

THE TRAVEL AGENT

by

Nicholas Waller

Bob Kashi stared angrily at the window of the Manhattan travel agency.

Perfectly shot display boards showed pristine white beaches in the Caribbean, the magnificent blocks of the Pyramids, the sinuous ribbon of the Great Wall of China, old mingling with new in the bustling streets of London. In front of these stood models of fat jetliners; beyond were the ranks of terminals, eager customers, helpful staff, shelves of brochures, grinning cutouts of false air hostesses, clocks showing the time in twelve international cities and a worldwide wall map studded with little twinkling red lights.

It was a kind of pornography, and it lied as it beguiled but he wanted it still. A weekend in Paris. Two weeks in Thailand. Latin America. Europe. The whole world, made up and smiling joyously. Oh yes sir, very clean. Please give money first, sir. \$1598. \$3998. \$9998 for first class service.

Kashi's first brick simply bounced off the glass. Annoyed, he found a heavy chunk of broken paving and heaved it through the window. As the glass cascaded the alarm wailed and he ran round the corner, straight towards two officers in a patrol car.

"Captain Carey, are you telling us that the air force is in fact scared of operating fighter-bombers in this situation?" asked Director Maddens.

Keith Brock, sitting next to him in the darkness, smiled.

"Admittedly, it is a dangerous environment," said John Carey. His uniform buttons flashed gold in the projector light as he put up an explicatory photograph. "But the target - compact, occupying a narrow ridge, a lump at one end,

ravines three sides, peaks all round - is hard to hit at jet speeds-

"Oh, so now the guys aren't good enough?"

"No, but..." Carey studied the spectacular but perhaps overused image: a panorama of the mountains and clouds and semi-sub-tropical vegetation surrounding the stunning man-made terraces of Machu Picchu. "You know, that doesn't really do the place justice; you have to be there."

Maddens shifted in his seat. "That's sorta what we're aiming to prevent, Captain."

"Ahh, yes of course." Carey put up a heavily contoured target map in place of the photo. "So I propose a Special Force assault via Chinooks. Six support Apaches take out the ticket office and hotel, neutralise the rail halt in Agua Calientes, and move to secure the perimeter."

"The troops are then dropped off to set shaped charges at key walls, rocks and features. Covering fire required: minimal. We withdraw in good order, embarking the ground troops while the support choppers deliver a series of timed firebombs and air-to-ground missiles. Our tired but happy forces lift out and away over the - Well. Should be over in 8 minutes."

The Captain stood proudly by his screen.

"Any questions?"

Director Maddens sighed. "I'm tempted, but it's unrealistic."

"Sir! The target is evaluated as completely suitable..."

"I know. I evaluated it. But I can't authorise this sort of high profile operation. Draw up some plans limited to setting fires lower down the hillside; they must sweep up naturally towards the site. No helicopters." Maddens stood up heavily. "It may well be the most deserving target in Peru, in fact the whole damn hemisphere, but we need more than a plausible deniability of our involvement, we need a plausible impossibility that we could even think of it in the first place. Dr Brock, I want a word."

As the deflated captain packed up his presentation, Brock followed Maddens to his office.

"DEA or ATF, that guy?" asked Maddens as they sat down.

Brock thought a moment. "DEA."

"Must have smoked too many fields in Colombia. The USIA trainees aren't much better; they're too Cold War, even now."

"Back to Human Resources then. Looking for?"

"Not gung-ho jocks who could bomb Baghdad tomorrow but have no real idea of our mission. We need people who are instinctively in tune with our goals, that we can train."

"Greens?"

"I don't think so. It might compromise their preventive work - Antarctica, the Himalayas; you know."

"Well," said Brock. "Then I have a lead I'd like to try out."

Bob Kashi sat scowling in the bare interview room in the precinct station.

"I don't deny what I did."

Keith Brock leant back. "I know that. But I would like to know why you did it."

"I need to get out of here. I could lose my job."

"Well, think of this as a possible career move."

"A what?"

