

NOW WHAT?

Irene gave me the manuscript back this morning. She looked me in the eye and told me, ‘People will say you have lost your mind.’ The day I decided to write this story, I realised that everything I had studied, heard and imagined had fallen into place with a discovery that changed my view of history. I had been deaf and blind until then, when I suddenly realised that coincidence is a word we use when we are ignorant of the real causes.

Fifteen years ago, when my father died, I wrote an essay in which I defined freedom not as the ability to do or undo things as we wish, but instead being able to accept events and understand them. True freedom is the freedom of all humanity. It cannot be *my* freedom because when I add a possessive it is no longer ‘freedom’. Qualifying something limits it. And the universe has no limits, just like humanity’s imagination and creative power. In the introduction to that essay I wrote:

‘For every ten people who see this book, one of them will be drawn to it; for every ten people who are drawn to it, one of them will buy it; for every ten people who buy it, one of them will finish it; for every

ten people who finish it, one of them will understand it; for every ten people who understand it, one of them will benefit from it; and for every ten people who benefit from it, just one will keep walking on. And that is who this book has been written for, that one person in a million. Just for that person. Because one day, perhaps, that person will take me by the hand and take me further than I was able to reach.

I have never since seen any of those mysterious companions on that extraordinary journey and I wonder what will happen when someone reads this story? Will their life stay the same? Perhaps they will think it is all just a product of my imagination, my fantasy; or maybe they will be that one person in a million who thinks on it and keeps searching. If so, I will consider that fine recompense. After everything that has happened, I can safely say that my life will never be the same again.

1 - A NOTE

*I am...
the voice that utters the word.
I am...
the hand that writes the message.
I am...
the memory of history.
I am...
just as you are
and others were
and others are
and others will be.*

‘If I were a rich man...’ Topol sang in *Fiddler on the Roof*. One evening, when I was young, I was sitting on the third step of a staircase. I felt strangely lucid and in a sudden outburst I raised my arms, looked up to where the sky’s infiniteness ends and cried, ‘I want to be wise!’
I sat there, turning it over in my mind: if I were a wise man... and I did not know what to add. Even today I still say, ‘If I were a wise

man...' And I wonder, 'What would I do?'

The same thought went through my mind when I stepped out onto the balcony of Luisa's and Alvaro's top-floor apartment on Avinguda Diagonal in Barcelona. They were moving abroad to Italy and were throwing a farewell party.

The balcony wrapped all around the apartment and had views of Barcelona to die for. I found a spot where I could stand and breathe in the evening air. It was a pleasant temperature. But I had had a tough day. I had spent a couple of hours in the morning trying to find a document for the taxman and when I finally found it the telephone rang. It was the garage. My car was ready but I had to pick it up right away as the next day was a public holiday. That took up the rest of the morning. Then Irene called me at six. There was trouble at work and she would be unable to go to the party with me. She asked me to apologise for her and say that we would go and visit them in Italy.

I could have sworn there was no-one else on that side of the balcony so when I heard a voice it made me jump.

'So you are the writer...'

It was a man, about sixty years old, well-dressed, bald and thickset with a smile on his lips.

'That's right, I am a writer, but not *the writer*.'

'The writer of the historic novel,' the man explained.

'There are other colleagues who work in the genre too. So I am not *the writer of the historic novel*, either.' I was not in the best of moods.

'My apologies for the faux pas,' he smiled. 'Both to you and your colleagues.'

I realised I was being a bit obnoxious towards someone who was being exquisitely polite.

'I'm the one who should apologise. I've not been having a good day.'

The man told me he liked my novels because they showed that I was searching for something inside myself. We carried on talking and at one point in the conversation he mentioned that in 1614, Galileo Galilei...

‘...wrote a letter in reply to accusations levelled at him by a priest in which he said that biblical texts should not be read as science but instead interpreted in the light of new knowledge. In 1633, they sentenced him to life imprisonment for those ideas and burned his book *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*.’

‘It is a sad story,’ I replied.

