

# BENEATH THE WORLD, A SEA

ALSO BY CHRIS BECKETT

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# BENEATH THE WORLD, A SEA

Chris Beckett



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## THE CORPSE SERVANTS

**T**he figure of the Palido appears in village folklore across the entire Submundo Delta. He has immensely long, stilt-like legs, skin that is completely white and a pointed tongue. He's usually depicted at least twice as tall as normal human height, stick thin, with elaborately curled moustaches, in a top hat and a brightly coloured waistcoat. He can fly through the air, make himself invisible, and be in two places at the same time. He can also raise corpses from their graves to run errands for him. The corpse servants whisper the Palido's messages with shrivelled grey lips.

There are many versions of the story, but in all of them, the Palido tricks the first Mundinos by opening some sort of door for them.

'Enter, my friends!' he purrs, stooping almost double to bring his smiling face level with theirs. 'Enter, and you will come to a place of peace and plenty.'

They hesitate.

'My dear friends, there is no need to worry,' says the Palido. His moustaches twitch, his long thin arms beckon them forward, his narrow pink tongue runs over his lips. 'As a token of my friendship, I will give you piglets and chickens to take with you, and tobacco

plants, and maize, and tools, and a whole big sack of sweet potatoes. I will even give you goats.'

They look at each other. They accept the gifts. They step through the door.

But the door leads into a cage, just big enough to hold them all. It's a cage, but it's also a coffin, and the corpse servants laugh as they dig a hole for it. 'Ha ha!' they hiss to one another. 'Now the dead are burying the living! The dead will walk while the living lie where no one will ever find them.'

The corpses are immensely strong. They dig so fast and so deep that the coffin drops right through the earth, for the ground of one world is the sky of the world below.

Hyacinth Young, *Myths and Legends of the Submundo Delta*



## I. THE POLICEMAN

(1)

**B**ecause the truth is' Because the truth was *what*? It was obvious that he'd just written the words – the notebook was open on his lap, his pen poised over that final S – but Ben had no idea what he'd been about to say. And why was the sun suddenly shining? And what was that strange scent, like nothing he'd ever smelt before? Only seconds ago, or so it seemed, he'd been sitting here on deck in the warm darkness of a tropical night with green rain forest passing by in front of him, dimly illuminated by the deck lights of the boat. It had been seven days into the four-week river journey to the Submundo Delta, and his excitement and anxiety had been mounting as he approached that band of territory surrounding the Delta that was known as the Zona de Olvido.

The Zona de Olvido. The Zone of Forgetfulness. That, of course, was the explanation, but though he had known in advance of the Zona's unique quality and understood perfectly well that once you'd passed through it and come out again, no trace of your time there remained in memory, the actual experience was so sudden, so total, so shocking, that it took him several seconds to grasp what had happened. It was like a cut between two scenes on a cinema screen.

He had been in that green forest at night but now the sun was shining and he was right in the middle of something else entirely. He looked up from his notebook and there it was, the Submundo Delta, the Delta Beneath the World.

The trees, if they could be called trees at all, came in shades of pinkish purple without the slightest trace of green, and grew in a mass of spirals and helices, constantly recurring at many different scales of magnitude. Huge, magenta leaf stems the size of arms uncoiled from the branches, and then themselves unfurled smaller spirals from bead-like nodes along their lengths, these spirals in turn releasing rows of still smaller ones. And the branches were spirals too, spirals branching out from spirals, giving the effect of some kind of ornate three-dimensional calligraphy in an unknown and untranslatable language. They hung over the water, these branches, their tips curling back on themselves in yet more spirals, and put out delicate, helical flowers – if flower was the right word – that were dazzlingly white except for their bright pink mouths. On a wooden hut that stood at the water's edge, a faded mural depicted grinning skeletons digging a grave, watched by a little group of living human beings confined inside a cage, while, beneath the grave, a many-armed creature waited, its round head covered in eyes. The air was thick and humid and that strange pervasive aroma wafted from the forest, a hint of burnt sugar in it, and honey, and bitter lilies, but something else there too so completely unfamiliar that Ben could find nothing to compare it with. The sky was covered in white, translucent cloud through which burnt a huge white sun, seemingly much larger than in the world outside, and with tiny flashes of pink and blue and green glinting around its edges, as if it was ringed with diamonds or splintered glass.

Spitting out fumes and bilge water, the boat chugged steadily onwards through all this strangeness, the river twisting and looping

like the one viable path through some vast maze, with countless side channels to tempt it off its course. Some of these channels were navigable and marked with rusty signs bearing arrows, crosses, exclamation marks or the names of villages – Ca’ do Santos, Bom Presago, Al’ do Mortos – but most of them were clogged with purple water plants and one was blocked by the half-submerged wreckage of a Dakota plane, its exposed wing and fuselage covered with the twisted filigree pattern of some white and glistening growth.

Ben was entranced. The coils and spirals stirred something inside him that was close to nightmare, but that was part of the appeal. Half an hour had passed before he thought, with a tiny twinge of unease, about the vanished days in the Zona.

He had absolutely no memory of it, but he knew that, while still inside the Zona, the boat had stopped at the inland port of Nus at the confluence of the River Lethe with the River Rhee, and had remained there for several days while the captain negotiated the sale of part of his cargo, and the advance purchase, to be collected on his return, of a consignment of rubber from the surrounding rain forest.

