

before she spoke I guessed her answer, feeling it explode in my chest with an unbearable raucous crack, a sound reminiscent of the break-up of log-jams or pack-ice. Yes, she had warned me against Eliot Crane, warned me with the bitter passion of her denunciation of him; and I, in my surprise at the denunciation, had failed to hear the real warning, failed to understand what she had meant by the passion in her voice. *That mess-head. He's bad for you.*

So, here it came: the collapse of harmony, the demolition of the spheres of my heart.

'Those weren't fantasies,' she said.

CHEKOV AND ZULU

I

On 4th November, 1984, Zulu disappeared in Birmingham, and India House sent his old schoolfriend Chekov to Wembley to see the wife.

'Adaabarz, Mrs Zulu. Permission to enter?'

'Of course come in, Dipty sahib, why such formality?'

'Sorry to disturb you on a Sunday, Mrs Zulu, but Zulu-tho hasn't been in touch this morning?'

'With me? Since when he contacts me on official trip? Why to hit a telephone call when he is probably enjoying?'

'Whoops, sore point, excuse *me*. Always been the foot-in-it blunderbuss type.'

'At least sit, take tea-shee.'

'Fixed the place up damn fine, Mrs Zulu, wah-wah. Tasteful decor, in spades, I must say. So much cut-glass! That boulder Zulu must be getting too much pay, more than yours truly, clever dog.'

'No, how is it possible? Acting Dipty's tankha must be far in excess of Security Chief.'

'No suspicion intended, ji. Only to say what a bargain-hunter you must be.'

'Some problem but there is, na?'

'Beg pardon?'

'Arré, Jaisingh! Where have you been sleeping? Acting Dipty Sahib is thirsting for his tea. And biscuits and jalebis, can you not keep two things in your head? Jump, now, guest is waiting.'

'Truly, Mrs Zulu, please go to no trouble.'

'No trouble is there, Diptyji, only this chap has become lazy since coming from home. Days off, TV in room, even pay in pounds sterling, he expects all. So far we brought him but no gratitude, what to tell you, noth-thing.'

'Ah, Jaisingh; why not? Excellent jalebi, Mrs Z. Thanking you.'

Assembled on top of the television and on shelf units around it was the missing man's collection of *Star Trek* memorabilia: Captain Kirk and Spock dolls, spaceship models - a Klingon Bird of Prey, a Romulan vessel, a space station, and of course the Starship *Enterprise*. In pride of place were large figurines of two of the series's supporting cast.

'These old Doon School nicknames,' Chekov exclaimed heartily. 'They stay put like stuck records. Dumpy, Stumpy, Grumpy, Humpy. They take over from our names. As in our case our intrepid cosmonaut aliases.'

'I don't like. This "Mrs Zulu" I am landed with! It sounds like a blackie.'

'Wear the name with pride, begun sahib. We're old comrades-in-arms, your husband and I; since boyhood days, perhaps he was good enough to mention? Intrepid diplomats. Our umpteen-year mission to explore new worlds and new civilisations. See there, our alter egos standing on your TV, the Asiatic-looking Russky and the Chink. Not the leaders, as you'll appreciate, but the ultimate professional servants. "Course laid in!" "Hailing frequencies open!" "Warp factor three!" What would that strutting Captain have been without his top-level staffers? Likewise with the good ship Hindustan. We are servants also, you see, just like your fierce Jaisingh here. Never more important than in a moment like the present sad crisis, when an even keel must be maintained, jalebis must be served and tea poured, no matter what. We do not lead, but we enable. Without us, no course can be laid, no hailing frequency opened. No factors can be warped.'

'Is he in difficulties, then, your Zulu? As if it wasn't bad enough, this terrible time.'

On the wall behind the TV was a framed photograph of Indira Gandhi, with a garland hung around it. She had been dead since Wednesday. Pictures of her cremation had been on the TV for hours. The flower-petals, the garish, unbearable flames.

'Hard to believe it. Indiraji! Words fail one. She was our mother. Hai, hai! Cut down in her prime.'

'And on radio-TV, such-such stories are coming about Delhi goings-on. So many killings, Dipty Sahib. So many of our decent Sikh people done to death, as if all were guilty for the crimes of one-two badmash guards.'