‘They condemned him for loving science and embracing knowledge instead of false faith. But at the beginning of 1634, a group of students created the Universal Scientific Community. Did you know that?’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘It is a secret society that has lasted down the centuries and fans the flame of the desire for knowledge. Its members call it the USC rather than the Community. It sounds less esoteric that way, so people might mistake it for a company.’

‘Now that’s interesting.’

He gave me the impression he knew a lot about it. He admitted he had a great love of history and he got me curious about secret societies, especially the USC. I wanted to find out more about its history and I asked him where I could get more information.

‘It is not easy to get into that circle,’ he said. ‘There are special conditions that have to be met; someone has to go with you and introduce you.’

Just at that moment, Angela appeared and interrupted us. The man excused himself, saying he was going to get a drink. I was about to stop him but my friend asked after my wife. I told her she was unable to come. We exchanged the usual pleasantries and said goodbye with the promise she would call us some day.

I went looking for the man who had sparked my interest in the USC but he was nowhere to be found.

At about eleven I said goodbye to everyone I could and left with a fine collection of hugs and kisses for Irene.

By the time I got home it was almost one in the morning. Irene was asleep.

The following morning I called Alvaro to ask after that odd guest. I was surprised to find out he did not know who he was. 'There was more than one gate-crasher yesterday; they polished off all the booze,' he joked. 'Well at least you still have the silver cutlery,' I joked back. 'What a shame!' I thought and promptly forgot all about it.

A few days later, in the morning, I was heading off to the office where I write. It is just three blocks from my house.

As I entered the building I found a letter in the box. There was no sender on the envelope. I tore it open and pulled out a handwritten note.

A reminder of a lovely conversation. If you want to find out more: start with Galileo Galilei, look at Alchemy and Boyle, find out about the USC and pull the Strings until you reach Phaeton... Future.

It was obviously from the man I had been talking to at the party. How had he found out my address? The note rekindled my interest in finding out more about the USC and I decided to investigate. I already knew about Galileo or at least a great deal about his life. So I focussed on Robert Boyle. After looking him up in the encyclopaedia and flitting from one book to another, following leads, I found a very interesting bit of information. In 1661, this English scientist published *The Sceptical Chymist*, which marked the future of chemistry and alchemy. Almost thirty years after Galileo was condemned, a book came out that signalled the end of alchemy as a science and relegated it to the occult. 'Why was that?' I wondered. The logical thing would have been for

alchemy to have evolved into chemistry but in reality it was taken out of circulation. We are told that the philosophers' stone was the catalyst that turned lead into gold. Of course, one should not lose sight of the fact this is the outer message and that there is another hidden meaning: the awakening of mankind's higher consciousness. Since the Church persecuted possible heresies, it was not unlikely that someone back then had discovered something that threatened a lot of beliefs and, seeing what had happened to Galileo, decided to conceal the discovery by turning alchemy into an occult science. Perhaps it had been Galileo's disciples who formed a secret society. Why not?

My informant had told me that the USC still existed. But why, if we are living a time when we have freedom of expression and the Catholic Church recently apologised and acknowledged that prosecuting Galileo had been a serious mistake? Perhaps what Galileo's students had discovered was so special that they decided the best thing was to conceal it. That would explain how the USC lasted until the 21st century. They were there to ensure that knowledge would not be brought to light.

And in all this I could see the seed of a wonderful story.

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One week later, after rummaging through libraries, searching on the Internet and asking friends and other contacts, I had been unable to find the least trace of the USC.

I was about to throw in the towel when I got a call from Paco Vallejo. I had contacted him because he was in the antiques business and loved finding out about secret societies.

'The USC turns up in a document in the Vatican library from the middle of the 17th century,' he told me. He had found a mention of the organisation in some papers left behind in an old house he had bought for its antiques. The document has now almost crumbled to dust but it clearly mentions the USC and there is a sentence that describes it as a sect.

I smiled. This was proof that the USC had not just been made up by some bright spark. It had existed in the 17th century and had attracted the Church's attention.