And Ben knew that – odd as it might seem for a place that no one outside could remember – Nus had a bad reputation. At the beginning of the journey, a leaflet had been given to each of the boat’s four passengers, with a small map showing the approximate position of the Zona, and the way this mysterious band of territory completely encircled the Delta. ‘The Company respectfully reminds its passengers,’ the leaflet read, ‘that everything that happens to you within the Zona, including Nus, will no longer remain in your memory once you emerge from the Zona again, and continue on

into the Submundo Delta. You should be aware that this creates many legal challenges. Crimes, which are likely to occur, may be impossible to investigate, and wrongs cannot easily be righted. You are strongly advised, therefore, to remain on board throughout our time at Nus, when there will be an armed guard on deck at all times.' A programme of movies would be provided, the leaflet said – they would be projected on to the wall of the boat's tiny dining room – meals would be served, and the bar would be open all day. It was up to each passenger to decide whether or not to accept the company's advice, but no liability whatsoever would be accepted for the safety of any passenger who chose to ignore it. The boat would continue its journey at the allotted time and any passenger not on board would have no choice but to wait for the next boat that had berths available.

Given that he was a very responsible and dutiful man, Ben assumed that he'd followed the company's advice. He had had no reason to go ashore in Nus and his professional insurance would not have covered it, for this was a business trip, after all, and his work lay not in the Zona but in the Delta itself. It was a little disappointing, admittedly, to come to the conclusion that he'd probably just stayed on board, but if he considered the alternative possibility that, freed from the fear of future scrutiny, he might have made the decision to ignore the company's advice, disregard the conditions of his insurance and go ashore, he experienced a twinge of something that felt like the tiny tip of a whole deep iceberg of dread.

But anyway, never mind all that. He was in the Delta now and in front of him were magenta trees with spiral leaves and flowers with bright pink mouths. This was where his work would be. This was the point of his journey.

He was sitting in a canvas chair on the starboard side of the small foredeck set aside for passengers. At the front of the deck, standing and leaning on the railings, was another passenger called Hyacinth who had told him, way back before the Zona, that she was an anthropologist, and that she'd made this journey several times already. She was in her middle thirties, roughly his own age, and he'd discovered that, though based in New York, she was, like him, a Londoner. She sometimes read interesting-looking novels by foreign authors, but she spent a lot of time just looking out at their surroundings with a quiet absorption he rather envied. From time to time she'd take out a sketchpad and make a drawing.

Right behind Ben, on the port side of the little deck, sat a middle-aged Dutch couple: Mr and Mrs de Groot. Both of them were plump and pink and usually glistening with sweat, him wearing pebble spectacles that enormously magnified his moist and weary eyes, her in very dark glasses for which, apparently, there was some medical necessity. Mr de Groot had told Ben he used to work for the United Nations in Geneva, and had learnt of the Delta there, the UN being responsible, of course, for the administration of the Delta Protectorate.

'We have so many hopes for this place,' Mr de Groot told him now, when Ben looked in their direction. His wife had some kind of chronic illness, and in the first part of the journey, back when the forest was green, she had often complained of headaches and nausea, and seemed to be constantly troubled by the weather, so that her husband was forever fetching aspirins and glasses of water, or helping her with cardigans or parasols. 'We have spent many years looking for something that might reduce her suffering. And I hope, I very much hope, that this place might possibly be the—'

But at this point his wife turned her blacked-out eyes towards him and spoke to him in Dutch, and he jumped up to fetch something for her from their cabin.

As he disappeared below, two strangers stepped out, a man and woman, walking over to lean on the railings to Ben's left. He had no recollection of ever seeing them before.

'Hi, I'm Jael,' the woman said, turning towards him. She was American and in her thirties. She wore dungarees without a T-shirt, and she was almost freakishly good-looking with a mass of wavy red hair.

'I'm Ben,' he told her. 'I guess you must have come on board at Nus?'

'I guess so,' she said, examining his face with slightly narrowed eyes.

'So, I suppose ...' He stumbled on his words slightly, unnerved not just by her piercing gaze, but by the reminder of those missing days inside the Zona. 'So I suppose we must have introduced ourselves before.'

'Yup,' she said, her gaze still unflinching. 'That's how it is with the Zona. You and I may have become bosom chums in there for all we know, or we might have been deadly enemies. We don't know.' She glanced down at the red notebook that was still on his lap. 'Or not unless one of us wrote it down. I never keep a diary in Nus myself. I think it defeats the point. But it looks like maybe you did?'

He stuffed the notebook into the satchel in which he carried things he might want on the deck. 'Just a few notes,' he said.

'Which may or may not be lies,' she observed, still studying his face in a way that made him feel that every word he spoke was being carefully weighed and classified. She smiled. 'That's the thing with Nus, isn't it? You can lie to your future self as easily as to anyone else.'

'I suppose so,' Ben said, trying to laugh, though it didn't seem much of a joke.

'And this is Rico,' she said.

Her companion turned towards Ben. He too was film-star good-looking with long slim limbs and a certain feline grace that Ben found instantly fascinating. But his beautiful face had a ravaged and weather-beaten look.