'The Sikh community has always been thought loyal to the nation,' Chekov reflected. 'Backbone of the Army, to say nothing of the Delhi taxi service. Super-citizens, one might say, seemingly wedded to the national idea. But such ideas are being questioned now, you must admit; there are those who would point to the comb, bangle, dagger et cetera as signs of the enemy within.'

'Who would dare say such a thing about us? Such an evil thing.'

'I know. I know. But you take Zulu. The ticklish thing is, he's not on any official business that we know of. He's dropped off the map, begun sahib. AWOL ever since the assassination. No contact for two days plus.'

'O God.'

'There is a view forming back at HQ that he may have been associated with the gang. Who have in all probability long-established links with the community over here.'

'O God.'

'Naturally I am fighting strenuously against the proponents of this view. But his absence is damning, you must see. We have no fear of these tinpot Khalistan wallahs. But they have a ruthless streak. And with Zulu's inside knowledge and security background... They have threatened further attacks, as you know. As you must know. As some would say you must know all too well.'

'O God.'

'It is possible,' Chekov said, eating his jalebi, 'that Zulu has boldly gone where no Indian diplomat has gone before.'

The wife wept. 'Even the stupid name you could never get right. It was with S. "Sulu." So-so many episodes I have been made to see, you think I don't know? Kirk Spock McCoy Scott Uhura Chekov *Sulu*.'

'But Zulu is a better name for what some might allege to be a wild man,' Chekov said. 'For a suspected savage. For a putative traitor. Thank you for excellent tea.'

In August, Zulu, a shy, burly giant, had met Chekov off the plane from Delhi. Chekov at thirty-three was a

small, slim, dapper man in grey flannels, stiff-collared shirt and a double-breasted navy blue blazer with brass buttons. He had bat's-wing eyebrows and a prominent and pugnacious jaw, so that his cultivated tones and habitual soft-spokenness came as something of a surprise, disarming those who had been led by the eyebrows and chin to expect an altogether more aggressive personality. He was a high flyer, with one small embassy already notched up. The Acting Number Two job in London, while strictly temporary, was his latest plum.

'What-ho, Zools! Years, yaar, years,' Chekov said, thumping his palm into the other man's chest. 'So,' he added, 'I see you've become a hairy fairy.' The young Zulu had been a modern Sikh in the matter of hair - sporting a fine moustache at eighteen, but beardless, with a haircut instead of long tresses wound tightly under a turban. Now, however, he had reverted to tradition.

'Hullo, ji,' Zulu greeted him cautiously. 'So then is it OK to utilise the old modes of address?'

'Utilise away! Wouldn't hear of anything else,' Chekov said, handing Zulu his bags and baggage tags. 'Spirit of the *Enterprise* and all that jazz.'

In his public life the most urbane of men, Chekov when letting his hair down in private enjoyed getting inter-

culturally hot under the collar. Soon after his taking up his new post he sat with Zulu one lunchtime on a bench in Embankment Gardens and jerked his head in the direction of various passers-by.

'Crooks,' he said, *sotto voce*.

'Where?' shouted Zulu, leaping athletically to his feet. 'Should I pursue?'

Heads turned. Chekov grabbed the hem of Zulu's jacket and pulled him back on to the bench. 'Don't be such a hero,' he admonished fondly. 'I meant all of them, generally; thieves, every last one. God, I love London! Theatre, ballet, opera, restaurants! The Pavilion at Lord's on the Saturday of the Test Match! The royal ducks on the royal pond in royal St James's Park! Decent tailors, a decent mixed grill when you want it, decent magazines to read! I see the remnants of greatness and I don't mind telling you I am impressed. The Athenaeum, Buck House, the lions in Trafalgar Square. *Damn* impressive. I went to a meeting with the junior Minister at the F. & C. O. and realised I was in the old India Office. All that John Company black teak, those tuskiers rampant on the old bookcases. Gave me quite a turn. I applauded them for their success: hurrah! But then I look at my own home, and I see that it has been plundered by burglars. I can't deny there is a residue of distress.'

'I am sorry to hear of your loss,' Zulu said, knitting his brows. 'But surely the culpables are not in the vicinity.'

'Zulu, Zulu, a figure of speech, my simpleton warrior prince. Their museums are full of our treasures, I meant. Their fortunes and cities, built on the loot they took. So on, so forth. One forgives, of course; that is our national nature. One need not forget.'

