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Martin Amis: In the Palace of the End

As one of the doubles of the son of the dictator, I am often to be found in the Palace of the End. Six days a week, to be precise: and twelve hours a day. Actual public impersonations of the successor — parades, investitures, going on television, and the like — are by now a thing of the past. But we have our standing duties. In the mornings, I set about my work in the Interrogation Wing. Then, in the afternoons, following a glass of scented coffee with the other doubles, I make filmed love to — or have filmed sex with — a series of picked beauties in the Recreation Wing. The Palace of the End is built in the shape of a titanic eagle: the beaked head downturned, the scalloped pinions outthrust. ... It was the brainchild of Old Nadir, who is very slowly dying of the injuries he sustained in the notorious "toilet bomb" assault at another of his palaces, in the south of our country. And now all power rests with his only son: Nadir the Next.

Until recently, at least, my work in the Interrogation Wing was not particularly onerous. I wasn't obliged to participate in the full course of the numerous procedures. My job was to "appear," super suddenly, at the climax of this or that cross-questioning (which might have gone on for days or weeks); flanked by armed infantrymen, I would stamp into the cubicle, wearing camouflage fatigues and cripplingly heavy combat boots, and administer one backhand blow to the suspect's face. And that was all. But nowadays, for several reasons, I am expected, as are the other doubles, to apply myself more variedly. We have not exactly been reduced to the status of mere bucket boys and poker-warmers — no; but in these tense times we must put ourselves about and show willing.

The interior of the Interrogation Wing used to be laid out in the traditional "cells and cellars" arrangement: dripping passageways, clanking iron doors, rooms within rooms ("the kennels"), and so on — with the howls and screeches of the suspects decently muffled or snatched or cut short. Now it's rather more open plan. One enters an anti-hospital, a vast factory of excruciation: there the strappado, here the bastinado; there the rack, here the wheel. The more communal atmosphere is meant "to discourage the others," and it's certainly true that, as far as the suspect is concerned, the introduction to the Interrogation Wing is far worse than any death. Indeed, it became almost universal practice for the prisoners to attempt summary suicide by the only means available: the dental excision of their own tongues.

However understandable, this response also entrained a paradox: the tongueless ones could neither proclaim their innocence nor (by far the wiser course) trumpet their guilt. In one way, it made no difference. At a certain point — perhaps months later — the prisoner's head would give a lolling nod, and the interrogator would stroll to the old Xerox machine for the standard confession, which the prisoner would then initial. After more torture preludial to death, ninety-nine per cent of those who enter the Interrogation Wing are eventually hanged; the remainder are sent home fatally envenomed, with a day or two to live — and, no doubt, a tale or two to tell. It goes without saying that this minority never includes any tongueless

ones. They have a tale to tell, but they will never tell it.

Anyway, these days the question of the tongueless ones is academic. There are no more tongueless ones. All suspects now have their teeth smashed and pulled in the cubicles of the Reception Hall, long before they are even fingerprinted by the registrars.

At twelve-forty-five, the doubles congregate in the doubles' commissary, which is situated in the main body of the building — in the golden eagle's muscular torso. At any given time there are twenty or thirty doubles stationed at the Palace of the End (though there are scores of us in the capital, and dozens more in every major provincial town). Idling and milling around the doubles' commissary, we enjoy a glass of coffee, and ready ourselves for the work of the afternoon.

For a double, this half hour in the doubles' commissary is a depersonalizing experience, to say the least. We all measure six feet one, and we all weigh two hundred and twenty-seven pounds. We all have the same glistening black quiff, the same protuberant, blood-flecked brown eyes, the same slablike front teeth (with the same missing canine), the same patch over the same eye. We wear an eye patch because Nadir wears an eye patch; and Nadir wears an eye patch because he was shot in the face, by a bodyguard, seventeen months ago. And here I touch on one of the heavier duties of a Presidential double. All the injuries sustained by Nadir, during the course of the increasingly frequent and desperate attempts on his life, must, naturally, be duplicated in his surrogates. For the blast to the left eye, we were, in turn, strapped and clamped into position with a small blunderbuss poised on a tripod six inches away; many doubles were lost in the initial efforts (despite countless experiments on a variety of suspects), and many more were decommissioned when their wounds failed to heal in the proper way. Similarly, every double lacks a right kneecap, a left heel, a left shoulder, and the fourth and fifth fingers of his left hand. We have all spent time in wheelchairs, on crutches, in neck braces, in arm casts. We are additionally subject to periodic poisonings. More recently, we all had our hair scorched off (after a flamethrower attack on the son of the dictator), and for a while a team of barbers and surgeons appeared every day to regulate the condition of our fuzz and blisters.

