

Magnum Opus

CHAPTER 1 - CALCINATIO

The human Soul, and Work: truly, two things which have much in common. For a start, no one is *really* sure if either of them is necessary. The two are so closely intertwined that they have become one and the same. We ask each other ‘What do you *do?*’, when what we really want to know is ‘What, or who, *are* you?’

Ed Talbot was currently pre-occupied, though he wouldn’t articulate it that way, with this very question.

He was here on business, in a professional capacity. And yet, in answer to the question ‘what did he do?’, the answer was technically ‘nothing’. He was time-rich, and finance-poor, for he was *sans emploi*. Out of work.

No, he was *between jobs*.

No-no, he was *suspended without pay*. Yes, that was it. Suspended.

Did that make him any less of a journalist? Even now - heading as he was to conduct an interview, with the intention of writing an article - did that not make him a journalist anyway, regardless of what an employer was willing to label him?

Maybe he was *freelance*.

The summer sun was already high in the sky, promising to make the day as uncomfortably stifling as the one before. All the better to be outside, then.

The temperature, even at ten in the morning, was well into the 20s, lending the landscape of Georgian sandstone terraces an other-worldly, almost Martian feel.

The fashionable inner suburbs are a foreign country, he thought: they do things differently there, and the weather is better.

Ed was the only one on the street, at first, with the creamy stone cliff of houses to his left reflecting the heat of the overbearing sun. Green privet hedges created cooler oases in shaded front gardens where birds hopped and played, while highly coloured bedding plants and well-tended roses provided most of the colour in this otherwise gold-cream and tarmac regolith.

The road inclined steadily - doesn't it always in this heat? - as Ed walked on, guaranteeing that he would arrive to meet his quarry with skin sticking invisibly but awkwardly to the inside of jeans and shirt. He pushed his fingers through brushed-back hair sticky with the fast-melting residue of styling wax. The wax had looked far better on the models in the bus stop commercials, the ones confusingly, yet appropriately, alternating every few seconds with greasy chicken ads and 'yanky' candles.

There was a link between all those images, he felt, something beyond mere appearances. Some message, of which each advert was a different aspect. Something the corporate world wanted him to aspire to, greasy and waxen. A shop window dummy.

At the crest of the hill a silhouette emerged from a garden, walking with a slight lop-sidedness under the weight of something carried. The figure paused and inspected its load which, as Ed approached, resolved itself into a large bag slung on the shoulder of a postwoman.

Ed was holding a small white note in his own hand, and he referred to this once more. It was but two lines of scrawled words: 'Robinson' was written in large, uneasy letters in what appeared to be wax crayon, while underneath that, in the same cack-handed manner, was an address on the road he now walked.

Ed was a writer. No, Ed *is* a writer. His current errand is for professional writing purposes, as we have said. But he was a writer on the local newspaper (still is, if you want to be pedantic. Pedantic but accurate).

He had been a young, promising journalist, with a talent for uncovering the less savoury activities of the so-called great and good in local government.

The thing is, he languishes at the same little newspaper. (Although, of course, right now, sadly *not* at the newspaper.)

He'd taken to digging too deeply in the wrong bins. When said bins refused to give up their secrets (perhaps because they didn't contain the necessary secrets) then imaginary bins might on occasion have given up imaginary secrets. Such is one's 'career'.

Fortunately, his editor, seeing value in a (misled) journalist with a future, took pity on him and suspended rather than terminated his employment. She'd given gave him a lecture on 'finding himself', and 'working out what he wanted from life', and 'getting over trying to put the deputy mayor in jail on no pretext'. And so he 'found himself' at home, with time for a little Soul searching, as it were.

At first that time was put to full use. After all, it takes a long time to read the World Wide Web from beginning to end.

But soon the attractions of cat videos, and the searing critiques of cat videos, wore thin, and Ed sought more fruitful territory. This is when he stumbled into the bottomless pit of online discussion forums. (The Web is essentially an infinite collection of infinitely deep pits, thus confirming the suspicions of anyone who has found themselves at 3:26am arguing the finer points copyright infringement when at some point you'd been

discussing family history, that the Web is the first human-made artefact to break the laws of Time and Space).

