

PART ONE

RE-ENTRY POINT: CONVERSATIONS WITH IL DUCE

The time is past already for hoping for time's arrival,
the time of yesterday, today and tomorrow,
yesterday is today, tomorrow is today, today all is today.

SCENE ONE: FINAL BEGINNINGS

The first time I use a gun. A 92 Model Beretta to be exact. Two shots to the base of the skull as he kneels before me. Then sit back while the creatures I've come to call The Scavengers clean up the resulting mess.

The second time I slit his throat. With a Bowie knife. I would prefer a stiletto but I need something with a sharp edge. Something that doesn't fall apart on the grind stone. Something that performs its duties with one clean slice.

The third time I try a noose, looping the rope across one of the exposed metal overhangs that give this place the look of a giant Lego set. Then kicking the chair out from underneath him. He jerks and struggles. Kicks. Wets himself. And it takes him much longer to die than I have been led to believe. I learn I have not positioned the knot in its proper place.

The fourth time, naturally, I electrocute him. Tied down to a shiny metal gurney with an array of electrodes. I pull the lever and there is a sizzling sound. He arcs up against his restraints and the muscles on his neck pop out with a snap before he shudders back into his chair and goes limp.

The next time . . . suffocation . . . drowning . . . poison . . . burial alive . . . plunging from the metal rafters . . . a perfect swan dive to the harsh floor below. . . .

Each time, I tell him it's nothing personal. That, if I have to kill him, I might as well make it interesting. For both of us. Otherwise, it's the same-old same-old. He looks at me with those big brown child-like eyes and says he forgives me. No, more than that. He says he loves me. He says that, if his dying is what I need to be happy, then he's ready to do it, however long it takes. Even an eternity, he says in his typically exaggerated manner.

Little does he know. Little does he realize that I follow right behind him. That I too splatter my grey matter against the nearest wall . . . feel the warm gush of blood pumping from my ruptured carotid . . . jerk like a deranged puppet beneath the mis-knotted noose . . . pound my fists and scratch in shallow-breathed desperation against the sealed coffin . . . the darkness . . . the lurching in the pit of the stomach . . . the last gasp sucking for air . . . the final evacuation . . . merciful, merciful relief. . . .

Only to find myself once again. Here. Popping up to the surface. Spitting out the fluids. Frantic to get a breath. Chest heaving with huge gulps. Of air. Walking naked. Bare-foot slip-slopping, flip-flopping. Wet. Cold. Shimmering. Shivering. Eyes darting. Following in the footsteps, the still slimy footsteps, of the one I am going to . . . lovingly, mind you . . . erase once more. Back to the start.

SCENE TWO: GETTING IN

Where to start. How about: *Getting in, I've been told, was easy for me; far too easy?* Yes, as good a place as any to begin. What did it take, after all, but the right colour-coded pass and a unique eye-print to match the one stored in the facility's central computer? Or so I've been told. Perhaps, it might have been even easier than that. Perhaps, they'd let anyone in who came knocking at the front door, genetic hat in hand, anxious for life without entropy, for eternal re-birth and re-generation. If only that someone now knew where the front door was.

Getting out is now another matter altogether. There was a time when, in order to leave, all you had to do was alert the nearest robo-guard and it saw you past the entry point—after a thorough scan to make sure you weren't trying to smuggle copyrighted genetic material to an unscrupulous competitor. But that, as far as I know, was the only way out, had always been the only way out: a metallic iris with a central point for the eye-scan. Zip—and it cycled open. Zip—and it cycled shut. Now, that exit route no longer exists. No guard—robotic or otherwise—will respond to your request. No matter how much you insist. Or cause a fuss. Or stamp your feet and throw a tantrum. Or even go on a well-planned rampage.

There are no guards left standing. Only pieces of guards stacked in dust-free, hermetically sealed storage rooms, occasionally jerking their spasmodic reflexes but incapable of ambulatory motion let alone asking or answering questions. The intercoms, the loudspeakers, the computers respond in mock-alive tones, pre-programmed to give a semblance of bustle and activity, of personality and character. But, like all mechanical things, they do a poor job of it, are sooner or later caught out—in the exceptions to the rules and the

complications of grammatical constructions; in the illogical or fuzzy logical or downright contradictory that we humans are so proud of.

