

Cotton had no grasp of where he was and no notion of how he had got there. He could not even tell whether his eyes were shut or he was trapped somewhere dark enough to make no difference. He could feel a very heavy weight pressing on the right side of his head. It felt flat, like the flange of a sizeable I-beam. It was squeezing his skull.

The few words of response that came to his mind were slow and insecure, as if they were not certain what form they should take, however simple. Though he had not moved, the pain in his head abruptly shifted, became something bulb-shaped pulsing at the base of his neck. His tongue felt dry as if it had not moved for a long time. His mind appeared to have whole sections missing, and what was left, apart from a few sparks of alarm, was as lively as dried, old dregs.

‘Have I been in a—have I been in an—?’

The letters that came to him formed *accent*. He winced, partly at the excruciating pain in his head. He meant *accident*. He knew the word. But he could not see how to get at it. With each throb the pain wiped part of it out.

Cotton had regained consciousness before. As a child of about eight at the dentist he had been given gas for the extraction of a milk tooth. And about fifteen years later, in Sicily, after the shock wave from an explosion had flung him against a jeep. From both he remembered a light spinning sensation before he recovered his senses. They had all come back in a bright rush – not like this. As if on cue, his mind

saw a spin of blue sky and white clouds, but the wrong way round. He was leaving them, dropping back not rising up. The clouds fractured and turned black.

Cotton slumped into unconsciousness again.

‘Can you hear me? Colonel Cotton? Can you hear me?’

Cotton tried to answer but he heard a sound he did not recognize as anything to do with his intent to say ‘yes’. He was not sure he had really managed to speak, only that something like a moan had reverberated in his skull. The bones in his head felt brittle and light, somewhere between dried-out honeycomb and crumbling leaves. The image made him feel like retching.

‘How are you feeling?’ said the voice. The voice was American and male. There was nothing at all familiar about it. Cotton could not understand the question. He could not get a grip on it. He recognized the words but could not run them together to make sense. Though his heart was already beating very fast, he felt it quicken. He could barely breathe.

‘Can you hear me, sir?’ the voice repeated.

Cotton made a big effort. ‘Yes,’ he said. This sounded to him more like a growl than a word.

‘Good. Good.’ The man was speaking very slowly and carefully. ‘Tell me now. How are you feeling?’

Cotton didn’t know what to say. He could not get past the pain and the nausea.

‘I guess you’re feeling pretty rough,’ suggested the voice.

Cotton tried again ‘Have I been in a crash?’ He sounded to himself like a profoundly deaf person speaking.

‘Is that what you think?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You’re having problems remembering.’

‘Yes.’

‘What can you remember, sir?’

‘I’ve been unconscious. Haven’t I?’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

Cotton considered the man’s reply. None of this made any sense. He could remember nothing. He could find nothing to remember.

‘Is there a problem?’ said the voice.

‘I’m thinking.’

But the truth was Cotton wasn’t thinking much at all. His mind felt gruesomely tenderized, but he had no recall of the blows that had tenderized it.

Somebody he could not identify had once said to him ‘Are you actually capable of panic?’

‘I was always taught panic was of no use,’ he had replied. ‘You have to think. There are times you can think pretty fast.’

Cotton couldn't move and he couldn't see. And, despite his scudding pulse, he could barely think. Was he blind? Paralysed?

He breathed in as deeply as he could. From somewhere in the dark he recalled, as a very small child, looking over the top of his cot as his Mexican nanny approached. She was smiling and talking to him but he could not hear what she was saying. In his mind, he held up his arms to be lifted.

'What are you doing?' said the voice.

'Remembering something,' he said.

'Of what happened to you?'

'Long ago.'

'That's good too,' said the voice. 'I mean it. That'll do. Can you tell me about it?'

Cotton felt another wave of nausea. 'Am I blind?' he said.

