

Sam Leith

The Coincidence Engine

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The Coincidence Engine

'The coincidence engine is starting to work. I saw it with my own eyes.'

The Intercept was from nobody. It had been more or less sieved from static. Shortwave frequencies, an echo of an echo. The original signal was, they thought, perhaps, a fax; it still retained some formatting features. But its origin and its destination were unknown, and the very fact that they found it continued to be a source of bafflement. It was a one in a million shot: the equivalent of getting a crossed line and hearing your best friend's voice from the other side of the world.

It wasn't even a term the Directorate's officers had been specifically searching for. But 'coincidence engine' was close enough to send up a flag: they'd been combing for 'probability', 'paradox' (since that had been the inaccurate but hard-to-shake term that had briefly attached to the project), 'singularity', 'Heisenberg' (in variant spellings) and a half dozen other key terms and areas. Red Queen, who made no secret of not being a scientist, explained it to the directorate's staff that they were looking for 'weird stuff and people who seem to know about miracles'.

But then that was more or less a description of what they'd been doing ever since those whackos around the second Gulf War revived the Directorate of the Extremely Improbable. Red Queen would have preferred to work in the State Department, and Red Queen had made this noisily clear -- which was almost certainly why Red Queen had the job. In this department, producer capture was not a good idea.

But the arrival of the Intercept, coming so soon after the hurricanes and the satellite photograph, had seemed too much of a... well, there it was.

Someone had flagged it, and now it was here.

The hurricane blew through the junkyard and it made a plane. I saw it. First the gathering wind, and then the sky was filled with metal clashing and screaming and spinning. Rivets swarmed. Currents of air dashed and twirled plates, chairs, tin cans, girders and joists, pinging and banging off rocks. Noise like you never heard. Unholy howl. Rushing and screaming.

Knock, knock, knock and the metal clashing and curving and denting and sticking with great screams. Beyond conception. Beyond seeing. The panel of a trailer. The corrugated sides of a container cracking and flattening. A flash in the middle of it, right in the middle, of a tiny man suspended in air, pedalling his legs like he's treading water

and his tiny mouth open and his eyes little dots of terror. Something forming around him.

And finally the wind calmed and the thing was made, the metal miracle. Water running in beads down its flanks under the heavy sky. To the west, the cloud broke and in the distance the sky was bright, like through a tunnel. There was a double rainbow. And on the other side, the sky was a sheet of black. A terrible promise.

The rotors of the engines were idling in the last of the wind. And sitting high in the air, strapped safely in the cockpit, was the pilot – mouth opening and closing, eyes wide, staring into the enormous sky. It works. I saw it.

Its author, Red Queen reflected, sounded about as well-adjusted as that guy who eats flies in the Dracula movie. But the thing about the plane had caught their attention.

And there had been a hurricane. This they knew. Hurricane Jody had moved through the Gulf of Mexico for three days in the first week of August, feeding on the warm air rolling off the coast in the unending heatwave. It refused to blow itself out and refused to come ashore.

‘Does the name “Banacharski” mean anything to you?’ Red Queen asked.

The man looked confused and disoriented, as he was entitled to. Four hours previously he had been teaching a class of students in MIT. Three hours and 45 minutes previously, he had been on his way off-campus when a couple of men in suits had started steering him by the elbows as if -- he had thought with indignation -- he were not a small, bald professor of mathematics but a small, bald bicycle.

Two hours previously he had been, for the first time, in a helicopter. An actual black helicopter, tilting over Boston and heading out into the country. During that short, fast journey, Professor Hands had become quite convinced that his voluntary work leafleting for a human rights organisation had made him a target for extraordinary rendition. His whole short body had been flushed, moment by moment, with the chemicals of terror and the lip-trembling self-righteousness of a liberal academic facing a non-fatal kicking from the forces of reaction.