'Yeah, hi, Ben,' he said. He was also American. 'Crazy Rico at your service.' And he bowed extravagantly and completely unsmilingly, as if he was one of the Three Musketeers.

Ben didn't take to the two of them. He felt he knew their type and that he had encountered people like them all too often in the police: druggie, alternative types who tried to intimidate you with their weirdness and unpredictability.

At dinner that night, when all six passengers and the captain ate together, Jael made no secret of the fact if the conversation bored her, zoning out completely, or whispering and giggling with Rico. But when a topic interested her, she spoke with great enthusiasm and erudition, her sharp, always slightly narrowed eyes darting from one face to another as she made her points. And having spoken, she would listen, very intently, to anything that was said to her in reply. Rico was much quieter but would suddenly say odd things or laugh loudly at unexpected moments when no one had said anything funny.

Later, when Ben returned to his cabin, he found on his cot a carbon-copy of a disclaimer document that he'd been required to sign in Nus, absolving the shipping company of any responsibility for injuries or losses that he might suffer while visiting the town.

Next to it lay a purple notebook on the cover of which was written, in his own hand, 'Time in Nus. June/July, 1990.'

In fact, there had never been any chance of his missing out on such a place, a place so hidden that he would be concealed there even from his own future self, but he didn't know that yet, and this unexpected evidence of his reckless choice was deeply disturbing. He didn't open the purple notebook, though he himself had presumably been the one who had laid it on the bed, but instead sealed it closed with two stout elastic bands and shoved it into the bottom of his suitcase along with another notebook – blue, and entitled 'Journey to Nus' – which he could remember beginning to write, but knew must also contain entries from days he had no recollection of, and the red one which he'd abandoned earlier that day. He didn't want to read words he could no longer remember writing, or hear in his head the voice of a self he had no knowledge of. For what might that other self say? What might he choose to hold back?

(2)

**W**hy are you going to the Delta anyway, Ben?' Rico asked Ben at breakfast. 'Have you told me already and I've forgotten, or are you keeping it a secret?' He gave a loud shout of laughter and then, before Ben could answer, held up his hand to stop him speaking. 'Don't worry, dude, I know! No need to tell me. You're going there for the same reason every fucker goes there. To fall apart.'

It wasn't just Ben that didn't like Rico and Jael. Hyacinth tensed whenever they were near and Mrs de Groot's level of agitation would rapidly increase. Sometimes in the dining room her husband



would look at Ben or Hyacinth with his huge magnified eyes, as if appraising what support he would have if it ever became necessary to forcibly remove the two of them. But luckily for the peace of mind of the other passengers, for the rest of that tortuous journey through the coils of the Lethe, Jael and Rico invariably took themselves off after breakfast to the cargo hatch at the back of the boat. Only rarely visiting the deck, they'd lie around all day up there with their cigarettes and drugs, her in the bottom half of a faded yellow bikini, him in khaki shorts. Sometimes Rico would strum on a guitar, not very well and not even properly in tune.

The de Groots were often absent from the deck as well, for when Mrs de Groot had one of her many attacks, she had to retire to the darkness of her cabin with her husband in attendance, and this just left Ben and Hyacinth. Hyacinth was very self-contained, apparently happy to read, or draw, or lean on the railings and watch the forest going by in her calm, absorbed way. Sometimes, when she'd sketched a twisted tree or a channel choked with vegetation, Ben would ask to see the results and she'd pass them across with a shrug. The drawings were very good. They evoked a kind of nostalgia for this strange place: a curious thing when the boat was still in the midst of it, with scenes right there in front of them, hour after hour, that were just like the ones she drew.

'So this is it,' Ben said softly on the afternoon of the second day, trying to anchor himself in this place which still seemed too peculiar to fully believe in. 'The Submundo! The Submundo Delta.'

Hyacinth looked over at him and smiled. 'You have to remind yourself it's real, don't you? I've been to the Delta seven times now and I still have to.'

From the cargo hatch to the rear came the sound of Rico's unhinged laughter.

‘Of course Delta is really a misnomer,’ said Mr de Groot, who was just returning to the deck after settling his wife into one of her drugged sleeps. He was a man who took comfort in facts, and liked to recite them whenever a chance presented itself. ‘The appearance is of solid ground with channels passing through it, but actually the water continues beneath the forest as well. It would be more accurate to call it an inland sea with trees growing up from the bottom of it. They put out side roots above its surface and these roots join together to create the dense mat that gives the impression of solid—’

He broke off, hearing a faint cry from his wife in their cabin below. With a sigh, he went back down to her.

There were just five crew on the boat. The captain, Korzeniowski, with his thick grey beard, dined with the passengers every night, and was courteous but completely unsmiling; Lessing, the engineer, never spoke to any of the passengers, and when they saw her at all she was usually fixing something or smoking by herself at the back of the boat in her blue overalls or making notes in a grimy little book; the cook and the two other hands were all Mundinos, local men from the Submundo itself, speaking to each other in their own idiosyncratic Portuguese Creole. (Hyacinth was fluent in this language and would sometimes chat to them but, though Ben had taken intensive Portuguese lessons before he set out, he quickly realized he was going to have to unlearn most of what he’d so laboriously acquired.) At night, when the boat was moored to one of the crumbling jetties that punctuated the banks of the Lethe, all five of the crew took turns to keep watch on deck, as they had apparently also done at Nus. But this time it wasn’t to protect the passengers and cargo from criminals, but to fend off any duendes

that might otherwise disturb everyone's sleep by climbing on board with their suckered hands and feet.

