

# Three Things for a Desert Island / Yoav Avni

## A book synopsis

"The year was two thousand something, but things weren't all that futuristic." These are the opening words of Yoav Avni's first novel. It tells the story of an Israeli high-tech company employee's business trip to a small island, which hides inside the second 'A' of INDIAN OCEAN on the map of the world.

Odi works for AdVice, a company that is developing a decision support system, one of which is urgently required by King Henry C of Koh-Tan-Gent, who is determined to free his kingdom's economy from its dependency on coconuts by initiating a tourism project of mammoth proportions.

Henry C is very different from his father, Henry B, who was a separatist and closed the borders of Koh-Tan-Gent to foreigners, while scattering lethal tourist traps around the island. The incumbent monarch is a good-natured widower with an irrepressible weakness for gadgets and tourists of all kinds. "I do not know of a more cheerful sound than the clatter of suitcase wheels on the city's sidewalks," he says.

Although the temperature is always 27°C in Koh-Tan-Gent, Odi lands on the beautiful island (one of Nature's ways of seducing human beings, according to the king) at a time of unrest – the king's enthusiasm over the proposed project and the tourists it would bring in its wake is not shared by all, and not everyone is interested in seeing his daughter, Alpha-Bravo, continuing the royal dynasty. An organization calling itself The Democratic Crown is demanding that Henry C abdicate and establish a republic on the island.

Traveling with Odi on the flight to Namastown, the capital of Koh-Tan-Gent, is Alpha-Bravo who is sobering up from a bachelorette party and from the effects of a prophecy she was given by an unprincipled fortune teller. She is traveling with

Terry Ken-Do, a childhood friend who is involved in the tourism project and suffers, in Odi's opinion, from an aftershave overdose. And there's also a curious cage of butterflies in the cargo hold whose prisoners are en route to the local zoo.

Odi is employed at AdVice as a technical adviser, but feels he lacks technical skills, as well as the ability to advise others. He boards the long flight to the island with mixed feelings – due to a bureaucratic error he did not get one of the vaccinations recommended for this trip. Now, he mustn't get bitten. All he wants is to conclude his business on the island and get back home at the allotted time, on Thursday.

But Odi won't get back home on Thursday. The first words Alpha-Bravo would say to him when they meet would be: "You look like James Bond's apprentice in that suit." And yes, he'll get bitten. Much deeper than he thought possible.

The novel, which deals with the Israeli propensity to take a big, extended trip around the world after coming out of the army and with the crisis that comes about a decade later, has been described by one reviewer as a "modern fable", while others found similarities with the works of Douglas Adams, Kurt Vonnegut and Tom Robbins. The book has become a bestseller in Israel and a cult book among backpackers and students.

#### Selected Reviews:

The kind of original, zany and funny work that reflects the absurd in our lives. An exhilarating, amusing and very real book that shouldn't be missed.

Amnon Jackont, Yedioth Ahronoth

Yoav Avni's first novel is distinctive in the span of its multicolored wings in the trying-so-hard-to-be-serious landscape of Israeli literature... Truly delightful.

Hagar Yanai, Globes

**Yoav avni - Three things for a desert island**

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In his first novel Avni creates a unique world, his own language and a witty, and undeniably funny, world of imagery. Avni's novel itself can be added to the list of three things to take with you to a desert island recommended by the book.

Yaron Avituv, Kol Hazman

# Three Things for a Desert Island / Yoav Avni

Translation sample (CH 1-5)

Translated by: Margalit Rodgers

## 1 ►

The year was two thousand something, but things weren't all that futuristic.

Technology had made it possible for gossipmongering spy satellites to whisper their secrets in the sky, but in exchange for a bushel of oats donkeys still transported buckets of uranium to the well furnished caves of barefoot fanatics.

The same technology made it impossible for Odi to strangle the secretary who called to inform him of the mistake. He was convinced there were precedents for secretarial strangulation. The year was two thousand something, and there were precedents for everything.

None of this was of any interest to the secretary. "Have you finished yelling?" she rebuked him.

Odi didn't respond. She was merely the messenger, but he knew that virtually all messengers wanted to be dispatched. That was the cornerstone of modern diplomacy, pizza businesses, and even his business trips.

"Have you finished yelling?" she repeated the question, encouraged by the sudden silence.

Odi passed his hand through his hair, which was still long, pulled the imaginary cigarette out of his mouth and tossed what remained of it onto the floor. He had recently taken to smoking imaginary cigarettes. He inhaled imaginary smoke, defiantly ignoring the imaginary Ministry of Health warnings. He could stop whenever he wanted.

Odi had finished yelling but was far from calming down.

"I want you to tell me exactly which vaccination you're talking about," he demanded. "And I want to know why this happened." He didn't like being angry,

or worried, but as time went by he discovered that he was rather good at it. People left him no choice. He was most irritated by stupid and apathetic people who looked at him and through him with a total lack of understanding or interest.

His left hand gripped the cell phone and his right covered his forehead and eyes like a skewed peak cap. Groaning at the insufferable ease with which strangers were capable of impacting on his life, he nodded his dissatisfaction. He'd had enough of the secretary, impatience blustered into the situation room in his brain, scattering stray sheets of paper, driving his mind out of its comfortable armchair.

"Look," she tried again, "the vaccination you forgot to get..."

"What?"

"I was saying that..."

"I heard what you said! You're saying I forgot to get the vaccination! I don't believe you're still saying that!" Odi genuinely didn't believe it. He was about to travel to the end of the world, to a place that necessitated three vaccinations, but a mistake by the company he worked for had left him unprotected.

Odi was sure they knew all that at AdVice, otherwise they wouldn't have sicced the secretary on him.

"Look, I'm not saying anything," she said. There was something slightly Zen-like about it, but Odi imagined that it wasn't in commercial quantities.

This is pointless, he thought, sighing into the telephone. Futile; being dragged into the depth of a vortex by a lower, but more intractable and easygoing, life form than himself.

None of this was of any interest to the secretary. To pass the time she leafed through his personal file – personal because it was about him and only about him, instead of his and only his. "I'm just from human resources," she explained, "the only thing I'm supposed to do is inform you that the destination you're traveling to necessitates three vaccinations, and you've only had two. I've already told you that you got yellow fever and typhoid fever, but you shouldn't worry so much. The third one is always the least important."

“Do you even know where I’m flying to? Do you know that Yoel Shieldman stood with me in front of the map, in the conference room, and had to move four steps to the side and bend right down in order to show me where it is? Do you know that all I could find on the Internet about this island is that it’s triangular and the weather there never changes, always stuck on twenty-something degrees? This isn’t my first time in the East.” He was on the attack. “Every vaccination is important!”

Yoel Shieldman was Odi’s boss. He was almost always away on a skiing holiday. At AdVice they were always saying that Yoel spent less time in the office than people who come to interview for a job. Odi suspected that Yoel spent less time in the office than people who faxed their résumé to the company.

“Of course I know where you’re flying to,” she paused for a moment, searching for the information. “Kotangens, wasn’t it?”

“Not Kotangens. Koh-Tan-Gent,” he corrected her, “it’s in the Indian Ocean.”