America, he knew, was a totalitarian enemy of free speech – but it didn’t actually kill middle-class white men. He expected to endure pain, speak eloquently, and become a cause célèbre. He imagined Chomsky talking about him on CNN; Glenn Beck denouncing him by name on Fox.

Now they were asking him about Banacharski.

‘Of course it does,’ the man said. ‘He’s a very distinguished mathematician. Or was, I suppose – depending on who you want to believe. But this has to do with

Banacharski? I can't see why he'd be of any interest to the CIA.'

'We're not the CIA, Professor Hands,' said Red Queen. 'We do a different job than they do. Remember all those bits of paper you signed earlier?'

He nodded.

'They don't mean very much. They say that you're breaking various national security laws if you disclose the existence of this organisation, let alone disclose the contents of our conversation, but the nature of what we do means that we could never actually drag you through open court if you break the agreements.'

'So we're adult about this. I do want to impress on you two things. One of them is that if you tell people about us, these people will think you are mad. Your first point of contact with us, was it not, was with two burly men in dark suits wearing wraparound sunglasses?'

Hands nodded.

'You were brought here in an unmarked black helicopter.'

Hands nodded again.

'And here you are, three floors below street level in New York in a secret —' Red Queen chuckled, '—a secret underground hideout. Talking to somebody with a name out of *Alice in Wonderland*.' Red Queen's palms turned upwards. 'It might be enough to earn you a sabbatical, but your accommodation would probably be chosen for you.'

Red Queen gave him a friendly smile. 'We are a serious organisation. What we do is extremely important. And we really do want your help. Contrary to the fantasies of all very highly educated and very poorly educated people, the government is truly not engaged in a conspiracy against the people. We do everything we can, in secret and in the open, to prevent them messing things up.'

'So just listen to what we have to say, and give us the benefit of what you know. Sit around here, talk, have a cup of coffee, come on board. And do us a favour: be an adult — and keep what we talk about to yourself. We need to be able to speak frankly with you.'

Hands followed the gesture and looked around the room. It was an odd room. Though it was windowless, on the wall behind Red Queen's desk there was something in the shape of a window that was giving off light, like a lightbox. The floor was pleasantly enough carpeted and beside him, there was a cardboard cup of coffee that said 'Starbucks' on it. Hands picked it up.

'Plus,' Red Queen added, fixing him with a harder stare, 'horrible things will happen to you if you speak about this. Really horrible.'

This was not true, in fact. Doing anything particularly horrible to a US citizen, particularly a member of a liberal institution of higher education, was almost always far more trouble than it was worth.

It was way, way outside the remit of the DEI — they didn't even have agents licensed to use lethal force — and even the FBI didn't do as much of that as people thought they did. If you want to keep a low profile, the two golden rules are: don't start leaving a trail of bodies and don't, whatever you do, involve the

FBI at any level. As for the CIA...

In any case, it was enough to focus the little professor's attention. Even if he suspected all of this, he didn't know it and he wouldn't be likely to want to test the thing out. He had been warned, flattered, and warned. He was short, and Red Queen was tall. He was sitting on a low sofa without a table in front of him, and Red Queen was sitting upright behind a desk. He was as ready as he'd ever be.

'Ok,' Red Queen continued. 'Banacharski. The organisation I work for is called the Directorate of the Extremely Improbable, and we've been very interested in Nicolas Banacharski for several years...'

Professor Hands, as Red Queen knew, was a number theorist with a very strong interest in Banacharski's work. And Red Queen knew, too, most of the basic facts of Banacharski's life.

'Well, ehm, Banacharski was a prodigy. Born in Germany. Father was a Russian Jew, died in the camps. He won the Fields in the sixties – you know, the big mathematical medal?'

'I know.'

'Amazing work. Very, very high levels of abstraction. He more or less invented – well, completely reshaped -- the field I work in. The Fermat solution wouldn't have been possible without his work. But he's barely been heard of since the early nineties. I don't know where he is. Nobody does.'