Zulu pointed at a tramp, sleeping on the next bench in a ragged hat and coat. 'Did he steal from us, too?' he asked.

'Never forget', said Chekov, wagging a finger, 'that the British working class collaborated for its own gain in the colonial project. Manchester cotton workers, for instance, supported the destruction of our cotton industry. As diplomats we must never draw attention to such facts; but facts, nevertheless, they remain.'

'But a beggarman is not in the working class,' objected Zulu, reasonably. 'Surely this fellow at least is not our oppressor.'

'Zulu,' Chekov said in exasperation, 'don't be so bleddy difficult.'

Chekov and Zulu went boating on the Serpentine, and Chekov got back on his hobby-horse. 'They have stolen us,' he said, reclining boated and championed on striped cushions while mighty Zulu rowed. 'And now

we are stealing ourselves back. It is an Elgin marbles situation.'

'You should be more content,' said Zulu, shipping oars and gulping cola. 'You should be less hungry, less cross. See how much you have! It is enough. Sit back and enjoy. I have less, and it suffices for me. The sun is shining. The colonial period is a closed book.'

'If you don't want that sandwich, hand it over,' said Chekov. 'With my natural radicalism I should not have been a diplomat. I should have been a terrorist.'

'But then we would have been enemies, on opposite sides,' protested Zulu, and suddenly there were real tears in his eyes. 'Do you care nothing for our friendship? For my responsibilities in life?'

Chekov was abashed. 'Quite right, Zools old boy. Too bleddy true. You can't imagine how delighted I was when I learned we would be able to join forces like this in London. Nothing like the friendships of one's boyhood, eh? Nothing in the world can take their place. Now listen, you great lummo, no more of that long face. I won't permit it. Great big chap like you shouldn't look like he's about to blub. Blood brothers, old friend, what do you say? All for one and one for all.'

'Blood brothers,' said Zulu, smiling a shy smile.

'Onward, then,' nodded Chekov, settling back on his cushions. 'Impulse power only.'

The day Mrs Gandhi was murdered by her Sikh bodyguards, Zulu and Chekov played squash in a private court in St John's Wood. In the locker-room after showering, prematurely-greying Chekov still panted heavily with a towel round his softening waist, reluctant to expose his exhaustion-shrivelled purple penis to view; Zulu stood proudly naked, thick-cocked, tossing his fine head of long black hair, caressing and combing it with womanly sensuality, and at last twisting it swiftly into a knot.

'Too good, Zulu yaar. Fataakh! Fataakh! What shorts! Too bleddy good for me.'

'You desk-pilots, ji. You lose your edge. Once you were ready for anything.'

'Yeah, yeah, I'm over the hill. But you were only one year junior.'

'I have led a purer life, ji - action, not words.'

'You understand we will have to blacken your name,'

Chekov said softly.

Zulu turned slowly in Charles Atlas pose in front of a full-length mirror.

'It has to look like a maverick stunt. If anything goes wrong, deniability is essential. Even your wife must not suspect the truth.'

Spreading his arms and legs, Zulu made his body a

giant X, stretching himself to the limit. Then he came to attention. Chekov sounded a little frayed.

'Zools? What do you say?'

'Is the transporter ready?'

'Come on, yaar, don't arse around.'

'Respectfully, Mister Chekov, sir, it's my arse. Now then: is the transporter ready?'

'Transporter ready. Aye.'

'Then, energise.'

Chekov's memorandum, classified top-secret, eyes-only, and addressed to 'JTK' (James T. Kirk):

My strong recommendation is that Operation Star-trek be aborted. To send a Federation employee of Klingon origin unarmed into a Klingon cell to spy is the crudest form of loyalty test. The operative in question has never shown ideological deviation of any sort and deserves better, even in the present climate of mayhem, hysteria and fear. If he fails to persuade the Klingons of his bona fides he can expect to be treated with extreme prejudice. These are not hostage takers.

The entire undertaking is misconceived. The locally settled Klingon population is not the central problem. Even should we succeed, such intelligence as can be gleaned about more important principals back home will no doubt be of dubious accuracy and limited value.

We should advise Star Fleet Headquarters to engage urgently with the grievances and aspirations of the Klingon people. Unless these are dealt with fair and square there cannot be a lasting peace.