“Well, whatever,” she said gaily, “I know everything’s going to be all right.”

Odi’s smile wouldn’t have gotten him through to the next stage of a TV dating show. He didn’t know everything was going to be all right, he didn’t know anything, he didn’t know, for instance, why he’d had to have his hair cut.

It was altogether odd. Despite the unusual demand, Yoel had managed to avoid an explanation and planted in Odi the feeling that with long hair he wouldn’t be able to sell a system in Koh-Tan-Gent. He immediately went on to talk about the cultural differences and told him the story about the Japanese and the defective screws.

It went something like this: The Japanese won a tender issued by an American screw manufacturer. According to the terms of the tender they were to supply a million screws of which no more than one percent would be defective. On the specified supply date they took delivery of a million screws, which arrived with a small package of bent screws. The delivery note explained: “Enclosed herewith one percent defective screws, separately packed.”

"You know what? I think it'd be better if I spoke to Yoel," Odi said. Fucked-up Japanese, he thought to himself. "Would you put me through?"

The secretary giggled, and Odi suddenly realized that her hair was dyed red. He hoped she was exceptionally ugly, although he knew there were no such secretaries at AdVice.

"Yoel's on vacation," she replied, "and believe me I, too, would have preferred one of the guys from sales to speak to you." She made it sound as if they were a close-knit bunch, which was far from the truth.

"Can you at least tell me what I was supposed to get a vaccination against?"

She could. "It's a type of fever, but don't take my word for it."

"A type of fever," Odi repeated, imagining the strands of his voice coiling around her neck. "What type?"

"I think it's something called Caterpillar Fever."

Much to his surprise, he liked the name. "What happens if you contract it?" he asked, slightly more encouraged.

"Weepy eyes, grogginess, tiredness, weakness, fever, hallucinations," she read out rhythmically. "It can result in internal organ failure," she added softly, and Odi pretended he hadn't heard her.

"And how do you contract it?" he asked, slightly less encouraged.

"We don't know exactly," she confessed, "from a bite maybe?" Her voice tried to give him a false sense of warmth and for a moment it seemed as though she knew him. But Odi knew she wouldn't recognize him in a crowd if her life depended on it. He hoped, in vain, that one day her life would indeed depend on it.

"We don't know exactly," he repeated. "You always multiply when you're in the wrong."

"All right then," she tried to conclude, "you shouldn't worry so much, the chances of contracting Caterpillar Fever are virtually zero, and you've got a good medical history."

"Stop telling me I shouldn't worry so much," he demanded. "And what's my history got to do with it? Right now I'm thinking about the future."

"You've got nothing to be afraid of," she insisted, "you're flying out via Bangkok and flying back three days later, aren't you?"

Despite having prepared himself for this part of the conversation, the question caught him off guard. His heart raced, beating out of sync. Odi repeated what he'd told Yoel, what he'd said to the courier when he delivered his airline ticket, what he'd whispered to himself before he locked the front door of his house, before he went out.

"Yes. I'm coming back in three days time, I have to be home on Thursday," he said. "Have to," he added, just to be on the safe side.

Odi had to be home on Thursday. On Thursday he'd watch the game. He'd come directly from the airport, sufficiently early so that finding a parking spot would be the least of his worries, he wouldn't be afraid to look the stairwell cleaner in the eye as he leapt over the wet stairs three at a time as if he were walking on water. The lock would comply when it realized it was him, and the TV would look big, as if its dimensions were metric.

Odi wasn't an ordinary fan. At home games, for instance, he felt outside – he had to go out into the cold, get stuck on the Ayalon Freeway and elbow his way into the stadium, into the heart of the sunflower seed-cracking crowd.

He enjoyed away games much more. He watched them at home, in front of the TV screen, giving way to loud cheering with uncharacteristic ease, with a constant supply of chilled Diet Coke, surrounded by familiar, protective walls. He loved the feeling he got when the team came out onto the court, so yellow and so full of confidence. That was another reason he felt he had to get back home on time, on Thursday.

Odi worked for a company that capitalized on uncertainty. The AdViser – AdVice's decision support system, which he presented on his business trips – was a device that transformed uncertainty into a fairly high degree of certainty.

Certainty was the only perk he demanded. He'd woken up one morning beside a sales manager from Nestlé and saw that her refrigerator was packed with vanilla ice cream. He wanted what everyone else wants – a little of what the company he worked for sold.

Since he'd realized long ago that fate couldn't cooperate with everybody all of the time, he decided to take certainty into his own hands, and whenever he went on a business trip he made it abundantly clear at the office when he had to be back. Every trip had to be circular, symmetric, structured, with a fixed return date. Not a randomly shot arrow. This time it was a game, and Odi announced that he had to be home on Thursday. On Thursday evening, when the basketball game began, uncertainty could continue undisturbed.

"So there won't be any problem," the secretary said confidently. "What can happen in three days?" The world is flat, witches float after being bound and tossed into the river, the speed of light cannot be exceeded, Odi thought – that kind of confidence.

Then she tried being nice. "Udi," she said, "everything's going to be fine. You shouldn't worry so much."

People tended to advise him not to worry so much and almost invariably mispronounced his name. Odi had been waging war against this particular distortion since kindergarten.

"Everything's going to be fine. You shouldn't worry so much..." He swept the words away angrily, "But my name is Odi, O-di, not U-di!" he said in exasperation, "Why can't people understand something as simple as that? I've been working at AdVice for two years now and it's about time you got my name right!" he yelled, tightening his grip on the cell phone. He could have turned lead into gold with his other fist. He heard the rustle of the neckties sported by the pampered salespeople walking on the soft carpets as if he were holding an office conch shell.

One saleswoman broke away from the group and walked towards him. Salespeople do that sometimes. She offered him some coffee and duty-free

items, and Odi knew that salespeople were capable of doing that as well. She smiled at him, an artificial smile, like Cherry Coke. Salespeople frequently do that. She stroked his shoulder and asked him to straighten his seat and fasten his seatbelt.

Odi woke up to the flight attendant's courteous face. No one was stroking his shoulder.

He checked to make sure his hair was short, that he had indeed had his hair cut, and remembered that he'd already had a similar conversation with one of the secretaries at AdVice a few hours earlier, just as he'd been about to leave for the airport.

The interior of the plane was too crowded, too economic, with the smell of aluminum meals and babies screaming at their parents. Odi straightened a little in his seat and examined his rivals. He waged a brief struggle with the plump woman on his left over the armrest, and lost. He drew comfort from the fact that she'd unconditionally defeated the thin, necktied man in the window seat as well.

The plane behaved with exceptional maturity as it lost altitude and its small wheels popped out, like the tiny arms of a superhero with a limb disorder. The landing in Bangkok was smooth, but Odi knew that the beginning could have been better.

Despite everything – he forced himself to think, lighting up another imaginary cigarette as soon the no-smoking-fasten-seatbelts sign flickered on – with a bit of luck it wouldn't end in tears, and perhaps not in tiredness, weakness, fever, grogginess and hallucinations either.

They'd made a mistake, and one of the three vaccinations was missing. He mustn't get bitten.