'Presumably he knows where he is,' said Red Queen.

'I wouldn't bet on it. He'd be in his eighties now, and he – you know – went *mad*.'

Hands scratched the back of his neck. He still looked a little uneasy.

'Banacharski had – well, they started as strong convictions. He was in Paris for '68 and he started to become more and more political. There'd been a chair created for him at the Sorbonne. He'd worked there for a decade or so, perfectly normally. Then he threw it up in 1972 on the grounds that his chair was partly funded by the military. He was a pacifist.'

'That's what was said.'

'It's the only explanation. He was still working at this stage, but he was getting crankier. Started claiming there was going to come some sort of scientific apocalypse by the end of the century if the physicists weren't kept in check. Then he upped and off.'

'Off?'

'Vanished.' The mathematician was starting to forget his surroundings and enjoy his story.

'He was living in communes, going Buddhist, vegan, some people said – stopped using beds for a bit. There were stories that he went round trying to sell buckets of his own faeces to farmers as fertiliser. He turned into a mad monk, essentially. He was notionally attached to the University of Toulouse, but –' he blew air out between his lips and shrugged '– he was doing his own thing. Proofs, papers – he mostly just wrote thousands of pages of what he called

“meditations”. There’d be fragments of proofs in them, amazing proofs -- some of them are in libraries. But he was cracked. That’s how the story goes.

‘One morning in the early nineties his girlfriend returned home to find he’d had a kind of manuscript bonfire in her garden. He was never seen again.’

‘Literally never seen again?’

‘More or less. These letters go out, though – of the long and rambling sort. People in the community, you know – they try to piece together what he’s doing. He claims to have given up on math. He’s living by himself and working something like twelve hours a day on mad material – some huge manuscript about the physics of free will.’

‘That’s where we come in,’ said Red Queen. ‘We know about the letters. We were keeping an eye on them. Does the name Isla Holderness mean anything to you?’

‘Yes,’ said Hands, and there was a moment before something dropped into place behind his eyes. Red Queen looked expressionlessly at him. ‘Uh, yes. She’s a mathematician in my field. She’s one of the last people who saw Banacharski. She went to look for him in the Pyrenees.’

Red Queen exhaled. ‘You know the story.’

“‘What is a metre?’”

Red Queen nodded in recognition. ‘What is a metre?’ Banacharski’s weird riddle: the last communication with Holderness before he disappeared for the final time.

‘OK. We’re on the same page. We know a bit more than you about some of it. But I’ll lay it out. Our organisation is called the Directorate of the Extremely Improbable. It’s a silly name, but it’s always been called that, and the silliness acts as a sort of camouflage. We could just as easily have brought you here in a green helicopter, and had you picked up by men wearing clear eyeglasses and button-down shirts from Gap. As it is, we don’t sound like what we are. That is the idea.

‘Our job is to assess threats to national security that we don’t know exist, using methods that we don’t know work. This produces results that we generally can’t recognise as results, and when we can recognise them as results, we don’t know how to interpret them.’

Red Queen continued to look at him levelly.

‘It’s frustrating work. Here.’

Red Queen fished in a desk drawer, pulled something out, and lobbed it across the room to the little mathematician, who caught it. ‘This is a souvenir from the days when we used to have our own memorabilia.’

He turned it over. It was a bronze medallion. Engraved on it was the pyramid-and-eye logo from the dollar bill. Above it, a scrollwork banner carried the initials ‘DEI’. Curving below, a scroll carried the words ‘Ignota ignoti’.

‘Unknown unknowns,’ Red Queen said. ‘That’s what we do. We deal with things we don’t know we don’t know about. Once we know we don’t know about them we hand them over to the CIA, who –’ Red Queen sighed

‘—generally continue not to know about them.

‘Predecessors of the DEI have existed as long ago as the Salem witch trials. We had operatives in the Culper Ring during the Revolutionary War. This, at least, is how the story within the organisation goes – but there’s no real evidence for any of it.