The reply from JTK:

Your closeness to the relevant individual excuses what is otherwise an explosively communalist document. It is not for you to define the national interest nor to determine what undercover operations are to be undertaken. It is for you to enable such operations to occur and to provide back-up as and when required to do so. As a personal favour to you and in the name of my long friendship with your eminent Papaji I have destroyed your last without keeping a copy and suggest you do the same. Also destroy this.

Chekov asked Zulu to drive him up to Stratford for a performance of *Coriolanus*.

'How many kiddiwinks by now? Three?'

'Four,' said Zulu. 'All boys.'

'By the grace of God. She must be a good woman.'

'I have a full heart,' said Zulu, with sudden feeling.

'A full house, a full belly, a full bed.'

'Lucky so and so,' said Chekov. 'Always were warm-blooded. I, by contrast, am not. Reptiles, certain species of dinosaur, and me. I am in the wife market, by the

way, if you know any suitable candidates. Bachelordom being, after a certain point, an obstacle on the career path.'

Zulu was driving strangely. In the slow lane of the motorway, as they approached an exit lane, he accelerated towards a hundred miles an hour. Once the exit was behind them, he slowed. Chekov noticed that he varied his speed and lane constantly. 'Doesn't the old rattletrap have cruise control?' he asked. 'Because, sport, this kind of performance would not do on the bridge of the flagship of the United Federation of Planets.'

'Anti-surveillance,' said Zulu. 'Dry-cleaning.' Chekov, alarmed, looked out of the back window.

'Have we been rumbled, then?'

'Nothing to worry about,' grinned Zulu. 'Better safe than sorry is all. Always anticipate the worst-case scenario.'

Chekov settled back in his seat. 'You liked toys and games,' he said. Zulu had been a crack rifle shot, the school's champion wrestler, and an expert fencer. 'Every Speech Day,' Zulu said, 'I would sit in the hall and clap, while you went up for all the work prizes. English Prize, History Prize, Latin Prize, Form Prize. Clap, clap, clap, term after term, year after year. But on Sports Day I got my cups. And now also I have my area of expertise.'

'Quite a reputation you're building up, if what I hear is anything to go by.'

There was a silence. England passed by at speed.

'Do you like Tolkien?' Zulu asked.

'I wouldn't have put you down as a big reader,' said Chekov, startled. 'No offence.'

'J.R.R. Tolkien,' said Zulu. '*The Lord of the Rings*.'

'Can't say I've read the gentleman. Heard of him, of course. Elves and pixies. Not your sort of thing at all, I'd have thought.'

'It is about a war to the finish between Good and Evil,' said Zulu intently. 'And while this great war is being fought there is one part of the world, the Shire, in which nobody even knows it's going on. The hobbits who live there work and squabble and make merry and they have no fucking clue about the forces that threaten them, and those that save their tiny skins.' His face was red with vehemence.

'Meaning me, I suppose,' Chekov said.

'I am a soldier in that war,' said Zulu. 'If you sit in an office you don't have one small idea of what the real world is like. The world of action, ji. The world of deeds, of things that are done and maybe undone too. The world of life and death.'

'Only in the worst case,' Chekov demurred.

'Do I tell you how to apply your smooth-tongued musca-polish to people's behinds?' stormed Zulu. 'Then do not tell me how to ply my trade.'

Soldiers going into battle pump themselves up, Chekov knew. This chest-beating was to be expected, it must not be misunderstood. 'When will you vamoose?' he quietly asked.

'Chekov ji, you won't see me go.'

Stratford approached. 'Did you know, ji,' Zulu offered, 'that the map of Tolkien's Middle-earth fits quite well over central England and Wales? Maybe all fairylands are right here, in our midst.'

'You're a deep one, old Zools,' said Chekov. 'Full of revelations today.'

Chekov had a few people over for dinner at his modern-style official residence in a private road in Hampstead: a Very Big Businessman he was wooing, journalists he liked, prominent India-lovers, noted Non-Resident Indians. The policy was business as usual. The dreadful event must not be seen to have derailed the ship of State: whose new captain, Chekov mused, was a former pilot himself. As if a Sulu, a Chekov had been suddenly promoted to the skipper's seat.