And of all the discussion forums he dwelt in, those concerning conspiracy theories became his most frequent abode. He'd never have confessed to an interest in conspiracies before, but sitting in your own home for three weeks without light or air, dwelling on where it all went wrong, and watching daytime TV programmes consisting of little other than lightly disguised advertising makes the whole of human civilisation seem like a conspiracy.

The truly fun part for Ed was that the conspiracy theories had conspiracy theories of their own. For every pundit coming up with his or her own uneasy truths, a hundred nay-sayers cried 'fake news' and had alternative facts. There was no truer conspirator, obfuscator, plant, or shill than the amateur pundit, or the amateur pundit's opponent.

The crowning achievement of conspiracy theories is that they're not mutually exclusive. Like the most popular religions, they could mesh and overlap as much as necessary, and the ambiguity and conflict merely enhanced belief in some over-arching plot against the common citizen.

Conspiracies are also a handy short-cut for anyone seeking to explain the world without putting in the effort of first *observing* it.

Like a whirlpool, or a black hole, the conspiracy forums had drawn Ed in slowly at first. He'd approached out of curiosity, assuring himself he was just there for the entertainment. On the outskirts their gravitational pull was gentle, welcoming, buoyant even, with discussions of lizard monarchs and secret UFO files. But Ed was trapped long before he knew it, the event horizon floating breezily by while talk orbited through 9/11 inside jobs, paedophile rings and the links between the two; JFK and trans-dimensional demons; lefty-Nazi-liberal-feminista-Stalinists; the military-industrial-

horticultural-agricultural-and-fisheries complex. Faster and faster the ride became, pulling and stretching him until the outside world was little but a dull memory of flat waters and linear space. Then, in the eye of this mixed metaphor, there emerged a calm little discussion of a man named Robinson.

Robinson had no great conspiracies pinned on him, or he had the greatest. He was the saviour of mankind, or the man who had brought it to the brink of destruction. He'd fired the bullet that felled JFK, or had dived clumsily wide in an effort to take said bullet. He had succeeded in stopping the alien infiltration of Earth (because, hey, where are all the aliens?) or he was still plotting from some bunker to bring it about.

Robinson's history was different to the other conspiracies. Its depth awakened in Ed some slumbering desire to get his teeth into a *real* mystery - real in the sense that it should be investigation-worthy *and* maybe not even made up. The Robinson story was soon fleshed out by the forum's regular denizens, to the point where Ed couldn't believe he'd not heard of the man before.

A core legend felt consistent: Robinson had, in the late 1990s, led a crack team of pseudo-governmental paramilitaries in the fight against the end of the world. The pre-Millennial tension which had gripped the world in that decade was a problem looking for a solution, and so the world's governments had apparently pooled resources to fund this team, this nearly-army, under the name Arcadia.

That the year 2000 had come and gone without so much as a minor extinction event was proof that Robinson and Arcadia had succeeded in holding back the tides of little green men, giant space rocks, plagues and angry deities.

Or it was proof that he had been a complete waste of time and of taxpayers' money.

Depending on which train of logic your ticket was for (it was always a one-way, no-refunds ticket), Robinson had either retired into wealthy obscurity, warm in the knowledge that he'd saved the world, or he'd withdrawn into hiding, rightly fearing the wrath of the millions of people he'd made fools of. According to the latter school of thought, Robinson was the perpetrator of the conspiracy of all - the conspiracy which taught the masses *that there were lots of conspiracies out there*.

But like the tiniest building blocks of our universe, as soon as you tried to look for him, Robinson was elsewhere, gaining momentum unexpectedly.

If there was a single conspiracy that Ed started to believe in, it was that someone somewhere was trying to muddy all the waters these cranks were fishing in. The harder he looked for Robinson the fainter Robinson became. Simply trying to extract useful information from these groups attracted accusations of Ed's complicity in a disinformation campaign.

What better subject for a less-than-busy journalist to tackle? And if that reignited his career, so much the better!

And then something odd happened (the first of many things, it must be said). No sooner had he made the decision to look for the 'real' Robinson than he received the note which we have just seen him carrying.