## 2 ►

Maybe I made a mistake, thought Alpha-Bravo a week earlier, maybe I should have voted for the stripper after all.

She closed her slanting blue eyes, which made most people who saw her for the first time wonder pettily “Why don’t I have eyes like that?”, and listened.

The clumsy footfalls slowly ascended the palace’s spiral staircase. Each one was attended by the rustle of jewelry and large scarves. Each footfall joined its predecessor – heavy, confident, yet also impatient, like the tanks she frequently saw on CNN Asia.

The year was two thousand something, and the world, having failed civics and economics this semester too, remained in deep recession. Even for a princess’s bachelorette party it was necessary to economize and choose – either a stripper or a fortune teller.

Outside, the last footfall echoed on the topmost stair, and then abated – the fortune teller was early.

Alpha-Bravo wondered if a real fortune teller wasn’t supposed to be punctual, and now she was almost sure. It had been a mistake; she should have chosen a stripper.

She had a sudden urge to run to the door and lock it, preventing the fortune teller from coming in, to breathe a sigh of relief with every turn of the key in the right direction, to remain with her two friends in the luxurious room until morning. But she knew she wouldn’t. “What a mistake,” she muttered silently, “a stripper is such a harmless creature.”

She fondly recalled the liberating ease with which a stripper was capable of instantly abandoning a career as a firefighter, policeman or construction worker, stripping off his clothes as soon as the music started, but she’d had no choice – the princess had been compelled to choose the fortune teller because she’d been worried about her father of late.

It was uncharacteristic of her. Little things didn't bother Alpha-Bravo, and she was adept at breaking down the bigger things into little ones. She insisted on keeping her job despite the chorus of criticism, serenely filling the important-but-ridiculously-simple duties she'd been assigned at royal meals, and had adopted three clearly distinguishable smiles.

The first was a classic, long U smile that looked like the signature of a gifted face designer. The second was short, supple and swift, barely perceptible, and like all things of genius seemed exceedingly easy to execute at first glance. The third, her default smile, was average and balanced, and Alpha-Bravo tried to use it as little as possible.

She also scrimped on the number of times she said "oopah".

"Oopah" wasn't a real word in any of the languages she spoke fluently, although it sounded like one whenever she used it – solemnly, when she didn't know what else to say.

Worry had seared into Alpha-Bravo about a month earlier, on the night she happened to see a shampoo commercial on one of the huge screens in an airport. In the commercial a stylish bottle, its top adorned with a crown, strode on a red carpet as the male model's hair cheered and sang: "The king is dead, long live the king!"

Alpha-Bravo had left hurriedly, but the jingle, like a musical weed, was already taking root in her mind – she was the only daughter and sole heiress.

The commercial made the princess refrain from washing her hair for about a week, until people at work started whispering. She had since regained her composure but still worried about her father. She realized he'd ceased being young twenty-five years ago, when her mother died.

Alpha-Bravo knew she wouldn't be able to share her fears with a stripper. Even in their wildest luxury package deals strippers don't offer heart-to-hearts. She'd hoped to get some answers from the fortune teller, but now she wasn't so sure. The fortune teller was a bachelorette party gimmick, and her worries were genuine.

Behind the heavy oak door the fortune teller lit up a cigarette to compensate for the complicated ascent to the palace's topmost floor, and Alpha-Bravo could almost smell the aroma of nicotine and the color of fresh lipstick through the wood.

It could all have been so much simpler, she thought to herself. She looked at her two good friends and knew that had they agreed to make the decision over the phone, before she'd been exposed to the malevolent shampoo commercial, she would definitely have chosen the stripper. Raja, too, would have been quite happy to make the decision back then, but true to form, Julia Thompson had demanded a secret ballot.

The three of them had met at an Asian princess convention about ten years earlier. Raja was from Malaysia, Alpha-Bravo from Koh-Tan-Gent. Julia was the only American and the only blonde. She'd joined the Texan royal family on the day she'd been crowned Dairy Princess at the San Jacinto Spring Fair and was the daughter of Thompson, the ice cream manufacturer who'd sponsored the princess convention.

Years later Alpha-Bravo still wondered if Raja resented her for winning first place.

Now, behind the door, the fortune teller had finished smoking, and Alpha-Bravo could have sworn she heard her kicking the still-burning butt down the staircase. She remembered the sophisticated smoke detectors that had recently been installed in the palace and her father, standing atop a ladder and testing them with smoldering marshmallows on a long skewer. Sadness and yearning competed for her attention and she automatically blocked the path of the tears that crowded at the emergency exits in her eyes, and sniffled.

It went without saying that Julia wouldn't want a stripper. Rather than physical activity, the American princess had increased the number of her visits to church, and whenever the stripper was mentioned, even on the phone, she giggled in a way that would have made Jesus smile with pride from the heights of the cross to which he'd been nailed.

Raja, by contrast, was in desperate need of him. The stripper, not Jesus.

In just a few days she was to be married to a Malaysian prince, an old and tedious lump of flesh who was only active in politics, so her bachelorette party was her last chance to legally do something outrageous.

Now the fortune teller was knocking on the oak door, strong, measured thuds that created a twin echo in Alpha-Bravo's heart. "I think I should've chosen the stripper," she said, aloud this time.

She was sprawled on her back on the soft, shaggy rug, like a crime scene fantasy of police detectives examining the chalk outline of a murder victim's body. The Malaysian beer, which came in thick, squat brown bottles, danced in her head and the numerous incense sticks spread heat and light and fragrance in the room.

Alpha-Bravo's qualms made Julia jump up. "Hey, it was a democratic vote!" she protested. "You can't change it now."

The two real princesses ignored the reference to the alien method of government.

"We need more incense," pronounced Raja. She clapped and sent her companion, who immediately appeared, to the street corner. "Twenty opium-cinnamon sticks," she whispered to her. "The big ones. And don't let anyone see you coming back here."

The companion disappeared as quickly as she had appeared, and the fortune teller slipped in through the open door. With surprising grace, considering her physical dimensions, she bowed to the Malaysian princess. Raja bowed back and handed her a bottle of beer.

"Shall we begin, or what?" asked the fortune teller defiantly, "I've been knocking on the door like a madwoman."

Alpha-Bravo's misgivings were now complete. She straightened up swiftly, knowing she wouldn't entrust anything into the hands of Tamila the Magnificent. She didn't like the converging eyebrows, the crimson head scarf, the heavy

breathing infused with cigarette smoke, and the fake gold earrings dangling from the large woman's ears, swinging impatiently as she walked.

"I like this room," said the fortune teller, as she loudly sipped beer and looked around, "there are good vibrations here."

That's exactly what we could have said about the stripper, thought Alpha-Bravo.

The room was perfect for a bachelorette party. Aside from the vibrations, it was covered in thick wool rugs and dark silk cushions. A narrow clay water channel ran around the walls, carrying pleasant gurgling and babbling between the planters that were big enough to contain citrus, banana and olive trees. Huge drapeless windows invited the shameless moon to peek inside.

