

## THE EXPLODING HEART

Looking at the printouts again the figures seemed to swirl around his head. The neatly tabulated rows of numbers he had printed out for before he had finally got to bed. Operational costs, monthly wage bills, heating, lighting. The list of overheads seemed to go on forever. How much could they recoup by scrapping the current machinery, Charles wondered again. Twenty-thousand. That couldn't be right. He was sure they had come to a figure more than that. Oh, it was all such a a mess. He had tried to convince his father to act sooner but Harold Brown Esq, as he still liked to sign his business correspondence, was one of those old-fashioned Northern businessmen who couldn't bring themselves to acknowledge that the world was fast-changing around them and that the textile and garment business, that bastion of Yorkshire's industrial past, and the business which he had inherited from Charles' grandfather was now teetering on the brink of financial collapse.

And so, recently, there had been a number anxious meetings with their accountants and a certain amount of what Mr Brown Snr might be refer to as 'plain-speaking' amongst the board. Secretly, Charles wondered it might even be too late for all that. He hated this frantic action so late in the day. Like his father, Charles considered himself risk-averse when it came to matters of business but for him that entailed acting early not procrastinating until all other options had evaporated.

But here was where they found themselves and Charles had at least finally convinced his father they had now run out of choices. They would have to close the factory operation in Leeds which at its peak had provided work for eighty staff - skilled cutters, machinists and designers whose woollen suits had dressed bankers and businessmen from Manchester to Mayfair. Besides no-one worse suits any more. The fashion these days was for business casual. The days of the three piece, the rigid conformity of a tightly buttoned waistcoat, had disappeared along with the pocket-watch and the bowler hat.

“Don't talk soft, lad,” his father had snapped, “A suit maketh the man.”

And Harold may, in his venerable wisdom, have been right about that but the simple fact was that suits longer made any money. For now Charles, as finance director of Brown & Co., had stalled the bank manager and secured a further nine-months on the credit line but most importantly Charles had begrudgingly brought his father around to his idea of a 'strategic reappraisal' although the phrase itself made the old man wince. If Brown & Co. was going to survive at all then it would no longer make men's suits but focus on the growing demand for womenswear. To that end, Charles had secretly placed ads in Draper's and interviewed a number of potential young designers for the job but the manufacturing operation, that financial ogre that Charles had been wrestling with all summer, that had to go and they would have to lay off many of Brown & Co's loyal workers and search for an overseas outsourcing partner who could assemble their designs for cheaper than they could produce them themselves.

And so, as Charles placed the printouts back into his briefcase and relaxed into his seat in the stuffy second-class carriage of the 6.09am train from Leeds to King's Cross, this, he decided was, the purpose of today. He would meet the representative of the Hungarian manufacturing operation whose details had found on the internet and who had spoken to a couple of times on the telephone. He would finalise costings and examine the samples which they had promised to bring and he would show them the designs for the new womenswear collection he had in mind for the autumn. If they could agree to the figures he had laboured-over all week then it was just possible that they could commence on the new lines in time to give to the buyers for winter and possibly - just possibly - avoid the ignomy of bankruptcy but that was by no means a certainty. But then, as Charles had come to realise in recent months, certainty was a commodity in particularly short supply.

As the train whistled past the outskirts of London and through Chalk Farm and

Camden laden with commuters reading newspapers or tapping away on mobile phones, Charles began to consider whether he himself had made a sartorial error wearing a suit to the meeting. In the warmth of that July morning, he could feel sweat patches beginning to form under his arms. Perhaps wearing a suit would give an impression of affluence which would hinder his efforts to haggle over the manufacturing costs? Still, it was a Brown & Co. suit an elegant charcoal grey two-piece from their 2004 collection and a Brown & Co suit still implied quality and imbued a certain solemnity into proceedings. It would at the very least give the impression that he was keen to get the deal done although exactly *how* keen was something he would need to be a little guarded about.

