

Chapter One: Goldfinger

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“There’s always an excuse to be a prick.”

—C. Bukowski

There's a man by my side walkin' .
There's a voice within me talkin'.
There are words that need a-sayin'.

For Frank Rosen

United Electrical and Machine Workers' Union

Carry it on.

Everything that happens here, happened.

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CHAPTER ONE

Goldfinger

Rolling Hills, Outside New York City

It's all my fault, because I'm such a cheap bastard. I was told to rent a white van, something nondescript that painters or a handyman might use and wouldn't be noticed parked at dawn on a road where only BMWs and Carrera 95s play.

But I was afraid BBC wouldn't pay for the van rental (I was right about that) and so here I was in the Red Menace, my fourteen-year-old busted-up Honda with the *BRAKES* idiot light on.

Anyway, I won't move. *I can wait you out.*

Well, maybe I can. It's freezing insane cold and the Dunkin' Donuts coffee is cold, and I have to urinate out the last three cups I killed waiting on The Vulture to drive through his estate's electronic gate to his "work" so I can somehow tail him unseen in my ridiculous red car.

And now God is snowing on me. Thick, nasty, wet, heavy predawn snow, so everything turns white

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except my red beater. I might as well stick a flashing sign on the hood: I AM ON A STAKEOUT. I AM LOOKING FOR YOU.

We started at four A.M. It looks really glamorous on-screen when we broadcast these stories: the dramatic long-lens footage, then the jump and the confrontation. But after four horridly cold hours, there is nothing glamorous, just my bladder screaming at me.

Badpenny calls from our Toyota, staked out in front of Vulture's office building. Same issue— she and Jacquie have to pee. So now they could blow the whole story because *God forbid* they should just squat behind a tree and make some yellow snow. The women insist on porcelain and *have to* leave their post. All right, damn it, find a gas station but *don't let them see you*.

Ricardo is cuddling his camera. His baby. Ricardo is calm. Ricardo is *always* calm. He's just back from Iraq, where calm kept him alive. Ricardo is never hungry; Ricardo is never cold and *never* needs to urinate. Whatever drug he's on, I want it.

I tell Ricardo, "We stay." Why? If God doesn't give a rat's ass about The Vulture and what he does for a living, what he's done to Africa, why should I? Well, fuck God.

If I were a psychologist, I'd say I'm here because my father worked in a furniture store in the barrio in Los Angeles, selling pure crap on layaway to Mexicans; then later on, he sold fancier crap to fancier people in Beverly Hills and he *hated* furniture, and I hated the undeserving pricks and their trophy wives who bought it. I could smell their cash and the smell of the corpses they stole it from. They were *all* vultures, and the rest of us were just food.

So there you have it. My story, my motivation: resentment, envy, revolutionary fervor, whatever.

But I'm not a psychologist. I'm a reporter. And apparently one with a tiny, if fervent, international reputation: Just this morning I got a request from another young man, this one from Poland, who wants to join our investigative team. But instead of the usual résumé, Lukasz the wannabe journalist writes from Krakow that he has my BBC press pass, my notebook, and my laptop, which he'd stolen at London's Heathrow Airport. Rather than money, he wants the job. It wasn't ransom: If I said no to the job, he'd return the pass and notebook anyway. But he'd already junked the computer after cracking my security codes.

I could use a guy like that.

But I don't ask why I'm here. I *know* why I'm here. It's because of what our Insider said on the tape about Vulture:

Eric's gone over to the Dark Side.

Las Vegas

The two-grand-a-night call girls are wandering lonely and disconsolate through the Wynn casino, victims of the recession. Badpenny, dressed full-on Bond Girl, is losing nickels in the slots and humming Elvis tunes.

Badpenny's assigned job here is to look good and get information. She's good at her job. A tipsy plaintiffs' lawyer is telling her, "A woman as beautiful as you should be told she's beautiful every five minutes." His nose dips slowly toward her cleavage. I didn't know there were guys who still talked like that. Well, good. Take notes, Penny.

My own assignment is to hook up with Daniel Becnel. Becnel is just about the best trial lawyer in the United States. He doesn't have an office in Vegas or New York. He puts out his shingle at the ass end of Louisiana, at the far end of the bayous, where he defends Cajuns like himself, and that includes the wildcatters out on the Gulf Coast oil rigs.

I have just come back from the Amazon jungle, where I was tracking Chevron's operations. Chevron Petroleum monopolizes deepwater drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. Maybe Becnel and I could trade

information. It's April 20, 2010. Hitler's birthday and my ex-wife's.

I found Becnel—far from the gaming tables and looking unpleasantly sober.

There was an explosion back home. A rig blew out and was burning. The Coast Guard called him. They want his permission to open an emergency safety capsule they'd found floating in the Gulf. The Guard assumed maybe a dozen of his clients who had been working on the Deepwater Horizon platform were inside, cooked alive.

The sound on the TV above the bar is off. The high, black rolls of smoke rising out of the BP oil rig remind me of my own office when it burned.

Something is *very* wrong in this picture. All I can see are a couple of fireboats pointlessly shpritzing the methane-petroleum blaze with water. What the hell? Where are the Vikoma Ocean Packs and the RO-Boom? *Where is the Sea Devil?*

Because of my screwy career path, I happen to know a lot about oil spill containment. And I know a lot about bullshit. This isn't spill containment, this is bullshit.

Here is a skyscraper on fire, and the firemen show up with two bottles of seltzer.

How could they do this? How could British Petroleum, the oil company with the green gas stations, with the solar panels on the cover of their annual report, that kissed environmental groups full on the mouth by breaking ranks with Exxon to decry global warming . . . how could Green BP savage and slime our precious Gulf Coast?

The answer: *BP had lots of practice.*

By the next day, CNN's Anderson Cooper and an entire flock of reporters ran down to the Gulf to take close-ups of greased birds and to interview that mush-mouthed fraud, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal.

But I know something the other reporters don't know: The real story about the BP blowout is in the opposite direction, eight thousand miles north.

I have in my files a highly confidential four-volume investigation on the grounding of the *Exxon Valdez* in Alaska, written two decades ago. The report concluded,

"Despite the name 'Exxon' on the ship, the real culprit in destroying the coastline of Alaska is British Petroleum."

I have a copy because I wrote it.

That was my last job. The job that defeated me: after years as a detective-economist, investigator of corporate fraud and racketeering, this was the case that ruined the game for me.

The important thing, the hidden story calling me north, is that the Deepwater Horizon disaster was born right there on the Alaska tanker route. Here's why: BP did the crime but didn't do the time. Exxon got away pretty cheap, sure, but BP walked away stone free, not one dime from its treasury, not one drop of oil blotting its green reputation. So I quit.

But for now, from the casino, Badpenny is booking me a flight on Alaska Airlines and calling around for a Cessna Apache to charter to the Tatitlek Village on Bligh Island. The network would have to trust me on this. I know that the key to exposing the cause of the Gulf spill is there in the Tatitlek Native Village. I need to speak with Chief Kompkoff.

Somewhere off the coast of Azerbaijan

Just after leaving Las Vegas, Badpenny received an e-mail marked "Re: Your Palast Donation," coming from, weirdly, a ship floating in the Caspian Sea near BP's Central Azeri oil drilling platform, that is, somewhere off the coast of Azerbaijan in Central Asia. It read,

"Would not be wise for me to communicate via Official IT system."

We replied, “Understood,” and waited.

When the Deepwater Horizon well blew out in the Gulf, BP acted shocked. Just six months before the Gulf explosion, a BP vice president testified to Congress that the company had drilled offshore for fifty years without a major blowout. When the big well did blow in the Gulf, the company said that nothing like this had ever happened before. That is, nothing they reported.

Weeks after we received the first message from the ship in the Caspian Sea, we located our terrified source in a port town in Central Asia; and he told us BP’s claim to Congress was a load of crap. He himself had witnessed another deep water platform blowout. He seemed really nervous. And for good reason.

I didn’t know where the hell I’d get the budget to get to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, but Badpenny booked it without asking. “I know you’re going, so let’s not discuss it.”

Rolling Hills, New York

Cold coffee in a snowstorm wasn’t what I had in mind. The original plan was not so screwed up. I’d enlisted that crazy bastard John McEnroe (really) to help us get consent to get onto The Vulture’s property.

From satellite photos of Vulture’s estate, we could pick out a tennis court not a hundred yards from his entranceway. To get cameras onto his property, we would show up in tennis whites with our smiling crew from the new reality show *So You Think You Can Play Tennis! Starring John McEnroe!* Would Vulture like to swing a racket with the champ?

But our timing went to hell. Tennis balls in a blizzard? Forget it.

Now London is calling on Ricardo’s cell. BBC Television Centre. Trouble. Some flunky working for Dr. Eric Hermann *aka* The Vulture seems to have spotted a red car at the end of his driveway and called Dr. Hermann’s PR firm in England, where it’s already late morning. The Vulture’s flak squawked at the BBC news desk, “Is Palast on a ‘vulture hunt?’” Jones, my producer, says he told The Doctor’s PR, damn right.

Jones adds, “*A farkin* red car!?” Forgive him, he’s Welsh.

Cold, and now a bad, bad thought: He’s slipped us. That’s easy to do from a house bigger than the Vatican—twenty thousand square feet with nine bathrooms (we checked the tax records). Worse, the aerial photo revealed acres of woods on the blind side, which leads right to the back of the Doctor’s office tower. And the profile said Dr. Hermann was a serious marathoner. This guy could merrily lope right across his private forest to his office, chuckling at the schmuck in the red car. Or maybe he could apparate there like a Harry Potter warlock.