‘We were shut down for reasons nobody within the organisation understands after the Kennedy Assassination, but then, come the run-up to the second Gulf War, certain senior members of the administration became very interested indeed in the sort of paranoid *X-Files* material that was traditionally associated with the Directorate. Donald Rumsfeld, as Secretary of Defense, reinstated our work. Our off-books budget suddenly reappeared. It got big.

‘Below where we’re sitting this compound goes twelve storeys down. There are tea-leaf readers, distance seers, chaos magicians and tarot tellers. Dicemen. Catatonics. Psychokinetics, psychic healers, lunatics. Haruspices. Illuminati. Idiot savants. Hypnotists. Bearded ladies. Oracles. All drinking the same coffee, and all paid for by the American taxpayer.’

Red Queen didn’t seem entirely sold on the tea-leaf readers, it occurred to Hands, but it didn’t seem his place to point it out.

Instead, he said: ‘So, ah, what is your interest in our mad genius?’

‘Banacharski?’ Red Queen said. ‘We don’t think Banacharski was mad. We think Banacharski was trying to build a weapon.’

5

Alex didn’t know what made him stop in Atlanta.

He’d been rebooked onto his onward flight to San Francisco, after the hurricane, but he had never gone to the airport. He had sat on the bed in his motel looking at the clock, his suitcase packed on the bed beside him.

The time when he had planned to leave for the airport had passed. Then the time when he’d need to leave to have a hope of making the flight. Then the time that the gate would have closed. Had he looked out of his window he’d have been able to watch his flight lift into the air. He thought about the empty seat on the plane, carrying a ghost of him to San Francisco, another reality peeling off this one and heading its own way.

He imagined the ghost travelling into town, walking down Market Street, the khaki-coloured buildings and tramways and clean sunlight. It would be weary, T-shirted, happy. He imagined walking up over towards Chestnut, and surprising Carey at Muffin Tops while she was pouring coffee for a customer. Then – blank. Nothing. He wasn’t imagining Muffin Tops. He was imagining Central Perk from Friends. And he wasn’t imagining Carey. He was imagining Jennifer Aniston. And his images of the city were a mash-up of Carey’s postcards and Google Street View.

He couldn’t imagine Muffin Tops. He couldn’t imagine Carey. That future was

illegible. Instead he was in Atlanta, in a motel room with its brown curtains drawn against the daylight, while his more purposeful ghost flew across America to surprise his girlfriend.

He couldn't stay, and he couldn't go. He didn't feel sad, or scared, or anything at all. He'd flown here on an impulse, and now the impulse had left him and no other impulses had arrived to take its place. He examined the feeling, or lack of it. He felt like if he stabbed a knife into his leg it would make a dull thunk, and then stick out as if he'd driven it into a wooden table leg.

He took out the small cherry-wood box and thumbed it open in his lap. The ring was inside, a half-moon of platinum standing proud of its little velvet cushion. Where there might have been a solitaire diamond, there was instead a double loop in the metal: the lemniscate.

He shut the box with a snap, opened it again, shut it again. What a small thing it had been to decide to change his life. He tried to remember whether he had decided to ask Carey to marry him before he'd seen the ring in the antique shop, or whether the idea had come fully formed into his head when he'd seen its object expression in the world. He couldn't.

He remembered wanting the ring, and knowing he wanted the ring, and knowing what it was for. The ring had cost about half what he had in the bank. The infinity symbol. He'd thought it was cool. Now he thought it was tacky.

He didn't know if it would fit. He didn't know if Carey would say yes. He didn't know what he'd say if she did. He didn't feel hungry. Eventually, as the afternoon slid into the evening, he turned on the television.

* * *

'Isla Holderness,' Red Queen continued. Hands was more or less at his ease, now. And he was curious how this story would unfold. A weapon? That sounded wrong. Banacharski was a fierce pacifist.