"We know your resume... college, low-paid bookstore jobs. You're conscientious, but you're also frustrated, unfulfilled, drifting..."

"Thanks."

"It's not what you want."

"What are you? a psychologist?"

"I'm from a government agency."

"What agency?"

"Sorry, covert. It's classified."

"CIA? FBI?"

"DEA would be nearest."

"Drugs? Why pick on me?"

"Not drugs. And think of this as an evaluation, not an interrogation. Why did you break the window?"

"It was stupid, I know. I'm embarrassed about it; but - it costs \$8000 for a tour in Europe! \$20,000 for a cruise!"

"You can't afford it?"

"It's all crap! It's all smiling bimbos and perfect weather... it looks great, but it's a lie. People are fooled into visiting trash dumps they know nothing about to get mugged by starving kids! The photos don't show that, they show an idealised... Well anyway, it made me smash one stupid window! so what?"

Keith Brock smiled. "Though we might express it differently, I think we're on the same wavelength."

Maddens looked up from the seismic maps spread over the boardroom table.

"Umbria, Italy," said Dr Andrea Schlimper. "The last series of tremors."

"And?" said Maddens.

"They caused plenty of damage. Stone-built towns like Assisi are just full of frescoes poised to turn to dust in an instant. They're on a knife-edge, needing just an extra little push - "

"I assume we had nothing to do with the first series of quakes."

"True. But we could do the extra push. Get Montefalco. Perugia. Urbino."

"How?"

"It's a development of oil-seeking technology that sends out shockwaves; the vibrations - "

"Hmmm. Shockwaves can be traced. Keith?"

"She's right; most of the buildings are ready to collapse."

"Are they real?" asked Maddens.

"Generally. There is the normal guidebook hype, misattribution of work to people like Giotto, but I doubt its worth the effort of knocking them down."

"I agree. Most Americans are visiting Italy for family reasons; this sort of operation wouldn't deter many."

"As the towns will undoubtedly collapse by themselves soon," said Brock, "we ought to boost our data capture programme."

"Dr Schlimper?"

"It's a great chance to test our new system - "

"Was there anything else?" asked Maddens.

"My ideas for Venice? or should I just throw them in the trash?"

"The same criteria apply," said Brock. "It's sinking anyway."

"Actually it's the Med that's rising, but we really can't afford to be complacent."

"Maintain our greenhouse gas emissions and we'll be OK, eh?" said Maddens. "Remember, US industry will profit from the large lagoon barrier project; we'd lose more than we gained if we rushed events along."

Dr Schlimper left, obviously irritated.

"If we don't authorise some kind of a mission soon, morale's going to suffer," said Brock.

"I know." Maddens looked at his agenda. "Your new guy next. Hope he's a better bet."

Brock spoke into the phone. "Send in Bob Kashi please." He sat back. "Promising, in the long term. His motivation fits our profile pretty well."

The door opened. Anne Godwin, a USIA trainee in a crisp white short-sleeved shirt, brought Kashi into the room. He smiled nervously at her departing back.

"What do you know about the global tourist and leisure industry?" asked Maddens, without preamble.

"Umm... Not enough, I guess."

"It's an enormous competitive business," said Maddens, leaning back. "Round the world on Concorde, backpacking in Asia, Disneyland. You name it, it means big investments, big profits. US tourist boards at all levels from federal to town district promote our beautiful tourist destinations, coordinate friendly facilities and generally help visitors to spend money in the many wonderful American localities."

"I see," said Kashi, guardedly.

"In their turn foreign authorities entice our citizens by pushing their own trinkets: landscapes, ruins, culture. You've seen the posters, the commercials. The lure."

"That's how I got-"

"It may look open, legal, and public - but it's actually a bare-knuckle battle for the traveller's buck."

"Um - "

Maddens looked at Kashi over steepled fingers. "You're probably wondering where we fit in."

"Yes, that's right."

"Policing."

"To protect foreign tourists?"

"Not exactly. Do you have a passport?"

"Er - No."

