‘I’ll tell you a story that contains the secret of the world,’ said the Professor, his eyes intense and more piercing than usual, so that it seemed as though someone, while the Professor’s back had been turned, had inserted drops into his eyes to make them glow more brilliantly; he seemed to have acquired the bearing of a feted theatrical actor, he had entered into a parallel existence, more defined, more memorable, more crystalline. His hand reached for the glass of brandy that his companion had poured for him a short while earlier as they sat in leather armchairs and viewed the familiar scene before them in the comfort of the Royal Automobile Club, where bankers and barristers and retired colonels roamed.

‘I was thinking of a dinner I once attended, a very elaborate affair it should be said. The dinner was rather like a game, like a game of chess. This was in the late 90’s and dignitaries, ambassadors, diplomats and some stray representatives of royalty were in attendance. Seated next to me at a table for thirty people was a very distinguished looking man. I later came to understand that his name was Joseph Deedes. He was a war correspondent and leaned to the left. He had covered some of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century, Rwanda, the Bosnian war, and the first Gulf War. He was telling the attended guests some story about the waiters in a five star hotel in India somewhere, all dressed in white and moving about elegantly like swans. They had, he remarked, an air of troubling subservience. He said, in a clipped, impeccable accent, “I was aware of this residual sense of insolence emitting from the British residents of the hotel, who still felt it was their divine right to behave rudely towards the too deferential waiters, who still seemed, to me at least, to be trapped in servile inferiority, a remnant (I imagine) from years of suppression and ill treatment. Of course this made perfect sense because when people have been browbeaten and kicked in the teeth and made to beg and plead it would be only natural that they wouldn’t be able to put aside old patterns of survivalist behaviour.” I looked at Deedes searchingly. He must have known that this was precisely the kind of place – with its formalised setting, its illustrious guests, its aura of privilege and affluence – where such observations might not go down too well. He winked at me, because he could see that I, much like himself, didn’t really belong there. We were both playing a part I suppose, but he played it better than I did. He was a kind of Lawrence of Arabia figure, dashing and elegant, but he knew that England, and all its slightly ridiculous laws and unwritten rules, did not really represent his essential self, which was nomadic and wild. Deedes really thrived when embracing travel, the open road, and unadulterated chaos. So we shared a certain kind of sense that the evening was farcical, grotesque even, with all these bejewelled ladies and affected people raising their glasses and helping themselves to champagne, the price of a single bottle of which could have fed a family of four in Africa for a pair of years. In the corner I could see that Deedes’s comments were rocking the boat and

a pale, silent man was beginning to look uncomfortable. Sensing this Deedes pulled back and said, very pleasantly, 'This pheasant is outstandingly good, is it not?' The comment seemed to be indicating that all was as it should be once again and that the skeleton of social injustice had been shoved back once more where it belonged – in the cupboard marked Irrelevant. Our hostess – her name was Lady Rathmere – had a remarkable set of operatic breasts that palpitated under her rococo dress like buoys heaving on a tempestuous sea – she turned to Deedes and said, breezily, 'Mr Deedes was always a fan of the underdog, but he could never quite bring himself to admit that his wages were paid by those who ensured the underdog stayed in his place.' Deedes took it all in his stride and lifted his glass, knowing that the best way to irritate this monster was by not rising to the bait. He merely said graciously, 'Ah, the wages of honest, hard labour.' This seemed to annoy Lady Rathmere very much. An elderly waiter who happened to be passing as he re-filled the wine glasses was now berated by Lady Rathmere as a result and she took him to task for failing to have allowed the wine sufficient time to breathe. For a full three minutes she viciously bullied and browbeat the poor old man for his breech of etiquette, for failing to do justice to the bottle of, I think, Mouton Rothschild. She made it clear that if he were to make another mistake along those lines he would be out on his ear and that the world was filled with people who would be able to replace him at the drop of a hat. She implied that this particular bottle of wine cost the equivalent of a month's salary and that his lack of wherewithal had effectively ruined the experience for all concerned. The old man stood there, looking shocked and sick and began to perspire. He managed to mutter a few words, and then she sent him on his way. It was a sickening display of the very kind of behaviour Deedes had been talking about, that primordial arrogance that marks those who occupy positions of power and influence. Deedes looked thoroughly disgusted and bit his lip. One could tell that he was on the verge of a verbal explosion the like of which has never been seen before but he contained himself. I could feel his body tense in fury and anger as he sat there, trying to take in what had just happened. Then, with perfect equanimity, Deedes got to his feet and the whole party suddenly fell silent. Knowing that he was about to lose favour with this circle of highly influential people, knowing that he was about to seriously injure his reputation, and possibly be abandoned to the cold winds of exile, he nonetheless did something that marked him out as a man of greatness and integrity. "Madam, you will forgive me I hope for leaving this gay party, but having witnessed the coarseness of which you are capable I find myself too nauseated to breathe the same air as you or to remain seated at the same table." It was one of the most electrifying moments I have ever witnessed as the stunned faces all locked eyes with this man declaring his solidarity with the waiter, daring to speak up when the majority of mankind would have kept its mouth shut. I was so moved that I too rose, driven by an impulse of loyalty. For once in my sorry existence I too would do the right thing, no longer keep my real opinions to myself,