As a journalist, he'd received his fair share of these in the past, but this one was so strange in its brevity (its lack of threat against himself or another was also unusual) that he looked at it differently.

Had he weakened somehow, and let himself get dragged into the conspirasphere? Had he been groomed into suggestibility? Or was he so

bored that he was willing to follow any lead just to get himself out of the house?

So here Ed Talbot found himself, walking along the front of a row of tastefully identical terraced houses, the beautifully painted front doors the sole splashes of colour outside of the lovingly tended flower beds. The golden stone frontages gave the impression of castle walls, designed to keep out as well as impress those who approached. Some glazing in the front windows was stained with blue or yellow, but the effect of those panes on the stranger was akin to that felt by an invading cavalry in the face of a castle's arrow-slits.

There was the tang of a bonfire or morning barbecue in the air, and the background hum of the city lent an audible commentary to the general peace.

Ed came within a few dozen metres of the postwoman as she shifted the weight of her load. Ed noted with some surprise that she was wearing long trousers, a large waterproof overcoat and stout boots. He broke into a vicarious sweat just looking at her. She took a quick, if intent, look at Ed before striking off across the road and down a side street.

When Ed finally found himself at the gate he had been seeking, he was at the very address to which the postwoman had just delivered.

The front path of this garden sloped up towards the entrance, enhancing the imposing visage of the terrace. The houses seemed to hold rank, like Roman soldiers, against one becoming separated and vulnerable. Any breaking from the pack, such as with a satellite dish or garden gnome, would no doubt be treated by the leonine parish councillors like an elderly wildebeest on the Serengeti.

The gate was all curving wrought iron, swirls and twists turning back upon themselves. A third of the way down, and formed from the same metal, were the words 'Et in Arcadia ego'. Ed raised an eyebrow - a link to the supposed group that Robinson led? Or proof that he'd been sent on a wild goose chase by someone who'd connected two dots and found an alignment? Perhaps it was gibberish, or an ornamental affectation.

Deep breath in; tug down shirt; deep breath out; Ed mounted the ascending path quickly. He rapped on the glossy black door. While waiting for an answer, Ed checked his phone once more to see whether an earlier social broadcast of his visit had garnered any response. There was only one - a scathingly cynical taunt about chasing unicorns - and he cursed himself for the stab of anger he felt. He'd not yet taught himself to ignore the trolls, but while he composed his pithy rejoinder the door opened, and a late middle aged male face glared at him from the hallway.

"One would think you'd have the good grace to get off your bloody phone when you knock on a man's door," said the face.

Quickly Ed stuffed the offending technology in his pocket, and held out the hand that had been holding it.

"Hello. My name is Edward Talbot. I'm -"

"I don't give a flying fig what your name is. I haven't got all the time in the world. What are you knocking on my door for?" One of the man's fists gripped the door latch, while the other swung free for use at a moment's notice. He was dressed in the smart home attire of a retiree brought up in a more considerate era. He wore tweed trousers and a cream flannel shirt, rolled to the elbows. A brown woollen tie was tucked into the shirt buttons, and his brown arms suggested muscle tone which belied the age shown in

his face and moustache. There was something of the habitual gardener about him. In fact, was that smoke from this man's horticultural bonfire? More to the point, was this Robinson?

"Out with it, lad," said the man. "You youngsters act like the world would wait for you, but it won't. So come on, what do you want?"

"I'm looking for a Mr. R-"

"And that beard. You think that's a new fashion, do you? Think it makes you look sophisticated?" The man smiled sardonically. "In my day we thought beards were old hat. Victorian. For men with something to hide. What are you hiding?" He reached out and grabbed Ed's chin, turning it left and right like a drill sergeant on parade. "Weak, girly jawline, if you ask me. Best keep the beard, then."

The man let go, and Ed took a step back. He stroked the beard roughly, to neaten it again. The work it had taken to grow - the itchiness, the grooming, the oils - was no trivial matter. While never teased about his appearance, the beard successfully disguised the underbite Ed felt robbed him of some masculinity. And this man had honed in on the buried sensitivity in 30 seconds. The mercury rose within him.