"How many Americans do?"

"I don't know; half?"

"About ten percent. Mostly, we stay home." Maddens leaned forward and looked straight into Kashi's eyes. "We aim to keep it that way."

"Why?"

"If half our citizens had passports, and half of those went overseas each year, each spending maybe \$2500 on accommodation, food, transport, gifts... that'd be - Keith?"

"One hundred sixty billion dollars," said Brock.

"My God!"

"Leaving the country," said Maddens. "Every year."

"That much..." said Kashi.

"You know what?" said Maddens. "That sort of money attracts criminals. Cheats. Americans abroad can be naive. For every zero point one percent of the population that stays here safely watching TV, we can stop at least a billion dollars flowing out to benefit foreign parasites. That's the mission of the TEA."

"TEA?"

"The Tourist Enforcement Agency."

"Charged with the prevention of American tourism abroad," said Brock.

"This isn't a UN thing, is it?"

"Absolutely federal," said Maddens.

"Well, I can see it would be worth it," said Kashi cautiously. "But how would you do it?"

"Travel restrictions," said Maddens. "Effective public information service programmes. Interdicting popular foreign destinations."

"Interdicting? That means attacking doesn't it- "

"Mr Kashi," said Maddens. "Please leave us a moment."

"But-"

"Thank you."

After the door closed, Maddens sat back. "Is he too squeamish to be receptive to the more active side of our work?"

"We'll build on what he already knows: tourist marketing peddles costly fantasies. When he's ready, I'll try the trip down the Nile."

"Risky."

"But a big payoff if it works."

Brock stood at the whiteboard, playing with a marker.

"What's the best way to stop Americans spending money abroad?"

"Cut up their credit cards," said Kashi.

"You're being flippant," said Brock.

"Make it illegal? Stop issuing passports? But you couldn't do that."

"Why not? We are the US Government, after all."

"It's unconstitutional!"

"The middle classes would certainly raise hell if we did it. But suppose," said Brock, looking at the ceiling, "we were at war with Germany, or Cuba?"

"OK, I understand, we'd stop our citizens travelling there."

"And interfere with their right to pursue life, liberty, and the freedom to tour? I'm shocked!"

"Yes, I get your point."

"So you concede that the law could be used to prevent US citizens taking holidays in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon - "

"Well who the hell would want to go there anyway?" asked Kashi.

"Ahh!" said Brock. "You know, you might want to yourself, if it weren't for- Your assignment tonight: what is far more effective than a legal ban on travel?"

Reading reports in his room that evening, Kashi found himself impressed at what the agency had helped accomplish.

Iraq had Mesopotamia and Ur, the Tigris and the Euphrates, the Garden of Eden. Iran was Ancient Persia - land of Persepolis, Isfahan, the Caspian Sea and the finest caviar... they were ideal tourist destinations, steeped in the romance of generations, Arabian Nights and the crescent moon hanging low over tents in the desert. But you just didn't see them on the posters.

And Lebanon. Small, but packed with history: Phoenicians and Alexander the Great; Byblos, Tyre and Sidon, Romanised Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, the Cedars, skiing, the vibrancy of pulsating Beirut... sounded wonderful: California, Paris and elegant historic ruins all in one compact package. But when he shut his eyes, the pictures that came to mind were Kalashnikovs and dismal refugee slums, hostage-taking and fundamentalists, civil war and terrorism. Iraq: Saddam Hussein, biological weapons and war. Iran; that was chanting hordes of US-hating veiled women who drank no alcohol and inflicted medieval punishments. Tehran or Miami, sir? You know, this year I'll go to Miami for the tenth time.

If he put his mind to it, how could he characterise the world? Communism was a gift, of course; hostile anti-American dictatorships enforced by humourless secret policemen. Post-communist Russia was ruthless gangsters, inflation and unsafe airlines. China: Tianmen Square and Tibet. Africa: famine, corruption, AIDS. India: food poisoning, riots, poverty. Asia: pollution, traffic gridlock and financial irregularities. South America: drug cartels, street kids, death

squads. It was endless. No-one in their right mind would want to go to any of these places.