Badpenny and Jacquie swore over the cell that they hadn’t spotted one face from their photo sheet going into the building; but that could have been due to their inexcusable porcelain pit stop.

I drove the Red Menace too fast on the ice around the back roads to Hermann’s office.

We already had the layout. Badpenny had done the recon a week earlier. She deliberately misaddressed an envelope, made a “delivery” to their office, acting like a confused ditz while mentally mapping the place. Now, as we’re huddled against the snow, she tells Ricardo that if we could get by the distractible security guy with some BS, we could walk right into the fourth-floor office suites of The Vulture’s company, FH International.

Inside the building—the security desk was oddly empty—Ricardo hopped the elevator, pulled his ultra-small digi-cam out of the sports bag and clicked on the microphone. A well-dressed woman riding up with us asked, “Surprise for someone?”

It was. But the surprise would be on us.

We hustled around the fourth floor with Badpenny’s hand-drawn map, looking for the FH suite doors. Around and around the building halls we went, three times, comically lost. Then I noticed a huge white spot on the hallway wall: The big sculpted name plaque of FH International had been *unbolted from the wall*, the

office number removed and the door locked.

Gone. In just hours. A billion-dollar group of international hedge funds . . . *pfft!*

I leaned against the door, just exhausted, just defeated.

Then I heard voices. Behind the doors. The Vulture had his employees locked in.

Now this was slapstick, this was the land of the weird: multimillionaires cowering under their desks in the dark, afraid of the guy in a red Honda. I was honored.

All this, the unbolted sign, the muffled millionaires, all to avoid answering this one question,

What, or who, is the Hamsah?

Liberia, West Africa

With The Vulture's crew still pretending they were invisible and building Security hustling us down the elevator, we knew the only way to get an answer to our question was to get inoculations and emergency visas and head out to Liberia. BBC was not happy about the cost of the airfare and I don't blame them, but I had to speak to the President herself.

Thirty-six hours after the stakeout in the snow, we were sweating at customs in Accra, in West Africa.

"WELCOME TO GHANA. WE DO NOT TOLERATE SEXUAL PERVERSIONS."

Well, as a national motto, that's a cut above *In God We Trust*.

It wasn't like the last time I tried to get a transfer into Liberia, during the civil war, in 1996, when the capital's airport was just a bunch of holes, bomb craters. Back then, the only flight in was chanced once a week by two Russians running contraband on an old Tupolev turboprop. I was told I could hitch a ride for two bottles of vodka. I asked if I could give them the vodka *after* we landed. *Nyet*.

Now I'm flying in on Ethiopian Airlines and taking the vodka for myself despite my promises to cut that shit out.

If you can't name the capital of Liberia, relax, this isn't a test. Most Americans don't learn the capitals of foreign lands until the 82d Airborne lands there. Kabul. Mogadishu. Saigon.

Answer: It's Monrovia. The capital of Liberia is named after the U.S. president James Monroe, who helped former American slaves give birth to the longest-lived democracy in Africa, founded 1847. Its democracy dropped dead when, in 1980, a Corporal Sam Doe marched every member of the elected president's cabinet out to the nearby beach, tied them to poles and shot them, TV cameras rolling. Ronald Reagan was elated and helped the killer dictator Sam Doe turn Liberia into a Cold War killing zone. One in ten Liberians would die.

Ricardo and I arrived in Liberia without two clues to rub together. But Ricardo had one. He had just learned some Arabic the hard way: As an involuntary guest of some bad guys in Basra, Iraq. He said, "You know, *Hamsah* in Arabic means 'Five.'"

Ah.

More significantly, a Hamsah looks like this:



The symbol is Lebanese. Of course.

Motown

By the age of fifteen, Rick Rowley was doomed. Born in the middle of Nowhere, Michigan, a wasteland of rust and snow so awful we let autoworkers have it. As a kid, Rick would put his head down on the railroad track and wait for the rare vibration of a train on the move far away. He was fifteen years old on the day he got up and followed the hum down the track. He walked for over two hundred miles, surviving on peanut butter and Wonder Bread all the way to Motor City: Detroit.

Rick wasn't running away; his parents were OK. He was running *to* something; who knows what the hell it was.

Rick never made it back to Nowhere.

He listened. He looked. And he found that other people's stories were more important than his own.

Along the way, he picked up a small camera that listened and looked with him. He found more stories in Argentina inside the IMF riots, then six months in the Yucatan jungle, learning Spanish with the Zapatista guerillas, who named him Ricardo, then somewhere along the way a stretch at Princeton University, then several stints in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and in Lebanon, with Hezbollah.

He held the little thing, that digital camera, weirdly, cradled like an infant. The first time he filmed for BBC News, at my insistence, Jones said, "What's that? Some kind of toy camera?" No, it's my gun.

Ricardo doesn't like to talk about himself. It took three deadly potent drinks at a bar in West Africa to find out about the railroad track, Hezbollah, Princeton.

He's off now, un-embedded.

Ignoring Jones's advice, he made it back to Iraq to catch warlord Abu Musa's last arrogant words before Abu was blown into small wet pieces. Rick's a lucky guy. So far.

Tatitlek Village, Bligh Island, Alaska

Chief Gary Kompkoff stood on the beach, watching the Very Large Crude Carrier *VLCC Exxon Valdez* bearing down on Bligh Reef. Kompkoff was wondering, *What the hell?*

It was near midnight, starlit and clear. As the ship's shadow loomed, the whole village joined him on the beach, wondering, *What the hell?*

Kompkoff told me he thought it was some kind of dumb-ass drill. Even a drunk couldn't miss the turning halogen warning beam lighting up their faces every nine seconds.

It wasn't a drill.

Now, don't get the idea that these were just a bunch of dumb Indians stunned by the appearance of the white man's supertanker. They didn't have televisions, but they did have training in oil spill containment.

Containing an oil spill on water isn't rocket science. Whether it's a busted tanker or a blown well, you do two things: First you put a rubber skirt around it. The skirt is called a "boom". Then you bring in a skimmer barge with a big sucker hose hanging off it and suck up the oil within the rubber corral; or you can sink it ("disperse" it with chemicals); or you tow it away and set it on fire. There are lunatic variants of course, most employed by BP. In 1967, the *Torrey Canyon*, in the English Channel, took a shortcut meant for fishing boats and broke up. It was the largest tanker spill ever. British Petroleum called in the Royal Air Force, which bombed the hell out of the slick as it floated across the Channel to France. The RAF was as effective on the floating oil as they are on the Taliban. Oil Slick: 1. RAF: 0.

Here's a dirt-simple illustration of how you contain an oil slick from a busted tanker.



It's roughly the same for a well blowout. You see in this photo a small cartoon tug dragging the rubber skirt, called a Vikoma Ocean Pack, around the ship, while the other little boat, a Sea Devil skimmer, sucks up the blotch, the floating oil.

Here's the irony, or the crime, take your pick: I obtained this diagram from Alyeska, the company responsible for containing and cleaning up oil spills on Alaskan waters, no matter who owns the tanker. Alyeska is a combine of companies and the politically helpful cover name for its senior owner, British Petroleum. Exxon is junior. Some junior.

The tanker spill illustration is from the BP-Exxon official OSRP (Oil Spill Response Plan) for Prince William Sound, Alaska, published *two years before* the Exxon Valdez grounding at Bligh Island, Tatitlek. The oil companies' top executives swore to this plan under oath before Congress.

It was, I admit, a beautiful plan.

It had everything: suckers and rubbers all over the place, and round-the-clock emergency crews ready to roll.

Simple simple: Surround with rubber and suck. The Tatitlek Natives could have done that lickety-split and you would have never heard of the *Exxon Valdez*.

But could have are the two most heartbreaking words in the English language.

The Natives were the firemen with the equipment. It was right in the plan. They just stood there. *Why?*

During my investigation right after the Exxon spill, Henry Makarka ("Little Bird"), the Eyak elder, flew me over to the village of Nuciik, abandoned now. He told me, "I had to watch an otter rip out its own eyes trying to get out the oil." Henry's a sweet guy, eighty now. But in case I missed the point, he added, "If I had a machine gun, I'd kill every one of them white sons of bitches."

He didn't say, "white." He used the unkind Alutiiq phrase, *isuwiiq* something, *bleached seal*.

I needed him to tell me straight, no BS, what the hell happened in those meetings between the Chugach chiefs and the oil company chiefs twenty years earlier, to back up my suspicions, or to tell me I had hit another dead end. It was not a conversation he was happy to have, especially with a bleached seal

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investigator.

The Eyak, Tatitlek, and other Chugach Natives have lived in the Sound for three thousand years, maybe more, the very last Americans to live off what they could catch, gather, hunt. It was March 24, four minutes after midnight, 1989, when Kompkoff witnessed the moment when three thousand years of Chugach history came to an end, the moment when Satan collected his due for the Natives' complicity, especially Makarka's.

Los Angeles, California

Why am I flying all over hell? Why am I chasing down kooky potentates and cowering hedge fund speculators, then schlepping you up to the Arctic and down to the Amazon?

Why am I writing this all down, dragging you along with me?

My publisher wants me to write a neat little book on one simple topic, like "oil companies" or "banks" or "Recipes from *Sex and the City*." But the planet is not as simple as a quart of homogenized milk, all silky white.

It's a mess, it's a jumble. Get used to it.

That's how it is. That's how we work. I don't get to say, *Oh, please don't send me that smoking information this week*. And the weeks following the Deepwater Horizon disaster produced the heaviest shower of must-follow info in my career.

But, for the sake of clarity, and my sanity and yours, I will take you along with me, one investigative move at a time. Only in this first chapter, I want to show you how our work actually gets done, following down several tracks at once. Stumbling over each other, knocking our heads into walls (I get my best ideas that way).