As the train finally ground to a halt at the platform, Charles checked his watch. Eighty-fifteen. He had forty-five minutes to spare. As it happened, Charles always turned up to meetings early. Mr Nagy, the operations manager in Budapest, had told him in a short, ungrammatical email that a driver would meet him at King's Cross station at 9am but now a doubt began to manifest in Charles' mind. What station? Did he mean the tube station or the train station? Perhaps there was something had been lost in the translation? Did Nagy even know that King Cross had two stations? As he grabbed his briefcase and queued in the aisle of the carriage along with the other commuters waiting to descend to the platform, Charles could feel the sweat snaking its way from his armpits to his torso. There was no need to be nervous about this, he told himself, and at least he had time to spare. The driver was probably not even here yet and it would give him time to check the tube station entrance too. Somehow, he gently assured himself, somehow it would all work out just fine.

As Charles exited the ticket barrier he scoured the concourse as a passing elbow thumped against his ribcage. The vast space was crammed with people. Armies of office workers marching in columns towards the exits, bewildered backpackers gazing at the flickering departures board and a group of schoolkids who were noisily

jostling each other and occasionally spilling into irate commuters. He hated London. Leeds was a big city, of course, but London.... Well, London was so pleased with itself. And for what? What was so great about London? It was noisy and filthy. People had no manners in London. People had no class. London didn't obey the rules.

Charles checked his watch again - seventeen minutes past eight and then as he looked up he noticed the man with the cardboard sign. A stocky man in a dark suit holding a piece of white card that had just the word BROWN written on it in thick black marker pen. As he squinted at the man, their gaze met and the man nodded in his direction. Charles took this as a good omen. Punctuality was a quality he much admired in his colleagues.

“You Brown?” said the man gruffly as Charles approached.

“Yes. Charles Brown. You must be from...”

Charles offered his hand but the man had already turned.

“Good. Car is waiting. We go now.”

The man walked briskly towards to the main exit of the station and Charles couldn't felt but feel rather perplexed by the introduction. He himself wasn't big on formality but there was a certain brusqueness to the man which felt rather alienating. Still, in his research on outsourcing he had come across an interesting article in the business press about cultural differences. Perhaps this was simply how the Hungarians liked to do things and he could appreciate an attitude which had a certain directness to it. Besides, at least they had been early.

Outside the station, the man pointed towards a black Mercedes. Charles secretly found himself rather impressed at this mode of transport. Business was obviously good. Surely another good omen. As then as Charles slid his suit over the soft-leather back seat of the Mercedes, he was rather surprised to find himself sitting next to what he presumed to be his prospective business partner.

“Mr Brown?”

A thick swarthy hand extended itself to him as the car suddenly pulled away from the station with a screech of tyres.

“Yes, Charles Brown. How do you do?”

Charles looked at the man as he felt his huge, muscular hand engulf his. He was late twenties possibly early thirties but with a very closely cropped high-style that gave his gaunt face an almost skull-like quality. He couldn't help but notice his companion's expensive wristwatch nestled next to an enormous chunk of gold rope that looked thick enough to moor a small boat.

“Good. My name is Sergei.”

“You're early,” blustered Charles, “which is good. I've been very much looking forward to our meeting. I think I have everything with me.”

“Very good,” replied the man as he gazed coolly out through the passenger window.

The man's thick accent was something which Charles was trying to get accustomed to. He had never heard Hungarian spoken before. It actually sounded more like Russian and Charles couldn't help but feel slightly irritated by the man's aloofness. Although they would at some point have to get down to the difficult business of hammering out the numbers, Charles felt things could still be cordial. But perhaps this was the Eastern European way of doing things. Perhaps the man felt uneasy about showing his hand too early and later once the ink had dried on their agreement they would make jokes over a bottle of wine at lunch and all this awkwardness would all be forgotten.

“And you have some samples of the product?” Charles enquired as the car edged it's way up Euston Road, one of the great clogged arteries of the city.