"Ah, I see you've prepared everything," said the fortune teller with satisfaction, situating herself in the corner of the room behind a screen separating her from the three princesses. After stroking the crystal cheeks of the ball, she placed it carefully on the table and then lowered her vast hips until they came to rest in a chair she'd pulled up to the table.

"So, who's first?" she asked from behind the screen. Something in her voice prophesied unease and the princesses tried to continue what they were doing.

"Come on, girls!" called Tamila the Magnificent. "We don't have all the time in the world. The future won't wait!"

Julia polished an apple on her shirt and fixed her nails, Alpha-Bravo looked out of the window and wondered if it took less time to fly to the moon on nights when it was full and so close, and Raja lit more incense sticks, and another gust of opium-cinnamon filled the room.

"I knew it would be like this," grumbled the fortune teller, moving the screen aside slightly. "Right. You with the blue eyes. Come on, dear, let's start with you."

Alpha-Bravo wasn't surprised. She'd been picked to go first too many times. She stood up and shuffled towards the screen. Behind it the crystal ball looked small next to the massive woman.

"I said blue eyes!" scolded the fortune teller. She stood up with great difficulty and examined Alpha-Bravo's slanted eyes closely. "Well, I'll be! I wouldn't have believed it. Good for you, sweetie, but I meant the blonde. Come on, darling!" she called Julia.

Raja was second and Alpha-Bravo third.

As she drew closer to the chair, this time to sit down, cold air filled her lungs and her heart swung from side to side like an agitated pendulum seconds before the clock chimed midnight. The crystal ball wasn't completely translucent, wispy vapor trapped in it like in a kettle's bowels. She wanted to get it over with and return to the familiar present.

Alpha-Bravo had no problem at all with the present; she'd had some of her best times there. Unlike Sleeping Beauty who let a hundred years elapse as she slept in her bed, Alpha-Bravo was a princess who knew how to live in the moment. "The present is a frozen future that's thawed," she once wrote in a journal she'd kept when she was fourteen, "every second of time turns into the present after being in the future beforehand." She'd discarded the journal four years later when she counted no less than a hundred and eight quotes from Duran Duran songs.

"Are you all right, dear?" asked Tamila the Magnificent.

"Yes, kind of," replied Alpha-Bravo. Too much beer, she decided as she sat facing the heavily made up mass, too much opium-cinnamon in the air, too much perspiration and dampness, too many heartbeats per second.

"Relax, darling, it's only the future," said the fortune teller. "But I understand how you feel," she added, scrutinizing the blushing Alpha-Bravo's figure. "I'd kill for a present like yours."

Tamila the Magnificent covered the crystal ball with a cheap scarf she'd picked up in the market. Then she took a deep breath and rearranged the cable of the recording device she'd concealed on her body.

The fortune teller's savings were rapidly becoming extinct and she knew that very soon she'd have to find a real job; otherwise she'd be living on the streets again.

It was her son who'd persuaded her to make the secret recordings. "Mother, there's nothing that can't be sold on the Internet," he assured her. "I'll get hold of a small tape recorder, you'll record your sessions whenever you're with famous people, and I'll sell the tapes. We'll split the money fifty-fifty."

The fortune teller laughed whenever she recalled the audacious proposal. Fifty-fifty! And from her youngest son, no less, the one she used to threaten with a terrible future when he was younger if he didn't eat all his vegetables. But he was right. It seemed to be the only solution. Probably illegal, she thought, but poverty should be illegal too.

She removed the scarf from the crystal ball and began speaking in a clear, loud voice, directly into the microphone concealed in the chasm of her cleavage.

"October 22nd. Tamila the Magnificent and –" she looked up from the ball at Alpha-Bravo.

"Alpha-Bravo," the princess completed her sentence.

"Tamila the Magnificent and Alpha-Bravo," repeated the fortune teller. "What is it that you do, dear? Are you a princess like the other two? I was told on the phone that this was a party for three princesses."

"Yes," answered Alpha-Bravo, "I'm from Koh-Tan-Gent. It's a smallish island, three hours flight south of here." And immediately reproved herself for the excess information she'd volunteered. She wanted to make it brief and return to the rug's embrace.

"Well, that's good to know, dear," said the fortune teller. Excellent, she thought to herself, three princesses! Someone will definitely want to buy it. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, her pupils were dilated.

Here it comes, they both thought.

But it didn't. As much as she wanted to finish her part in the bachelorette party, hand the tape over to her son and go to bed, it seemed to the fortune

teller that she hadn't paced her powers correctly, that she'd spent all she had on the first two.

She tried not to be irritated by the little smile resembling a stowaway that had crept onto the lips of the princess sitting in front of her.

Tamila the Magnificent turned the ball slightly, trying to improve the connections, but couldn't utter a word. It had happened to her once before, but then it had been a case of indigestion.

Alpha-Bravo heaved a sigh of relief. "Never mind," she reassured her, "it can happen to anyone sometimes." She stood up, amiably patted the fortune teller's soft, broad shoulder and moved the velvet screen aside, but Tamila the Magnificent swiftly grabbed her arm. Her grip was strong and Alpha-Bravo knew that the fortune teller was capable of breaking her arm. Now. In the present. She sat down.

"It's happening, my dear, because you're radiating resistance," the fortune teller rebuked her. Her fingers encircled the princess's arm easily, blocking the blood trying to flee to her fingertips.

"What are you doing? Let go!" demanded Alpha-Bravo. Her other hand clenched into a fist.

"I'll let go when we're done. It's bad luck to get up in the middle like that," said the fortune teller, still gripping her arm. "What's your star sign, dear?"

"Oopah," said Alpha-Bravo angrily and tried to escape. "I think I'm allergic to astrology."

"Your two friends were much easier, and that made it easier for me too," Tamila the Magnificent insisted, tightening her grip, "I'm tired too. I want you to stop radiating resistance."

"I'll radiate whatever I want!" Alpha-Bravo said furiously. "Let me go! There's nothing in the book you probably read on how to become a fortune teller in three weeks that interests me. And besides, I know what you were going to tell me anyway." With her free hand she brushed a stray strand of hair from her eyes, "I'm almost thirty, so I'm probably going to meet someone in the near future,

right? Someone who'll finally understand me without having to make an effort, someone who clearly possesses something – something real you can put your finger on, who you can sense when he draws near." Again she tried to get up, and again the fortune teller kept her in her seat until the bones in the princess's arm groaned under the pressure.

Impertinent brat! It was How to Become a Fortune Teller in Seven Weeks, not three, she thought irritably, but knew that the princess's outburst had saved her, that now she'd be able to conclude the session. The fortune teller swung back into action.

"Of course you're going to meet someone, dear," she promised, "and I'll tell you something else –" she recalled the chapter that discussed associations and improvisations. She was about to perform what the guidebook called a "Jazz Phrase". The technique was simple. She had to assemble something, anything, from the first three things that popped into her mind. This time it was the financial paper she'd read with her morning tea, the last movie she'd seen, and her youngest son who'd once told her, before he got into computers, that he wanted to be a hairdresser.

"You will meet someone, sweetie," she repeated. "I see a business suit. I see kung-fu, I see something to do with hair."