"What about your moustache?" Ed found himself saying. "What does that say about you? In my day moustaches-"

"If you're just here to discuss facial hair then I'm afraid I'm going to have to slam this door in your face." The very same door started swinging towards Ed.

"Arcadia," he said loudly. The door stopped, obscuring the face and half the body behind it.

"You know your classics, son," said the man, and the door resumed its shutting.

"Mr. Robinson?"

There was a pregnant pause.

“No.” It was an over-loud rebuttal.

“Too late,” Ed said, pushing back on the door to only minor effect. “I’ve come a long way to find you. A long way.”

“A long way for nothing,” came the reply. “You’ve got the wrong man.” But the door had stopped moving.

“I’m here to help,” said Ed brightly. “Do you know what people are saying about you online? All kinds of things. Allegations. Your online reputation’s at stake.”

“Oh, my *online reputation*?” the man said, pulling the door back to reveal his face again. “Ah, the Internet: where fools congregate to argue amongst themselves, while corporations and governments can harvest their data and carry on their carrying-on unmolested. It was a useful source once upon a time...” The man was staring at Ed, having forgotten himself for a moment.

“Well, that certainly sounds like the Robinson I’ve heard so much about,” Ed said, holding his right hand out again.

There was a second silence, longer. Two sets of eyes locked. Two minds, both aware of a crossroads in their fortunes, of opportunities and traps, went into brief battle.

Ed stared into the short, flickering flames as they nibbled at bundles of papers, bits of stationery and dozens of photographs. Strange gardening. Yet to discover the truth of all this history, he felt something unique was disappearing forever; untold ghosts of messages, lives, visits and interactions nothing but darting motes in the air.

He looked into his coffee cup instead, until the man he was standing with broke the silence.

“I will admit, Mr...”

“Talbot, Ed.”

“Mr. Talbot. I’ll admit that I am sceptical.”

“Sceptical?”

“Of you.” He said. “Of visitors in general. You see, I have spent a long time ensuring that I don’t get any. What puzzles me is how you got here.”

“I... I drove-”

“I’m sure you *drove*, Mr Ed. The question is *why*?”

“Well, when you come off the ring road it’s only a couple of-”

“I mean why did you bother? Why the effort? If you know anything about me it’s that there is nothing to tell. I’ve nothing to say.” There was a pause, and then he said: “Who sent you?”

“Sent me? No one,” said Ed. “I came of my own accord. I told you, you’re all over the Internet.”

“What?” He seemed angry, or maybe incredulous.

“Well, not all over it. But there are conflicting views. I want to find the real you.”

“Well, here I am,” said Robinson. “Happy now?” He knocked back a slug of whatever was in his mug.

“I want to set the record straight,” said Ed. “Being in hiding is doing nothing for your reputation. It’s fanning the flames of rumour. If even half the work you’re supposed to have done is true, then your legacy deserves protection.”

“My legacy? What use is a legacy when I’m dead? This lot?” He gestured to the pile. Ed spotted a couple of sheets which could have been headed paper.

“Nothing more than so many dead trees,” said Robinson. He strode purposefully back towards the house.

“This is all Arcadia stuff? You’re burning everything?”

“Don’t talk to me about Arcadia! Why would I know anything about that?” he said, perhaps in the hope that Ed would produce a reason. “I’ve no use for those cast-offs now, and I dare say no one else has either.”

Ed ran after him. “But archivists, researchers...”

“Is that who you are? Is that what you’re hoping to find today? Even were you to sift through that lot I don’t think you’d find much of interest. It’s marketing, merchandise, press releases... junk.”

“But Arcadia was a serious business.” It was halfway between a question and a statement, for at this point Ed didn’t really know the relationship between Robinson and Arcadia.

“A waste of time is what it was!” In response to Ed’s expression of disbelief, he added: “Do you even know what Arcadia tried to do?”

“Stop... stop the end of the world?”

“Ha,” he barked. “Something like that. I see you’ve done a bit of homework at least, which puts you a nose in front. Do you know what Arcadia’s original name was? *Millennium*. Very *zeitgeist*. Turns out some TV program got there first, so we changed it to Arcadia. Took us weeks to agree on that. Then someone pointed out it was the name of a clothing shop...” He shook his head sadly and walked in through the back door of the house, through the kitchen and into the hallway.