He knew Holderness's story well. It had done the rounds in the mathematical world. She was the woman who had found Banacharski. She started as a disciple and they'd exchanged some letters. She wanted to see if she could talk him out, talk him back in. She'd schlepped through tiny villages in the Pyrenees armed with an old photograph of the mathematician. She'd found him, living in a shack in the hills, living like a monk.

Banacharski, to her surprise, had been friendly. The shack was a mess, by all accounts. Banacharski slept on a pallet on the floor, and – in one version Hands heard – lived on grass. Hands wasn't actually sure that was possible.

Somehow, though, he took to Holderness. He had even been flattered to hear that, since his disappearance, one or two of his conjectures had been proved, but he said he'd stopped doing mathematics. Then he'd started ranting about the devil and the physics of free will. He believed that an agency - he called it the devil, though Holderness hadn't been sure whether or not he meant it as a metaphor - was interfering in measurements, making precise knowledge impossible, minutely bending space time.

After she returned to England, they began to correspond. It went well at first.

He indicated, so the story went, that he intended to make her the custodian of his legacy – that he'd pass her his findings. Then one day a letter arrived, apparently, demanding the answer to a question: 'What is a metre?'

Holderness had no idea how to answer it. Then a sheaf of further letters arrived before she had even finished composing her reply. The first was incoherently angry, filled with scrawled capitals and obscenities. It accused her of being in league with the Enemy. It arrived on the same day as another that appeared to threaten suicide. The third arrived a day after the other two. It was addressed to 'The Supposed Isla Holderness'. Every mention of her name in this letter was surrounded by bitterly sarcastic inverted commas. 'Since you are not who you say you are, you know that I cannot be who you say I am,' it opened. It was signed 'Fred Nieman.' Holderness had gone to find him. She had found the shack burned to the ground and Banacharski, again, gone.

'He thought Isla Holderness was a spy,' said Red Queen.

'Why would he have thought that?' said Hands.

'He was intensely paranoid,' said Red Queen. 'Also, he was quite right. She *was* a spy. She worked for us. We'd been monitoring all her correspondence with him. His letters dropped hints of what he was working on – I think he thought that was what was keeping her interested; after all these years of isolation, the human contact was welcome, and he was flattered by her interest. But you have to remember this was a deeply, deeply paranoid man. The hints were purposely fragmentary. We had to stay at arm's length, and she was deep cover.

'We thought we had the breakthrough, but "What is a metre?" completely threw us. It threw her too. But she waited to respond.

'That was when it became clear something was very wrong. Banacharski vanished. Then we thought Holderness had gone rogue. We knew enough about what this man was like to know that the longer she left her response, the more likely it was that he'd flip his wig. We'd sent the clearest possible instructions on receipt of the "What is a metre?" letter that she should go immediately, in person, to see him and find a way of talking him round. But instead, she spent a week trying to work out the answer to his riddle.

'She was responding to none of our signals to come in. She didn't use the dead letter drops, and the messages she was sending stopped making any sense: newspaper buying, for instance. There was a complex series of codes surrounding what paper she bought, at what time of day, and how much change she used.

'All of a sudden she seemed to be buying newspapers completely at random. It took us a while to cotton on to what had actually happened.'

'What *had* happened?'

'It turned out that – actually – Banacharski was wrong. Isla Holderness was just what she professed to be: an academic mathematician who was interested in his work.'

'I don't follow you.'

'He was right but he was wrong. Isla Holderness was a spy. But that was

a different Isla Holderness. We made a huge mistake. This woman with Banacharski wasn't our Isla Holderness, and she wasn't spying on him. It was another woman with the same name. And she'd been buying newspapers completely at random all along.'

Red Queen looked a little bitter about this.

It was hard enough keeping track of all the DEI's agents, and the organisation's institutional reluctance to commit anything to paper for fear of being counter-surveilled made it more or less impossible.