“Of course,” said Sergei “We have. You will like.”

“We're really looking for something young..... Well, young and fun.”

Sergei grinned.

“Yes, young and fun. We have for you.”

At eighty forty, the car swung into Tavistock Square and pulled up outside the doors of the Euston Hilton as the man on the front passenger side opened the door and got out.

“We have room here,” said Sergei as he reached for the door, “We show you everything, Mr Brown.”

Charles couldn't help but feel the last words came out with an air of menace. There was now something about this whole thing that was now beginning to make him feel slightly uneasy. Perhaps it was all part of some ploy, he mused, to get the upper hand. Some sort of strange game to out-psych him.

On the seventh floor of the Euston Hilton, Sergei and his associate stood either side of Charles as the lift door opened. He glanced briefly at the other man as he followed him along the corridor. He was still wearing a pair of dark sunglasses that rested on a fat, squashed nose that looked like it belonged to a boxer.

“And I take it you work with, Sergei?” Charles asked.

It was less of a question more of an ice-breaker which Charles had hoped might lead to the opening of a more convivial rapport between them but whatever it was it was not reciprocated. The man nodded silently. Charles looked at the thick barrel of his chest which looked like it might at any moment erupt out of his crisp white shirt. With the man's suit jacket resting over his arm, his upper torso like an enormous iceberg. A cold, glacial expanse that seemed to move irresistibly down the hallway.

Room 713 where the men were staying turned out to be a suite. Probably not the hotel's best suite, Charles surmised, but a suite nonetheless. The main reception room

had a sofa and a chaise-lounge arranged around a large wooden coffee table on which sat a couple of packs of cigarettes, a mobile phone and three tumbler glasses. On the far wall were two elegant french-style windows. Charles sat down at the coffee table gently placing his briefcase at his feet as watched Sergei fumble with something across the other side of the room.

“You want drink, Mr Brown?” Sergei asked swivelling around.

Charles could see in his hand was a half-full bottle of whisky the top of which he was already busy unscrewing.

“Erm... it's a bit early in the morning for that, isn't it ?” replied Charles still slightly dazed by the suggestion.

Now he felt baffled. Sure, there were cultural differences but it wasn't even nine in the morning and this strange host, this prospective Hungarian business partner of his, was offering him whisky. What kind of mavericks were these people? They hardly spoke, played these unsettling mind games and now were offering him liquor before the working day for most people had even begun.

“I drink,” said Sergei pouring a large measure of scotch into one of the tumblers and reaching for the packet of cigarettes on the table.

“I think you'll find all the rooms are no smoking actually,” ventured Charles.

“I know,” replied Sergei “But who give a fuck?”

And he smiled a horrible leery smile that exposed a chipped front tooth.

By now Charles had all but forgotten about Sergei's silent companion. He seemed to have disappeared into a side room and Charles was concerned that this whole meeting, if it could even be considered as such, was rapidly descending into some dark farce. He checked his watch again. Eight forty. Ok, he told himself, this was all a little unconventional but perhaps this was the Hungarian way. It was time to get this show on the road. He would take control of the situation. He had come to do the deal and, damn it, he would get the deal done! Get back to the business in hand.

Show them how business in Britain should be conducted.

“So perhaps we could start by you showing me the samples,” Charles proposed.

“Yes, yes. My friend he bring now. You see. Like you say, young and sexy.”

“Young and sexy? No, I said young and fun.”

“Ah, yes... young but fun.”

At that moment, the door to left opened and the iceberg reappeared with what appeared to be two slender, young women wearing matching neon pink bikinis and who were now nervously smiling at Charles.

“As you can see... young and fun, no?” Sergei commented.

“Erm... yes, you could say that,” said Charles trying to clear his throat, “I'm not sure it's exactly what we had in mind but I can see there might be a market for that type of thing.”