'No, you have a cover over your eyes to protect them. You may be having acute problems with your sense of balance. You have to trust me, Colonel Cotton. I need your collaboration. Try to keep talking. Tell me about the memory you just had. Is it still there? Can you recall it?'

Cotton understood the bit about balance. He thought about landing craft yawing in a swell. But that wasn't right. This was worse; a sensation that he was on the verge of falling out of the space that contained him. The space was egg-shaped but the egg was fragile. He recalled someone telling him an egg was the most efficient

aerodynamic shape. He had no idea if that was true, nor what good it did him. This shape was prone to shifts and lurches.

The more he engaged with the voice the more conscious he became of how many separate bits of him hurt. His joints, for example, felt as if somebody had gone mad with a small, shiny hammer, the kind doctors use to test reflexes but had used like a weapon on him. Had he been badly burnt? ‘Something when I was very young, that’s all.’

‘Tell me.’

‘It’s before I can even speak. I’m watching my *ama* come to pick me up out of the cot.’

‘Ama? What’s that word?’

‘Nurse,’ said Cotton. ‘Nanny. In Mexico.’

‘Can you recall her name?’

‘Consuelo.’

‘Right,’ said the voice. Cotton was aware the speaker had turned his head towards someone else. ‘That makes sense, right? Consuelo means Consolation. Isn’t that the case?’

Almost instantly Cotton felt a surge of utter distress, as if he had just received the most heartbreaking news possible – but all from the notion that the other man was misunderstanding. It wasn’t the translation of Consuelo’s name that mattered; it was Consuelo herself. Why was he so abject and alarmed that he might be misleading a doctor?

‘It’s quite a common name.’

‘Oh, I’m sure it is. I’m not doubting that, Colonel Cotton. Not at all.’

Cotton confirmed the man was calling him by his old rank. ‘Who am I speaking to?’

‘My name is Dr Sanford.’

‘Are you a proper doctor?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re not a psychiatrist?’

‘No, I’m not,’ said Dr Sanford. ‘Are you telling me you’ve had a bad experience?’

‘Not me.’ Cotton thought he was falling asleep again, but he was prevented from doing so by someone speaking. It took him some time to appreciate that the fluent, peremptory, sneering voice he was hearing was coming from him.

‘But it was quite exceptionally difficult to avoid an impression of the psychiatrists involved in our war effort as combining the qualities of both Uriah Heep and Torquemada. The abject alacrity with which they kowtowed to funding and authority was most striking. Almost as much as the speed with which they dispatched the soldiers they were supposed to be helping. Is “shirker” a recognized term in psychiatry? I once saw one of these people call a sergeant that. The man had no skin on his lower legs but presumably the psychiatrist couldn’t look down past the table he was sitting behind.’

Dr Sanford laughed. ‘Well now! Where did that come from?’ he said.

Cotton had no idea. It had been like listening to someone else, a bitter, vindictive someone else – like the second master at his old school, who insisted on being addressed as *padre*. Or possibly, it seemed to Cotton, like a certain kind of interrogator.

‘Let me reassure you Colonel Cotton. You have no need to worry. I’m a physician, a neurologist. Are you in a position right now to know what that means?’

‘You deal with epilepsy, Parkinson’s, cerebral palsy ...’

‘None of those is your case, Colonel. But I’m sure you know that sometimes we have to use symptoms to trace back. This conversation is in the nature of an investigation.’

‘Of what?’

‘Your condition. Right now your eyes are covered because light is extremely painful for you. Do you remember that? It’s not too strong to say you were in agony. You said it was like having rusty hat pins stuck into your eyes.’

Rusty hat pins? It seemed a bizarre, far-fetched simile to Cotton. ‘I don’t remember.’ Immediately however Cotton felt himself cringe. He felt frightened of having the surface of his eyes scratched by flecks of rust. The flecks floated in the liquid between his lids and his eyeballs, and the damned things were spinning, rather leisurely, like blotched, metallic sores. What the hell was the matter with him? Why was he worried about rust when a hat pin in his eyeball would certainly have blinded and very likely killed him directly? Where was his sense of depth?