Many DEI field agents didn't even know they were working for the DEI – and a good few of them actually thought they were spying on it for one of the several fictitious cover agencies that it ran. Red Queen occasionally pretended to be unsure whether the DEI was a real organisation or, itself, a red herring.

Hands looked mystified. 'So where was your Isla Holderness while the other Isla Holderness was with Banacharski?'

'Thousands of miles away in a cave network in Northern Pakistan,' said Red Queen, gloomily. 'She had spent the previous three years infiltrating with unprecedented success – not that we knew about how she was getting on at the time, since we'd forgotten she was there – bin Laden's inner circle.'

'What?' said Hands. '*Osama* bin Laden? The terrorist?'

'No,' said Red Queen, brightening up a bit. 'As it turned out, not.'

* * *

The car was a box of smoke. It pulled into the parking lot of the International House of Pancakes where Bree had made the rendezvous and stopped in the rank of parking spaces across from where she was waiting in the shade of a tree.

Through the windshield, Bree could see nothing. It was like a white-out in there. The driver's side door opened, and the car exhaled – a roll of what looked like dry ice furling out under the door and dissipating above the hard-top. A hand, holding a cigarette, gripped the edge of the roof. A foot – a giant foot, like a beached canoe – appeared under the edge of the door, and a very tall man scissored out and stood upright, looking around, as the smoke cleared.

Bree reckoned he was about six foot three. He had a thin face, and short pale grey hair. She walked up with a hand in her pocket, and she could see his attention register her.

He put the cigarette in his hand into his mouth and pulled on it very heavily.

'Hello,' he said, without taking his sunglasses off. 'I'm Jones.'

'Bree.'

They didn't shake hands, though an awkward moment passed when they could have. They stood opposite each other in the hot parking lot, and even from this distance Bree could smell the smoke on him. There was a parchmety greyness, close-up, to his skin. It was like wasp-paper under his eyes.

He indicated the car with a gesture of his arm. 'This is my... wheels.'

He looked oddly pleased with himself.

Bree had been told a little about Jones. She still didn't understand it, not exactly, but she was comfortable with that. Red Queen had said only that

Jones's 'condition' was going to be an advantage in the hunt – and that Bree shouldn't be disconcerted if he seemed a little eccentric. Bree had, in her time, spent days staring earnestly into crystal balls alongside people who, in Brooklyn accents, assured her that they were 500-year-old Mittel-European gypsies. She had a wide tolerance for the eccentric.

She guessed she'd find out about Jones as they got along; provided she didn't asphyxiate first.

'Jolly Rancher?' she said.

She held out her hand, and the thought came to her momentarily that she might have been pulling a dog biscuit from her pocket. Jones looked at it, and paused as if confused.

'Yes – please,' he said.

He took one of the little candies from her hand. Bree noticed with satisfaction that it was the peach flavour, which was the only one she hated. Jones unwrapped it fastidiously. He removed the cigarette from his mouth, popped the Jolly Rancher in, and replaced the cigarette.

'Thank you,' he said.

Bree took one of the green apple flavour, and after a moment or two they climbed into Jones's rental car and they slammed the doors and Bree wound down her window and Jones pumped the air-conditioning to full and lit another cigarette and then they drove out of the IHOP car park and into the world.

* * *

Alex's mental fug lasted most of that evening. He had watched pinky faces on CNN until he had got bored, then he'd turned over to the orange faces on Fox News, then – briefly – the BBC, where he didn't know whether it was the familiar rust-coloured graphics, or the familiar green-yellow face of the correspondent standing by the railings in Downing Street that made him feel homesick.

Then he flipped again, to a show called *I Want A Million Dollars NOW!*. Some girls in bright swimsuits were screaming at each other.

He had noticed that the wall of his room, by the door to the bathroom, had a bottle-opener fixed to it with screws. So you could lever the crown top off a bottle of beer, presumably, before you took it into the toilet to settle in for a shit.