"Excellent, sweetie," Alpha-Bravo mimicked the fortune teller's deep voice and couldn't believe that just a few hours ago she'd seriously considered speaking to this woman about her father. "Please let go of my arm and I'll make a note of it. A suit, kung-fu, something to do with hair, right? Great. Let go of my arm, you madwoman. Now!" the princess commanded, raising her voice. She'd never had to treat a grown woman this way.

"Alpha, is everything all right?" asked Raja from behind the screen.

"Everything's fine. We're just finishing off," replied Alpha-Bravo, "aren't we?" she lowered her voice. "You can still leave without any trouble. We'll call it a minor misunderstanding. You know what, we won't call it anything. Ever. We'll

leave it at that. A suit, kung-fu, something to do with hair, see, I remember. How about it?"

Tamila the Magnificent released the princess's arm and shrugged. "I was just doing my job, dear. No need to get tetchy."

She left immediately after that, not even stopping the secret recording. Princesses are vindictive creatures and the fortune teller didn't want to take any risks. She went down the staircase with as much speed as her body could muster, holding the crystal ball in both hands, like a frightened marsupial cub.



"See you soon," Raja announced and hugged them both as they parted at seven the next morning.

"Next time we'll meet at my place," said Julia, "maybe I'll finally manage to get Brad Pitt to come to a family meal."

The two real princesses smiled. Julia had remained stuck on the top of her family tree. Ever since they'd met her she'd boasted a family connection, vague and unrealized, with Brad Pitt, her distant cousin.

"Wake up, Julia, you'll never get the chance to pass him the salt," laughed Raja and pulled Alpha-Bravo to a corner of the room.

"Alpha, are you all right?"

"Sure," she replied, although suddenly she wasn't so sure.

"You don't look all right," said Raja. "You're always the calmest of the three of us and now..." she concluded with a bewildered shrug.

"I'm fine, Raja, it'll pass. It's passed. It's nothing. Here, look." Alpha-Bravo managed to release one of her long U smiles, and Raja felt a warm tingling sensation spreading through her.

"Are you sure you can't stay another day or two?" she asked

"I'm sure," replied Alpha-Bravo. "I have to get back to work."

"You know, I've never understood why you insist on working."

"I know." She smiled her long smile again. "And what about you? You haven't changed your mind? You don't want me to come to the wedding?"

Raja sighed. "There's no point. I insisted on something small, and in any case I'll cry through the whole thing. It isn't going to be a happy event."

"You could still –" Alpha-Bravo ventured, but Raja shook her head, her short, unruly hair striving to touch her miniature shoulders. "Are you going home from here?" she asked.

"I wish," replied Alpha-Bravo. "I don't know why, but I agreed to do the whole route. I've got a few days in Shanghai, then one night in Hong Kong and from there to Bangkok, and only then home."

"When are you meeting Terry?"

"In six days time, in Bangkok."

"I can't believe it's already been a whole year," said Raja.

The Koh-Tan-Gentian princess didn't respond. She didn't feel a need to justify the time.

They parted, and in the time it took Alpha-Bravo to reach the airport, Tamila the Magnificent had already managed to sell the recorded conversation with the help of her son who was permanently connected to the Internet.



It was exactly what Yoel Shieldman had been looking for, a week earlier, although he only realized it after he'd found it.

He sat in his office concentrating on the computer screen as if he was about to beat it in a game of chess.

Yoel Shieldman was shorter than average and somewhat gaunt. His bones, and his hair it seemed, were packed with dry, stiff calcium. A nondescript gold watch he'd received from his wife's parents sparkled on his wrist. No charm was produced as a byproduct of his movements, but he was brilliant.

He'd been gathering information about Koh-Tan-Gent all morning. Yoel knew that the trip to the distant island could be the door through which AdVice penetrated the Southeast Asian market, maybe even the East Asian market, maybe even the whole Asian market. He appreciated doors. He wanted to hold

the key, the secret code that neutralizes the alarm system, and to peek through the keyhole as well.

The business card of the island's king was on his desk, and Yoel drummed it on the desktop. He had no sense of rhythm, but he did have quickness of mind. He'd found the business card among the multitude collected by the company's representatives – the crop from the last international exhibition.

He'd come across the recorded conversation between the fortune teller and the princess quite by chance, when it was offered for sale on an Internet website devoted to the minor royal families of Southeast Asia.

Yoel Shieldman decided to take a gamble. He believed in gambling that didn't risk anything except someone else's peace of mind. It was simple – in addition to the technical adviser he'd send, if he had in his possession information about the princess he could influence her, and then he could, perhaps, get to her father as well, making it that much easier to sell the system. Yoel's past experience had taught him that the shortest route to attaining his objectives was not necessarily the direct one.

He picked up the phone.

"Suzy?"

"Yes, Yoel?"

"We need to make a bank transfer of fifteen hundred dollars to Tamila the Magnificent Inc." He gave her the details. "And I need a list of all our technical advisers who are available for a business trip in six days time."

He lingered for a while and listened to the recording. "...something to do with hair," the fortune teller's voice flowed through the Internet to the two speakers on his desk, and Yoel Shieldman was convinced he'd made a good deal. "Suzy," he asked the secretary, "Odi's going to be available, isn't he?"

"Just a second, I'll check... I know he's got the day off today, tomorrow he's flying to a meeting with the Dutch bank, and he'll be back the next day," she replied. "But then you know Odi," she added, "he's always got an important reason for coming back straight away. Yes. I think he's going to be available."

"Excellent," said Yoel. "Suzy," he added, "just to be on the safe side, get that list to me anyway and mark an asterisk next to the bald ones and those with long hair."

"Okay."

"Excellent. And one more thing. Pick up the phone."

"Yes, Yoel?"

"Don't put this expenditure in your monthly report," he added. It was his move; he sometimes thought his superiors preferred procedure over success.

"When do you need the list?"

"Now. I want to make a decision today about who's going to Koh-Tan-Gent, before I leave for vacation."

"No problem." Suzy wasn't in the habit of asking unnecessary questions. That was her little secret of survival, her modest contribution to the evolution of secretaries.

Yoel Shieldman leaned back in his executive chair and listened once again to the recorded conversation between Tamila the Magnificent and Alpha-Bravo.

He picked his nose intently, as he did whenever he smelled a business opportunity.

### 3 ►

On the morning of her flight home from Bangkok Alpha-Bravo was forced to swear. Fortunately, the range at her disposal was vast.

Apart from the Koh-Tan-Gentian dialect, she also spoke English, Hindi and a little Chinese, which were her father-, mother- and grandmother-tongue respectively. The princess could, if she wanted to, send someone to look for a fisheye in a plumber's backside, or wish that they'd get stuck in an elevator with a real estate assessor in a variety of languages. But she only swore when she had no other choice. At first she made do with "oh!" and then moved on to "oof!" and "shit!", and finally, when the appliance in her hand died, she hissed: "Ju-dong-mujongari-lav-da!"