Damned difficult doing all this without a lady wife to act as hostess, he grumbled inwardly. The best golden

plates with the many-headed lion at the centre, the finest crystal, the menu, the wines. Personnel had been seconded from India House to help him out, but it wasn't the same. The secrets of good evenings, like God, were in the details. Chekov meddled and fretted.

The evening went off well. Over brandy, Chekov even dared to introduce a blacker note. 'England has always been a breeding ground for our revolutionists,' he said. 'What would Pandit Nehru have been without Harrow? Or Gandhiji without his formative experiences here? Even the Pakistan idea was dreamt up by young radicals at college in what we then were asked to think of as the Mother Country. Now that England's status has declined, I suppose it is logical that the quality of the revolutionists she breeds has likewise fallen. The Kashmiris! Not a hope in hell. And as for these Khalistan types, let them not think that their evil deed has brought their dream a day closer. On the contrary. On the contrary. We will root them out and smash them to - what's the right word? - to *smithereens*.'

To his surprise he had begun speaking loudly and had risen to his feet. He sat down hard and laughed. The moment passed.

'The funny thing about this blasted nickname of mine', he said quickly to his dinner-table neighbour, the septuagenarian Very Big Businessman's improbably

young and attractive wife, 'is that back then we never saw one episode of the TV series. No TV to see it on, you see. The whole thing was just a legend wafting its way from the US and UK to our lovely hill-station of Dehra Dun.

'After a while we got a couple of cheap paperback novelisations and passed them round as if they were naughty books like *Lady C* or some such. Lots of us tried the names on for size but only two of them stuck; probably because they seemed to go together, and the two of us got on pretty well, even though he was younger. A lovely boy. So just like Laurel and Hardy we were Chekov and Zulu.'

'Love and marriage,' said the woman.

'Beg pardon?'

'You know,' she said. 'Go together like is it milk and porridge. Or a car and garage, that's right. I love old songs. La-la-la-something-brother, you can't have fun without I think it's your mother.'

'Yes, now I do recall,' said Chekov.

3

Three months later Zulu telephoned his wife.

'O my God where have you vanished are you dead?'

'Listen please my bivi. Listen carefully my wife, my only love.'

'Yes. OK. I am calm. Line is bad, but.'

'Call Chekov and say condition red.'

'Arré! What is wrong with your condition?'

'Please. Condition red.'

'Yes. OK. Red.'

'Say the Klingons may be smelling things.'

'Clingers-on may be smelly things. Means what?'

'My darling, I beg you.'

'I have it all right here only. With this pencil I have written it, both.'

'Tell him, get Scotty to lock on to my signal and beam me up at once.'

'What rubbish! Even now you can't leave off that stupid game.'

'Bivi. It is urgent. *Beam me up.*'

Chekov dropped everything and drove. He went via the dry-cleaners as instructed; he drove round roundabouts twice, jumped red lights, deliberately took a wrong turning, stopped and turned round, made as many right turns as possible to see if anything followed him across the stream of traffic, and, on the motorway, mimicked Zulu's techniques. When he was as certain as he could be that he was clean, he headed for the rendezvous

point. 'Roll over Len Deighton,' he thought, 'and tell le Carré the news.'

He turned off the motorway and pulled into a lay-by. A man stepped out of the trees, looking newly bathed and smartly dressed, with a sheepish smile on his face. It was Zulu.

Chekov jumped out of the car and embraced his friend, kissing him on both cheeks. Zulu's bristly beard pricked his lips. 'I expected you'd have an arm missing, or blood pouring from a gunshot wound, or some black eyes at least,' he said. 'Instead here you are dressed for the theatre, minus only an opera cloak and cane.'

'Mission accomplished,' said Zulu, patting his breast pocket. 'All present and correct.'

'Then what was that "condition red" bakvaas?'

'The worst-case scenario,' said Zulu, 'does not always materialise.'

In the car, Chekov scanned the names, places, dates in Zulu's brown envelope. The information was better than anyone had expected. From this anonymous Midlands lay-by a light was shining on certain remote villages and urban back-alleys in Punjab. There would be a round-up, and, for some big badmashes at least, there would no longer be shadows in which to hide.

He gave a little, impressed whistle.

Zulu in the passenger seat inclined his head. 'Better move off now,' he said. 'Don't tempt fate.'