I'm what Dr. Bruce, my high school science teacher, would call a honey dipper. Before Dr. Bruce earned his doctorate, he took one of the few jobs a black child in the Deep South could grab to earn a few dollars, honey dipping. When someone dropped a wedding ring or a wallet down into the outhouse toilet, Dr. Bruce would dip into it with his bucket, pull up the stuff and go through it carefully. He got to enjoy it. So have I, dipping in, squeezing it through our investigative filters, finding the good stuff. There's not one topic, but there is only one story: I chase different turds around the planet, but it's all the same shit.

There is only one story: the story of Them versus Us.

THEY get homes bigger than Disneyland, WE get foreclosure notices.

THEY get private jets to private islands, WE get tar balls and lost futures, and pay their gambling debts with our pensions.

THEY get the third trophy wife and a tax break, WE get sub-primed.

THEY get two candidates on the ballot and WE are told to choose.

THEY get the gold mine, WE get the shaft.

Them versus Us: that's my career, my obsession—and my tombstone ("*THEY FINALLY GOT ME.*")

This book, this journey, is a quest to unmask The Beast, the monstrous machine that works ceaselessly to take from Us to give to Them.

That's not answering the question, is it? The question of *why* I'm doing this.

I'm from Los Angeles, from the trough called the Valley, where the losers are tossed until there's a need for cheap labor and cheap soldiers when the *gusanos* don't supply enough.

I went back there, just once. When you drive over the Hollywood Hills and descend into The Valley, you don't see houses, you see a heaving smoggy soup that's a kind of puke-and-urine yellow. The female

giving me a lift said, “I thought Southern California had climate. This is a *color*.”

I grew up and, fast as I could, got out of the urine soup. After failing at several unpromising jobs—ballroom dance instructor, sandwich-sign man, jazz drummer, sperm donor, ghost writer for term papers (“*an ‘A’ guaranteed!*”), I ended up an investigator. I did the big cases, involving hundreds of millions and billions of dollars. I got screwed around a lot. That is, my targets always seemed to slither away in time to catch the best table at Nobu.

So I quit. Now I’m an investigative reporter. I still get screwed around. But now, I can screw back.

The Gulf Coast, Alabama Shores

The story I’d gotten from our scout Ronald Roberts was like some Grade B horror movie: Fish were drowning.

In weird places all over the Gulf, dead. I didn’t even *know* a fish could drown. But then, what I don’t know would be a book all by itself.

Ronald Roberts had gone to sniff the scene ahead of us and ask BP questions without raising questions himself. His real name isn’t Ronald, it’s Zachary: Zach Roberts the photojournalist. But if you Google “Ronald” Roberts, you get a photo of a Florida sex offender, deceased, as well as the author of the classic study *Fish Pathology*.

Despite the oil still barfing out of its Macondo hole, BP was in holocaust denial mode: The fish were not dead. And, BP said, if they were dead, BP didn’t kill them.

Investigating fish murder isn’t my game. So I would need an expert who wasn’t full of shit and wasn’t full of industry money. The field was narrow, so it’s no surprise that without consulting each other, Ronald/Zachary and I settled on Dr. Rick Steiner. I knew Steiner as the Big Name in fish and oil contamination, the chairman of the biology department at the University of Alaska. Steiner literally jumped into the field two decades ago, wading into the Exxon Valdez muck engulfing his own boat.

Professor Steiner was not only beyond corruption, he was beyond telephones, somewhere in Africa. My research maven, Matty Pass, somehow tapping into our telepathic vibe, also went on the search for Dr. Steiner, locating him in that toxic toilet called Nigeria, playing with sludge left there by Shell Oil forty years earlier.

We lucked out because Steiner wanted to scoop up some of BP’s dreck off the Mississippi coast for testing. The oil company wouldn’t let Steiner come along with their rent-a-profs, so he arranged to visit the suspect water columns by submarine. No kidding.

The professor offered to take me down with him.

It was worth a flight to the Gulf Coast to do the Captain Nemo thing with Steiner so I could pick up some scientific clues to answer a question that just wouldn’t let go of me: The wrecking of the Gulf Coast, the dead marshes and polluted wetlands shown on TV over and over . . . everyone agreed it was BP’s oil. Was it really BP? I suspected not, and not without reason.

Seattle, Washington

Our floating inside witness, even out in the Caspian, knew he had to stay behind a cloak. He knew, and everyone in the industry knows: Bad things happen to people who drop a dime on BP.

Chuck Hamel could tell him. Hamel, an oilman, had partnered with BP and Exxon in Alaska. In 1986, he discovered that the Valdez terminal was a mess, a tanker accident waiting to happen. He was so shook up, he took the first Concorde he could find to London to tell BP’s chairman, in person, they were in danger of a disaster.

BP’s response was to hire a team of former CIA spooks to trail him. They tapped his phone. They broke into his house. They set honey traps, women lesser men would not pass up, but Hamel is unnaturally faithful to his wife. Then, when Hamel set up a meeting with a Congressman in Washington, BP’s Alaska CEOs went

nuts trying to figure out which whistle Hamel would blow. BP's black-bag crew ran a remote-controlled toy truck through hotel ventilation ducts and rigged the toy with wires for microphones to eavesdrop on Hamel. Unfortunately for the BP operatives, U.S. Navy SEALs had set up a secret listening post in the hotel. The Navy's espionage team flipped out when they picked up the BP microphone, sure that the Russians were onto them. The Navy agents traced the signal, kicked in the hotel room door and arrested BP's spies.

BP had to write a check to Hamel. But the industry was patient and got Hamel in the end. When Hamel first teamed up with Exxon, he was a wealthy oilman. He's no longer wealthy and has no more oil. I just spoke to him in Seattle, where he had moved after Exxon bankrupted him.

Hamel doesn't have a lot of good days now. He is ill, with not enough air to get through our conversations. But I needed his help.

I had braved through six hundred pages of BP's Oil Spill Response Plan for their Gulf deepwater operation. I didn't have to. It was pretty much a photocopy of the Alaska plan. Rubber boom, skimmer, emergency crews (and seal cleaning). That was the boom and skimmers I did *not* see around BP's burning, sinking Gulf rig when I caught it on the TV screens above the bar in Vegas. I can't say I was shocked.

The equipment wasn't there in Alaska and it wasn't there in the Gulf. Same company, same plan, same bullshit. The real question for me was, *How are they going to get away with it this time?* Hamel's good wife had had enough, and told him to stay low. But I figured Hamel might know someone who might know someone.

But whoever he could lead me to might not talk: after the job BP did on him and a half dozen others, not many industry or government insiders would poke their heads out, even to whisper to me off-the-record. Hamel gave me the number of Inspector Dan Lawn. BP's spies had tapped his phone too. But The Inspector, it seems, enjoyed the opportunity to educate his hidden audience of industry knuckle draggers.

Kazakhstan

If I were a gumshoe on a divorce case, I'd look for the jilted partner. In investigating this multi-continental petroleum giant, I looked for the jilted partner.

Jack Grynberg was certainly jilted by BP, left standing at the Caspian Sea altar by John Browne, soon to be knighted Lord Baron Browne of Madingly and, until the Lord perjured himself in 2007, CEO of British Petroleum. In 1991, Grynberg Energy brought in BP as a partner in Grynberg's exclusive deal to drill the Kazakh side of the Caspian Sea.

Kazakhstan is the largest of those nations on the Central Asian Steppe shat out by Mother Russia in 1991, when she ejected her unwanted Muslims and Armenians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Turkmen, pooping out new nations so fast that the "Kyrgyz Republic" received its unrequested independence from the Soviet Union in a surprise telegram, causing the party chiefs there to meet in emergency conference to ask, "How do we get mail? Do we need to print our own stamps?"

The Caspian Sea deal was the big score of Lord Browne's BP career. Then, in 2004, Browne screwed Grynberg out of, by my estimate, \$180 million when BP sold the lease. Exactly how the Lord did the screwing—I'd have to get that from Grynberg.

I think Browne made a big mistake. Whatever, I figured it worthwhile to locate a bullheaded demi-billionaire oilman with a jones on for BP.

Grynberg owns more producing oil wells (672) than I have regrets, and that wealth doesn't include the massive payout he received through his dysfunctional financial marriage with BP PLC.

A former U.S. intelligence agent, Grynberg prefers to vanish when he is sought by the press. My crew left him messages and made calls to anyone and everyone who might get word to him. That got us a call from his cell from God knows where.

I offered to meet him in Denver, where he has 30,000 head of cattle, or London or Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Lucky for our bleeding budget, he had to make a quiet visit to New York during UN General Assembly week when he could meet discreetly with presidents, prime ministers, and dictators pretending to be

presidents.

He had something for me to see. No, he would not fax it.

Baku, Moscow, Washington

But there was the other half of the Caspian Sea that BP lusted for, under Azerbaijan's waters, off the ancient caravanserai of Baku. That's where the other BP rig blew, at least according to our floating tipster.

Azerbaijan is another ex-Soviet excretion. It became an Islamic republic, where the dictatorship requires all its citizens to pray five times a day to British Petroleum. I had to get in. But, you don't just show up in Azerbaijan with a film camera, asking questions.

Getting in was one thing. How to find the evidence, even about something as big as a giant blown-out oil platform, required expertise I was glad not to have.

I figured an oil spook like Grynberg could give me a hint about how to move through Baku's dark, ancient alleyways. Grynberg suggested I find a BP insider who worked with the oil company's XFI unit in Baku. He gave a name, but we would have to find his address and phone, which was somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere. Hint: XFI may stand for Exploration Frontiers International—or not. It may have existed—or not.

Well, Badpenny had something to start with.