As she did every year around November, Alpha-Bravo removed the small amount of hair that had sprouted on her legs during the past year. She sat on the edge of the bath in the hotel room and, as she always did, treated this activity as a necessary nuisance, which she attended to with the same reluctance that beset her every time she paid the royal tax that had been imposed on her since she'd reached maturity – an occasional photograph for the newspaper at the inauguration ceremony of a new square in the capital or a brief speech every few months at the hospital's children's ward.

The hairs mounted the helicopter-shaped device one after another, like soldiers in a hostile rice paddy, but one of them was left behind when the appliance switched itself off.

After she'd sworn, she held the appliance up to her slanting eyes and inclined her head slightly to locate the malfunction. When she did so, her black hair came down almost to her waist.

Alpha-Bravo was good with machines. She'd dismantled and reassembled her biological clock numerous times.

With one sharp movement she turned the appliance until she beheaded it. She gathered the last “ooohs” remaining in her and with one long “phooo” cleaned the head, reactivated it and collected the last remaining hair as well. Then she finished packing her small suitcase and got ready to leave. The morning was running out.

The meeting with Terry forced tense anticipation onto her, and that, too, was uncharacteristic. Again she looked at the photograph he’d sent her, set against the skyline of an American city. He looked rather good and so self-assured. Almost a year had elapsed since their last meeting and after every “Ciao, sweetheart” with which Terry concluded the video chats she held with him from her father’s study, Alpha-Bravo decided that it was pointless to debate the difference between “ciao” and “bye”, which she preferred much more.

A final glance at the photograph clarified what bothered her – suddenly she was sure she didn’t recognize anything he was wearing. Not only the shirt and tie – the socks too, or the underpants. I’m not sure you can say you truly know someone until you know all their clothes, she thought to herself.

And she hadn’t forgotten the fortune teller. Suits, kung-fu and things to do with hair haunted her in her sleep, and when she looked at the photograph again she wondered if the suit jacket wasn’t somewhere near Terry and it was just by chance that he hadn’t been wearing it when the photo was taken.

Outside, the Monday noonday sun augured well. The night before she’d refused to take the royal suite at the Hong Kong Ritz-Carlton. She didn’t like receiving special treatment when she was working. She made do with a simple room, where she slipped and hurt herself as she loosened her hair when she stepped out of the tiny bathtub.

If the fortune teller knew anything about the future, she thought to herself, she should have warned me about the stupid bathroom.

Alpha-Bravo hurried to the airport, the improvised bandage on her right elbow preventing drops of perfectly shaped O<sub>+</sub> blood dripping onto her smooth legs.

## 4 ►

Despite the lateness of the hour the airport was packed. The year was two thousand something, and people rarely did anything alone.

The flight to Koh-Tan-Gent approached rapidly – in terms of time, not distance – and Odi pushed the trolley.

He tried to look like all the other passengers, and with his suitcase and the AdViser, which at first glance looked like just another laptop in a black leather case, he almost managed to pull it off – but Odi knew that very soon the calm would be broken.

The Airport Security Disorder he suffered from, and which he hadn't stated on the medical form he'd filled in when he joined AdVice, was in all probability about to break out. Soon, Odi thought, and for no justifiable reason, he'd be surrounded by security guards.

The disorder made undercover security personnel reveal themselves to him. Investigators presented him with their interpretation of the Prisoner's Dilemma, and policemen talked to him briefly, mainly about drugs – simplistic talks about light drugs and heart-to-heart talks about hallucinogenic drugs.

Odi was the immediate and prime suspect in every airport he went through.

To policemen he was the core of gut feelings, the butler who's already dunnit and is now escaping on a pleasure vacation. He saw himself as the Dreyfus of modern aviation. Whether due to excess security or deficient security – it was a problem of security.

In order to join the line that was forming at the boarding gate he had to pass between two policemen. They stood three meters apart, but Odi knew he wouldn't make it.

Policemen and wizards, who are located on the two extremes of the reading comprehension scale, can spot worry from a distance and scorn it. None of this was of any interest to the only wizard in the airport at the time. He was

preoccupied with the purchase of three bottles of greenish absinthe for the price of two, but the two policemen homed in on Odi when they detected the sigh he swallowed, and cautiously closed in on him as if they had seen the perfect crime for the first time.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the senior of the two. The law compelled him to speak courteously. On his epaulettes three lions embroidered in gold thread roared next to a single pineapple.

"Hi," said Odi.

The other, a lone jackal between two banana trees on his epaulettes, licked his lips in excitement: "Passport," he demanded, his eyes gleaming.

For the next thirty seconds the two policemen scrutinized him suspiciously, as Odi tried to capture the elusive document by the tail and pull it out of his bag. As he handed his passport to the jackal, he tried to look as much like the small, upside down photograph.

They examined one another, all of them, the four of them, and Odi was somewhat alarmed to discover that he felt equally detached from the two policemen and the small photograph, in which his hair was still long.

"Cut hair? Cut hair?" asked the jackal, Inspector Clouseau in his eyes.

Odi blurted a short chuckle that was merely the tip of a colossal, inestimable chuckle. He wanted to burst into laughter even if he'd be charged with breaking and entering, he wanted to hop in front of the policemen even if he'd be charged with hopping, and yell "Cut hair!? Cut hair?!" as he tugged their ears.

In virtually every conversation with a stranger he felt as if he were only two or three mistakes away from a situation in which he'd find himself handcuffed, temporarily insane, being led into custody in a nameless prison to the cheers of traitorous bystanders.

The lion didn't wait for an answer. "This is a routine inspection," he explained, but Odi knew that policemen never comprehended that it was their routine, not his.

"Where are you flying to?" inquired the lion.

"Namastown, Koh-Tan-Gent."

"Ah, the triangular island," said the lion, exchanging smiles with the jackal.

"And where have you come from?"

"Tel Aviv."

"Israel," pronounced the lion, "nice place. Boom-boom, eh?"

Odi shrugged.

"How long will you be staying in Namastown?" asked the jackal.

"Just three days. I have to be back on Thursday."

"Have to..." the lion repeated, leafing through the passport. When he came to back cover he raised his head, disappointed. The end neither proved nor disproved his suspicions.

"There's a game on TV," Odi explained, even venturing a smile, but none of this was of any interest to the policemen. "Business or pleasure?" asked the lion.

"I've never understood why those are the only two options," said Odi.

"What did you say?" the jackal became agitated.

"Nothing, never mind. Business," he managed to correct himself, "I work for a company called AdVice. I've got a meeting tomorrow with the king at the palace in Namastown."

"Oh, the king," the jackal mimicked the lion.

"They say that the king of Koh-Tan-Gent," said the lion in the hushed voice of a confidant, "will buy anything that has electricity flowing through it, you know. Are you trying to sell him something electrical?"

The jackal made an effort to maintain a serious expression.

"I'm not a salesman, I'm a technical adviser," Odi said cautiously. "The system is called AdViser." He pointed to the black leather case on the trolley. "It's a decision support system," he explained.

"Oh, decisions," said the lion and handed the passport to Odi. "Very important."

"Very important," repeated the jackal.

"High-tech," said the lion.

"High-tech," echoed the jackal.

"High-tech," Odi concurred.