They drove south through Middle-earth.

Not long after they came off the motorway, Zulu said, 'By the way, I quit.'

Chekov stopped the car. The two towers of Wembley Stadium were visible through a gap in the houses to the left.

'What's this? Did those extremists manage to turn your head or what?'

'Chekov, ji, don't be a fool. Who needs extremists when there are the killings in Delhi? Hundreds, maybe thousands. Sikh men scalped and burned alive in front of their families. Boy-children, too.'

'We know this.'

'Then, ji, we also know who was behind it.'

'There is not a shred of evidence,' Chekov repeated the policy line.

'There are eyewitnesses and photographs,' said Zulu.

'We know this.'

'There are those who think,' said Chekov slowly, 'that after Indiraji the Sikhs deserved what they got.' Zulu stiffened.

'You know me better than that, I hope,' said Chekov. 'Zulu, for God's sake, come on. All our bleddy lives.'

'No Congress workers have been indicted,' said

Zulu. 'In spite of all the evidence of complicity. Therefore, I resign. You should quit, too.'

'If you have gone so damn radical,' cried Chekov, 'why hand over these lists at all? Why go only half the bleddy hog?'

'I am a security wallah,' said Zulu, opening the car door. 'Terrorists of all sorts are my foes. But not, apparently, in certain circumstances, yours.'

'Zulu, get in, damn it,' Chekov shouted. 'Don't you care for your career? A wife and four kiddiwinks to support. What about your old chums? Are you going to turn your back on me?'

But Zulu was already too far away.

Chekov and Zulu never met again. Zulu settled in Bombay and as the demand for private-sector protection increased in that cash-rich boom-town, so his Zulu Shield and Zulu Spear companies prospered and grew. He had three more children, all of them boys, and remains happily married to this day.

As for Chekov, he never did take a wife. In spite of this supposed handicap, however, he did well in his chosen profession. His rapid rise continued. But one day in May 1991 he was, by chance, a member of the entourage accompanying Mr Rajiv Gandhi to the South Indian village of Stripumbudur, where Rajiv was to

address an election rally. Security was lax, intentionally so. In the previous election, Rajivji felt, the demands of security had placed an alienating barrier between himself and the electorate. On this occasion, he decreed, the voters must be allowed to feel close.

After the speeches, the Rajiv group descended from the podium. Chekov, who was just a few feet behind Rajiv, saw a small Tamil woman come forward, smiling. She shook Rajiv's hand and did not let go. Chekov understood what she was smiling about, and the knowledge was so powerful that it stopped time itself.

Because time had stopped, Chekov was able to make a number of private observations. 'These Tamil revolutionists are not England-returned,' he noted. 'So, finally, we have learned to produce the goods at home, and no longer need to import. Bang goes that old dinner-party standby; so to speak.' And, less dryly: 'The tragedy is not how one dies,' he thought. 'It is how one has lived.'

The scene around him vanished, dissolving in a pool of light, and was replaced by the bridge of the Starship *Enterprise*. All the leading figures were in their appointed places. Zulu sat beside Chekov at the front. 'Shields no longer operative,' Zulu was saying. On

the main screen, they could see the Klingon Bird of Prey uncloaking, preparing to strike.

'One direct hit and we're done for,' cried Dr McCoy. 'For God's sake, Jim, get us out of here!'

'Illogical,' said First Officer Spock. 'The degradation of our dilithium crystal drive means that warp speed is unavailable. At impulse power only, we would make a poor attempt indeed to flee the Bird of Prey. Our only logical course is unconditional surrender.'

'Surrender to a Klingon!' shouted McCoy. 'Damn it, you cold-blooded, pointy-eared adding-machine, don't you know how they treat their prisoners?'

'Phaser banks completely depleted,' said Zulu. 'Offensive capability nil.'

'Should I attempt to contact the Klingon captain, sir?' Chekov inquired. 'They could fire at any moment.'

'Thank you, Mr Chekov,' said Captain Kirk. 'I'm afraid that won't be necessary. On this occasion, the worst-case scenario is the one we are obliged to play out. Hold your position. Steady as she goes.'

'The Bird of Prey has fired, sir,' said Zulu. Chekov took Zulu's hand and held it firmly, victoriously, as the speeding balls of deadly light approached.