Here's what we learned before attempting to meet him. Just minutes after the 'Stans were freed of Communist rule, BP's XFI team rushed in with offers to help the new nations develop their fallow resources. Or maybe to *help themselves* to the resources.

"The world runs on oil," a member of the Petroleum Club heading out there to the Wild East told me, "and oil runs on payoffs and pussy." It's not a sentiment you'd find on a Hallmark card, but then, the strongmen of the new Islamic republics don't get Hallmark cards. Britain's ambassador to Uzbekistan mentioned that Uzbek President Karimov boiled his opponents alive, not something you bring up at state dinners.

Absolutely no one was better at the P&P game than BP's XFI front man, Leslie Abrahams. The operator liked to boast to his buddies about how his envelopes of cash and his girls won the hearts of Baku's bureaucrats and their oil leases. In other words, this Abrahams was a professional creep. BP's creep. He passed the Azeri state oil company a "sweetener" of \$30 million. The check was handed to him by Lord Browne, that is, the lord handed Leslie an old brown valise containing the check. The old bag was accompanied, appropriately, by Lady Margaret Thatcher.

But would Abrahams say this to me on tape, on camera? Getting him to talk was not so easy since he still conducted business in Baku which requires his judicious use of contacts with an injudicious dictatorship. Furthermore, British intelligence, we were told, put a "D-1" notice on him. A "D-1" makes reporting what he says a crime in the UK.

Nevertheless, I hoped the BP bagman might be willing to shine a little light on some unpleasantness regarding BP's suspected involvement in overthrowing the elected president of Azerbaijan.

BP denied any role in that coup d'état, saying, "That's not part of our culture."

BP did lobby Tony Blair's government to release the greatest mass murderer ever convicted in a British court to help the company obtain drilling rights from Libya's dictator Muammar Gaddafi. That, apparently, is part of their culture.

I should note that, to BP's credit, the corporation refused a request for a half-billion-dollar bribe from Marat Manafov, a crony of Azerbaijan's strongman, to secure the Caspian drilling rights. Who sent Manafov to ask? Who knows? We can't ask Manafov. He was fired (that is, his body can't be found).

That left us Leslie the Bagman, the man from XFI, if he could be found and if XFI existed. It certainly is not on BP's Web site ("YOUR SEARCH 'XFI' DID NOT MATCH ANY DOCUMENTS"). But then, not every door has a

handle.

Badpenny's exhausting planet-wide search found The Bagman where we should have looked first: at the Oriental Club, Westminster, London.

In today's legalistically prudish world, Abraham's little tasks for BP and Queen, a bit of bribery wrapped in vaginas, would be a jail-time offense. But until a mere decade ago, gentlemen weren't sent to prison. They were sent to the Oriental Club. Membership requires nomination by a diplomat, intelligence operative, or other bona fide claws on the arm of Empire's reach.

By phone, I explained to a coughing man with a plummy accent that our story was about oil.

The Bagman was game, but talk is talk: By any chance, did he have any, say, photographs? Chums from Baku days? The names of "Sirs" and "Ladies" flew from his memory—including John Scarlett, later chief of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, who still signs his name as a single initial, C, in green.

Interesting, but our story is about BP.

Yes, he said, "About MI6."

He'd meet us in the Members' Bar.

Now, if you think the application of sex and cash is a form of corruption unique to Russia and Central Asia, take note that BP and other oil majors used the same technique with the U.S. Minerals Management Service to secure sweetheart drilling leases in the Gulf of Mexico. The difference is that the American apparatchiks were satisfied with much less cash and uglier women.

That's a fact: I've seen the photos. The Azeri prostitutes were just stunning—as one would expect of carefully selected Russian FSB agents.

How could I know if all this information from Kazakhstan and Baku was a bonanza or bullshit? I shot a note to our Web guru, Yuriy K——, whom we'd brought in from the old Soviet Union, to hook me up with someone who'd gotten inside the BP Azeri and Kazakh field operations as well as BP's partnership with Russia's "BP- TNK" oligarchs. The reply came back from Georgi Zaicek—George the Rabbit. Since when did Yuriy become Georgi?

Badpenny got him on the phone. "*Yuriy! Stop hyperventilating!*"

She calmed "Georgi" and handed me the phone. "Georgi's my other legal name. I can't use Yuriy K—— there. I hadn't told you, but I got myself in trouble, really big trouble." This struck me as a don't-ask-don't-tell moment.

More interesting was what "Georgi Rabbit" passed on to me from a third party with a phone number beginning +7-495-, that is, Moscow, for "Максим Шингаркин."

Badpenny has a passable knowledge of the Cyrillic alphabet and sounded it out: Maxim Shin-gar-kin.

Shingarkin? Google could find only one useful reference to "Shingarkin" in English, from the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

"Maxim Shingarkin, a former major in the Russian military's secretive 12th Department, which is in charge of strategic weapons, said suitcase nuclear bombs . . ."

Sounds like a man we want.

I was told not to call Shingarkin directly but to call someone who would call someone who would then tell Shingarkin to take my call.

But first I called our "fixer" in London. How long would it take to get a journalist's visa for Russia and Azerbaijan? "You won't have time." Unless, of course, we went as "tourists" with a 5D. A Canon 5D Mark II

is an ultra-high-resolution video camera that looks like a tourist point-and-shoot and can be fitted with a fearsome telephoto lens.

Matty Pass, our team's twenty-seven-year-old Wonder Boy, had just come back from Cuba with 5D footage of hijackers, political prisoners, and, for good measure, oo-la-la photos of Che Guevara's comely granddaughter. Before boarding to leave Havana, the authorities threw him in isolation and grabbed all his printed literature, meaningless junk. They'd already stolen his laptop. But they didn't realize that the still camera this tourist wore on his neck with benign photos of palm trees and rum parties had also collected disturbing videos. The good stuff, on memory chips, had already been spirited out via Costa Rica.

For the Caspian, the 5D it would be.

Texas and Tokyo

By mid-May 2010, with his presidency floating face

down in the Gulf, Barack Obama had yet another crisis to deal with. Obama still had a couple of wars burning on the stove, and our troops needed, *right now*, "life-saving mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles."

So the President sent an *emergency* funding bill to Congress. Defense Secretary Robert Gates marched to Capitol Hill and said Our Boys on the front lines would be blown to bits if they did not get \$1.1 billion for the mine-proof vehicles, \$137 million for new body armor, and \$9 billion for two nuclear power plants.

Say what?

Actually, the Defense Secretary left that last one out of his testimony. I only know because an angel told me.

The angel is Harvey Wasserman of Columbus, Ohio. When God decides to smite this planet again, I know He will save Harvey from the waters, even though that means sparing Columbus.

Harvey is the Cassandra of Radioactivity. For three decades, he has stared unblinking into the menacing eyes of power industry evil and the bored eyes of news editors.

Harvey wanted me to sound the alarm, to bust open this billion-dollar nuclear boondoggle smuggled into the war bill inside the soldiers' body armor. And, said Harvey, there's a rock star who would make a donation to my investigations crew for writing it. But I don't take money for stories if someone has their jones in it. Harvey knows that.

And I have *no time*. I have to get to the Gulf of Mexico, the Caspian Sea, Alaska.

But this, said Harvey, is "*urgent*."

Everything is urgent, Harvey.

But this is *urgent* urgent.

Not now, Harvey.

I admit, it was tantalizing. The \$9 billion takedown was so brilliantly done. The billions were concealed as a small item, by military budget standards: only \$180 million for "alternative energy," dumped in with some solar panels, appearing as part of the Army's plan to "go green." How some lobbyist wizards stuff \$9 billion into a \$180 million wrapper doesn't matter, just that they did it. The guys behind it really knew their game.

I smelled Houston.

The flimflam had that unmistakable aroma of the Houston Ship Channel where Exxon and BP dump their toxins from refining Venezuela's heavy crude. The city that gives pollution a bad name.

And the headquarters of NRG Corporation.

If there is some creepy, slithery way to tap into a free billion for some crackbrained and dangerous project, it would certainly attract NRG Corporation of Houston, Texas, and their entourage of bankers, contractors and muscled-up lobbyists.

"NRG is in," said Harvey, but not under the name NRG. NRG changes aliases like Lady Gaga changes

the color of her whips. This time they named themselves Nuclear Innovation of North America. NINA: That's a good one. "Nina" beat out twenty big-name power companies, said Harvey, to win half the \$9 billion in the war bill.

I know NRG well. And NRG claims they know me: They kept a file on my penis with supposed evidence it ended up inside a rising young politician close to then-Prime Minister Tony Blair. And I keep a file on *them*. So, for the moment, we're even.

But no one's giving NRG a dime, Harvey, let alone \$4 billion, even if they change their name to Mother Teresa Nuclear Puppy Kisses. They've just come out of bankruptcy, so their investment grade rating is zorch; that means there's no way in hell they can get government financing. Furthermore, Texas regulators officially designated NRG an "imprudent" manager, government-speak for "incompetent," after squandering a billion dollars of their electricity customers' money on their older South Texas plants—"you *know* that, Harvey"—not to mention the serious safety violations at their nuclear plants and the company's record of massive fines paid for terrifying disregard for safety rules. Harvey, Harvey. This won't happen.

It will, he said. They've got a terrific "beard." They teamed up with Westinghouse Nuclear, and they're promising American jobs.

Harvey, there *is no* Westinghouse Nuclear anymore.

Yeah, there is. The Japanese bought the name.

And "Nuclear Innovation" has brought in Tokyo Electric Power to reassure the Department of Energy that they have "prudent" competent guys on top of the project because of Tokyo Electric's excellent record operating nukes in Japan. NRG is giving Tokyo a 20 percent slice; that's nearly a billion dollars out of the treasury subsidy.