but act in accordance with decency, and no longer hide behind fear and the masks that we parade in front of others so often that in the end they get stuck, and can never be removed. I said a few words about how I felt I also had to take my leave and wished to stand by Mr Deedes by leaving with him. We both hurried off and left the place as quickly as possible. I felt euphoric and Deedes looked at me with unmistakable admiration and affection. We didn't say an awful lot, I suppose there wasn't that much to say. We walked in silence for a while and I monitored Deedes; he looked agitated, as though realising the cost of his probity and a cloud seemed to hang over him. We got into a black cab and Deedes suggested that we stop off at his club, this very same club we are now seated inside. And then he seemed to calm down as he sipped on a single malt and lit a fat cigar. Somehow we felt at ease in each other's company though we barely knew one another but our act of mutineering now bound us and it was miraculous to see the premature intimacy that it created. I didn't want to press him because I knew that he was the kind of man who would only speak when he felt the urge to, and to pin him down with childish questions would more than likely irritate him and make him clam up altogether. As he smoked his cigar he looked up in a forthright manner and began, "You know," he said, "as that old battle axe was hauling that waiter over the coals a sudden memory flashed into my brain. Years back I was posted in Baghdad, this was during the first Gulf War. The Americans has just started their first tour and the city was already pretty decimated. The night sky was filled with incandescent light, that you might think signalled celebration or joy, until you stepped back and realised that it was the harbinger of destruction, of annihilation, of death. Not the destruction of age, of loss, or of trauma. Not the destruction of sadness, of grief, of disease. No, the vaporizing, unremitting destruction of modern warfare, which once witnessed can never be erased, and burns like sulphuric acid on the membrane of your mind. No one in their wildest nightmares can conceive of the horror of war and the agony, the clinging, unceasing agony it imparts on defenceless civilians. The next morning as I surveyed the absolute ruin I came across an Iraqi boy. He couldn't have been more than five. He had had his legs blown off. He was still breathing but that was a terrible realisation, because I knew he would have to regain consciousness into a life with half of his anatomy cut away. It was … there are no words. It was pitiful, so awful that even now I feel a shock that renders the world senseless. I lifted the child in my arms and I found that my eyes were streaming with tears that I hadn't shed since boyhood. There I was holding this poor maimed body, scrambling around, madly wondering if I might be able to locate his severed limbs, I had an idea that it might be possible to re-attach them, but I eventually had to accept that they were lost in the debris and ruins. There I was, in hell, the absolute living hell that men have created for themselves and for others, a hell that can never be banished but is destined to go on forever, burning the skin and soul of humanity. At last I managed to get the child to a hospital; my team and I drove him in a jeep to the nearest medical unit

we could find. On the way there he regained consciousness and I can still hear his screams of agony. Needless to say the unit was rudimentary and barely functional, zero hygiene observance, barely any medical supplies, but they had morphine, thank God, they had morphine and they injected him immediately with it. I stood there, watching, weeping. This was the memory that flashed through my mind when Lady Rathmere began scolding the waiter, telling him off for not giving the wine enough time to breathe. What pettiness, what indulgence. And I thought to myself, here we are seated amidst absurd levels of comfort and luxury with exquisite food and drink, absolute decadence, and abundance, and there, at the polar opposite, in scattered places throughout the world a dark, dismal hell exists, stripped of everything that makes life worth living. That is life, I thought, at once the beautiful garden of the rich and the cold abyss of the slaughtered. What a pathetic mess we have made for ourselves, what a blood soaked mess is life. It's all so unnecessary, so utterly unnecessary." I stared at him, moved and dumbfounded. After a minute's silence I asked him for a cigar and he passed me one, with that irresistible charm that he could summon at will. I cut the end off and he passed me a box of matches. It was good for me to focus on something practical at that moment, to light the match and hear it fizz and burn, to get the cigar to smoulder, to take my mind off the harrowing things that he had just told me. Then we smoked together in silence for a moment. There was nothing else left to do. '