Sergei nodded thoughtfully and casually gestured towards one of the girls who dutifully began to untie her bikini top.

“Umm... I don't think that's really necessary,” said Charles nervously, “I think I can see everything from here.”

“Is no problem,” replied Sergei, “Like I say, we show you everything.”

The synapses in Charles' brain now suddenly went into a frenzied overdrive. Who were these men? And who were these two semi-naked young women who stood nervously in front of them? His mouth hung wide open like the entrance to a railway tunnel.

“You no like?” Sergei whispered as Charles found himself silently staring at the young girl's pert pink breasts.

What followed was what seemed to like a monumentally long pause while the occupants of the room each tried to decode each other's reactions.

“Look, I'm terribly sorry... there seems to be some awful mix-up,” Charles



babbled still trying to grasp some words which might seem fitting.

“You say young but fun. They young, no? They fun, no?”

Charles was immediately aware of the rising tone of anger in Sergei's voice. He watched him as he stood up and inhaled deeply on his cigarette. Over on the other side of the room, the iceberg glared at him.

“Look, I don't want this. I don't mean to offend but...”

“Why not? Why you no want? They nice girls...”

“I'm sure they are very nice ladies. I'm sure they are but I'm not here for anything like... I mean I don't want to do anything with them although I'm sure and I don't mean to offend any of you I'm sure they're perfectly nice...”

Charles could feel himself babbling as Sergei took another slug of whisky from the tumbler.

“Look, don't fuck me around, Mr Brown. We bring girls now where's money?”

“What money?”

“Fourteen thousand pounds.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Fourteen thousand. We agree seven thousand a girl. You better have money. You tell me in car you have everything.”

It was only at this moment that it suddenly occurred to Charles exactly what Sergei's proposition amounted to. For a moment, he had thought this was some sort of lewd introduction but, no, now it was beginning to sink in. “*Seven thousand a girl.*” He was actually trying to sell these women. These two poor girls who couldn't have been more than seventeen who and were now both standing in a hotel room just off Tavistock Square, shivering and practically naked.

“Look,” said Charles trying to mask his growing terror with a tone of righteous indignation, “I don't know what the hell is going on here but I don't have fourteen thousand pounds and I certainly don't want to buy these women. I think you are very confused.”

“No. No confused. You Brown?”

“Yes, I'm Mr Brown....”

“You Brown from Birmingham. You have Brown's Sauna in Birmingham, yes?”

“No, I'm Charles Brown and I'm finance director of Brown & Co in Leeds...”

“What is Brown & Co? It is sauna?”

“Certainly not! It's not a sauna... we a tailoring firm and we're the fourth largest....”

“Ok. Mr Brown. Ok. You shut fuck up now, see?.”

For the next couple of minutes, Charles sat on the sofa silently while Sergei and the iceberg spoke in low, hushed voices. His brain was still busy trying to assemble a coherent explanation of exactly how he had arrived in this situation. His MBA had taught him about strategy, accounting, entrepreneurship and marketing but what did it offer him now? Nothing. Meanwhile, what remnants of rationality that still remained was telling him to remain calm but deep in the cavity of his chest, his heart was manically thumping away.. He could already feel his sweat-soaked shirt sticking to him. Perspiration gushing from every pore of his skin. His instinct was to run but there was at least ten feet between him and the door and what if he didn't make it in time? The morning sunshine was beginning to stream through the windows at the end of the room. No! This couldn't be happening. In a moment, it would all be exposed as some sort of ruse. This was perhaps a strange Hungarian joke they were playing upon him. Or it was one of those TV shows where innocent members of the public were confronted with some horribly implausible situation. Or perhaps he had got the day wrong? But no, he had checked and double-checked. It was definitely the seventh - he had remembered it when he wrote it in his diary - then, just as Charles looked at his watch again and saw that it was ten to nine, there seemed to be a strange shudder that he could feel in the building almost like an earthquake.