I'm googling while Harvey continues his begging. And there it is, the press release from "Innovation," dated May 10, 2010, not a week old:

TEPCO [Tokyo Electric Power Company], acting as technical consultant, has provided the benefit of its experience achieved in developing, constructing, commissioning and operating the Advanced Boiling Water Reactors (ABWR) to the project. TEPCO also will continue to contribute to the essential task of training the highly skilled workforce.

So, Harvey, what you want me to do is tell my network and my editors to hold the presses because I have a story on how the White House is secretly funding a bunch of has-been operators to build nuclear plants in Texas with some Japanese guys with little hands who buy little girls' dirty panties from vending machines. I read that somewhere. Is it true?

"It's true."

I can't sell this one, Harvey.

Then Harvey decided to show me some leg. "Shaw is the A/E." He knew I'd stay on the line for that. "A/E" means Architect-Engineer, the firm that draws up and actually builds the plant, pours the cement, bolts the panels to the wall. Shaw, from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is the latest corporate mask for another shape-shifter, Stone & Webster Engineering Company. In 1988, a jury found the company had deliberately falsified a nuclear plant's ability to withstand an earthquake.

Earthquake, shmearthquake. The company settled and the judge let them off the hook with a payment of \$50,000. I'm sure they celebrated with a \$60,000 lunch.

The investigator who uncovered the Stone & Webster fraud, Greg Palast, wasn't too happy about that. I don't hold grudges. I do hold files.

And here comes Stone again, dressed as Shaw.

Fascinating: How were a bunch of guys from Tokyo Electric, who sing the company song in the morning and can't hold their liquor, going to "train" a bunch of Houston rattlesnakes and Louisiana swamp rats?

"Still can't do it, Harvey."

But then, I did.

It was after I got The Brick through the door.

Three days after I guiltily put off Harvey, a package, no return address, no name on it, came from Houston. A pile thick as a cinder block.

I don't know who sent it. I don't ask. Whoever sent it took a hell of a risk to get it to me—career suicide, even imprisonment.

Sure I was tempted. But the Central Asia visa application can't be changed—getting one was already a dicey dance involving a cockamamie story for the Azerbaijan dictatorship's security ministry. You just don't show up in the Islamic republic like it's Club Med.

But that radioactive brick, the hot pile of documents from inside NRG, just sitting there in a rubber band, kept whispering, "*Just take a look. Come on, you know you want to look.*"

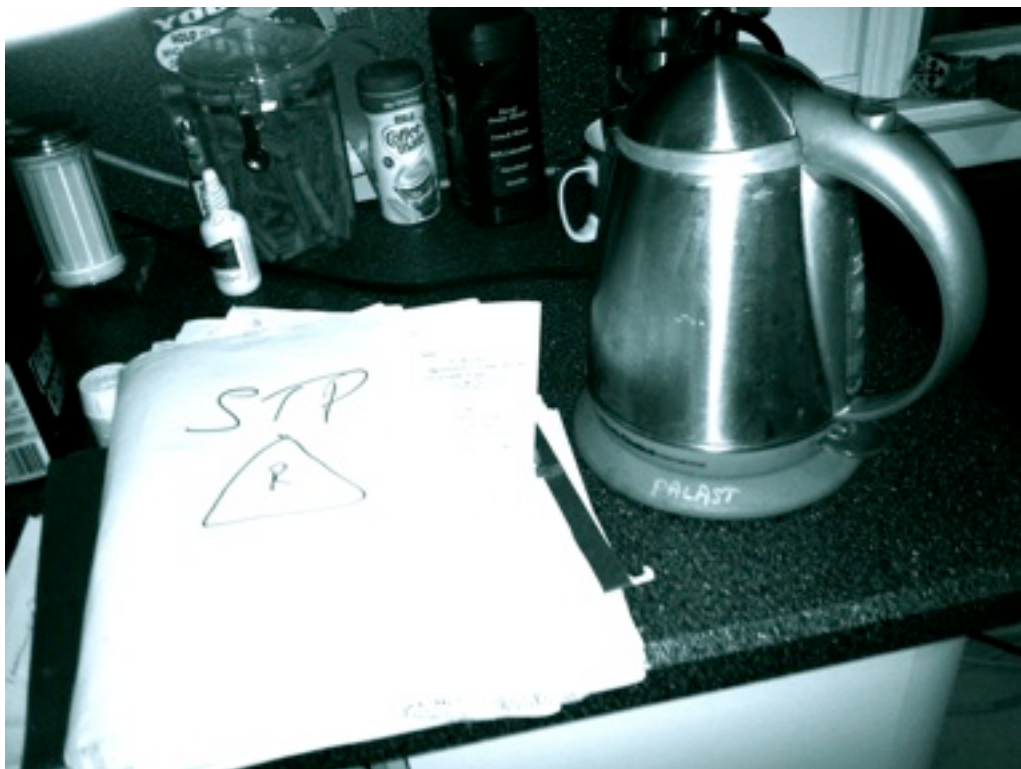
I looked.

Inside: lots and lots of paper, a crazy mix. Hand notes, financial spreadsheets, scribbles, filings to government, and most marked "confidential."

Now what? Maybe in Sam Spade movies or Batman or Columbo, the smoking gun smokes: the candlestick with the little bit of skull still stuck to it, the letter that screams "guilty guilty guilty."

That's not how it works, at least not in the big cases, the billion-dollar cons involving corporate chiefs with accountants and finance mavens who could dazzle Merlin. Incriminating info is chopped up like a jigsaw puzzle thrown on the floor, with most of the pieces missing; it's written in techno-Croatian, and if math is your problem, forget it. And it can take months or years to make it tell its story.

But this one went click, click, click. In a murder case, you look for fingerprints that match. In fraud, look for numbers that *don't* match. And here were two that didn't match—a lot.



After a day and a half I couldn't spare, I saw that "Innovation" had given the federal government what looked like their price for building the plant: \$5 billion. In the crazy-ass world of nuclear, that's cheap, a winner.

Then there was another batch of numbers, some put down in private handwritten notes sent from Tokyo, which looked to me like the reactor builder's private estimate of the cost of the plant, what they would actually charge to build it. The note is marked over with *in confidence* and *proprietary*. And the numbers add up to seven billion dollars.

Call me crazy, but I just felt something wasn't straight.

Two numbers, two continents, off by \$1.4 billion.

I'm sure there's an explanation. There's *always* an explanation.

I can't say no to Harvey Angel and sleep at night. What if I die and have to explain myself to the Lord and all I can do is mumble about deadline conflicts?

So, before I board for Central Asia, I slam down a story, "*Nuclear Option in War Bill—Smells Like Fraud*," an exposé about Houston grifters, Japanese nuclear guys, and Louisiana tricksters. I've never had a spec story turned away in my entire career, which is why Harvey put the burden on me. "Never" came to an end. I got back a cheery e-mail ending with,

"It's an interesting story but doesn't quite fit for us."

What fit for them was a story titled "Lesbians Who Love Male Gay Porn." I kid you not.¹

I shoved the Radioactive Brick to the corner of my sloppy desk, where it slept quietly for almost a year, until March 11, 2011. Then it went critical.

Geneva

Badpenny is driving like a bat out of hell on the autobahn to Geneva. Something just doesn't make sense here. I see lots of cows. I see pretty chalets and fairy-tale castles and the Savoy Alps rising up like an angel's ice-cream cone and it doesn't make any sense. Per capita, Switzerland is the world's wealthiest industrial nation.

So where's the industry? All these flash Mercedes aren't paid for by cheese, chocolate, and cuckoo clocks.

"Drug dealers," says Badpenny, of the most powerful drug in the world: OPM. Other People's Money. She knew. She was born here. Escaped at eighteen.

Now she was showing me how to track some of that OPM. Months earlier, we'd found out that the president of Zambia had gone on a shopping spree here in Geneva with what we estimate was about \$40 million in his pocket. We figured he deposited a chunk of it in an anonymous numbered account at Credit Suisse. Some call Credit Suisse a bank, some call it the world's most respectable Laundromat.

In one afternoon, Zambia's then-president Frederick Chiluba had, we heard, blown nearly a million dollars of his loot in one shop, Boutique Basile. Jones at BBC Television had asked Badpenny to see if she could somehow get in to film it.

¹ No, I'm not mentioning the name of the paper, because that would give you the impression that one U.S. news outlet is different from another. No American editor would choose a warning about nuclear plants over lesbian porn unless some plant actually burnt down.

Easy-peasy. She walked in, appropriately styled, with her cameraman, speaking in the local Alpine German dialect. Hearing the clerk speak French, she switched to *française* and announced herself as producer of yet another reality show: *Shopping with the Rich and Famous!* The clerk was thrilled. Yes, of course, there were celebrities that came through all the time. He mentioned some Russian mafiosi which, given the gawd-awful clothes at insane prices, made perfect sense. And heads of state? Why certainly: the President of Zambia.

Camera rolling, Badpenny waltzed among the schmaltzy \$8,000 leisure suits. Chiluba had apparently bought 200 shirts, 200 suits—each one costing more than a year’s income of a typical Zambian village—and a tie, striped with rows of diamonds, for 125,000 Swiss francs (about \$110,000 US). And 100 pairs of elevator shoes (Chiluba was a bit on the short side).

Most important, we were certain that about \$3 million of Chiluba’s booty came from the man called Goldfinger.

Washington, DC

It was surprisingly difficult to find a guy whose business was protected by the President of the United States. I needed two detective agencies and a Badpenny all-nighter to find Goldfinger. But then, if your business is, as one UN diplomat put it, “killing babies” in Africa, you wouldn’t expect him to list himself in the Yellow Pages.

