



ZOLTAN Andrew Newsham

The high street was full of shoppers, beggars, preachers and market research people. One guy with a clipboard caught my attention. ‘Change of identity sir?’

My feet slowed to a stop and I turned around. He was a young man in a viciously cheap suit. He smiled at me and repeated himself.

‘Change of identity sir?’

I walked back. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Would you like to be someone else sir?’

‘Are you recruiting for some sort of cult?’

‘Nothing like that,’ he laughed. ‘I just want to ask you a few questions...’

I thought about it for a few moments. It was obviously some kind of con but I couldn’t work out what and my curiosity got the better of me.

‘When you say identity,’ I asked, ‘what do you mean?’

‘Anything you can think of sir.’

‘New name, new job, new life?’

‘If sir wants it that way...’

‘What else could a change of identity mean?’

‘Well, only changing certain aspects of your current life may be necessary.’

There are basics like food preferences you might not want to tamper with. You might like shortbread for example. Unless shortbread was intrinsic to your identity there'd be no reason to stop eating it.'

'You're trying to sell me shortbread?'

'No. I'm just saying that a new identity might not have to be a completely revolutionary thing. You can take it as little or as far as you want.'

'But a new identity is a pretty revolutionary thing.'

'I agree but some people might not. You could have a new name, a new job, a new life, but not one that has no room in it for shortbread.'

'What if I say I want a new life because I hate shortbread so much?'

'Then damn the shortbread, smash it to pieces.'

He mimed the crushing of biscuits by clenching his fist. There was a spark in his eyes.

'I can see you're a man who's tempted by what I've got to offer. We can talk over the semantics of what constitutes an identity change all night or I can show you in a few minutes...'

With every word he spoke I found myself being drawn in. I was thirty-five years old and completely bored. There was nothing really wrong with my life but there was no excitement. I needed some sort of a change but I didn't know what. On the radio that morning I'd heard an interview with the boxer George Foreman. He was over sixty and had been retired for years. He had more money than he needed, beach property around the world, everything you could ever dream of and yet he was talking about stepping back in the ring and going for another title shot. He said, 'I have everything I want but that's not living, that's just existing.' His words haunted me. I'd never had a title shot in anything.

'Okay,' I said.

'I just have to ask you a few questions.' He turned a page on his clipboard. 'What's your current employment?'

'I work in a bank.'

He noted my answer down and asked me another question and then another. Most of the questions were the usual market-research type but the odd one was surprising and pseudo-psychological. It went from 'Are you married?' to 'Have you ever dreamed of sex acts with plants?'

I answered as quickly and as honestly as possible. I was married. I'd once dreamed I was putting a cactus up the arse of a co-worker. I told the man it was more of a nightmare than a 'dream'.

It went on far longer than a few minutes and I began to get impatient. I made a point of looking at my watch, doing it in a slow and obvious way so he would understand that he was running out of time.

'Just one more question,' he said. 'How would you like your hair in your new identity?'

I thought about it for a few moments. 'I'd like to get rid of the grey and have it really black and long.'

'Good.' He wrote a few final words on his papers. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a laminated card and handed it to me. It was a membership pass for a gym. The name on it was 'Zoltan Gupta.'

'What's this?' I asked.

'It's your new identity,' he said. 'Mr Gupta.'

'But I'm not Asian. My parents were Irish.'

'You're clearly a bit of an enigma. The pass is valid at the gym for three months.'

'I'm already a member of a gym.'

'But Zoltan prefers this one.'

'Actually, I don't go to the gym that often anyway.'

'Well Zoltan doesn't necessarily have to either. See it merely as a place to explore your new identity. You might be married but Zoltan isn't. You could go there and meet some women... or men.'

'What are you trying to suggest?'

'Nothing, just that you can do anything, be anyone.'

‘So, you work for the gym?’

‘No,’ he said, ‘not exactly. But I can help you in other ways. You’re going to need somewhere to live and I can set you up with a variety of city centre apartments...’

I shook my head and started to walk away. It was nothing but a sales con after all. An ingenious new approach but he was still selling the same old shit.

He followed me. ‘What about a holiday, Mr Gupta?’

‘I’m not really interested.’

‘Not even a hair cut? Dyed black with extensions. There’s a place around the corner, I’ll get you a good deal...’

‘Look, it was nice talking to you but I’m really not interested in buying anything.’

‘A new mobile phone? Get a number just for Zoltan. He’s bound to be popular. How will his friends contact him?’

I picked up my pace but he stayed with me.

‘What about some new towels for the gym?’ he said.

‘Zoltan has no money,’ I said.

‘I could get him some work, cash in hand... as an escort.’

‘I’m not interested, please leave me alone.’