So what was going on? Did Brock mean that the US actually caused all these atrocious conditions - AIDS in Africa and political instability in the Middle East? Massacres in Rwanda? Famine? War? Pestilence?

By the end of the evening his head was spinning. What was true, propaganda or lie? Was the government of the United States managing the entire world in a vast conspiracy designed simply to prevent American citizens spending their hard-earned dollars abroad?

"Of course not," said Brock when they met again. "It's impossible and unnecessary. We'd never do anything like that. Well, apart from creating the odd small fact on the ground. Take Lebanon; everyone knows we support Israel, but we also fund Hezbollah as long as they stay camped round Baalbek.

"But on the large scale, creating AIDS, Pol Pot, the el Nino effect and all those other natural disasters would backfire horribly, even if it was possible. Our Information Agency make the information available in easy to understand releases; the media do the all the necessary demonising by themselves."

"Europe seems to be tough work," said Kashi.

"Generally, but you can still have a big impact with a little effort. Place a small bomb in Berlin, blame Libya, retaliate - that translates into big drops in US tourism all over Europe. It's the wired society; panics move fast, people stay home."

"Doesn't anyone ever demonise us?"

"We're the Great Satan, an atheist morass of drugs, pornography, racism, lunacy, mugging, mass murder, gluttony, gambling, perversion, and a military-imperialistic-religious ambition to dominate the world."

"That's crazy!"

"I'm glad you think so."

"I can buy that everybody misrepresents," said Kashi. "I just didn't realise how successful it could be."

"Not everything we've done has worked as well as islamophobia, which you could call our star project, but even there we've had some relative failures. Did you identify any?"

"Egypt has a lot of tourists. Bali too?"

"Egypt. Very important."

"Don't tell me we pay for the terrorist attacks on US citizens there!" said Kashi.

"It's mainly Germans, Japanese. And it's risky to organise; those guys have an agenda all of their own."

"If they found out, the press would crucify you!"

"Listen; there's a low intensity war going on, and Joe Blow doesn't want to know the dirty work we do on his behalf." Brock looked at Kashi as if coming to a decision. "News management and opinion-forming is one thing," he said. "These days we're moving much more into identifying specific targets for obliteration."

"Obliteration?"

"Yes. Complete physical destruction."

"Isn't that just - vandalism? Especially sites of historic value?"

"We can't deny that under combat conditions collateral damage has been caused to important places - Dresden, every Japanese city except Kyoto. Dubrovnik. Carthage."

"We fought World War Two to cut tourism to Carthage?"

Brock smiled. "You could say there was a fortuitous impact on the tourism gap, but we have no policy of destroying sites of genuine historical value. Well, not yet, anyhow."

Kashi smiled too, wanly. "How do I know that's true?"

"What is the truth? Does the US perpetrate untruths? Not exactly. But lies are being peddled by others; big ones. Our task is to seek them out and destroy them. What do you know about Lascaux?"

"Lascaux? nothing," said Kashi.

"Cave paintings?"

"Oh, umm, you mean prehistoric stuff?"

"Good enough. There's a meeting this afternoon. You'll learn something."

Kashi sat near the back with Dr Brock and looked round the seminar room. This was the biggest group of people he had seen since joining the programme. Over there was Maddens. Next to him sat a couple of lean military officers; behind them some older academic-looking types.

And there was Anne, one of a tight group of five short-haired young men and women in short-sleeved shirts. He felt unprofessional and out of place by comparison.

"Who are they?" he asked Brock in a whisper.

"USIA - Information Agency trainees. And the two men right in the front; they're the field agents."

They had the weatherbeaten complexions of people who spent a lot of time outdoors. Kashi looked at them closely; perhaps this branch would be where his career took him.

"I'm Mark Hojsack, this is Mark Wendell. Hi."