I told him I was looking for a subject for a novel. I also told him I would be eternally grateful if he found anything else. Before he hung up he suggested asking around in a specialist internet forum. It was not a bad idea. So, over the following days, I delved into forums on esoteric subjects, secret societies and mysteries... One afternoon the phone rang. A man who spoke Spanish without an accent and seemed well-educated asked if I was the person asking questions on forums under the name Boyle Le Mariotte. Then he asked me to meet him that Wednesday at Carrer Diputació with Passeig de Gràcia and hung up before I could reply. That weekend I turned it over in my mind. I wondered how he had got my phone number. I had not included it in any of my comments. I was tempted not to turn up.

Irene realised something was on my mind and asked me what was up. I told her I was following up an idea but did not tell her anything about meeting up with the caller.

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I got to the corner of Carrer Diputació with Passeig de Gràcia at eleven on the dot and waited, watching the people milling around. A black Citroën DS 23, famously nicknamed the 'Shark' in Spain, stopped right in front of me. You do not get to see many of them nowadays and I love classic cars. The driver got out, opened the door to the back seat, and gestured to me to get in.

Inside the car was a man aged around sixty-five. He had grey hair, a rosy complexion, a straight nose, a well-balanced chin, light eyes and a smile that revealed a perfect set of teeth.

'Please, come on in,' he said, patting the seat. It was the voice I had heard on the phone.

I got in and settled into that cosy upholstery. It was not for nothing that in its time the Shark was called the palace of the

road. I accepted his outstretched hand and he shook mine politely and sincerely. He was wearing a dark suit with a plain, dark blue tie. Although he was sitting down, I reckoned him to be about a metre sixty tall. He was not wearing a ring, a watch or any other jewellery. There was nothing that gave me the least clue as to his origins or personality. I felt that strange feeling of seeing before me a quality wine in an unlabelled bottle, one of those rare vintages that are not available to just anyone.

‘You are just like in the photos,’ he told me.

‘What photos?’ I replied in surprise.

‘In the newspapers,’ he answered with a broad smile.

He spoke educated Spanish with no discernible accent. He did not smell of aftershave either. All the tricks I thought I could use to find out some information about him were thwarted.

‘Sometimes photographs do not really capture a person’s soul. But that is not so in your case,’ he said.

‘It is not the photograph that captures the soul but the photographer,’ I replied in Catalan.

‘You’re right. It is the artist’s sensibility,’ he answered, sticking to Spanish.

He had understood what I was saying but he was clearly not about to switch languages; he would not give me any clues that way either. If he had answered in Catalan, I could have narrowed his accent down too much.

The car moved off. The chauffeur was about forty years old, tall and slim. He had dark hair, thick eyebrows above an aquiline nose and proudly wore a thick moustache. He wore a dark suit and gloves.

We went up Passeig de Gràcia towards Diagonal.

‘They say you can be trusted.’

‘Who do?’

‘People.’

‘Pleased to hear it. May I ask you who you are?’

‘A friend who is here to answer your questions.’

‘What is the USC?’

He looked at me, nodded gently, smiled again and leaned right back into his seat.

‘How did you come across the USC?’ he asked.

‘Someone—I don’t know his name—told me about it and sent me this,’ I explained and handed him a photocopy of the note.

‘A reminder of a lovely conversation. If you want to find out more: start with Galileo Galilei, look at Alchemy and Boyle, find out about the USC and pull the Strings until you reach Phaeton... Future,’ he read out loud. ‘Very interesting. And what do you make of all this,’ he asked me, offering me the note back.

‘You can keep it, it is a photocopy. So far what I have found out is: the USC is a secret society, which was set up by Galileo’s disciples to avoid being persecuted by the Church. It seems to be related with alchemy in some way and they decided to conceal it. So Robert Boyle wrote a book that meant the end of alchemy, which went underground.’

‘So you have connected Galileo, Boyle, Alchemy and the USC, but here it says: Strings, Phaeton and Future.’

‘I must admit, no matter how hard I try I cannot figure out who Galileo’s followers were. I don’t know how I am going to pull the strings that link all this to Phaeton, which I imagine is the point when the doors will open and I will reach the future.’

‘Why do you think it will open those doors?’ he asked with his imperturbable smile.