And the colour-coded pass and eye-print that allowed you to enter so effortlessly are suddenly useless for the outward journey, are nothing but excess baggage which you quickly discard, quickly toss back into the trunk with the rest of the superannuated junk: locket of hair pressed between the leaves of well-thumbed crumbling books and passed down from generation to generation; a jar with an air-tight cap and half-filled with formaldehyde; letters of true and everlasting love sealed, for some arcane reason, with a bloody thumbprint; and other remnants of a past life.

There was a time when I used to think: Ah, but someone has to get out, no? The ones who run this place? The observers or controllers or whatever? Or are they, too, trapped in here? No, that doesn't seem likely, I said to myself, that doesn't make much sense. After all, they have families, hobbies, wants, needs, desires, a restlessness to see faraway places and do far out things. Don't they? So, despite appearances, there must be another way out. Yes, definitely. A back door escape hatch for when the foaming-at-the-mouth hounds are howling and clawing and digging at the front entrance.

All I have to do is find the persons in charge and either force the knowledge out of them or wait for them to make their inevitable move so I can follow them, watch as they begin to disappear and then throw myself at the invisible opening before it seals itself again. Or maybe there's some other way to communicate with the outside—telephone, computer network, e-mail, TV signals, via satellite. There must be something. Smoke signals. Tapping against the walls. Telepathy. Something. All I've got to do is find it. Work out the kinks. Get it going. Get on the right wavelength.

That's what I used to think—and, for all I know for sure, it might still be true. After all, the facility is huge and it would take a long, long time to search every nook and cranny, every tunnel, passageway, mountain and valley. Let alone every

storage device, electronic path, digital communicator or neural net. As well, the entire array is constantly shifting, never staying put or in one place for long. At least not long enough for me to catalogue its contents in their entirety. Like keeping track of the number of ants as they dash along the jungle floor.

But, somehow, search as I might, I doubt I'll find anything new, anything that hasn't already crossed my path at least once. Somehow, it has become all too familiar for me. And that includes the possibility that the observers, controllers or whatever departed long ago, leaving the machinery to the machines. And me.

So here I am one more time. In what I call the "projection room." Sitting huddled up in my favourite pseudo-leather swivel chair. The one being held together with duct tape not so much because it keeps things from falling apart but as a means of holding onto something familiar, something recognizable. I'm wrapped in a cocoon of images and sounds. Some (the expression goes) as old—and worn-out—as the hills, being played over and over again; some newly created, wet behind the ears, at this very moment at the point of birth. They cover every square inch of the walls and ceiling. Constantly shifting, moving, being replaced, flashing in and out. Up to the minute. Up to the second. I feel sometimes that the images appear on the walls even before the events actually take place.

In one of the other chairs beside me, leaning exhausted, shiny bald head lolling as if his neck can no longer support such a massive, misshapen weight, is the reason I've entered once again this nightmarish circle: my student, my ever-renewed responsibility, my tongue-tied albatross. Is it my imagination or do they seem to be appearing more and more developed each time a new one comes out? Didn't the very first ones emerge like enormous fetuses, all curled up and amorphyously gooey around the edges? Undifferentiated and leaking essential fluids? First rolling, then crawling along the floor and leaving a trail of putrid slime behind? Like mutant

creatures who have spent too much time swimming in spent-rod pools. Now, their eyes are already open, their mouths wanting to chirp, their fingers eager to grasp.

The oversized baby in the chair beside me groans and smacks his gums together in his sleep. I pat his milk-white clammy hand. He grips mine claw-like, only the gross motor skills working. I sigh and look around. The room is windowless; the walls a play of liquid colour swirling and dancing about hypnotically. Like some type of late 20th century abstract art. Or the aurora borealis trapped within a jar.

Come, my friend, I say, standing up and taking him by the hand. *Let us arise and go now. We have many wonders to see.*

He is reluctant. Unsure. When he stands, his body shakes—and not from lack of coordination. He is afraid. This fear . . . this reluctance . . . this unsureness . . . is also new. The previous ones placed all their trust in me. Absolute trust. Without pause or hesitation. Their lives were literally in my hands.

Come. I slip his arm through mine and pat his hand. *There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing. We'll do it together, okay?*

He nods, a beatific grin on his face. Odd with his teeth not yet in. A gummy grin. Then he frowns and shakes his head, tries to retreat to the safety of his chair. The place he considers his mother.