"Hi," said Wendell, while Hojsack put up the first picture: a wooded hillside. "Lascaux cave: two small chambers near Montignac in southwest France. It is, according to the guidebooks, a key example of paleolithic painting, dating back some 17,000 years."

Kashi studied the simple yet bold paintings of elk, bison and chubby horses with interest.

"The legend is that in 1940 some boys found the prehistoric cave while out looking for their dog. It became a tourist sensation after the war and had to be sealed off in 1963 because the flood of visitors caused irreparable damage to the paintings. In the 80s, a perfect replica - called Lascaux II, built in an old quarry nearby - was opened. The pictures were recreated exactly. It gets up to two thousand visitors a day."

"It's a classic pattern," said Wendell. "We're asked to believe that an ancient artifact that lasted perfectly preserved for seventeen millennia took less than a quarter century to start crumbling away once it was discovered."

Kashi noticed that others in the room were smiling knowingly.

"You're way ahead of us. Yes; Lascaux II is modern; but so is the original so-called prehistoric cave - "

"You mean it's a fake?" said Kashi incredulously, out loud. One of the USIA women - Anne, unfortunately - sniggered. Kashi felt his face reddening.

"Precisely," said Wendell. "Lascaux was first secretly constructed in the late 1930s. The materials used proved to be substandard, so they had to rebuild it; but every last bit is twentieth century work."

"That's a fine job," said Maddens. "You've exposed a great fraud on the American people. Now, what do we do about it?"

"I've had some preliminary thoughts for renormalising the situation," said Captain Carey.

"I'm sure you have," said Maddens. "No doubt ones that would invite disproportionate retaliation; the French are proud bastards. Do any of you youngsters have a more reasonable suggestion?"

The USIA group staying silent, Kashi suddenly felt it was time he took his chance.

"An accident," he said. "The replica is in a quarry. Some old dynamite could - go off? destroy Lascaux II and flood the original?"

Maddens looked pleased. "Not bad... not bad at all."

Kashi made a determined effort not to glance over to see if Anne was looking his way.

"Well done," whispered Brock.

"We'll consider specifics when we have fully evaluated the environment," said Maddens. "But next on the agenda, Dr Andrea Schlimper will present a technique for the seismic disintegration of Machu Picchu."

"Machu Picchu is a fake?" said Kashi incredulously.

"I'm afraid so," said Brock afterwards, over a coffee.

"Lascaux, OK - it's smaller than a house. But Machu Picchu is huge! Isn't it the most popular attraction in South America?"

"What else do you know about it?"

"It's the lost city of the Incas..."

"Hiram Bingham, exploring Peru looking for the lost city, finds this unknown site," said Brock. "Untrue; Bingham was a fraudster on a massive scale. He built Machu Picchu, then discovered it himself."

"Why don't we expose it as a fraud?"

"Who would believe us? No doubt it has powerful friends."

"So instead we'll vibrate it to pieces?"

"It wasn't a priority while we had the Shining Path. But now a generated earthquake would be ideal."

"Don't you feel like just nuking it or something?"

"Sure. But you know the answer to that."

"Yeah. I guess international condemnation followed by some sort of retaliation." Kashi sat up. "But has that really happened anywhere?"

"Remember the bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York?"

"Of course; my home town."

"That was a warning shot from the British."

"The British?...no."

"It was convenient for us both to blame Pakistani fundamentalists. But we know and they know we know."

"Wow... Why, have we ever interdicted English places?"

"During the SDI tests we used a satellite beam weapon on York Minster to start a fire." Brock smiled. "Some people thought it was a bolt from God. Anne Hathaway's cottage. Windsor Castle. Usually we're a lot more subtle with them. For instance, we have a controlling interest in Stonehenge-"

"Is that a fake too?"

"No, it's just an unpleasant experience. Price gouging, busy roads, a urine-soaked pedestrian tunnel, hard to see anything. But we have a nice little bookstore there too."

"Don't tell me - I used to work in bookstores. You get better views in an expensive book?"