‘It’s only logical,’ I answered with a shrug. ‘The process starts with alchemy and ends with Phaeton, a mythological character, the son of Helios (Lord of the Sun) and Clymene (daughter of Oceanus), who persuaded his father to let him drive the sun chariot for a day and took the reins of the celestial horses. What is the connection between Galileo, Boyle and alchemy?’ I asked, pausing briefly before continuing, ‘I think I am on the right track; something immense was discovered, perhaps even something terrible. According to mythology, Phaeton was about to set the Earth on fire.’

‘And the word ‘future’ is preceded by an ellipsis. At first, I thought

I was a signature, that the writer of the note had chosen that word to define himself. After all, it starts with a capital letter. But then all the nouns start with a capital letter: Alchemy, Strings and Future. And during my conversation with that man, he repeatedly said, “What is the point of studying history if you don’t look to the future?” So the word “future” is the conclusion to what comes before.

‘Whoever wrote that note is definitely a cultured person.’ I pointed at the note. ‘Smart handwriting, the ‘R’s are written as if they were printed. All the punctuation is as it should be...’

‘I suppose you are hoping it will tell you what connects the three remaining words.’

‘You wouldn’t have replied to the messages I sent out otherwise.’ He nodded slowly and repeatedly and then he said, ‘If your suppositions are right and I explain what you believe to be the future, what will you do?’

‘I don’t know,’ I replied honestly. ‘It was the story that might lie behind a secret society that drew me to this adventure. A fascinating subject for a novel. But...’

‘But...’ he encouraged me to go on.

‘The future has been written a thousand times and the only use that has been is to allow us to point an accusing finger at those who got it wrong or right. Knowing what the future holds has never made us change course,’ I admitted.

‘So it was, so it is and so it ever shall be. The prophets speak so cryptically and so ambiguously it makes them hard to interpret.’

‘A prophet who could predict the future with all manner of little details would be crushed by crowds of people clamouring for the winning lottery numbers,’ I joked, smiling. ‘I have no intention of being a prophet. I am content with understanding the past and extrapolating it into the future. Knowing and understanding has been my lifelong goal.’

‘That’s a good path to follow.’

‘Does that mean you’ll help me?’

‘It means you seem honest and perhaps we will give you a hand,’

he replied. He half-closed his eyes and added, 'Provided you agree to play by our rules.'

'And what rules are they?'

'You can copy everything we give you. But you must return it just as it was when we gave it to you. Including the folder. Plus, you must tell us what you find out. If you do not give back something we lent you or we think your conclusions are not up to the standard we require, our relationship will be over,' he said looking me right in the eye. 'And if we cut off our relationship, you must abide by our decision, forget we even exist, and not tell anyone what you have experienced, heard or read.'

I sat there in silence, weighing up his conditions.

'Do you give me your word of honour?' he insisted.

I took a deep breath. That man knew me much better than I had thought because he had used the term 'word of honour'. And I had no doubt from his tone that he knew perfectly well that my word is sacred. That has got me into places very few people have ever been. I have read things the general public are not allowed to see and I have met people who live in anonymity.

'You have my word of honour that I will faithfully comply with each and every one of those conditions,' I replied and added, 'But only those conditions. I reserve the right to complete freedom regarding everything else, whatever it may be. Agreed?'

'Agreed.'

'And when I have finished, I will be free to write whatever I like.'

'But I will decide whether you have finished or not,' he hedged.

'Alright then, I accept.'

'This folder is for you,' he said and pointed at the bag on the floor in front of me, behind the front seat.

I picked it up. It was a slim, black, plastic A4 folder.

'This is where we part ways.'

The car stopped on the corner of Balmes with Roselló.

'How can I contact you?'

'When you have finished, insert an asterisk in the title of one of your books on your web page. Anything else?'

THE PHAETON REPORT

‘Since we are going to be working together, what should I call you?’

He looked at me with a smile in his eyes and the smirk of a naughty child.

‘My name is Mr Contact.’

I shook his hand and got out. As the car drove off, I memorised the number plate.