It was assumed Goldfinger would keep himself, like most of his corporate shells, safely outside the country. But here he was at his mini-mansion near DC. No question this was our guy: a gold Cadillac with magnesium racing wheels out on the driveway for display. We knew about the mags from the Caddy aficionado’s chat site, where he logged in as Goldfinger@DAI.com.

Goldfinger, née Michael Francis Sheehan, is Vulture Number 2.

Vultures are repo men. But unlike the scuzzy little guys who snatch your car for the bank when you don't make a payment on time, these are very big scuzzy guys who snatch entire nations that don't pay their sovereign debts on time.

I didn't give Vultures their name. Their own banks call them Vultures, the banks they enrich with the kills in their claws.

This is Goldfinger’s story: The nation of Zambia bought some worthless tractors from Romania decades ago. When the world copper market went bust, Zambia went from dirt poor to desperately destitute. If you’re forty years old in Zambia, you’re a lucky guy: Life expectancy is thirty-nine—and dropping from the AIDS epidemic. The CIA profile of the country lists the typical weather of Zambia as “drought.”

Romania, itself busted, told Zambia’s finance ministry to pay just \$4 million, a fragment of the \$29.6 million owed for the tractors.

But somehow, Goldfinger jumped in and paid \$4 million to Romania to get his hands on the right to collect the \$29.6 million from Zambia.

Oddly, the government of Zambia, rather than pay \$4 million to Romania to settle the debt, agreed to pay Goldfinger four times that much instead. Huh?

When Oxfam tipped me to this oddity, I suspected all was not kosher, and it didn’t take us long to find an e-mail from Goldfinger to his hedge fund partner,

“As you will recall, we bought \$29.6 million in, I believe, February of this year for about \$4 million. . . . The deal is going to get done for political reasons because we are going to discount a bunch of whatever to the President’s favorite charity.”

The President’s “favorite charity,” it seems, is the Boutique Basile. You don’t need an MBA to figure this one out (though I have one). Pay to play. Baksheesh. Backhander. Bribe. Even the FBI, when they asked

for a copy, didn't need translation. (We'll get to that.)

Hey, if everyone could pay \$4 million and collect \$15 million a couple of weeks later, we'd all do it. But would we all pay into the president's favorite charity? That's between you and your deity.

That's why we were out there before dawn near Washington, with a copy of the e-mail, for BBC London, to ask Mr. Goldfinger about his "charitable" donation.

Rich folk have their own police forces, the private security guys that patrol around looking for suspicious people like me. So, Ricardo and I kept our distance, with the camera covered up on the floor of the white rental car, while Badpenny, dressed in her Russian contessa gear, strolled up and down Goldfinger's street in the nasty cold, ready to give us a signal. Rent-a-cops stopped, and wanted to know why this elegant lady was loitering around at dawn in front of this gentleman's home, and we caught it on a remote microphone.

"I am looking for my poosy cat!" (I guess the cops didn't get the vaudeville pickup line. They were supposed to say, "Sorry, lady, we haven't seen your pussy." Badda-bing!)

Now, it's useless to collect a debt from Zambia if Zambia has nothing to collect. Even a vampire like Goldfinger can't suck blood from a stone.

But Zambia does have something: AIDS. About 25 percent of the adult population is HIV positive. So nations like the United States and Britain, responding to Bono's threat to sing "It's a Beautiful Day" over and over again, have agreed to provide aid. Goldfinger can't wait.

For Vultures, civil war, genocide, epidemics, drought, and Africa's pestilence of kleptocratic presidents are profit centers, opportunities to pick at an economic carcass others would walk away from with a shudder.

But how did Goldfinger get inside information on the Romanian debt? Goldfinger, we discovered, once worked with the World Bank, advising Zambia on its debt problems. Apparently, he was just casing the joint.

Zambia's finance minister could have put a halt to this game, but he had disappeared. Literally. The minister was employing witchcraft to make himself invisible. Minister Kalumba had good reason to vanish: \$30 million was missing from government bank accounts. In the end, Kalumba was discovered hiding in a tree, believing himself invisible. However, the cops had outsmarted the minister: The Zambian police defeated his cloaking charm by removing their underpants. I can't make this up.

Once Kalumba was out, a new finance minister signed off to turn over, for no visible reason, the nation's treasury, the nation's fate, to Goldfinger's Caribbean shell company.

So, in the cold DC dawn, we waited, piecing together these mismatched puzzle pieces. And after four hours, the high, curved double doors opened and out came a dumpy little man with a limp, followed by a woman just as dumpy.

The mastermind of a cruel, brutal plan to seize an entire African nation and pocket for himself and his cronies the millions that should have gone for AIDS medicine. A man of such deep and untiring evil should look like Christopher Walken, like a proper villain.

But what walked past the pimped-out Caddie, the real Goldfinger, looked like a pathetic schmuck, slumping along in an old beige Eddie Bauer hunting jacket, goofy workman's cap, and worn-in Hush Puppies. This was a terrible letdown. Evil shouldn't be so dull. Evil should have a sense of style. Sharp-shouldered Nino Cerruti raw silk midnight-blue suits. Devils wear Prada, not JC Penney.

Nevertheless, Zambia bled, and someone had to confront this limping predator—and this morning, in the chilly air, it would be me.

I nodded at Ricardo and counted down, "Three, two, one, go!"

Park Avenue, New York

So this long blonde comes up to me after some forgettable book-hawking chat at Barnes & Noble and says, "I'd like to speak with you privately."

Of course you do.

“I need your help.”

We all need help. What’s your name?

She whispers, Patricia Cohen.

Means nothing to me.

She whispers, *Steven Cohen’s* wife.

That means something. Steven *A.* Cohen?

A nod. “I have documents. Can you come to my apartment tomorrow?”

Sooner. The Energy-Finance Combine had just opened a door and said, *Come on in!*

Steven A. Cohen, SAC Capital.

Septa-billionaire (\$7.4 billion net worth, give or take). Enough to be called a “philanthropist.” The Genius “arbitrageur.” In other words, he was trailed by just enough of a scent of criminality that the merely wealthy were happy to hand him their millions to play with, no questions asked. None answered.

The Sack knew which way a stock would move before God knew. He beat the knickers off Wall Street’s best and brightest. He was Karnak the Magnificent, knowing which card the dealer would throw before he threw it—every time.

Using inside information? Heaven forbid! That would be *illegal*. “Research,” his investors say, grinning. Why can’t Badpenny come up with magical research like that?

Used wives are very attractive to me, as a journalist. They remain angry for years, and Patricia Cohen was very angry.

Now, when a lady of a certain age, even a blonde who could suck the air out of your soul, says she wants to tell the truth on her ex, she doesn’t want to bring him to justice, she wants to bring him to his knees. First Wives want, first, the money; second, revenge; third, the money.

As I walked into her Park Avenue kitchen, I could smell vengeance burning. It was close enough to Mick Jagger’s place to borrow a cup of sugar from him. Swanky, but hardly the digs of a billionaire. Obviously, ex-Mrs. Cohen was *very* ex’d.

“I think you’re the man,” she said, “I think only you have what it takes to do this investigation.”

No good has ever come of those words, especially from a blonde.

I got out my pad. “Mind if I take notes?”

So why did she give up a guy who clearly had the game sussed? As always, it was another woman. The other woman was . . .

“His mother. He loved his mother.”

I’ve heard of worse.

“Yeah, but he *really* loved his mother. He called her every day. Steven couldn’t take a poopy without calling Mommy. Then we’d go to see her every week in Great Neck and have dinner with her, and she would say to him, ‘All I know is, *money makes the monkey jump. Money makes the monkey jump.*’

“And we’d leave and half the time in the car he’d be in tears about his mommy humiliating him.” Apparently, Steven’s monkey hadn’t jumped high enough.

Athens to Quito

Two weeks after the Deepwater Horizon caught fire and sank, Greece caught fire and sank.

On May 5, 2010, I open up the *Journal* and I could puke. There was this photo of a man on fire, just a bunch of flames with a leg sticking out. Two others burnt with him on a pretty spring day in Athens.

The question is, *Who did it?*

If you read the U.S. papers, the answer was obvious. A bunch of olive-pit-spitting, ouzo-guzzling, lazy-

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ass Greek workers who refused to put in a full day's work, retired while they were still teenagers on pensions fit for a pasha, had gone on a mad social services spending spree using borrowed money. Now that the bill came due and the Greeks had to pay with higher taxes and cuts in their big fat welfare state, they ran riot, screaming in the streets, busting windows, and burning banks with people inside.

Case closed.

I didn't buy it. It wasn't just a feeling in my gut, it was the document in my hand marked

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Well, it's my official duty as a journalist to disclose it. The firebombing, the mobs in the streets of Athens, one in seven workers marked for unemployment in a single week, the empty pension funds, and the angry despair that would sweep across Europe in 2010 began with a series of banking transactions crafted in the United States and Switzerland. The plan was eighteen years old, and here it was played out in the streets of Greece, then Spain and Portugal, and before that in Latin America and Asia. The riot was written right into it.

When I ask, *Who did it?* I don't mean the damaged fool who threw the Molotov cocktail into the crowded bank. I'm looking for the men in the shadows, the very big Monkey Jumpers who turned economies into explosive kindling, lit the fuse, then stood first in line at the fire sale.

I have their phone numbers.

The five numbers came from a message about "the endgame," The ominous *note*, also confidential, was written by Tim Geithner to Larry Summers. Over time, Summers and Geithner each would take a turn as United States Secretary of the Treasury. But in 1997, they had higher posts, as Masters of the Financial Universe. (I will explain later.) But, however valuable these notes, they were just a bunch of paper not worth bothering you nor anyone else with unless I could get confirmation they were legit. And that would require another expensive trip to Geneva.

