line with the mercury.

Then, his veins chilled. His stomach turned to liquid.
10:07?

Peter looked at his watch for the first time in a long time, perhaps ever, if he was entirely truthful, to look at the time rather than to gaze lovingly at its diamond-encrusted face. It made no sense, what with the time difference, but Peter was sure they were supposed to have landed an hour ago.

The rest of the announcement was a blur of sound. Peter's heart throbbed in his ears. A high-pitched squeal seemed to fill his skull.

'Come on, come on, come on!' he shouted. He had a plane to catch, and his bladder was stabbing him again.

'Sir, please calm down.'

'I have a connecting flight to make!'

'I'm sure we'll have you arriving on time, now please take your seat.'

Peter looked at his watch again. Why hadn't they made any announcements? Any apologies?

The disembodied voice continued. A whole heap of babble about personal belongings and overhead bins and deplaning assistance floated around Peter in a thick mist.

'I need to get off the plane now!'

'Sir, if you don't sit down, I'm afraid we'll have to detain you.'

Peter sat back down heavily, even going so far as to re-fasten his seatbelt under the attendant's watchful eye.

'On behalf of Royal Turgistan Airlines and the entire crew, I'd like to thank you for joining us on this journey and we look forward to seeing you on board again in the near future. Have a nice day!'

Cardigan was jiggling his leg again. Peter angled his body to block the way to the aisle. No way was he letting Cardigan get ahead of him. As he shifted, his bladder sloshed, and Peter was worried he'd lose control.

Row eight. Peter began to curse Percy for not booking him a seat closer to the door. He calculated his exit strategy. None of his opponents were of particularly impressive stature, barring the man in row four, whose large arm Peter could see from here. He should be able to barrel through most of them without too many problems, so long as he timed his release from the seatbelt impeccably, and so long as he protected his bladder.

The fasten seatbelt sign went dim. An almighty 'ding' resounded throughout the cabin. In one fluid motion, Peter released himself from his shackles and stepped into the aisle, bag in tow. He pushed his way to the front of the line, preventing even the escape of the man in row four by placing his arm across the chair in front in the kind of blocking move he'd learned in rugby at school, but hadn't used in years.

The door was in sight.

But then, Peter realised, he was missing something.

The bloody detention centre plans.

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About the Author

SARAH NEOFIELD is a writer, linguist, and world traveller who has spent more than her fair share of time in airports. *Number Eight Crispy Chicken* is her debut work of literary satire. Find out more at sarahneofield.com

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I hope you enjoyed reading *Number Eight Crispy Chicken* as much as I enjoyed writing it. I invite you to connect with me via any of the means above, and please, share #NumberEightCrispyChicken with your friends!

References and Reading Guide

While the characters and stories of Peter and Jeremy, along with the institutions depicted in *Number Eight Crispy Chicken* are entirely fictitious, the plight of those detained indefinitely is all too real. Find references and your free reading group guide at sarahneofield.com/resources