Sergei must have felt it too because he flashed a curious look at the iceberg. They had all felt it, hadn't they? What on earth was this morning turning into?

“Look, if you don't mind I'd really like to go,” said Charles.

Sergei glared back at him.

“No. You stay here, Mr Brown.”

“Look, I think there's been some terrible misunderstanding here. I'm not here to...”

“You shut fuck up now,” Sergei repeated “I know you go and tell police. You think I'm stupid?”

“Look,” said Charles desperately trying to sound accommodating, “I don't know what's going on here and quite frankly I don't think I want to know. If you let me go I'm not going to tell the police. I'm not going to say anything about any of this. Just let me go and...”

“You think I stupid? You think I fucking stupid?”

Sergei was now positively exploding with rage and Charles realised that this approach was only making matters worse. He should shut up now as his host advised. Whether he liked it or not this was for all practical purposes a hostage situation and now it occurred to him that he had seen a documentary about these situations a year ago on television and he was now frantically trying to remember any sort of advice that it has imparted. What had it said now? He tried to picture the face of the police negotiator. What were the golden rules? Ahh, yes that was it... *in these circumstances the worst possible recourse was to antagonise his captors.* However difficult it may seem in this moment, he would have to do his very best to remain calm. That was it. He would have to remain calm or else... or else what? That didn't bear thinking about. What was that *what?* That was now a question Charles tried desperately not to ponder.

Outside on the street below, there suddenly seemed be almighty cacophony of police wailing sirens coming from all directions. For a moment, he considered that

perhaps the police already knew what was going in room 713 of the Euston Hilton but, no, how could they? Who would have raised the alarm? There hadn't been any raised voices. No screams for help. Perhaps he should scream for help? No! That was the worst thing could he do right now. That that went against all the advice. But what the hell *was* happening out there? Charles had never heard so many police sirens in his life. And now, as he sat on the sofa, with all these questions tumbling through his mind he could see Sergei and the Iceberg looking nervous and uncomfortable. They must have heard it too. They, like Charles, had sensed that outside some drama was unfolding.

“I'd like to go the toilet,” said Charles trying desperately to think of something which might sound reasonable.

The iceberg strode over to the sofa and lifted Charles up roughly by the arm.

“Give me phone,” growled the man.

It hadn't even occurred to Charles that that was a way out. He could have texted someone in the toilet. Would someone even have taken such a text seriously? Surely, they would think it was some kind of macabre joke. Instead, he took his mobile phone out of his pocket reluctantly and placed in the iceberg's enormous, out-stretched palm.

“You go toilet but I go with you.”

Charles fumed at the indignity of it. He needed the toilet though. All that anxiety had now worked its way down into his bladder and soiling himself would only make matters worse. It would have felt like an admission of defeat and this hotel suite was now a battlefield. This was psychological warfare and in spite of the very real fear he felt inside, he had no intention of surrendering any time soon.

“I really think I can go to the toilet by myself!”

“No,” grunted the iceberg.

For a few minutes Charles tried to reason with his captors but all along he knew it was pointless. Still, it was about killing time and the longer the time went on the

longer he could put off anything *really* bad happening the more possibilities there were for some opportunity for escape. In the end, he managed to negotiate a compromise in broken English whereby he was allowed to relieve himself whilst the iceberg stood in the open doorway of the bathroom. The act itself at least took away some discomfort but there no avoiding the fact that the immediate situation remained unchanged. Afterwards, the iceberg escorted him back into the lounge which was now empty except for Sergei who pushed him roughly down on the chaise-lounge.

They all sat there for now for four or five minutes in complete silence and Charles had the growing realisation that none of them had any clue as how to resolve this impasse.

“Look, if it's about money,” said Charles, his hand reaching inside pocket of his suit jacket, “then I have...”

Charles could see the iceberg reach for something in his own pocket as he peered inside his wallet.

“I've got forty... I've got forty five pounds,” he replied dismally.