Entering the doubles' commissary is, as I say, a depersonalizing experience. It is to enter a hall of mirrors. Who is that man by the window with his back turned to the room? He slowly swivels. Yes: it is I.... There's no little pleasure to be had, naturally, in mingling with one's peers. But the conversation is always somewhat strained. It isn't just the guaranteed presence of five or six professional informers, posing as doubles — for we are all informers, and inform on one another as a matter of course. No. It is the feeling (entirely unfounded, no doubt) that Nadir himself is perhaps among us. Once in a while, as you pass the time of day and complain about the weather, you sense in your interlocutor a wavering heat in the eyes, and a heat from the body (and a hot smell, too: the smell of power) that seems to betray the proximity of the Next.

There is one double, and one double only, with whom I feel I can be more or less myself: Mekhlis. I always know it's izings, the raucous "squad bangs," and so on. Now we recline in luxurious apartments with our lady friends of the afternoon; we feed them peeled jargonelles drenched in choice liqueurs; I might softly declaim a few verses of the immortal poet Narciso as I reach for my lute. Then, at two-fifty, you become aware of the activation of the camera, and you proceed.

Nowadays, a doubles best possible result, in the Recreation Wing, is to bring about multiple orgasm. Any kind of orgasm at all is an inestimable prize; and a solid success rate will suffice to protect a double from disfavor or disgrace or disaster. But multiple — and preferably continuous — orgasm is what we always feel we have to aim for, and it is a not entirely happy double who, sipping his cola in the commissary at seven-thirty-five, has failed, that day, to achieve it.

At the time, it was thought that the reason for Nadir's policy change was baldly utilitarian. He had, by then, simply run out of odalisques and filles de nuit, and was now working his way through the general population: young nurses, young secretaries, young schoolteachers — nearly all of them young widows, needless to say. I do not subscribe to this explanation (and am attempting to formulate my own). But the fact remains that the double confronts an altogether different kind of assignment in the Recreation Wing. On entry into its apartments, as I made the air hum with my switch, I used to encounter an ogreish wink and a lewd roll of the tongue. Now I encounter the isolated stare of the girl next door, and do so with diffidence. Mekhlis claims he speaks for all the doubles when he says that they liked it much, much better in the old days: you make your pact with pain, and that's that. Well, he doesn't speak for me. The new pressures faced by a double push down into the very lining of a man, and involve mortal danger (not least from suicide). But I wouldn't go back. No, I wouldn't go back.

And the months do pass.

Your first objective, of course, is to still the trembling. Normally you would hope to get this out of the way over lunch: you calmly adumbrate what lies ahead, and itemize the rewards and penalties attending success or failure. (The young women are also sharply warned that the lengthy verification process — polygram, scopolamine — will expose all attempts at simulation: such an orgasm, as interpreted by the Next, is a deadly affront.) And yet some of them go on trembling well into the afternoon, despite the skilled foot massage, the reciprocal ablutions, the application of many a telling unguent. Indeed, some of them never stop trembling, and the challenge, in these cases, is to find the deeper rhythm or logic of it, and so transform vibration into vibrancy. It is not the work of a moment.