‘That’s why I am asking you about memories,’ continued the doctor. ‘We want to see how much you can join up, as it were.’

‘Are you telling me I’m brain-damaged?’

‘Honestly? We don’t know yet. But you are doing extraordinarily well so far, let me assure you.’

‘Was I in an acci—?’ It wasn’t that Cotton couldn’t say the word; he couldn’t even find it.

‘An accident? You were found unconscious in a doorway in Center Street, about a block down from Police Headquarters.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Little Italy.’

Cotton heard ‘Lillillily’. ‘Lill—?’

‘Colonel Cotton! Colonel Cotton!’

Cotton came back with a grunt of protest. ‘What?’

‘Italy,’ said the doctor. ‘You were found in Little Italy. New York. Have you got that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. You were found in a doorway. When I saw you for the first time you were having convulsions. We didn’t have an easy time. At one stage you went into shock.’

‘What is wrong with me?’

‘You’ve had an influx of drugs in your system, Colonel. We are pretty sure we know what the main drugs were but we don’t quite know how much you got.’

'What are you saying?'

'Well, for example, we found substantial traces of scopolamine in your blood. And there was mescaline in your urine.'

Cotton heard the words but they vanished immediately. 'Say those again.'

'All right. You may have heard of mescaline. Or perhaps you've heard of peyote? Oh, that has a link with Mexico, doesn't it? Peyote's another word for mescaline.'

'Yes.'

'Tell me.'

'Peyote. It's a hallucinogenic.'

'It doesn't cause what we would call true hallucinations.'

'I see. More like symphonies and harmonies, an intense feeling of oneness with the colour and petals of a rose?' It was that sarcastic voice again. It made Cotton feel sick, as if he had swallowed a ventriloquist's act and couldn't get rid of it.

'That's correct,' said Dr Sanford. 'And how about nightshade? Scopolamine is derived from nightshade.'

'Deadly?'

'There are variations and non-lethal doses. We suspect you've also had sodium amytal, but that is harder to sort out from other barbiturates. Do you know what that is?'

To his own surprise Cotton heard himself speak, quietly, as himself. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘The Germans invented it. They wanted it to be a truth drug.’

‘Good. What we are doing is clearing you out. I’m afraid this has meant more drugs. And we’ve been monitoring your heart and, in particular, your kidneys. That’s the physical side. On your mind we are less able to work because we can’t monitor it so well. Do you understand what I am saying? I need your help. We need to communicate.’

‘Right,’ said Cotton. ‘I feel tied down.’

‘You are,’ said Dr Sanford’s voice. ‘You’ve had convulsions. Do you remember I said that? They were violent but we got them down in intensity and frequency and in the last twenty-four hours you’ve had no attacks whatsoever. I assure you, however, that even three days ago, they were still violent enough to cause you quite severe injury. We had to ensure you didn’t bite your tongue. But we’ve been reducing the sedation and you really are holding up pretty well.’

‘I don’t remember any convulsions.’

‘That’s not a problem. I wouldn’t expect you to remember any. OK?’

‘No,’ said Cotton. He sighed. ‘*Mierda.*’

‘You remember Spanish?’

‘I think so.’

‘Say something.’

‘*Estoy jodido.*’

‘What does that mean?’

Cotton felt enormously tired, as if each word he had spoken had been bruising his brain and he simply had no more space left for any more bruises. He could see a kind of kaleidoscopic fracturing of colours under his eyelids. These broken bits began to spin and melt into a single colour. It was a repulsive shade of urine and tangerine.

'He's screwed,' said another American voice, one that Cotton had not heard.
'He says he's screwed.'

If he had been able to, Cotton would have nodded. The translation was just right enough. He passed out again on a feeling almost like relief.