Ed found Robinson grappling with a sealed cardboard tube, the kind of tube that might have been delivered mere moments before by a postwoman.

Robinson popped the plastic stopper off one end and drew out a roll of paper. He examined it with a close squint.

They were stood at the entrance to two rooms, and Ed casually inspected them over his shoulder while Robinson read. To the front of the house was a tidy living room. In fact, it was tidy to the point of non-use. There was a new-looking but old fashioned three-piece suite, a few ornaments and expensive wallpaper. A coffee table had a pile of large books on it, neatly fanned out, while the fireplace had a mantle bare of decoration.

The second room, next to the kitchen at the rear of the house, was another matter altogether. The walls were entirely hidden by bookshelves, reaching floor to ceiling. The books themselves were of all sizes and ages, and overflowed onto the tables, the floor, and an ancient looking leather wing-backed armchair.

Robinson looked up.

“What strikes me, sir, is that you’ve arrived on this of all days, as I’m burning what some people would call evidence. I ask again: who do you work for?”

“No one,” he said, before adding quickly, “Myself, then. I’m... freelance.”

“Freelance what? Everyone’s freelance these days. It’s just a fancy word for zero hour contracts. Now, where’re my glasses?”

There was a small cuboid parcel behind the front door, and Robinson picked this up. He carried it, along with the paper, into the messy study. Ed tried to make out titles on the darker leather volumes, though many looked to be in Latin: *Rosarium Philosophorum* and *Coelum Terrae* were about the only two he later remembered - some kind of botanical works? The more modern volumes looked esoteric and philosophical: *The Elixir and the Stone* and a biography of Roger Bacon stood out. It all meant *something*, but Ed didn’t know what they signified about the owner’s interests.

Robinson put the paper and box down on a dark wooden desk, which took up a large portion of one wall. The desk’s top was a tornado of notes, post-

its, open books (ach, the ancient and broken spines!), bookmarks and Biro's, pencils, highlighters. A project was in progress - perhaps a project was always in progress - new information constantly collected.

Robinson had found his reading glasses, and unfolded them onto his nose. He unrolled the sheet of paper that had come from the tube, and began looking over it. Ed cast his gaze over to the fireplace, books piled in the grate more for convenience's sake than fuel. In contrast to the living room, this mantle was stuffed with things: an ash tray (empty and clean), postcards, a ceramic abstract figurine of an occult-looking banana-sheep hybrid, and a photograph in a carved wooden frame. The photograph was a portrait which looked like it had been torn from a larger image, and was of a woman Ed recognised instantly. Silver hair on a woman who looked too young for it. He was now certain he was talking to the true Robinson.

"It must be difficult..." he began, turning around. But Robinson was engrossed in the paper. His eyes were centimetres from the page, and as wide as Ed had seen eyes. Robinson turned to him briefly.

"What?" he snapped. Robinson straightened, grabbed the small parcel, and forcefully tore the sellotape from its seams.

"About Mrs Robinson. Difficult, since she died, I'm sure. You were a team, I gather..."

Robinson's free hand grabbed Ed's shirt front, nearly pulling him off his feet.

"How dare you? How *dare* you?" he growled.

"I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"You come here-"

"I did," he squeaked.

"You come here asking questions about my past."

"Yes?"

“Digging around in something that’s not your business.”

“I was just interested-”

“Never drag Sally into your little plot. *Never*. And anyway,” he said, throwing Ed off, “Sally is not dead. She... She’s presumed alive.”

Ed smoothed himself down, and took a small step back.

Robinson looked away.

“She’s alive?” Ed had read the forums, and Sally was perhaps even more of an unknown than Robinson himself. She disappeared / she was abducted (by the FMB / KGB / aliens...)/ she left her husband. Funny how the women in these stories were always discussed in the context of scandal and relationships, or as damsels in distress...

“I’ve led a busy life, Mr Talbot. Too busy at times. We did indeed work as a team, for some time, but...”

“She left you?”