Badpenny wanted me to bust the game. "So you're going to write about this, no?"

"No."

I had already talked a British TV network into ponying up for my BP hunt in Alaska and the Caspian. Plus, BBC and The Guardian had me looking for The Hamsah; Harvey the Angel was on my ass for the nuclear power investigation, and I had a Europe-based publisher who didn't care if Europe flew or farted—they just wanted 100,000 words to shove between two covers and sell sell sell. They'd been patient enough, and no one is going to pay us to traipse around the Alps like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*.

So forget it.

Badpenny gave me that wicked grin and bought tickets for Switzerland, round trip from London.

But first to Quito to go over this "RESTRICTED DISTRIBUTION" stuff with Ecuador's president.

That wouldn't be easy. President Rafael Correa swore he would never speak to American reporters, nor any Americans, really, after he was strip-searched in Miami while changing planes on his way back from an OPEC meeting in the Middle East.

Correa didn't take a lot of crap from the United States nor anybody, for that matter. Correa—"The Belt" in Spanish—ran campaign commercials using the Twisted Sister's anthem, "We're Not Gonna Take It."

He doesn't.

Ecuador was under siege by financial vultures. But unlike the Zambians and Liberians begging for a deal, Correa told the vultures to go to hell, he wouldn't pay. Fuck off. He simply would not pay ransom to

speculators whose claims were just usurious horseshit.

Correa's flat-out refusal to pay caused an international freak-out in all the big banking centers. The IMF and World Bank brought down their hammers. They would cut off his nation's access to credit.

When Correa took office, his country was hurting. Despite its oil resources, despite the price of bananas doubling (yes, Ecuador really is the quintessential banana republic), the average Ecuadoran didn't have two peels to rub together. He'd won office not long after the two-mile-high capital was seized by angry Quechua-speaking women wearing bowler and fedoras, banging empty food pots and setting cars on fire.

The hunger, the mass exodus of desperate Ecuadorans to the United States, Correa blamed on secret pacts with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund which, he suspected, had been accepted by his predecessors (one certifiably insane, others certifiably corrupt).

His claim of secret agreements is nasty, wild, and 100 percent accurate. I had copies—and I thought he might like a look.

He did. So it was back to Ecuador with Ricardo, to the Presidential Palace.

Geneva

By saying *Hands off our oil and 'take your bonds and shove it,'* Correa broke the rules.

But whose rules are they? Who made them up?

Who said that the oil under the Amazon belongs to Occidental Petroleum? That it's *turn over your resources to pay the vultures or else!* Who said that Greece had to let bankers seize pensions to pay other bankers?

When did we agree to live our lives on their game board, to let them tell us who is rich, who poor, who runs the casino, who gets to load the dice?

The first guy to ask those questions died a bitter pauper, and worse, he nearly died in England. Jean-Jacques Rousseau hated the English. He was chased out of his native Geneva although he begged to stay and promised to live on an island in the middle of the lake, and write and speak no more. But Rousseau silent was still more dangerous than most men shouting. His house was stoned and the burgher bankers booted him across the Channel.

In the eighteenth century, when kings ruled by divine right and earthly whips, folks just took it and said OK. Then Rousseau wrote *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Among Men*. He said the idea that a vulgar little hedge fund speculator like The Sack is worth \$7 billion and you don't have health insurance (he cited the eighteenth-century equivalent) is because we've all agreed to *his* rules: *his* rules of property, ownership, and law. And why do we just go along with his rules? We don't know, because the rules go all the way back to when there were guys named Ugh and Thug. Thug had a big rock and put a fence around the best dirt for growing corn and left Ugh with just about nothing, and Thug said, "This is the rule and this is my big-ass rock. Get it?" And Ugh said, "OK."

So who holds the big rock today? Who made up this system and who enforces it for The Sack's benefit, for Goldfinger, for BP PLC?

We're told the Invisible Hand of the Marketplace holds the rock now, but it must attach to a very powerful arm. Whose? There were many candidates, several Thugs and their generals moving assets and reserves around the map. Undoubtedly, one of them sat within the high-walled compound rising up in front of Badpenny and me, the headquarters of the WTO, the World Trade Organization.

You see, we had something more important to do on the shores of Lake Geneva than to follow Zambia's diminutive dictator on a shoe-buying binge.

We wanted to speak to an enforcer of the rules, the police chief of the Energy-Finance Combine eating Ecuador for breakfast, Greece for lunch, and still hungry for Brazil and dessert. Amazingly, we cadged a meeting with the Director-General of the WTO, Pascal Lamy, the Generalissimo of Globalization himself.

Lamy probably granted the interview on the basis of something kind I'd written about him when I was still drinking.

D-G Lamy came to the WTO from Le Crédit Lyonnais (LDL), the French mega-bank, where he also wore the epaulets of director-general. The fit and sparkly Frenchman, comfortable with himself and confident, dressed down for me, in a powder blue sweater vest. He was at ease but made sure I was not. He'd set our chat at his grand and dark conference table, a hollow room meant for folks more important than I will ever be.

So I spread my cards, my documents, on the table, fanned them out like a Texas poker player who'd drawn to an inside flush. Across the cover of the thick one on top was a clearly ineffective note:

“Ensure this text is not made publicly available.”

I knew I could make the General smile.

“*The WTO is not some evil cabal of bankers,*” the banker insisted.

Maybe not. But the meeting notes of the non-cabal made for some pretty interesting reading.

It took an hour and a half to go over each, especially the one you could call the Magna Carta of Globalization. The Frenchman was amused, clearly delighted in the game. Their content and significance require their own chapter, and that will come.

Prince William Sound, Alaska

What Exxon's oil didn't kill, Exxon's money did. I remember the grim prophecy of the Tatitlek President and Chief Kompkoff. (Kompkoff's daughter was—and forgive me for the stereotyped image—an eerily exact replica of Disney's cartoon Pocahontas, just that beautiful, and her husband a celluloid image of an Indian brave.) Sitting out under the Northern Lights with me, a year after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, Kompkoff was thinking out loud, troubled. “Lawyers say we might get maybe fifty thousand dollars each from Exxon. I tell you, we get that kind of money out here, well, man, I don't want to be here in the village. I mean, everyone's got a gun and drinking, you know; it could all go crazy, crazy.”

For this new post-Deepwater Horizon investigation of BP, I planned to fly up to meet him to find out if the oil companies had finally set out the damn Conex boxes of rubber boom they promised, and did they get the payout. It turns out, Tatitlek got their \$50K checks, but Kompkoff failed to take his own advice to get out. I was having a hell of a time reaching him. Then I got an elder on the phone. She told me, “Oh, he's gone. Drank himself to death. It was after his daughter was murdered there by her husband. She died in her father's arms, you know.”

I didn't know.

I told Matty to cancel the Cessna and instead charter a fishing boat to the village of Chenega, which was way out there in the middle of the Sound. I didn't want to chance flying in, lest they refuse me permission to land as they had done before.

Besides, Chenega's President still owes me \$300.

It goes back to 1989. Chenega is the most remote village, the one that suffered the most from the oil damage and therefore its President, Chuck Totemoff, was the man who would have to face down Exxon and BP's Alyeska consortium. I flew fourteen hours to meet with him in Anchorage, but he never showed up, though the charter pilot swore he'd brought him in safely from the village.

Then the next morning, while I was chugging down the sidewalk near the Captain Cook hotel on my cross-country skis, looking for breakfast, I saw Totemoff bent over a boilermaker at a local bar. You couldn't miss him. Chuck was as wide as he was tall, with an unmistakable topping of straight black hair. Chuck had been elected Chenega's President though he was barely in his twenties.

I sat down next to him. “What happened, Chuck? We missed you.”

He looked pretty shattered. He'd been up all night at the Alaska Bush Club, a famous (or infamous) strip joint where women could be rented for private entertainment. He rented one, then another, then another, he told me. And now he didn't know how he could get back to the island as he'd spent the poor village's entire travel budget, which they'd given him in cash.

He wanted to explain. "Well, you know, did you ever have one of those nights when you just couldn't get enough pussy?"

I lent him three hundred.

Somewhere, USA

And then I got the e-mail. Badpenny was beside herself. "It's the Smart Pig!" she said.

She didn't mean the guy who sent the note. There's a pig in every pipeline, and not just the porky, bonus-bloated executive that gets sucked in once in a while. She meant the diagnostic machine that is supposed to pick up dangers. BP uses them, or is supposed to. They're kind of important. A gas pipe in California blew up, taking nine lives. Blame the pig. The pig should have caught the faulty welds that gave out.

The guy our files call Pig Man #1 had some devastating info on the Smart Pigs. Maybe they weren't so smart. But I'd have to meet him in person to get the skinny.

But, Pig Man #1 said, as they all say, "I only ask that you do not reveal my identity"

Of course it can't. You chose to work in an industry without mercy. They find you, they find out you squealed, they get you. A bullet to the back of the head of your career. They write NRB on your file—Not Required Back. Or the poison note about an affair is placed in the file (a BP special), or you're canned for "insubordination."

I promised Pig Man #1 we'd meet in Somewhere USA, a location a couple hundred miles from both his base and mine of which we would keep no record; and when we filmed, we promised to show nothing more than the smoke he exhales.

Federal Detention Facility, Buffalo, New York

My week was going from absurd to insane. I received yet another package, this one from George Boley Jr., son of a political science professor at the State University of New York in Binghamton. I knew lots about his dad, George Sr. On Professor Boley's vacations and time off from the university, he would return to his home in Liberia to lead his private army of children, some as young as eight years old, whom he drugged, starved, then whipped into a killing force armed with AK-47s. Boley ordered them to murder without mercy in the professor's war with another American academic, the economist, escaped convict, and (currently imprisoned) war criminal, Charles Taylor.