Apparently that was the password. They let him through, and the jackal burst into laughter. "Hey! Don't look so worried!" he called after Odi who was advancing towards the line boarding the plane without looking to the left at the accursed TV screens that were compelled to perpetually repeat departure times, or to the right at the portrait of King Rama IX.

The Thai king was hanging, but not in the way the revolutionaries intended. He peered serenely from the center of a placard that covered an entire wall, in a pressed uniform and the hint of a smile forming in the corner of his mouth, as if asserting: "I am the king. I control Thailand. I control myself."

Odi remembered the wall from his last visit to Bangkok, ten years ago, during his long, post-military service trip. Then the picture had filled him with wonder, and he remembered that he'd taken six or seven photographs of the king – all of which were now stuck in one of his photo albums. This time he turned his back to the policemen and the huge placard, although he suspected that this constituted an offence involving moral turpitude. He regarded policemen as the monarchy's watchdogs, and Odi didn't like dogs.

"Man's best friend" was a meaningless campaign. Who'd want to be man's best friend? Dogs had an ulterior motive, dogs had a lot to learn from creatures that had a backbone, like butterflies.



He pushed the trolley alongside the windows of the terminal and his image reflected in them. This was the most suitable moment for first impressions – and Odi instinctively straightened up.

Although there was a greenish tint in his eyes, he'd always been considered brown eyed. He was of average height. That wasn't about to change, but as he walked he incorporated some hip-hop into his strides so he seemed taller. Every fiber of his body wanted to be cool. As he did whenever he traveled to a hot country, he was wearing a cut-sleeve T-shirt, and in his orange sweatpants and

gray basketball shoes, he didn't look like the serious, starched technical adviser featured in AdVice's ads. His biceps were impressive, but not so impressive that they could get him out of trouble.

Odi peered at the glass surface reflecting his image. He didn't have to be in mortal danger for his life to flash before his eyes.

When he was born everything looked promising. He learnt to stand on his feet and sprouted teeth, he gave up diapers, trainer wheels, reading aids. He learnt basic mathematics and thought, like other children, that collecting empty Coca Cola cans was a worthy pastime.

Symptoms of disenchantment with humanity already began appearing when he was in pre-school, when he stood at the side of the sandbox on a cold winter's day for four hours just because he thought he'd heard the teacher telling him to wait for her on the side. In first grade he was infected with distrust when he discovered that someone had taken his box of Cuisenaire rods during the recess between PE and arithmetic, and cynicism erupted towards the end of the week when the colored rods suddenly reappeared, and the principal's son, who was in the same year, had to give a talk to all the first-graders about the concept of "property".

Odi completed his simple mathematics exam successfully, and in later years more complex mathematics as well. In elementary school he developed an aversion to dogs and extreme sports. In high school he discovered a proclivity for black music. He grew up and only stopped to think at the Israeli checkpoints, at the ages of 13, 18, 21, and also 23 when he was about to embark on his trip to the East, where he tried to build himself with a self-assembly kit, helped by friends, with the enthusiasm of building a barn with the Amish.

Now the year was two thousand something, and Odi knew that sometimes he was almost happy, but even on a good day the difference between almost and truly seemed too big, so big that God the coward chose to be in the small details.

Sometimes, although he wasn't a doctor, he diagnosed that something wasn't quite right. The worried shadow he cast increasingly resembled an unsuccessful

x-ray image. He wanted to be true to himself and when he heard an internal click, he didn't always know if something in him had closed or broken.

In fact, it was enough for him to know what was expected of him – he had to change, right?

Odi also presumed he knew how – among other things he had to position himself at an equal distance from the yin and the yang, from the feng and the shui, from the carpe and the diem. He had to protect himself, not give more than he got, not seem eager but not give in either. He had to cut down on sugar, salt, meat, milk, cornflakes, Diet Coke. He should go overboard with water, green and orange vegetables, contentment, belief in himself. And above all, he should look less worried.

The year was two thousand something, and dealers were offering bargain price Ferraris previously owned by long-haired monks before they started secluding themselves next to each other on mountaintops. For the first time in history the paths of employee committees and awareness workshops converged.

The apartment in Tel Aviv was his castle and the Yarkon River his moat, but the barn he'd built started falling apart. It seemed to Odi that people didn't need to make special efforts to disappoint him. The so-called Amish made money, had children, or both.

A few days before the trip to Koh-Tan-Gent, when he was filling up at a gas station, he realized that slightly more than thirty two years was slightly more than a third of a tank and although the bulk still remained, Odi felt that he was driving on fumes.

On the face of it, all he needed was change, but Odi was of the opinion that everybody needed change. The world turns and every human-hamster running on the Earth's crust has to change a little with every turn, just to remain in the same place.

Now he was an employee and his mother was happy. The frequent overseas trips made her believe that he was seeing the world and meeting interesting people, although in actual fact he mainly encountered talking business cards.

For the past two years he'd devoted most of his time to work. At AdVice they liked that, and Yoel Shieldman had made Odi the star of the department. But AdVice had sent him to the end of the earth without one of the required vaccinations.

Since he didn't believe in the afterlife – only butterflies engaged in active reincarnation, dying as a chrysalis wrapped in shrouds and reborn with wings – and since in order to improve their lot in this life people frequently chose a type of ball and a type of hoop and rewarded themselves with outrageous prizes if they managed to sink at least two out of three throws, Odi had decided to let his team play for him.

Professional basketball players would make one of those throws for him. They'd probably win and something of that would stick to him too. That was another reason why the game on Thursday was crucial, that was another reason why he had to get back in time.

## 5 ►

Odi approached the noisy tail of the line, and beyond the windows of the terminal he saw the aircraft cruising slowly towards the telescopic gangway. Now the flight to Koh-Tan-Gent was drawing near not only in terms of time, but also distance. The plane seemed too small and old – too small to contain all the people thronging the boarding gate, and old, like an executive jet that has gone bankrupt and is prepared to take any job that comes its way.

Apart from the flight attendants who smiled at everything that moved, it seemed as though every single person in the line suffered from a certain degree of autism. Odi noticed the ape element he discerned in every human being. They all gnawed at the banana of the soul whilst preoccupied with their petty affairs – fixing a tie, picking at an ear, making some inconsequential remark to a nearby relative, rechecking a boarding pass and trying to ignore the big picture surrounding them. It seemed as if each and every one of them had celebrated life alone in front of a cheap birthday cake at a party that could have been more successful if only there'd been more friends or surprises.

Airports always looked the same to him – the same place translated in every country into the local language.

Judging by the line, Odi decided that the Koh-Tan-Gents had something else in common – they were all very different from him. Light-skinned men with a Chinese appearance, sporting natural Charles Bronson hairstyles and small, sparse, matching moustaches. Overgrown, swarthy Sikhs, their hair contained in a thicket of fabric. Short-haired, irate matronly women in dresses resembling garish pajamas made from cloth that to Odi seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. There were also some young parents and noisy Pucca kids arranged in families that reminded him more than anything of a sales promotion for a product in distress – buy two adults, get four more children. Here and there willowy students giggled more than necessary and, by contrast, an assortment of

solemn, shaven-headed monks and local businessmen tried to mask the spiritual or material disdain glinting in their eyes. Odi identified a few Westerners as well, but they were no consolation – two or three Europeans about his age, but boring, yellow-haired and unjustly tall.