Today, for example, I entertained a young anesthetist from the provincial capital. Judiciously, I plied her with fine wines, told her a succession of amusing anecdotes, and recited certain stanzas in praise of her pulchritude, which was considerable, despite the belly-dancer outfit and the ghoulish maquillage on which Nadir still invariably insists — and despite the cladding of hatred in her eyes. The young anesthetist's hands and voice were steady enough; but when I romantically hoisted her into my arms and carried her to the bed she felt like a bronze statue (one of the more modest statues of the Next, perhaps) — all suppleness and buoyancy lost, and as cold and adhesive as dry ice. Toward the end of the third hour of unpunctuated cunnilingus, I thought I might be beginning to get somewhere; but in the end the young anesthetist was unable to respond. She will lose her passport and her right to medical assistance. As for me, the non-satisfaction, the anticlimax, will go on my P-card. It will be noticed.

We used to have the ability, sometimes, to arouse them with our beauty. For we once were beautiful. Regrettably, during his various incapacitations, the Next has now gained some ninety-five pounds; and there are also the hideous "splatter wounds" to his chest and back, sustained in a dual R.P.G. and I.E.D. assault (rocket-propelled grenade and improvised explosive device) while he was travelling underground by monorail. Then, too, there was the hit from the A.T.S. — or anti-tank shell — he took in the ballroom of a provincial palace, whose casing, and much glass, became temporarily embedded in his crown and nape. No, we are not beautiful any longer. One vast lesion: that's what I am. When we shower together -and there are only a dozen of us now — we look all red and raw, like a convocation of enormous penises.

The darkest moment of the day, I find-surprisingly, perhaps-is the midday change: the adoption of the pointed slippers. This is when I have to deal with my humanity, and answer the questions posed to me by my shrivelled soul. And so I gird myself for the next cowering honey-blonde, the next pale brunette, the next resplendently contemptuous redhead, all of them trembling, trembling.

Obviously, anticlimax does not represent success-but there is a whole other order of failure. A whole other magnitude of failure. We don't talk about it. Mekhlis doesn't talk about it. I don't talk about it. This is why the moment in the locker room is, if you like, a confession: a confession of the ' male secret. . . . To err is human. It can be tolerated, every now and again. But we all know the point at which we can expect the lavish, the in-wrought wrath of the potentate. And there is, of course, another reason that this second order of failure-so radical, so all-deciding — particularly incenses Nadir the Next.

At eight o'clock, we repair to our separate bungalows on the grounds. Fraternization among doubles was always strongly discouraged (to thwart conspiracy), but now, in these days of laxity and dissolution, as the Next ages, as we age, there is a more or less nightly bazaar of black-market aphrodisiacs in our compound, all kinds of potions and philters — every known quackery, as well as every known pharmaceutical. To step out into the capital is, of course, an impossibility; a double wouldn't last half a minute in the capital, or anywhere else. But here at night, with all these pots and packets and powders, so needfully assembled and dispersed, we can still get a sense of the life of the city.... I stand before the mirror. I am choking on my own tongue-it looks like the fin of a flayed shark-and must soon submit to my third lingual "carve-, down." Is that myself I see, or am I staring through glass at another double?

The months pass. And it can't be long now. For us, and for the Next — so ceaselessly are his bastions mined, his bunkers trip-wired, his bolt-holes booby-trapped.

Some doubles say that there have been worse times to be a double of Nadir's. Years ago, before my arrival at the Palace of

the End, he used to send them out to give fiery speeches in city squares, to parade invitingly in open limousines, to march at the head of tickertape tattoos. All, of course, were briskly assassinated, thus somewhat alleviating, for a short time (or so he felt), the danger posed to the Next.

Other doubles argue that there have been better times to be a double: when, for instance (this is Mekhlis), the doubles were asked to uphold their mercilessness as they moved from one wing to the other. The "pact with pain" theory. I remember those days, and the mental atmosphere was certainly very different.

Enmeshed in an atrocity-producing situation, the human being (according to Mekhlis) responds with one of two psychological strategies or mechanisms. The first is called "numbing." I remember numbing: like submission to a drug of deeply unwelcome and alien efficacy. The second strategy or mechanism, curiously, is called "doubling." That's what we all do now. There is the person of the morning, and then, following the period in the changing room, there is the person of the afternoon.