Alex didn't have a bottle of beer. There was a little plasticky coffee-maker on the table by the television, though. He had plugged the two-pin plug in, filled the glass pot awkwardly from the shallow sink, filled the coffee-maker's reservoir from the pot, replaced the empty pot on the hotplate. Beside it there was a plastic basket designed, apparently, to fool the passer-by into thinking it was made out of bright blue wicker. He had picked up the heat-sealed plastic envelope that said 'Coffee', and tore it open. It contained, apparently, a giant tea bag full of coffee, some of which had spilled out of the torn tea bag onto the table.

He had picked up the other plastic envelope, a paler brown, which contained

the decaf. He had liberated the giant teabag intact this time, smoothed it into the round space for it in the top of the coffee-maker, flipped the hinged holder so it sat back over the pot. Then he had replaced the two-pin plug, which had fallen out of its slot. Then he had flipped the switch on the base of the coffee-maker so it glowed orange, and waited for the machine to chough and splutter to a natural death.

Then he had unsheathed one of the two white styrofoam cups from its plastic wrapper, poured the scalding caramel-coloured coffee into it, waited for it to go cold, then drunk it.

Now he had run out of things to do.

Alex had never been to America before. Having set out with a sense – now, he saw, entirely bogus – of purpose and adventure, he felt suddenly small and pathetic and alone.

In his imagination, it had been a vector transformation. Going to America would, necessarily make him equal to the setting. America, far away, looked big: he would become big as he travelled towards it. America, close up, was enormous. And he, travelling towards it, had become even smaller. He imagined himself labelled 'Shown actual size.'

There was an entire country out there to be seen, and he couldn't bring himself to leave his motel room even to eat. How hard could it be to walk round the corner and get a pizza, or go to a bar? He knew he was exacerbating things by inactivity. He felt low enough to do nothing but not so tired that he could go to sleep. Now the numbness was fading, the pleurably dismaying shock of simply not doing what he was intended and expected to, he found it hard to put the wasted cost of the flight out of his mind.

And while he sat here his mind was moving, never quite settling, on a survey of his situation. He was twenty-four years old. The most important thing in his life, for three years, had been a PhD that his gut told him he wouldn't finish. Now it was a girl whom his gut had told him that he would marry, and in marrying whom, his gut told him, he would change his life. Now his gut had vanished. He was gutless. He looked down, miserably, at his gut, as if he imagined someone was watching whom he ought to impress with his wryness if not his resolution.

Nobody was watching. He zoned back in. A bikini girl on the television shouted, at a buff-bodied and gormless male competitor: 'Alix!'

He flicked the channel, and a British sports commentator said with lugubrious sonority:

'...run...'

Flick.

'...run?'

Cricket, this time. Flick.

'...run away as far and as fast as you can ...'

A cowboy film. Flick.

'...circumstances are conspiring there...'

Politics. Flick.

'Out!'

Tennis. Flick.

'To get you...'

An advertisement for an ambulance-chasing personal injury lawyer whose swiftly scrolling small-print was just beginning to make its way up from the bottom of the screen.

Click. Alex turned the television off. Something nagged at him – a feeling right at the back of his mind, almost below the level of consciousness – that someone somewhere was trying to tell him something. He shrugged it off.

He decided, finally, to make himself go for a walk. He swung his legs off the bed, and himself up onto his feet. He pulled back the chain from the door, shrugged his jacket on, and with not the slightest enthusiasm left the room, crossed the broad balcony and took the single flight of stairs down to the car-park.

The light was orange and the night hot and tarmacky and strange-smelling. It was about nine o'clock, he reckoned. The motel consisted of an L-shaped block of rooms two storeys high, up to the foot of which parked cars nosed shell by shell. The motel was about a third full. Looking behind him as he crossed the tarmac, he could see a guy with his face in shadow, drinking a can of something on the balcony, two rooms down from his room.