No, my friend. I pull him back towards me. Gently. And point to the walls. *There are no windows in this room. This room has no windows. We must go out to see. . . .*

R . . . r . . . r . . . room, he says, following my finger.

Yes. Room. I pat him on the back as I lead him out, knowing that positive re-enforcement is always a good thing. *Very good.*

Yes. There are no windows in this room and, from here, I can see nothing of the rest of the facility. But it doesn't matter. You could start anywhere in describing it. How about at the eerily lit central enclosure with its administrative offices and operating equipment? Where the bio-engineers peer out (or used to anyway) into a cryptic darkness and the cloning tanks glow with their own inner light of doubtful green? Where the heart of this abomination

pulses ever so slightly, ever so carelessly, a spark here and a spark there?

My friend shrinks back. Tries to get back into the room. But the door has sealed behind him and it only responds to my palm print.

Nothing to fear, I say, leading him down the corridor. *All the ghosts are gone. Kaput. Nada. It's only you and me. Only me and you.*

Or we could start at the hollow, semi-circular spokes. Eight in all. Radiating out to the smaller, peripheral structures. Shaped like incredibly huge Quonset huts that stretch out as far as the eye can see.

He collapses to the floor and refuses to move. Curled up so that his arms and his legs are tucked in and he resembles a spongy ball. And, in fact, he does wet the floor, still excreting a glue-y liquid.

Come now! I say, becoming a little annoyed, unused as I am to this reluctance on the part of one of my protégés. *There are so many things to show you. So many things for you to see. And learn. You want to learn, don't you?*

He shakes his head back and forth, rhythmically, in tick tock fashion. I don't know whether he is responding to my question or simply decides that it is a good moment to shake his head.

Or we could begin with the mush-walled passageways between the structures themselves, a not-quite-closed ring connecting all but one of them—and that one accessible only from the central hub? Or the invisible “fence” around the outside edge of the facility, an impenetrable, unrelenting field of energy that gently but firmly bounces you back with exactly the same force you used to strike it? And don't go trying to dig beneath the fence or rocket over it either. The field forms a perfect sphere, a global encirclement. Impenetrable not only for tangible objects such as humans and hurled stones but also for Morse Code, radio signals and radiation. As well as fission, fusion and neutron bomb blasts, quantum particles, sub-space transmissions and anti-matter rays, too, for all I know.

You're trying my patience, I say. Do you want me to drag you?

He continues to shake his head. I notice a puddle forming around him. Yellow and brown liquid oozing out from him.

Oh, good Lord. Now look what you've done.

I reach into the nearest wall. It gives way with a whoosh. I pull out a hose, aim it at him and press the nozzle. A gush of water sprays at him, washing him down. I place the hose on the floor and it pulls itself back into the wall with a suck-a-suck sound.

Okay, I say, noticing that he remains curled up on the ground. You win. Maybe another time.

I place my palm against the projection room door and it opens. My friend scurries back inside, stumbling over himself, slipping and sliding to get back inside. I too walk back in, losing myself among the images flickering on the walls. The images multiplied in all directions.

Here I am again. Here you are again. Here you and I might as well not exist. Or you could be multiplied a thousand fold and no one would care, no one would ask: Who's the real you? Does that question have any meaning here? Thanks to the force-field's masking capabilities, I suspect that anything I do to the inside of these facilities will never see the light of day. I could destroy it utterly and no one would be any the wiser. To the outside world, this has always been an area of simulated non-being, a blank wall, invisibly blended into the slightly glowing slag heap background, just another product of mid-21st-century life.

My friend sits back down, a look of total calm on his face. Or is it a look of total blankness? Placid and flaccid. Without a care in the world. And so it should be. What does he have to worry about? To be concerned about?

There used to be an expression that was popular once: Memories make the man. This was normally mirrored by another expression: Once upon a time . . . The combination of the two was supposedly enough to trigger any of a series of neural patterns—from proud individuality to full-blown racial consciousness reaching back to the

days when my primary occupation was to suck lice from the head of the dominant male and to make myself available for his various pleasures. It was the way to piece together what once was and never would be again.