And the doubles have doubled. I think I can prove it. The laws of our country do not permit the execution of female virgins. Circumventing this stricture, by mass rape, used to be one of our perks. But ever since Nadir was shot in the face, and things changed so markedly, no double will have anything to do with the forced deflowerings; we leave all that to the bucket boys and poker-warmers and the other, humbler torturers of the Interrogation Wing.

The destiny of the failed double (one who repeatedly creeps in tears from the luxurious apartments, with his pointed slippers in his hand) is probably worth mentioning. Such a double must watch all his clan submit to the antic horror of the confessionals, but the double himself is dispatched by lethal injection -- put to sleep, like a toothless dog. No further harm or disfigurement is visited on his body.

One day I was about to supervise the "de-gloving" of an elderly suspect when Mekhlis, in contravention of a major ground rule (doubles are never to appear plurally in the Interrogation Wing), drew me aside and, in a thick, hiccuppy whisper, passed on the rumor of the latest attempt on Nadir. I had just started to work, and so there were several anxious hours to endure before I limped into the doubles' commissary at twelve-forty-five.

There are only six doubles now. Some have died from complications arising from their more recent injuries (the bazooka attack); some have taken their own lives. Many, after grimly monotonous failure, have attracted the special execration of the Next.... Because, you see, Nadir is impotent. He has ever been impotent. All his grown life, helpless, as in a dream, surrounded by women he could do nothing with.

Rumor, where there is no settled truth, stops feeling like rumor: briefly but palpably, it feels far more convincing than any immutable fact. ... It was at first believed, in the doubles' commissary, that we would lose a foot, an arm, an ear, the other eye. (The other eye -- what would that spell for our tasks of the afternoon? We could continue. But why would he want us to?) It seemed that he had been bayoneted in the guts, poleaxed in the throat, harpooned in the mouth. We spoke with unusual license (and the room was, of course, an aviary of mobile phones), because we could cast off the resilient superstition that Nadir was among us. Nadir was not among us; he was fighting for his life in one of the futuristic Presidential hospitals. Could the doctors be trusted? Or would they deliberately bungle their work, as they had with our recent tracheostomies and cerebral trephinations? At one-fifty-five, we received three independent reports that confirmed our worst fear: the Next, while crossing the Oder-Haff by submarine, had, like his father, fallen victim to the dreaded toilet bomb.

In the changing room, I sat on the bench, wearing the colossal canopy of my kimono; at my feet, the pointed slippers; by my side, the tasselled tarboosh. I was wondering, as I always do at this time of day, why the body's genius for pain so easily outstrips its fitful talent for pleasure; wondering why the pretty trillings of the bedroom are so easily silenced by the inconceivable vociferation of the Interrogation Wing; wondering why the spasms and archings of orgasm are so easily rendered inert and insensible when compared to the contortions of torture, jagged and instantaneous, like lightning. You "respond" to that, and no mistake; there's never any need to get them into the right mood. And consider how pain can be made to proliferate: where is the role, in the realm of pleasure, for the three-year-old daughter?

It is all over now, anyway. Nadir the Next will join Old Nadir in the spaceship of permanent intensive care, his center of gravity replaced by a raw hollow. Whether he lives or dies, the fetish of verisimilitude will draw each double to the sandbagged cell and its rigged toilet bowl (with the limpet mine tucked under the U-bend), and the surgical team standing by.

This afternoon in the Palace of the End I shall strive, as Nadir's proxy or prosthesis, to be ever more tremulously tender. I think I understand this gravitation of the Next's: the tendency to the tender, in the Recreation Wing. I can empathize with him, after all — and I feel something like a hard vacuum in the side of our heads where our eye used to be. But I am not the Next. I am only his double, and my half of it reads like this. When you have been hurt yourself, you don't want to hurt anyone. When you love something so intimately fragile as your own body, you don't want to hurt anyone. That's what I say to myself in the changing room. Please let me not have to, hurt anyone.

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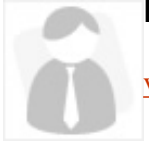
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