I walked around the corner and found that there were a lot of people waiting at my bus stop. It was rush hour. I joined the back of the queue. Annoyingly, the man stayed with me. I tried to ignore him but he stood close, reading through the answers I’d made to all his questions. He was clearly gathering his thoughts together for another sales assault.

‘I don’t have any money,’ I said.

‘Not even for a turban?’ he replied.

‘A turban?’ I asked. He surprised me and I couldn’t stop myself from talking to him.

‘You could be a Sikh or, if you prefer, I’ve got a Jewish Skullcap...’

‘How much?’ I asked, reaching into my pocket. He was persistent and I

could see it was the only way I was ever going to get rid of him.

‘Ten pounds,’ he said.

‘I’ll give you five.’

‘Okay.’

I gave him the money and he handed me a bag containing a one-piece ‘Maharajah Turban’. It was navy blue and had a large fake jewel in the middle.

‘Great doing business with you Mr Gupta,’ he said, then winked and walked away.

My bus came. The doors opened and swallowed about a third of the queue in front of me and then left. The rest of us edged forward like the endless walkers in the paintings by M.C.Escher.

It started to rain heavily, a deluge with drops as big as grapes. I was nowhere near the shelter so I began to get wet. As I didn’t have an umbrella I put on the turban.

It didn’t offer much shelter but it was something. I began to imagine that I was Zoltan Gupta. Where would I be going? What was I doing getting on this bus? I decided I was the long lost brother of the man who ran the Persian restaurant near my house. I was going to upset things. Zoltan was going to cause a lot of trouble. The prodigal son was returning to dance the skeletons out of the cupboard. I imagined bursting into the restaurant and turning over the tables. They’d call the police. They might try and put me in a mental hospital.

Five minutes later another bus arrived. Some of the queue had run away from the rain so I managed to get on board. It was crowded though and I had to sit down next to a fat man who took up most of the seat.

I took off the turban. That was it for Zoltan. He lived only briefly. His time no longer than a mayfly, his life no better than an improvised umbrella.

The fat man opened a packet of crisps and I smelt the pungent aroma of cheese and onions. I looked at the ghost image of the bus in the rain smeared window. Everyone looked tired and worn out. Utterly bored. Consumers, that’s

all we were. We had different names and different faces but we were essentially the same. We were what we ate, what we bought, and the story of our lives was nothing more than a long bank statement. If I persisted with Zoltan it would only be a matter of time before he went to Ikea or drank coffee from Starbucks. To throw off the warm duvet of my somnambulant world would take more strength than I had. It wasn't a bad life and I was comfortable.

When I got home my wife wanted to know why my forehead was stained with blue ink.

I looked at my reflection in the mirror. The turban dye had run in the rain.

'Zoltan did it,' I said.

She looked at me strangely.

I locked myself in the bathroom. I wished I hadn't mentioned Zoltan to her. She was bound to make it bigger than it was. She would worry and cry, say I was bored with her, with our life together. She would require an endless amount of tedious reassurance even though she was probably as bored with everything as me.

Maybe we needed a holiday? No, I could imagine exactly what would happen down to the smallest detail. How the initial excitement would be crushed under an avalanche of drab inevitabilities. She would fumble with the foreign currency, juggling an electronic currency converter, charting the weary waters of comparative costs. Some shit would be slightly cheaper than we would normally expect but not by much. A cork bathmat would perhaps look good in the bathroom but we wouldn't be able to decide and it would soak up more time and mental energy than any amount of bath water we might need it for. We would stumble over some irrelevant ruin with inappropriate footwear. The warm sea air would blow sweetly over the cold dead embers of our souls.

'This is nice,' we would say. But what exactly would we mean?

I washed the blue ink stain from my forehead and took out Zoltan's gym pass. The fucker had really started something. I ripped the card in half and

threw it in the bin.

When I went outside I told my wife that I would treat her to a meal at the Persian restaurant down the road. She was suspicious but went along with it.

‘I want to eat some ram’s balls,’ I joked. They did actually serve ram’s balls. The joke was that I would actually want to eat them.

‘It’s about time you got some balls,’ she said. She was joking but the way she said it was not really funny. It was more of a challenge than a joke.

The meal was very nice. I told her about the guy who’d stopped me in the street, about Zoltan, about the turban. She didn’t get upset about it at all, I’d been wrong about that. I splashed out on a whole bottle of wine rather than just two glasses and then, after we’d finished the main course and were considering desert, my heart began to beat faster as four small words formed in my mind. My wife noticed my agitation immediately.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘Nothing.’ My palms were wet with sweat.

‘Tell me.’

‘Okay.’ I took a deep breath and my heart leapt and I felt a combination of fear and excitement. ‘I want a divorce.’

My wife blinked in surprise, then smiled. It wasn’t a happy smile; it was a sick, nasty mask of a smile, as if something had snapped within her.

‘Good,’ she said. ‘Because I want children. But not with you, obviously.’

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