Down in his tiny cabin, Ben rather enjoyed listening to the footsteps of the allocated member of the crew pacing the boards over his head. It was a soothing sound, and there were very few other sounds at all, for there were no night birds in the Submundo to cry or scream and the local creatures were completely silent. But sometimes creaks and groans came from the forest's roots and branches and Ben would sleepily wonder about the source of these pulses of tension passing through that enormous woody mass. Were they the result of wind blowing through the canopy, perhaps, or rainfall in the surrounding mountains changing the flow of water through the submerged trunks? Or was it the tugging of the moon, whose light crept in through his porthole to shine on the neatly folded clothes he laid out each night for the next morning?

The Lethe was truly serpentine. You might pass some distinctive landmark – a half-collapsed jetty, a rusty signpost – and apparently leave it far behind you as you chugged slowly onwards through the river's twists and bends, only to find yourself looking through a narrow neck of forest at that very same jetty or sign, and realize you were only a matter of yards away from a stretch of water you'd been through several hours before.

Two or three times a day, the boat came to riverside settlements – clusters of simple, usually flat-roofed cabins, joined on to one another, propped up by poles above the water, and often decorated with brightly coloured murals. The many-armed and many-eyed water creature was a constant theme. So were the skeleton gravediggers, lowering their caged victims into the ground. And

often a sinister white-faced figure stood watching in waistcoat and top hat, stick-thin and immensely tall.

From time to time the boat moored at the jetties of these villages to take on fresh vegetables or a few chickens, which the cook, rather than buy for cash, would barter for small items specially brought for the purpose, such as knives, enamel mugs or plastic buckets. The Mundino people, so Ben had learnt from the material sent to him from Geneva, had Iberian, African and Native American origins, and had been shipped into the Delta back in the 1860s by a wealthy Portuguese aristocrat called Baron Valente with the idea that, if any of them were fortunate enough to survive, they and their descendants would be useful in the future as a ready-made labour force when the time came to open up this remote and unexplored region to civilization.

‘In much the same way,’ Mr de Groot observed over dinner one evening, snuffling with the amusement that his store of facts provided him, ‘sailors in those days would leave goats or pigs on uninhabited islands, so there would be a food supply in the future in case of need.’

Every Mundino settlement was surrounded by vegetable gardens, shockingly bright green against the pinks and purples of the ever-encroaching forest. Chickens, pigs and small children wandered about and, in an open space in the centre of every village – a sort of town square, separated from the river by at least one row of cabins – there invariably stood a carved representation of the Mundino god, Iya. The wood was rubbed with fat to preserve it, which made the images shiny and black, and even shinier black stones – pieces of obsidian from the Montanhas de Vidro at the northern edge of the Delta – were set into them to form the small pointed nipples and eyes.

On one occasion, Ben walked over to the central square in one of the larger villages and just stood there looking up at Iya's stone eyes and her strange fixed smile. Children were pestering him for sweets or pens, but he did his best to shut them out of his mind, absently patting curly heads, and gently detaching his fingers from sticky little hands that took hold of his. And, as he looked up at the god, it struck him, not for the first time, that it was impossible to look at the image of a face without, at some level, seeing it as alive. He'd first noticed this with a teddy bear he'd had as a child. Even when he was much too old to really believe it, he could still not completely rid himself of the idea that the thing's glass eyes could see. It was as if there was a primitive layer of the brain which took everything to be whatever it seemed to be.

'She watches over them,' Hyacinth said, coming to stand beside him. She was wearing a white T-shirt with her sunglasses tucked into the top, and was holding her sketchbook at her side. 'She protects them against the duendes, and against floods, and she sees everything they do, good or bad, and stores it in her mind for the final reckoning.'

Suddenly the children stopped tugging at Ben and Hyacinth and went running and shouting across to Rico. He'd brought his guitar and now, perching himself on the veranda of a hut in a single graceful movement, he proceeded to bash out songs and gurn for them, while Jael, all by herself, danced a little dance in a floaty green dress.

Hyacinth raised her eyebrows slightly but said nothing.

'Do you think they kill duendes in this village?' Ben asked her.

She laughed at the naïvety of the question. 'Oh, for sure! They do in all the villages. For them it's just like killing rats.'

Presently, the captain rang his bell and they returned to the boat. The de Groots were already in their cabin, and Jael and Rico

resumed their normal station on the cargo hatch, so Hyacinth and Ben had the deck to themselves again as they left the village behind.

‘I don’t know why I haven’t asked you this before,’ he said, ‘but what exactly is your reason for coming to the Delta?’

She smiled. ‘I don’t blame you for not asking,’ she said. ‘Jobs, goals, objectives ... It all seems a bit trivial, doesn’t it, compared to this?’ She gestured to a mass of white helical flowers, like tiny twisted saxophones, their bells opening towards the boat in a blast of silent crimson. ‘I think I told you I’m an anthropologist – yes? – but perhaps I didn’t explain more than that. I’m based at Columbia University in New York, but I have a small research grant from the Protectorate to study the folk beliefs of the Mundino people. How about you?’