“She didn’t-” Robinson tensed again, but then relaxed. “She... Mind your own business.”

Robinson seemed suddenly to remember the parcel, the open box. He looked into it again, appeared puzzled for a second, and cast a meaning-filled glance at Ed.

“So you’re not burning everything,” said Ed, hoping to salvage the conversation.

“Just the junk,” said Robinson, drawing some kind of paperweight out of its ripped paper padding.

“Arcadia records?”

“Some. This is incredible,” said Robinson, turning the glass over in his hands.

“Archives? Memos? Minutes?”

“The useless stuff. Plenty of it. This is unbelievable.” Suddenly he looked up, then straight at Ed. “This is something to do with you, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“This manuscript. And this... this thing,” he said, waving an angular glass bauble. “Who put you up to this?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

Robinson squinted at him, waiting for a tell, a twitch, a hesitation. None came.

“You mean to tell me it’s a coincidence you and these... this *junk* dropped onto my door mat on the same day? The same morning? Come on, you must-”

“Look, I really don’t know what you mean. I came empty handed.”

“And you’ll go away likewise if you don’t tell me what this is all about.

Where did you get it?” Robinson waved the paperweight at the manuscript on the desk. Ed now saw the latter was torn down one side, and the former was a large and pentagonal lump of glass or crystal. The glass was around four inches across, with something suspended in the centre. The paper on the desk was thin and crinkled, and covered in intricate patterns and unfeasibly small text. “This is Arcadian property, Mr. Talbot.”

Ed shrugged his shoulders. “Well then...” he tried. “Arcadia was real.”

“Of course it was real. *Is* real! I just have nothing to do with those nincompoops any more.” He leant over and studied a diagram on the paper.

“Arcadia still exists? I thought it was some kind of millennial...”

Robinson looked up at him.

“Cult?” said Robinson. “Church? Army? No, sir. Arcadia was state; was government. We were publicly funded. That was its greatest strength, and its downfall.”

Ed, feeling the man's tongue loosening, took his chance. "This Arcadia was set up to save the world from apocalypse, no?"

"That's one way of putting it," Robinson said with the weariness of one who had explained this over and over again.

"And we're still here, right?"

"I detect the imminence of some sort of sophistry..." he groaned.

"So you must have done good work. The evidence is all around!"

Robinson merely shook his head, and turned his attention once more to the crystal in his hand. Ed now saw that the object trapped within the glass was a letter 'A', in a curling, Gothic serif. It was black, made of a material that absorbed all light hitting it, making it hard to tell its dimensions, two from three.

"If you didn't deliver this," Robinson said deliberately, holding the object to the light, "then..." He trailed off, giving Ed the distinct suggestion that something weird and/or interesting was going on, unknown to both of them.

Robinson spread the curling paper out fully, using the paperweight as a... well, a paperweight, and Ed peered over Robinson's shoulder at it.

To his uneducated eyes the document looked like a blueprint. The print was not blue, however, rendering the name somewhat inappropriate. The paper was covered from edge to edge with lines and letters, all drawn in a dark burnt orange ink. Some of the lines ran multiple parallel courses, suddenly turning at right angles, acute angles and those other angles one forgets the name of. Others curved in twos or threes, crossing the other tracks as they went. Lettering only appeared in a few places, running between the lines and rendered in a font so small that even Ed's eyesight could not discern it clearly. The whole resembled the plan of an

underground rail system with no ground un-tunnelled, no address not served by a station.

Two shapes seemed to dominate, though only as a Magic Eye image emerges from a tangle of repeated patterns. One was a circle, taking up the majority of the page, while the other was a tall trapezoid, like a triangle with its peak removed. If Ed's eye skimmed the page too quickly, trying to pin down the designs, both shapes disappeared. Then they would slowly reappear while the gaze was fixed on a point, trying to read the snatches of text that might have been labels, explanations, little poems or assembly instructions.

The manuscript was a circuit diagram, a sewer map and elaborate flock wallpaper all in one. In this way the whole of the paper was covered, but the tear down the right hand side showed that there was more to this diagram than what they had in front of them.