"Excellent! So you'll appreciate why our government helps our corporations develop and maximise income streams through the exploitation of copyright on information about places like Stonehenge. Not just book publishing -

there are big media corporations in all kinds of knowledge rights fields from words to 3D navigable VR models... Why struggle to see some old rocks in the rain when you can download a digital version at home for a small fee?"

"So film, tv, cable, music..."

"And video, software, satellite communications, virtual reality; don't forget theme parks. They're distributed, mobile, and hard to hit. Investing in the internet and intellectual property protection is our strategy. Most foreigners invest in old buildings and artifacts of dubious provenance."

"But the copyright in real archaeological sites can't be held by US corporations - can it?"

"Why not? The Japanese owned the reproduction rights to the renovated Sistine Chapel. Who adds the value? It's usually US taxes that fund archaeological research; our scholars who write about them; our photographers take pictures, our graphic designers build 3-D models, our businesses take the risks. They should be compensated."

"What about the country that owns the site?"

Brock waved his hand impatiently. "An accident of history. Why should undeveloped countries benefit simply because a thousand year-old building happens to stand inside their hundred year-old borders? There are precedents in oil and pharmaceuticals. If we can patent the blood of primitive tribesmen half way round the world we can certainly copyright cut-away pictures of the Taj Mahal."

"You know, right now I find it a relief that some things are real enough to be exploited." Kashi looked into his empty cup. "I want to be useful to the agency, to you, but I've never been to any of these countries - how can I tell what's fake or not? to me it's all just words and pictures and historical disputes."

"It's time you got out into the world," said Brock decisively. "There's something going on in Egypt and I need to take a look."

Kashi stood at the window of his air-conditioned 14th floor room in the Ramses Hilton, looking out over the slow Nile as the sun set fatly in the polluted sky. He felt excited, alive, his new US passport in his new back pocket and new memories frothing in his brain.

Cairo was not what he had expected, it was better. Sprawling, crowded, rushing, bright, alien and dirty and packed with houses, wailing mosques, back alleys, faceless apartments, official buildings, neon lights in Arabic, sad palm trees, and thousands of frantic little dinged dodgem cars on double-decker streets. The people were short and skinny, seething with a desperate energy on the verge of madness. Bones of countless levels of past old cities seemed to lie just beneath the uneven surface, constantly ground to dust by the daily passage of millions of modern feet. The place oozed time from its pores and drains and roofs, everything worn with age and discoloured through use. It was faintly dangerous but fiercely alive.

He craved the buzz of the street. Far below traffic jammed the bridges and roads. Large international hotels loomed by the sluggish Nile, sparkling in the gathering dusk, moored ships of refuge for company representatives and other weary travellers. Above, catching the late sun, an airliner, lights blinking purposefully, headed out across the dome of the world to who knows where - London, Bombay, maybe even New York.

And there, west on the purpling horizon, he could make out the hazy shape of the pyramids at Giza, standing guard at the edge of the desert. He had got there that morning, finally, and saw the man-made mountains close up, touched the massive blocks that had been there four thousand years, and wondered at the enigmatic Sphinx that had kept them company for so long.

In the afternoon he had gone with Brock to the Information Agency office, where they introduced his friend Anne to her first posting among the crisply short-haired, short-sleeved staff. Keith stayed for discussions with managers while Kashi, revelling in his deliberately

underdressed, young-tourist field agent style, had been sent alone to the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square.

There he saw for himself the artifacts of the ages: Tutankhamen's gold face and treasures, walls of hieroglyphics, stacks of sarcophagi, rows of mummified and dessicated bodies, the whole apparatus of boats to sail those silver-sanded seas beyond death. For the first time in his life he felt the weight of the countless generations of men and women who must have gone before him on this earth.

He checked his watch. Oops, late to meet Keith Brock in the bar at the Nile Hilton.

Kashi looked at his beer glass with satisfaction. "This may be disloyal, Keith, but I don't want to be prevented from travelling."

Brock laughed. "Had a good day?"

"Unbelievable. Fantastic."