“Yes,Sergei grinned, “You are a little short, my friend.”

“Er... I could. I could write you a cheque.”

As the words left his mouth, Charles shuddered at the absurdity of the suggestion. A cheque? These were not men who accepted cheques. Gangsters didn't take cheques. Everyone knew that. No, these men had two currencies, cash and blood, and one way or the other they would insist on the account being paid.

Charles looked up now to see the iceberg handling a dark object he had pulled out his jacket.

“Look,said Charles gasping for breath, “Let's be reasonable here. You're reasonable men. I'm sure you are.”

Except that the timid tone of Charles' statement betrayed how really quite unsure he was about this proposition. Did they even understand the word? Was it even in their lexicon? But they were not stupid. They couldn't commit cold-blooded murder

in a hotel room in central London and get away with it. The idea was simply absurd. For one thing, they would be heard. Surely, it was a bluff. Even in London a city which seemed to obey no rules whatsoever you couldn't just go shooting people at half past nine in the morning! And as these thoughts raced their way through Charles' mind and he tried to ascertain exactly what unspeakable acts it *was* possible to commit at this time of the morning in a suite at the Euston Hilton he watched the iceberg retrieve a long dark cylindrical object from his pocket and screw it on the barrel of the gun.

Oh shit! They really had been one step ahead of him all of the way and he had been a fool for not acknowledging it. He now pictured himself slumped in the bathtub with a single shot to the head to be discovered tomorrow morning by a distraught hotel maid who would recount her story with quivering lips to a TV news crew eager for ever grisly detail. And Sergei and the Iceberg? They would get away with it. They would get away with it because they inhabited some shadow world where murdering people and trafficking in human flesh were all perfectly acceptable ways of earning a living.

“Look,” Charles desperately ventured, “look... let's not do anything silly. We can work this out. We can fix this. I'm sure we can fix this.”

Charles could hear his own voice but it was a voice even he had ceased to believe in. Of course, they couldn't fix this. These animals wanted their fourteen thousand and he didn't have it. What did he honestly think they were going to do? Apologise about trying to sell him some young women and threatening him with a gun and ask him politely not to mention any of this to the police?

And it was at that very moment, that moment when Charles had resigned himself to it all - resigned himself to being found slumped in a bath - that was when it happened. An almighty flash and a bang which shook the room and shattered one of the windows and for a split second Charles had thought that the gun which the Iceberg had been pointing at him had been discharged and he reached for his chest.

Except that it then occurred to him that it couldn't have been the gun because he was still alive and suddenly there was a strange moment of silence where no-one did anything whilst the whole room shook with a horrifying shudder and there was no sound whatsoever except for the clinking of the tumbler glasses on the table.

Sergei and the Iceberg edged towards the window, pulling the net curtains aside transfixed by what was happening on the street below and it was at that precise moment that Charles decided to seize his chance. With the two men absorbed in what was happening outside, Charles bolted for the door. They hardly even noticed him as he grabbed the handle, wrestling it open, and sprinted outside but Charles didn't look back. He raced down the corridor and barged past a couple of hotel guests on the stairs, jumping two or three stairs at a time. He navigated whole flights like an olympic hurdler - the adrenaline all the time surging through his veins - until he finally reached the ground floor and raced out of the hotel lobby onto the street.

Just in front of him, to the right on Tavistock Square, he could scarcely believe his eyes. A double-decker bus with the top deck ripped off like it had been opened with a cheap tin-opener. And a strange pungent smell of sulphur that reminded Charles of Guy Fawkes' night. There were some people in tattered clothing stumbling about on the pavement and what looked like red paint splattered against the wall of a building on the square. On any other day Charles would have stopped to take in the spectacle but now he didn't stop. He ran past the bus, ran past the square and he didn't stop running. He didn't stop running until he couldn't find himself in a place he didn't recognise, unable run any more and he felt as if his poor beating heart would explode.