‘Well, as you know I’m a policeman ...’ Ben began and hesitated. He remembered announcing this over dinner on the first leg of the journey. As a rule he enjoyed the slightly chilling effect this news typically produced, but in the context of a river boat travelling towards the Submundo Delta, the effect had been more of slightly absurd incongruity. In the faces of all of them – Hyacinth, Korzeniowski, the de Groots – he’d seen the same unspoken question: *A London policeman? Here?*

‘Yes, you did tell us,’ she said. ‘But why do they need you in the Delta? I didn’t quite get that.’

A large flock of bright blue iridescent birds had suddenly appeared. They hovered briefly around the mouths of the flowers, stabbing into the naked upturned bells with long red tongues, and then headed off up the river ahead. Of course they were not *really* ‘birds’, Ben reminded himself, and the helices with their upturned bells were not *really* ‘flowers’. Life in the Delta was different. The

birds had teeth. The flowers, as Mr de Groot liked to inform him from time to time, had no stamens and no known reproductive function, though they secreted a kind of golden milk, which could sometimes be seen dripping into the water from their lips, to disperse in creamy clouds.

But now Ben spotted a more familiar-looking animal in the trees ahead: a large green lizard, a bona fide reptile, leaning down from the top of a branch shaped like a musical clef, to watch the boat approach. He wondered how it got here, so far away from anything remotely of its kind.

‘Why do they need a British policeman?’ he said. ‘It’s a good question, but there’s a particular problem that I’ve been recruited to assist with. I shouldn’t really say more than that.’

She nodded. ‘A particular problem, which you can’t discuss. How mysterious! But let me guess. Would it by any chance be to do with duende killings?’

As she obviously knew, after a campaign by the small research community in the Delta, the UN had decreed that the beings known as duendes, unique to the Submundo, should be categorized as ‘persons’ under Protectorate law, meaning that they were entitled to the same protections as human beings. Hyacinth was quite right in guessing that his appointment was a direct consequence of that decision, strange and rather daunting as that now seemed to him, so far away from that dreary office in Geneva where he’d been interviewed, but he smiled and told her he wasn’t yet at liberty to discuss his role.

‘You should try drawing those birds,’ he said to change the subject. It seemed that the creatures were interested in the lizard. They were hovering around it, and the boat was catching up with them.

‘That would be hard,’ she said. ‘They don’t keep still for one thing. And there’s something about them, isn’t there, that really isn’t of this world? It would be hard to get down on paper, I think. Those teeth, and the way the beak almost seems to mock.’

‘But they’re only animals after all,’ Ben said.

‘You think so? I don’t know *what* they are, myself. I don’t think anyone does. But I can’t look at any of this without thinking about how it must have seemed to those first inhabitants when they were dumped here. Imagine what that must have been like! They were all alone. No one else would come into the Delta for sixty years. They thought they’d been buried somehow in some hidden world beneath the world they knew, a world under an enchantment, with its own giant sun and moon.’

The few books about the Submundo that Ben had managed to find were all written from the perspective of the scientists and explorers who had rediscovered the place in the 1920s, and so it was their reactions that he was familiar with. He’d never thought before about how the first Mundinos must have felt when they found themselves here back in the 1860s, but now he remembered the shock of emerging from the Zona, and asked himself what that might have been like if you had no idea where you were or what to expect. ‘They wouldn’t have remembered how they got here, would they?’ he said. ‘It must have been very scary.’

They were passing the green lizard when suddenly one of the bird creatures darted forward and bit it. With blood running from the side of its head the frightened animal opened its red mouth to hiss and show its teeth, but another bird darted forward, and then another, each attacking from a different direction so that the lizard didn’t know which way to face and was unable to defend itself. Bleeding and torn, the creature backed off towards the trunk, but



they cut off its retreat and kept on harrying it until eventually – it was some way behind now and Ben had to lean over the railings to see – it lost its grip and dropped into the water. The birds hovered over it in a swarm, watching the dying animal sink into the Lethe in a cloud of its own blood, and then, in what seemed a single movement, they darted back to their golden feast.

‘Yes it must,’ Hyacinth said. ‘It must have been absolutely terrifying.’

She and Ben lapsed into silence, surrounded by that strange aroma that was a little like caramel and honey and bitter lilies, but was mostly like nothing else at all.

‘I should warn you, Ben,’ Hyacinth said after a few minutes, ‘it’s hard to see projects through in this place. People think they’ve come here for a particular reason, but somehow the momentum dissipates, and what was going to be a straight line becomes a meander and then, as often as not, it fizzles out completely.’

### (3)

In the middle of the Delta, a cluster of small extinct volcanoes formed a kind of island, rising up out of the hidden sea. The main channel of the Lethe came right up to it, widening into a kind of lake, and looping round its northern tip before continuing westward towards the remote and impassable Valente Falls. A wall enclosed a harbour kept clear of weeds and lilies. A couple of launches were moored there, as well as a modest-sized tanker and a small, white two-person submarine with its name painted along its side in large blue capital letters: SOLARIS.