Ed leaned in to try to read some of the hundreds of words. The tiny text seemed to float off the page, the paragraphs squirming and trying to escape the gaze like a politician at a rostrum. Ed could only make head or tail of a few:

“In the beginning is the End, and in the End, new beginnings.”

“Solvitur ambulando.”

“The adept is always accompanied.”

“Square the circle's two sides.”

Ed said: “I've seen this before.”

“What! How can you-?”

“In pubs. Catchphrases and verse painted on the walls. It's meant to sound deep or something, I don't know. But it's nonsense. It's gibberish. I mean, circles with two sides?”

Robinson's shock died quickly, but at the word 'gibberish' he looked again at Ed.

"Don't underestimate the power of gibberish," he said. "Just because you don't understand the meaning doesn't mean there isn't one."

Ed hummed blandly. He'd seen more than one Internet personality build up an air of mystique around themselves by parroting meaningless 'deep truths' like this. If it sounded like real philosophy it went viral. If it was something bloody obvious that everyone agrees with it went stratospheric. If it was self-evident but one or two loud-mouthed dissenters chose to disagree it made the evening news.

Something troubled Ed, however. There was still a chance Robinson himself had a hand in all this, perhaps a PR team behind him. In no time at all Robinson could be trapped in the jungle or some kind of locked and monitored compound with a dozen other self-important beached careers; one last hurrah before the world said "no really, that's enough of you, thanks".

On the manuscript, one word stood out from the rest, dotted as it was all over the place: Arcadia. It appeared in the middle of sentences, it appeared around the edge of the paper in what looked like labels or computer file names, and it even appeared buried half-disguised in some of the intricate lines which covered the manuscript.

"So, what is this thing?" Ed asked Robinson.

"Well, it's a..." Robinson paused, as if choosing the right word. "It's a... Well, isn't it obvious?" While Robinson's head didn't move, Ed could see his eyes turned surreptitiously towards him.

"Should it be?"

“No, you’re right, of course it shouldn’t. Not to any old novice. But the important thing is that it came from Arcadia.”

“That much is clear.”

“Exactly. That’s all you need to know. That’s what’s important.”

“So what is it?”

Silence, then Robinson said:

“Well, if you didn’t bring it here-”

“I didn’t.”

Robinson paused again. Ed leaned in.

“Then someone sent it.”

“Right.”

Robinson gestured at the torn edge. “We need to find the rest of it. To work out what it means. *Means*-means. We need to find out who sent it.”

There was a trace of energy in his voice for the first time. Up to this point, Robinson had sounded like the victim of everything, and everything tired him, had beaten him. “Someone is obviously trying to contact me, to tell me something. Look at this thing!”

“That’s -” Ed stopped himself before he threw away his opportunity.

“You’re right. You know, you’re right. We should. Where do we start?”

Robinson put on the appearance of thinking for a moment, but Ed had a feeling that the man knew exactly what he wanted to do.

“Look at this:” Robinson pointed to a line of text which stretched down one side of the document. This text was different to the rest, grey and separate and blocky, unlike the warm tones of the majority.

A:\backup\docs\copy_of_backup\backup_of_A\backup\docs\19990
811.wps

“A computer file name?” Ed said, justifying his Level 2 Powerpoint Training certificate.

“I know of only one computer that could create this file. And I know exactly where it is.”

“Great,” said Ed. “Bring it out.” He stood back.

“Not so fast, Gigabyte,” said Robinson with excitement. “It’s not here.” He pulled the paper off the desk and folded it several times, picked up the paperweight and put both in his pocket.

Robinson walked out of the study, and swung a coat off the bottom of the banister. He patted the pockets and looked around the hallway. Spotting keys in a saucer by the phone, he walked over and grabbed them.

“Where are you going?” said Ed.

“Might as well start straightaway, Mr. Talbot. I must say, I have to thank you for excessively researching my past online, tracking down my personal home address and coming to see me out of the blue, and suggesting my wife is dead. Otherwise I might not have come to see the answer.”

“The answer?” said Ed.