At the registration office, strip light blared from the Perspex window where the teenage night clerk sat watching television. The door adjacent was half lit, with a sign hanging on it saying 'Closed' and the brightest light source the Mountain Dew decal on the vending machine.

Alex walked past the registration office and onto the broad highway: three lanes in either direction. He turned right. There wasn't much traffic. To his left, a pickup and a family car waited for the overhead lights to turn green.

There were no pedestrians. On the opposite side of the road was a long car-park on the other side of which was a Pet Superstore, a CVC chemist, and a 7-11. On his side of the road was nothing at all: a pavement, a broad grass verge, a low hedge. There was some sort of office building set back from the road behind a network of drives and flower beds.

It took him ten minutes to reach the end of what he presumed to be the block, and still there was nothing doing. He kept walking. He assumed that this was not downtown.

It took him another ten minutes to reach the end of the next block. There was a twenty-four hour photo shop. It was closed. He kept walking. It took him twenty minutes more to reach a drive-through McDonald's on the other side of the road. Alex felt a shade ashamed to have travelled to America and to be eating at McDonald's, but he was now tired and he thought that something comforting and familiar might see off his self-pity if it didn't exacerbate it.

He walked up towards the ordering window. There was one car – an SUV – pulled up by it, a meaty forearm and a measure of beard protruding from the driver's side window. It rolled on with a jerk, and Alex walked up to the booth.

'Ah.' He tried to see past the kid behind the microphone to a menu somewhere, though he didn't need it. 'I'd like... two plain hamburgers please. Small fries.' This had been the food Alex had ordered while alone, and passing McDonald's, for years. 'And a –'

He was interrupted by the blare of a horn, close enough to cause him to physically jump with fright. Ice-white headlights washed past him, and the horn went again.

'Hell do you think you're doing? I could have killed you! Get in line, you little prick!' a woman with a frightened face shouted at him from the driver's window of her station-wagon. He realised that behind the SUV had been a queue of two cars, one of which had not seen him walk past it in the pool of dark beside the cashier's window and had nearly broken his legs.

The cashier looked amused. 'Ma'am?' he said.

Alex, hot with shame, retreated and let the car jounce up to the window. The woman's attention left him. He walked down the curved grass verge. The car behind pulled up to the station-wagon's bumper as if pointedly. Alex walked down further.

He stood by the off-side back wheel of the car behind. Whoever was in it showed no sign of acknowledgement. Another car pulled in behind. The station-wagon lurched off from the window. The car behind which Alex was queuing moved off to take its place – and the car behind Alex, as if he was invisible, moved up in turn behind its bumper.

'Hey!' Alex felt himself saying – or, at least would have, had he not felt the ridiculousness of him saying it before it left his lips. 'Ahem!' would have been no more dignified or effective. He didn't think he had the courage to go and remonstrate with the driver. He was a pedestrian. He was nobody.

Alex stepped off the verge and stood behind the rear bumper of the car that had jumped the queue. He didn't look to see what if any expression the man in that car was making in his rear-view mirror.

It took about a minute for the car to move off. Another had pulled in behind him. He could see the shadow of his own legs across the bumper and boot of the car in front. Then it was gone, his shadow lengthened across the tarmac, and the car behind him honked its horn.

He held his ground, and moved forward deliberately. Finally, he reached the window.

'Two hamburgers. Medium fries. Regular fries. And a Sprite please.'

He ate his supper out of the paper bag on the verge. The burgers were not like they were at home. They were hotter, flimsier. The buns were different. More scrunched-up, somehow.

He felt, again, lonely. He walked back to the motel without meeting another pedestrian.

When he got up the man on the balcony was there again. He couldn't reach his door from the staircase without walking ten feet towards him, so he bobbed his head and said: 'Night.'

'Night,' said the man, in what sounded like a British accent.