But there's no need for that formula now, is there? I say, patting my friend's arm. Not when we have projection screens—and video cameras whirring at this very moment, like visual bloodhounds. Not when we have stacks of cassettes to back us up, piles of laser discs, cases of digitalized film, layer upon layer of holographic images in containers the size of thumbnails. The repetition of the same experience ad infinitum—and captured from any angle you choose. Isn't that right?

He looks up at me and smiles. As if he actually understands. Then the blankness closes in around him again.

So, what say we run the first tape, eh, my huge-eyed, pink-skinned, bald-headed, blue-veined friend? My fully grown baby? What say we get the show on the road? Here, sit up straight in your seat. Posture is important. Open your eyes. Look straight ahead. Start blinking. It's all there in the blink of an eye: birth . . . blink . . . life . . . blink . . . death . . . blink . . . re-birth . . . blink . . . Remove the protective mucus that keeps us from the truth, that holds back the flood of angst and anger. Rub those eyes real good with the back of your hairy knuckles. Hairy knuckles? Now there's a good sign. A sign of evolutionary progress. Be alert. Pay attention. Be thankful. Sit up straight.

This is for your own good. Believe me. I wouldn't be wasting my time, otherwise. Or yours. I wouldn't be racking my brain for new ways to bring it all to a climax, now would I? No, I'd just let you rot right here in this chair. I'd just let you melt back into the pool of slime and ooze, a quick slurpy meal for our dear friends, The Scavengers.

SCENE THREE: INTO THE PETTING ZOO

Ready?

My own first memories of this place must always begin when I was a very young child and still living at home, not quite old enough yet for the communal boarding school that would swallow me and others of my age group for the next decade. It was something all families that could afford it did, public schools having gone the way of the household cat. In the meantime, I received my education via computer which connected all the children my age to the virtual central school hub.

During what we all had come to realize would be the last year of his long, long life, my grandfather often took me here. He called it the Petting Zoo—and that’s how I came to think of it as well, complete with capital letters. Unfortunately, it was something I couldn’t really boast about during the occasional electronic “Show and Tells.” Oh, how I wanted to. How I wanted to shout it out for the whole world to hear: *I go to a place where there are all kinds of. . . .*

I remember several times switching on the camera and getting ready to describe the Petting Zoo. Ready to shock/impress my virtual classmates. But I never went through with it. My grandfather had sworn me to secrecy. He had warned me that, if I told anyone about the Petting Zoo and what went on inside, it would be the last time he’d take me there. And he would get into trouble. So, if anyone asked where I was going, I would tell them my grandfather took me to the park. And everyone would laugh because there was nothing to see in the park—except maybe some limp trees scarred with acid rain and the occasional homeless person staring out vacantly and waiting for the Kennel Kops to come.

When I mentioned this to my grandfather, when I told him that my friends laughed at us, he would take my hand firmly in his horny grip and say: *That is the laughter of fools. That is the same laughter I received when I told my fascist schoolteacher I was going to join my father with the partisans—and that we were going to defeat them. As long as the fools laugh, you are safe.*

Unfortunately, that didn't make me feel much better—especially since I had no idea what he was talking about when he spoke about fascists and partisans. Was that like some kind of cheese? I asked once. And it was his turn to laugh. Okay, I told myself, maybe I can't tell my friends about the Petting Zoo. But I can certainly make the park a lot more interesting. So I began describing all the animals I saw at the park with my grandfather. That brought even more laughter and ridicule. I guess I hadn't thought it through clearly. Everyone knew there were no animals in the park—unless you were talking about the remnant insects in the ground or the humans who had reverted pretty much to a similar animal state.

The year was 2030, long enough past the millennium for the excitement to have worn off and for the realization to set in that the transition from 1999 to 2001 had been little more than symbolic. One more really big number that sounds important and serves as a memory aid. In fact, nothing had changed very much really. The battle lines between the rich and the poor were a little more sharply drawn; the tiny pockets of resistance against the democratic right to shop till you drop were on their last legs, resorting to strip mall terror and the occasional blowing up of phallic symbol buildings; and, following the example of the American presidency in 2020, government by business proxy had become an accepted replacement for the outmoded one-person one-vote system.

There had been, of course, one unexpected millennial effect. That was the destruction of most of the world's free-roaming animals in the years between 2015 and 2025. By the end of 2025, anything higher than a member of the insect family was either dead or in the last painful throes. And, within a few years, the insects had filled in most of the niches left