Behind the harbour was Amizad, the Submundo’s only town, with its red-tiled roofs and white church tower, its very ordinariness

strange. The crew threw ropes to Mundino dockhands. Hyacinth slung her bag over her shoulder. The de Groot's emerged from their cabin. Ben thought Mrs de Groot seemed a little more cheerful than she had been at the beginning, and she smiled at him as her husband helped her down the gangway to a waiting taxi, an unexpectedly sweet, almost conspiratorial smile. Hyacinth strode off by herself into the town. Rico and Jael simply settled down on the jetty as if they had nowhere to go, him strumming some chords on his guitar.

Ben had a delegation to meet him. 'Wonderful to see you, Inspector Ronson,' said the Chief Administrator, a squat, Australian woman called Katherine Tiler. 'I hope you had a pleasant journey.'

'Or what you can remember of it anyway,' said Da Ponte, the Chief of the Protectorate Police, thickly moustached, glossy with a sheen of sweat, and also very short.

The small stature of the two of them reinforced in Ben a growing sense that he'd arrived in Toytown. They had a car waiting, also small, and a driver – they insisted on Ben taking the front seat for his long legs – who took them along two shortish streets to the hotel where he'd be staying. The two-storey buildings had plastered walls that were either whitewashed or painted in pink or pale blue. They looked European, though which part of Europe exactly, Ben couldn't say. A few were crumbling and empty.

The Hotel Bem-Vindo stood on the town's small central plaza, facing a brick clock tower that had been built to commemorate the establishment of the Special Protectorate. The Town Hall, where the administration was based, stood on the adjoining side of the square to the hotel's right, and there was another hotel opposite, and a couple of cafés. As Ben climbed from the car, a little mechanical man in traditional Mundino dress came out of a door at the top of the

clock tower, bowed and banged four times on a bell with a hammer before disappearing inside with a whirr. Just like Toytown, Ben thought, or perhaps a film set, its very familiarity and ordinariness made bizarre by the presence just across the water of life forms so unlike the life of the rest of Earth that they were thought by many to have arrived five hundred million years ago on the same asteroid that created the Submundo basin.

Ben's two hosts insisted on walking him into the reception of the hotel.

'So looking forward to working with you!'

'No rush at all in the morning, obviously.'

'You'll need your sleep. That journey takes it out of you.'

'Shall we say an eleven o'clock start?'

They were very keen to come across as friendly and pleased to see him, but it seemed to Ben that they overplayed this, like a cheating husband trying too hard to act the part of a loving and attentive spouse.

He turned away from them. The lobby of the Hotel Bim-Vindo also served as its bar but was completely empty. Fussy, fake antique furniture stood unused. The barman polished glasses. Mrs Martin, the proprietor, greeted them excitedly. She was an Englishwoman, it seemed, who had at one time been married to a local man. She was thrilled to see one of her compatriots, and rather obviously also thrilled that he should turn out to be a good-looking youngish man. (Ben was thirty-five, and he *was* good-looking, with his thick black hair, his blue eyes, and his slender, toned, physique.)

'You feel so cut off here sometimes,' she said. 'What with planes not being able to get in, and no phones or TV or anything. It sometimes feels as if all the world's going on without you. And it's so nice to hear a proper English voice.'

She came out from behind the reception counter to show him up to his room, which was also fussily ornate, with elaborate mirrors, big, heavy velvet curtains, and sepia-tinted photographs in heavy gilt frames. One of the pictures showed Baron Valente posing with twenty of his so-called ‘pioneers’, a tall, handsome white man in a richly embroidered waistcoat, one hand resting paternally on the head of the small, frightened-looking boy on his right, the other on the head of a tense little girl whose face was too blurred to make out at all.

The porter laid down Ben’s bags and left. The room was warm and a little stuffy, with the strange bitter-sweet smell of the forest somewhere in the background behind the furniture polish and pot-pourri. Desperation and loneliness oozed from Mrs Martin. (‘Nicky! *Do* call me Nicky!’ she cried.) Ben had a sudden strong sense that, if he’d made the smallest move in that direction, she would have very willingly laid down with him right then on her hotel bed. In fact, it seemed to him that, short of saying it out loud, she was actually telling him just that. Here in the Submundo, he was to discover, even in the centre of Amizad, unspoken signals were louder than they were in the world outside. At times this was exhilarating, at others claustrophobic: everything and everyone felt a little too close, as if they had come right to the threshold of his inner self.

Mrs Martin wanted to chatter, but she finally left him, and he opened up his cases and began to unpack. As he stacked shirts in a drawer, the photo of Valente caught his eye, and he went to have a closer look at it. The Baron’s gaze was direct, confident and sure of his own rightness. All the other faces looked wary and confused, and almost all of them were blurred, as if they hadn’t understood that an image was being made of them or that they needed to keep

still. The picture next to it showed the clock tower in the square in the process of construction, seen more or less from the same perspective as he would have now if he looked out of his window. Or at least, so Ben thought, until he read the inscription beneath it. 'Nus town square, 1933', it read and he felt a sudden chill. This wasn't the Amizad clock tower, then, but an identical one inside the Zona de Olvido, which he must surely also have seen and stood in front of, as alive and conscious as he was now.

Beneath his shirts he found his three notebooks – blue, purple and red – where he'd shoved them to the bottom of his case. He weighed them in his hand for a moment, his notes from oblivion. All he remembered of their contents was the first part of the first notebook, and the final four words of the last: 'Because the truth is'. He had a momentary impulse to toss all three of them into the wastepaper basket so the maid would remove them in the morning and that would be the end of them. But he knew he wouldn't be able to leave them lying there so instead he put them in the left-hand drawer of the fancy Louis XIV-style desk, laid a few small things on top of them – a paperback, a pack of cards, a waterproof torch – and pushed the drawer closed.