Odi glanced at his flight companions again and sighed. Normally, he wouldn't want to get stuck with them on a desert island, but this time he knew that if everything went as planned – that's what would happen. He felt greater affinity to the beverage vending machine in the corner, lit up another imaginary cigarette, and blew invisible smoke rings.

Outside, the fine rain turned into a water park with millions of droplets bungee jumping and scurrying back to the end of the line. "What a downpour, eh?" he heard one of the flight attendants say with a smile. They'll be smiling when the world comes to an end too.

The passengers stood in pairs in two disciplined lines that advanced at the speed of a candle flame. Soon the lines would conclude their role, and the passengers would stride through a long tunnel and take their seats. They'd be handed newspapers and salted peanuts and cover themselves with blankets. Angelic flight attendants would divide them into two groups, business and economy.

When he neared the front of the line, an odd sound began coming from the other line. Someone there had violated the law of lines.

Odi detected the bandage moving towards the black beard at about the same time – they were both equally uncommon. Waving his magnetic card with the skill of a Jedi knight, the bearded man ousted a monk and took his place.

Lines, Odi believed, are a far more noteworthy invention than the wheel. Unlike wheels, lines prevented thousands of wars every day – over a slice of bread, cut-price tickets to musicals, over the way home.

None of this was of any interest to the bearded man.

He looked semi-European, and Odi thought his stylish beard had been imported from France. It wasn't a nice beard, he decided, if there was such a

thing. It wasn't the kind of beard Smiley would have grown had he been stuck in military reserve service, or on a desert island.

The beard aside, a cloud of overstated elegance hovered over him, like an overdose of aftershave. He was one of those men who wear turtlenecks to hide a short neck, but infuriatingly manage to turn it into a visual advantage.

He was what went through the mind of whoever wrote Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better – including living, and when Odi picked up his suitcase, the bearded man spread his arms, which were more muscular than his.

From the other end of the line, from the telescopic gangway leading to the plane, someone called out "Terry!" and like a bowling ball that makes every pin in its way go weak at the knees, a blaze of black hair rushed past the blushing ground crew. She came to a halt with her back to Odi, trapped in the bearded vice from which only the white bandage hiding her right elbow could be seen.

The flight attendant's uniform she wore, a kind of tight-fitting sari that ended just below the knee, was the right color blue, and her hair was long and straight. Odi was willing to bet that her toenails were painted in black nail polish, and that her eyes had to be blue. Or vice versa. Or both. He wanted to know more.

In order to see her face he had to step out of the line, pass the knot of policemen standing nearby and press against the wall of the terminal, towards which her face was turned. The policemen scrutinized him suspiciously, trying to recall the precise warning about orange sweatpants, and Odi knew that the maneuver was liable to cost him the entire trip.

With his eyes he tried to shoot arrows into her back to make her turn around, and every time one of his arrows struck he was filled with sweet anticipation, but the distance was too great, and her head was buried in the bearded man's pectorals. Her hair gleamed so brightly that he thought he could see his face in it, reflected between one drag of his imaginary cigarette and the next.

He could, however, see the bearded man's face.

He looked about thirty, with an aquiline, almost broken nose – silent and aggressive testimony to the manner in which he demanded and got what he was entitled to from the world, without fear of repercussions.

His hair was very short and his face square with a wide chin that excelled in beard growing. Odi presumed that when he was eager to obtain something, when he lifted weights or leaned over something in his bed – the effort was evident in his face. The beard encircled his mouth like a muzzle.

Odi didn't like beards. People with beards, he suspected, are hiding something. They are incapable of connecting with their feminine side without alarming it, and when they eat soup, their mouth looks as if it's surrounded by a wet rag.

"Good evening, Koh-Tan-Gentian citizenship?" asked the flight attendant in a honeyed voice, and Terry replied: "Among others." He pulled out three passports and handed one of them to the flight attendant.

"Have a nice day, Mr. Ken-Do," said the flight attendant.

Odi looked at them in disgust and lit up another imaginary cigarette.

With one last wave of his magnetic card, the bearded man was effortlessly upgraded to business class.



Something about Terry Ken-Do detonated a depth charge in Odi, releasing other things he was averse to – gold for example. The year was two thousand something, and castes were widespread. Gold customer clubs closed their doors to the unworthy. In Odi's view it was an arrogant and tasteless metal, perfect for the false teeth industry. Had Odi been an Olympic champion sworn to defending his title, he'd have been torn between the desire to win and aspiring to the medal that looks slightly less vulgar on one's chest.

He managed to get a quick look at the magnetic card before it went back into its sheath. Gold, of course. Inscribed on the card were the letters M.M.I.Y.M. in a delicate cursive font, contrasting harshly with the cardholder's thick fingers.

It could have been symmetric, if only she'd flung a glance in his direction. It could have been symmetric if the bearded man's arms hadn't embraced her so tightly, barely touching the bandage on her arm.

Terry Ken-Do, who treated Alpha-Bravo like a rare truffle, knew that where there were truffles, sooner or later pigs would turn up as well. He noticed Odi looking and, his arms still around her, with big, exaggerated movements of his lips in slow motion as if he'd popped the chemical opposite of speed, in accentless English and with an unpleasant, sadistic and soundless smile, waving a finger directly into Odi's face, he mouthed the words: "I-know-kung-fu."

The threat was so abrupt and direct that for a fraction of a second Odi lowered his eyes to the terminal floor, igniting the bearded man's smile, his finger still drawn.

Odi was glad that the owner of the bandage didn't turn her head. A large gob of digestive juices rose to his throat. He didn't want her to see him like this. He wanted her to know that he wasn't always like this, that there was another side to him, or perhaps just a corner or aspect, of calm.

In hindsight, he wasn't surprised. Life persistently sent him little warnings whenever he left home and flew to a meeting – two cyclists he'd almost run over in Amsterdam when he failed to indicate a turn into Ferdinand Bolstraat, a neurotic Roman coffee drinker who cursed him furiously in a nameless piazza when Odi inadvertently trod on the hem of his Versace, Swiss rain, only apparently neutral, that sought out people like him who believe that umbrellas don't make any difference, and now a bearded kung-fu aficionado on the other side of the world.

He somehow felt relieved. He knew he wouldn't make it to Koh-Tan-Gent without incident.

Terry Ken-Do flew business class and Odi didn't want any business dealings with him, but minutes later, inside the plane, wrapped in a blanket, a Koh-Tan-Gentian newspaper in his right hand and a bag of peanuts in his left, he already wanted an opportunity to wipe the smile off the bearded man's face, and to see

whether the owner of the bandage was symmetric from the front as well. His heart beat to a vague tribal rhythm, and every Rorschach blot would have reminded him of a triangle.

The flight to Koh-Tan-Gent began with the aircraft's powerful acceleration, as if its life was in danger. This is how one should live life, Odi reminded himself for the thousandth time as the metal tail was the last thing to detach itself from the ground, on it the Koh-Tan-Gentian flag: a green triangle against a blue background.