Boley Jr. claimed that his dad, the academic and/or warlord, had gotten a bad rap. It was a case of mistaken identity and mistaken motives. Nevertheless, the Department of Homeland Security was holding the poli sci professor as an unwilling guest at the Buffalo Federal Detention Facility on a visa violation. That is, he had failed to put down on his entry forms that he was a mass murderer.

The evidence, the enclosed government agent's affidavit, was based on the say-so of three unsworn

witnesses, Mr. Sonny Swen aka Satan Baby, Mr. Garley Farley aka General Scarface, and Mr. Blanco Tuan aka General Butt Naked (who went into battle thusly uniformed). During the Liberian civil war, my researcher Jim Ciment met with General Naked and found him credible and kind of charming for a man who executed his prisoners with a steak knife.

Homeland Security could have gotten it all wrong. They usually do, like when they charged me with violating the antiterrorism laws. I swear I'm innocent. That's another story for another book.

But I hadn't traveled to Africa to investigate Boley or crimes against humanity. I was there to pick up what I could about *The Vulture*.

I wanted Boley Jr. to get me in to see his father in prison. I couldn't care less if Boley was a blood-crazed warlord or a shy professor (or both), but I was quite sure that Boley had some clue for me about the *Hamsah*.

London

There comes a dark time in the career of every journalist known as The Meeting With The Network. To participate in this mystifying ritual, I was flown to London. It was a complete waste of my time and, I suppose, a waste of your time too, as I'm bothering to write about it. But this book is *reportage verité*, and I will conceal nothing from you, including scenes of painful annoyance.

I'd be doing my new oil investigation for Channel 4 *Dispatches*. Its weaker episodes play in the United States on PBS's *Frontline*.

I'm on a three-way call with my Russian from the 12th Department and going through the dump of documents I'm not supposed to see, when I get an e-mail from the network in London that they don't want me to wear my hat.

They had a meeting about it.

In Africa, a one-armed child hawks chewing gum; Muslim hookers in Azerbaijan wait grimly for the list of bureaucrats to service; black poison spews at 25,000 gallons a minute from the Devil's asshole at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico; the Taliban plant roadside bombs, stone women, and have homosexual circle jerks while Obama holds in his gut a secret about Afghanistan that makes him feel like he's cheating his children even when he holds them.

And the network is thinking about my hat.

My director's thinking about my hat.

For four decades I've worn this fedora. When my nose went on television, I didn't realize my hat followed me because I never think about my hat. But Prime Minister Tony Blair noticed and his hounds told the press, "Don't trust a man in a hat." So, BBC said, "Wear the hat."

Now Channel 4, the rival network, decided that the hat was a BBC "icon." If my hat only knew its status! They didn't want a BBC icon. Worse, the hat was now a costume worn by Matt Drudge, a poseur pretending to be a journalist.

I can't have network executives writing e-mails in which they visualize dressing me and undressing me like a middle-aged Barbie doll.

I don't know about you, but I have much to do before the Devil's work is done.

To make sure Greg Palast doesn't run amok, The Network assigned a gung-ho Oxbridge boy, James B, to be my director, poor bastard. I checked his Web site. He'd also been to Liberia, and there is a clip of Director James in the bush, getting shot at while his mercenary bodyguard fires back, swearing. James continues filming from down in the grass, which evidences either extreme dedication to the story or complete insanity. I concluded it was both after he suggested we fly into Tomsk, Siberia, the coldest city on Earth, rent a helicopter, and fly over the Samotlor oil fields, which BP and its oligarch partners had turned into a toxic horror show. I pointed out that Samotlor is a Russian security zone, and according to Jane's Military catalogue, every MiG-21 carries two 30-mm cannons, a twin-barrel 23-mm gun, and a variety of heat-seeking air-to-air missiles. We, on the other hand, would carry our press passes and hand-lettered signs

that read, DON'T SHOOT! OUR MOTHERS STILL LOVE US!

Helicopter canceled.

James did show his cautious side by going nowhere without his emergency surgical kit, including “heavy bleed anti-clot applicators, abdominal burn towels, quick-set fracture splints, a syringe sterilizer,” and much more, hygienically sealed. Plus a satellite phone. Ricardo and I travel with Pepto-Bismol tablets, condoms, and mosquito spray, and me, out of habit, K-Y Jelly and a 3.4-ounce flask of Felipe II.

And my hat.

Manhattan, Second Avenue, Downtown

The alarm at five A.M. wakes me up to one of those drippy mornings invented for suicide. What kind of sick fuck would make it rain before dawn? I have to do Amy Goodman’s show, *Democracy Now!*, in a couple of hours. *Democracy Now!* is kind of a refugee camp for exiled journalists. Amy runs my BBC investigations when BBC’s dear sister U.S. networks, the corporate capons, won’t touch them.

My jet lag from the thirty-six-hour bounce to Britain is kicking me in the ass, and makeup call is 7:40 A.M. This shouldn’t be happening: I spent my life doing everything humanly possible to avoid jobs where I have to punch the clock. Instead, I end up with jobs where the clock punches *me*.

Five thirty A.M. and still dirty light. I’d passed out on my official napping mattress and now, in the ugly early, I see Badpenny at her desk, her face lit by the laptop screen, working her vampire hours. She whips around, all sparkly and grinning, to tell me she has connected Montreux to Vulture Hermann. Oh, yeah, we still have the Vulture investigation boiling. Everything at once. Badpenny’s excited, she’s squirming in her leathers and pointing at the screen at abstruse SEC filings. “They’re partners!” The Vulture is locked up as *owner* of Montreux with Straus, has been for years. “R----- will be *furious* because Hermann, straight to his face, denied any connection to Straus.” I have every reason to believe this will make sense to me when I wake up.

She is beaming, as well she should, but I’m not up for this now and drag myself to the upstairs kitchenette.

Suddenly, Badpenny is thundering up the steps, shouting, “*OH NO YOU DON’T! YOU WILL NOT SABOTAGE YOUR ENTIRE DAY!*” and grabs my breakfast right out of my hand, splashing my Felipe II all over my wrist. (Two fingers of Felipe II in a coffee cup, no ice. Ice is disgusting in the morning. Or, in a rush, straight from the bottle.)

I pour another, but Badpenny grabs Felipe. She’s nuts. She’s *possessed*. I grab it back and she grabs it away again. I’m not going to let go. She’s not going to let go. Now she’s commanding me, like a tiny Stalin, “*I WILL NOT LET YOU DO THIS!*”

Let the fuck go, you crazy-ass . . .

The little thing is quite violent and she’s *strong*. She’s dragging me and Felipe to the top of the staircase and—“*SHIT NO!*”—we are all going to break our necks. I don’t want to die like this. I try to slap her—this is no time to be a gallant—but holy shit, *she’s fast*.

I thought she’d grabbed a steel rod, but it was just her fist. The blood, *my blood*, sprayed everywhere: walls, window, *ceiling*. The stairwell looked like the scene of a mafia hit. And by the time the blindness caused by the pain ceased, Badpenny had slipped away home.

I looked in the mirror. My face was getting bigger, swelling, and, my God, there was a hunk of my lip simply hanging down.

Amy Goodman’s sweet Iranian makeup lady did her best to cover over my butterfly Band-Aids and the nasty gash. I told the camera guys to shoot only my left profile.

“*And that was a special report from Liberia from BBC Television investigative reporter Greg Palast. So tell me, Greg Palast . . .*”

Amy was saying something to me very, very sincere. She was asking me about Vultures. I was trying to stay mental. Amy kindly did not mention to the radio audience that her guest had a hunk of bleeding flesh

hanging over his teeth. I'm sure Jeremy Scahill will get a fucking big laugh out of this.

Got back to the office and, just to get even with the arrogant little bitchlette, I lay down on the couch and killed three-fourths of the liter bottle. "*You should be told you're beautiful every five minutes.*" Oh, *please!* A more sensible idea would be to kick your little ass every five minutes.

I'm lying there, working. That is, staring at a fly and puzzling the problem. *Vulture has a piece of Montreux?* How did I miss that? Here's how: Evil is healthy. Evil has running shoes. The Vulture gets up early. He jogs, he does marathons. That's a fact: Matty Pass looked it up.

Let us be honest: There are some people in this world who truly need a fist to the face. I'm one of them.

The next morning, I fired my coauthor, Felipe II, and flushed my spare pint down the toilet. (Well, nearly did. I sucked down the one sip left, the one for the road, for the marathon.) The world is intoxicated and stumbling, which means I'd have to write this story, this book, stone sober.

For weeks, I wouldn't admit to Badpenny that I had stopped drinking. There is nothing worse than a woman who rags you and nags you. Especially when she's right.

JFK

By the end of this story, you'll find out whether Professor Boley armed children, killed children, ate children, or saved children; how Japan created its own slow-motion Hiroshima; and why Texas and Georgia are in a race to go next—and the location of BP's next horror show.

I'm not giving away the ending because I have *no idea* how this will all end. As I'm writing this, Badpenny is behind me, puzzling visas to Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, and chartering float planes and jeeps for Alaska and hunting up a bayou fan-boat in the Delta. Right now, I am heading to JFK Airport with a parka and Bermuda shorts.

The question mark in place of a last chapter is driving my publisher crazy. But what drives *me* crazy is that, while I'm dead sure I can name four of them, the fifth man, the *Hamsah*, remains just past my fingertips.

End of excerpt.

**To get the book in Hardbound, eBook,
enhanced eBook, or Kindle, go to
www.VulturesPicnic.org**