## II. THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

(4)

**B**ack in the seventies, when Hyacinth was a teenager in North London, there was a little wood behind her parents' house. She thought of it as a wood, at any rate, and 'the wood' was what she and her friends always called it, but in reality it was an old bombsite from the war, which for some reason – a legal dispute of some kind – had never been redeveloped. And so, in the thirty years or so since a German flying bomb had exploded there, trees had grown up, not to full-size, but certainly well past the sapling stage: sycamore, yew, rowan, ash, holly. The sloping strip of uneven ground had once been a terraced street called Diski Row, which had climbed towards the larger, busier road that still ran along the top of the hill. Every house in the row had been wrecked by the bomb, and the passing of time had finished the job. Now there was a mesh panel fence round it with rusting Keep Out signs, and barbed wire along the top.

But in various places holes had been wrenched in the fencing and, alone or with friends, Hyacinth would slip inside almost every day and head to a favourite spot among the trees which couldn't be seen from anywhere outside. Usually she and her friends had the whole wood to themselves, but they weren't the only ones who knew about it. Other people came there to have sex, smoke dope or

drink cheap booze, and it was also used for small-scale fly-tipping, solvent sniffing, and masturbating over pornographic magazines. Each of these activities left behind its own distinctive archaeology so that, along with rusty fridges, broken TVs and spilling sacks of rubbish, there were broken cider bottles, glue-smeared polythene bags, used condoms (whose contents, she learnt, shrank and turned yellow as it dried), empty cigarette packets with neat little rectangles of cardboard torn out of them, and little autumnal drifts of flesh-coloured torn-up porn. (Hyacinth was puzzled about these drifts. Why not just leave them in the wood if you didn't want to take them home? It was only when she'd learnt a little more about male lust and the way it switched off like a light when it had performed its function, that she realized how the wood's little tribe of wankers, having reached their climaxes, would suddenly make the humiliating discovery that the focus of their excitement was nothing more than ink on paper.)

Already in a way an anthropologist, Hyacinth was curious about all these different human tribes who shared her hiding place and, in her mind, they were as much parts of the life of the wood as were the trees that had taken root there, or the foxes and cats that she and her friends sometimes came across when they crawled in through the fence to lose themselves in clouds of oily, aromatic smoke. They saw rats occasionally too, and squirrels, and even a couple of times a small deer, while in early spring the stagnant pools that formed in the footprints of the demolished houses would fill up, first with groaning masses of copulating frog flesh, and then with tadpoles you could scoop from the slime in soft writhing handfuls. The wood was a coalition. It didn't belong to any one of these human and non-human organisms but was a sanctuary for them all, even the sad pervert with the glass eye,

who once offered Hyacinth and one of her friends a whole pound note if they'd let him see their knickers.

She felt comfortable there. Back at home she could never tell when her mother's fragile veneer of normality would fall away and she'd lash out suddenly in bitter, tearful rage, while her father hid in the tiny attic room he called his study, knocking back sherry by the tumbler-full and doing supposedly important things with books and paper that no one else would ever give a damn about. Their only child, wherever she went inside the house, she was surrounded by the poisonous force fields that thrummed and crackled between the two adults through the hollow, drab brown rooms. But in her wood, with the foxes, the birds, the tadpoles, and perhaps with a friend or two from equally inhospitable homes, she could do what she pleased and feel sane.

One warm summer day Hyacinth and her friend Tiff found a red ants' nest under a curved fragment of rusty metal which the creatures had used to provide themselves with a solar-heated roof. Tiff turned the metal in her hands. 'What is this anyway? It's quite.... Ow!'

An ant had bitten her and she flung the metal to the ground, but Hyacinth picked it up and shook off the remaining ants. 'Wow! I know what this is, Tiff! It's a piece of the bomb that made this place!'

The two of them had smoked a fair amount of grass. Squatting down with their find, they developed the idea of the bomb as a kind of blind creator god, of which this scrap of metal was a precious relic, and ended up spending the rest of the afternoon constructing a little shrine around it with stones and twigs and chunks of rubble. But as they were emerging from the wood towards evening, they met some young workmen who were bringing up new fencing



to replace the damaged panels. The workmen were only a year or two older than Hyacinth and Tiff. They were friendly and weren't particularly bothered by their trespassing. But perhaps they were a little resentful that these posh-voiced girls could spend the afternoon taking drugs and daydreaming while they lugged mesh fencing around North London in a stuffy van, because there was a certain grim satisfaction in their voices as they told Hyacinth and Tiff that their company was about to clear away the remnants of Diski Row to build a block of flats.

So the wood was going to be cut down, bulldozed, covered in concrete, and reconnected to the ordinary London streets that surrounded it. Hyacinth grieved, but not that much. She knew she was beginning to outgrow the place, and she was old enough to understand there wasn't the slightest chance of saving it. This wasn't some piece of ancient woodland, after all, or the last refuge of some endangered species. It was just a lacuna in the fabric of the city, opportunistically taken advantage of by herself, her friends and sundry other life forms. She took some comfort in the thought that, when her wood had gone, all the elements of the coalition that had made it what it was would still exist, ready to take the next opportunity whenever it came.