“Yes,” he said as he moved back into the hall. “Appropriately, it was printed on that manuscript: *solvitur ambulando. It is solved by walking.* Meaning: you don’t sort out anything without getting out there. Which is what you’ve done, and which I must now do. You have been very helpful. Thank you. Pull the door to when you leave.”

With that he unlatched said front door, and stepped outside. Facing the very real possibility of tracking down a semi-mythical Internet meme, only to let him escape further scrutiny, Ed Talbot scabbled for delay.

“Hang on,” he said quickly. Robinson half turned. “You’re off to decode this manuscript?”

“Amongst other things.”

“And you think it points to some conspiracy against you?”

“I didn’t say that, but it’s a fine suggestion.”

“And you’re hoping to uncover some evidence of this conspiracy and bring it to the public?”

“Err... yes, I suppose that might come about.” He looked at Ed, then out at the sunny street.

“You’re going to need help.”

Robinson put his full attention on Ed.

“Help?” he said, eyebrow raised. His sceptical voice had returned.

“You’ll need... proof. Verifiable evidence. Witnesses. A witness. Because who would believe the conspiracy king if he tells people there’s a conspiracy against him?”

“I’m not the conspiracy king, Mr Talbot.”

“You are. Remember that online reputation. It firmly places you in the camp with the nutters, the tinfoil hatters, the paranoid and the downright quirky. If nothing else, you need a guide to the modern murky waters.” He already had his phone out again, ready to show Robinson the wonders of social media, and the flood of cynicism, hatred and small-mindedness in which Ed immersed himself daily. “You need someone who knows their way around documentary research, online gossip campaigns, and misinformation. Someone who can sort the wheat from the chaff when it comes to sources.”

“I’m not sure what you’re expecting me to do, Mr. Talbot. This manuscript is some sort of personal threat, perhaps blackmail. It’s got nothing to do with the wider world.” He pulled the paperweight out of his pocket, and inspected it thoughtfully. “Publicity is probably the last thing I need, or would seek. Public opprobrium on social media is certainly something I do not desire. And you with your ‘statistics updates’ or whatever it is every ten minutes is not the kind of documentation I need, thanks all the same.”

Robinson turned on his heel, and walked down the garden path.

“I see,” said Ed, disappointment clearly and loudly articulated in his voice. “I see now. Arcadia. It’s not even real, is it? It wouldn’t do for me to follow you around waiting to meet this shadowy group. Because there is none, is there? I can’t believe I let you fool me...” He stepped out of the house, pulled the door sharply closed, and stamped down the path past Robinson. As he did so, the shirt-grabbing technique was once again applied by the latter. “Now you listen here, you millennial little gen-Xer. I don’t know why I should give even the tiniest of pygmy marmosets about what you think is real, or isn’t. Take a look at this again, Mr. Talbot.” Here he let go of the shirt, knocking Ed backwards into the flowerbed, and thrust the paper and the small glass object in its box into his hands. “Is this not real enough for you? Perhaps you think I spend my spare time making this stuff up for fun and timing its delivery to the precise moment you turn up at my door. You think I’ve got time for that?” He stalked off towards the front gate. “I’ll show you real,” he called back. “I’ll show you conspiracies and documentary evidence.”

Ed’s mind was in a spin. He couldn’t remember who was arguing what now. Ed jogged down the steps as Robinson disappeared down the street.

“And put that bloody phone away! I’ll have no distractions!”

Ed did as he was told. Whether Robinson was telling the truth, or was deluded, it promised to make a good story. If nothing else, it would reassert his nature as a journalist, rekindle that flame which he knew still smoldered within him. Through Work he might rediscover that inner Soul. “Excellent!” Ed called ahead with affected authority. “It’s what Sally would have wanted, I’m sure!” The glare Robinson slung over his shoulder suggested something about changing the subject. “Well,” Ed said, “when you think about it, a circle does have two sides: the inside and the outside!”

Robinson stopped and turned around. The expression now on his face was one of genuine mystification, as if the words made no sense, were indeed gibberish.

“It’s a... it’s a joke,” said Ed.

“I see,” said Robinson, then walked away.

Ed looked down at the small box holding the paperweight. The address on it, Robinson’s address, was written in the same child-like scrawl as that on his own note. And there was no stamp.