"Don't worry. Like drugs and prostitution, tourism will always be with us. And the more Americans stay at home, the better for you, eh? You don't have to share the sights with a load of fat old couples from Iowa."

"Put like that-"

"Protecting them from fraud. Helping the Greens save the environment. And we get to travel. It sounds selfish, but everyone wins, apart from a few criminals."

"I'll drink to that."

Brock raised his glass.

"So, did you discover anything suspicious?" he asked.

"Fakes? no," said Kashi. "The pyramids seem just too solid; almost like they're natural..."

"Anything else out there?"

"Well, the Sphinx is having pretty obvious restoration work - is that what you mean?"

"It's a slippery slope and a matter of some discussion.... where does simple maintenance shade into renovation and restoration, on through building re-imagined structures from a few holes in the ground, and finally to manufacturing

complete frauds? But that's a big subject. Anything else? What about the museum?"

"King Tut? - His stuff looked great ... but I really can't tell old from new, antique from modern. To me, it's all genuine. Completely. Sorry; did I fail some test?"

"No, don't worry, said Brock. "We let you go alone today for a purpose: so you could see just how hard it is to judge. From now on you'll have us to guide you. And this -"

Brock passed over a small grey device.

"What is it?" said Kashi, flipping it open.

"The United States Information Agency Palmtop," said Brock, proudly. "Great for field agents - all the history, tourist data, visa information and foreign language phrases you could possibly need - without the self-interested hype of the commercial tourist literature. Keep it with you at all times. Download new data only at USIA offices. It will be your constant and true companion."

"It can tell me what's old and what's actually modern?" said Kashi, awed.

"It is a database of what we know so far; and in time, what you too find out and report."

"Oh, wow."

"To answer your specific question, apparent age is not a guarantee that a thing is genuine. Even fakes can be old: duplicitous English monks in the 11th century successfully faked King Arthur's grave at Glastonbury in order to attract gullible paying pilgrims. Medieval European churches had enough relics of the True Cross to build a ship or two. But take a moment to think from your own experience: what is common to the Lascaux cave and Machu Picchu?"

"OK. Nothing much at first sight - one's a French prehistoric cave, the other's a hill town in Peru. Without checking, I would say they were both discovered this century but had never been heard of before?"

"Yes. Recent discovery is certainly a good indicator. That's why we remain wary of places like Pompeii, Troy, Sutton Hoo."

"King Tut was found in this century, so is he a fraud? Should I look him up?"

"We don't know; it's still worth probing. That palmtop doesn't know it all. And watch out for new things. When Iraq opens up we expect to see a lot more of Babylon than ever before, perhaps even the fabled Hanging Gardens, which probably never existed in the first place. And we're extremely suspicious that Atlantis is going to show up again one day."

"Atlantis? Isn't it fictional?"

"Possibly not; the Greeks in Santorini made a claim for it. Some say it is in the sea off Cornwall, others that it's on the altiplano in Bolivia; just ripe for a latter-day Hiram Bingham. And the seven wonders of the ancient world, such as the Colossus of Rhodes and the Pharos of Alexandria... I bet you within fifty years someone will claim to have discovered them."

"What about things that were always known and never lost? Like the Colosseum in Rome, the Parthenon, the Leaning Tower of Pisa?"

"Some may turn out to be recent improvements to an earlier structure. The ancient Colosseum was said to hold over 150,000 spectators. We might find - without much help from the Italians - that the original seated five thousand at most... what we see today is impressive, but not strictly original. And the Parthenon in Athens - probably first built of cedar wood, rebuilt in stone in the 18th century."

"And the pyramids?" asked Kashi, worried.

"No more than fifty-foot high piles of mudbricks. What you visited today are typically grandiose Victorian recreations to see how far the engineering could be pushed."

"You're kidding!"

"Yes!" Brock laughed. "Sorry, couldn't resist it. They seem to be the genuine article."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Remember. The price of truth is eternal vigilance. Cleopatra's Needles were exposed as recent objects only when we found they were crumbling so fast they'd have been heaps of dust by Christ's birth if they'd been genuine. There's plenty more of Egypt for us to check."