And that included her. She would find a new refuge, she told herself, perhaps in America, where she was already planning to continue her studies after school, far away from her mother and father. She had no inkling, of course, that one day she would find the Delta, but her wood had given her faith that something would turn up.

It always was a *something* for her, a something or a somewhere, never really a *someone*.

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This was her seventh time in the Submundo Delta but she still loved the river voyage, even though on some previous trips this enjoyment had been marred by having to share the deck and the dining room with other returnees who affected to be irritated by the length of the journey, or the fact that they couldn't charge their laptops, or the time it was keeping them from their important work. She always found this maddening. Could those people not *see*? Could they not *feel*? Were they so blinkered by the dreary goals trained into them by a society obsessed with its need for control and mastery, that they couldn't appreciate the loosening, the opening out, the rising to the surface, that came with that moment when you realized you'd forgotten the last few days and you were there in the midst of the Delta? You could loathe the place, she could see that, you could fear it, you could be repulsed by it, you could long to be somewhere else, but she couldn't understand how anyone could get bored of it for to her this was the one place on Earth where her emotional responses didn't diminish over time. In fact, sustained intensity when you were in it was one of the Delta's many strange psychic properties, the counterpoint to the effect that occurred when you passed through the Zona the other way and emerged in the world outside. You could still remember that you'd been there – the Submundo wasn't like the Zona – but it was hard to hold on to the *feeling* of the place, and even harder to convey it to other people, who always seemed oddly indifferent to the fact of the Delta's existence.

But to her relief, no one this time was complaining about the length of the journey, or the lack of electric sockets, or the wasted time. Jael dallied on the cargo hatch with the increasingly lobotomized-looking Rico, the two of them clearly returning from one of the regular trips to Nus which they claimed to find energizing.

The unhappy Dutch woman, Mrs de Groot, languished in perpetual pain like a tragic Fisher Queen maimed by some forbidden spear, tended by her loyal but impotent knight. And the other passenger, the British policeman Ben Ronson, was very obviously, and rather endearingly, entranced. He was actually quite nice-looking too, with his thick black hair cut in a boyish, old-fashioned, Second-World-War sort of style, and his startlingly naked blue eyes whose apparent defencelessness he himself of course couldn't see. She found him pleasant to talk to. He had nice manners. He even listened to what was said to him.

After she'd learnt what he did for a living, Hyacinth had dimly remembered reading about some work he'd done in London on forced marriages or some such culturally sanctioned crime. She supposed that, from the perspective of the world outside, where the Delta shrank to a small grey dot on a map which an obscure, not very interested committee in Geneva was supposed to administer, duende killings fitted rather neatly into that same category – crimes committed by a community that didn't consider them to be crimes at all – making Ben an obvious choice to look into them. But of course he had no idea what he was letting himself in for, or what kind of place the Submundo was, and she could see that, rather touchingly, he hadn't even noticed the effect the Delta was already having on him – that opening up, that rising from the depths, that shaking off of old and calloused skin – though it was utterly obvious in his face and his posture. He was still at the stage where he was putting it all down to the novelty of the experience and nothing more.

There was a lot of time to spare and the forest did open you up. Once, while she was drawing, Hyacinth told him about her wood in London, how it had been a refuge to her, and how, absurd as the comparison might seem, what the wood had meant to her back

then was something akin to what the Delta meant to her now. He seemed puzzled, but listened and asked questions. It turned out that, when they were growing up, he and Hyacinth had only lived a mile or two apart, and they soon established that he knew all the streets that surrounded Hyacinth's wood, though he couldn't place the wood itself.

'I used to go to Scouts over there,' Ben told her when she mentioned one of these streets, and she almost laughed out loud at the news that he'd been a Scout in his teens – it seemed so fitting somehow – but she saw him flinch in anticipation as he saw the signs of laughter in her face, and she managed to contain it.

'But you must have seen the wood then!' she told him. 'The Scout hut was pretty much opposite the top of it!'

'I vaguely remember a metal fence with bits of crumbling brick wall behind it.'

'That was it! That was the top end of my wood.'

'Oh, I see. I suppose I didn't really think of it as a wood.'

She could tell he was completely bemused by the idea that anyone could feel this sort of attachment to a patch of waste ground.

'Didn't you have somewhere like that?' she asked. 'Some special place that was just your own, where the grown-ups didn't go?'

But he laughed uneasily and said he didn't, he'd always been too busy with 'school, and football and generally getting into trouble'.

In Hyacinth's experience people who talked in that way about 'getting into trouble' were never the type you could imagine getting into any kind of trouble at all, much in the same way as people who said, 'Don't mind me, I'm just crazy,' were always exceptionally conventional and sane. And what kind of trouble could Ben have possibly got into, she wondered, when something as mild as her illicit use of a bombsite as a hiding place from the adult world

seemed to strike him as inexplicably weird? When she pressed him a little more about his childhood, he talked about the cinemas he used to go to, the schools he attended, and the football team he supported, but seemed to find it difficult to come up with anything more than these shells and containers.

‘To be honest, I can barely remember it,’ he said, ‘which is probably because it was so boring and average. Nothing at all like yours, by the sound of it.’