"How can you possibly keep track of new artifacts appearing all over the world?"

"Plato chips."

"What?"

"It's a form recognition technology, installed in networked photo-processing labs around the country. Tourist snaps are automatically and covertly scanned; the software prioritises targets and alerts us to novel items."

"You guys think of everything."

Brock smiled. "Now drink up. We leave in the morning."

The vast sheet of water spread to the south, shimmering in the bright desert. Kashi, standing near the great statues of Abu Simbel, checked the entry in his USIA palmtop. It was dull and pedantically accurate: ancient Lake Nasser, created between three thousand two hundred and three thousand three hundred years ago when the Pharaohs built the dam at Aswan to regulate the annual flooding of the Nile: the world's first significant water engineering project

The journey hundreds of miles south along the winding river and into the increasing heat had been a tremendous adventure for Bob Kashi, almost spiritual in its impact. Luxor, Karnak, the Valley of the Kings, Kom Ombo. In some nameless place on the voyage downriver - far from any monuments - he had stood at a spot timeless and profound and intensely fragile, like the Earth herself orbiting her naked sun. The habitable country was so narrow, just a few hundred yards across: brilliant blue water with white-sailed feluccas drifting downstream, bordered on each bank by palm trees and irrigated crops in mud brown fields, supervised by a dusty hamlet; beyond that lay only the pitiless empty desert. Life here for a hundred and fifty centuries or more had been fixed to the immutable wheel of the seasons.

He felt as though he was tracking the history of the human race along the umbilical of life; if he left Keith Brock here to his paranoid fantasies and pressed further south he

would reach equatorial East Africa and the cradle of humanity itself a million years in the past. New York and supermarkets and television and the internet and a thousand trivial aspects of modern life seemed so far away, so ephemeral, so disconnected from the reality of the world, which was about how to conjure sustenance from the soil and the water and the burning light.

And yet people found time to create the most magnificent expressions of hope and immortality. Kashi turned to look up at the four huge ancient statues of Abu Simbel, two each side of a dark entrance to a cool temple carved out of the living rock. Enigmatic but proud, staring out over the lake as they had for thousands of years, the enormous figures were at one with their cliffside. They gave him a tremendous sense of peace and permanence.

"There's something not quite right," said Keith Brock, coming up to him, worried.

"Keith," said Kashi, sadly. "What is it now?"

"The shape of the hill, this cliff; doesn't quite match the rest of the landscape. And there's a strange little door. See, to the right there."

"Can't you just let it be? Feel the moment? It's probably nothing."

"Kashi," said Brock, forcefully. "We're here on a mission. Now, while I distract attention, you investigate."

"But-"

"Do it."

"OK! OK!"

As Kashi reached the unexceptionable door, two hundred yards behind him Brock fell to the ground with a convincing cry, bringing officials and tourists walking, then running.

The door posed no problem to Kashi's new skills. With a quick twist and a shoulder push he forced his way into a dark space where he could no longer see. He shut the door against the blinding desert and let his eyes adjust.

As they did he had the shock of his life: he was standing in a hangar-sized building, a large artificial space defined in concrete.

In the high ceiling a few small fluorescent lights burned. Two pairs of massive concrete buttresses obviously supported the weighty stone figures outside.

A big rectangular structure between them was clearly the outer shell of the so-called temple area reached by the central doorway.

Steel ladders and platforms must provide access to high places for maintenance engineers.

Boxes on the walls presumably housed light switches, climate control, fire systems, a telephone.

The statues and the temple and the entire hill comprised one big audacious fake, no more than forty years old and brutally arrogant in its execution.

He did not know how but he was outside in the hammering noon with his hands gripping Brock's shirt until they pulled him off and quietened him down and brought him back to the bus and to Aswan, back to Cairo, back to the modern world, and he watched as he travelled as the people sailed their little boats and picked dates and washed their clothes in the river and lived in poverty among the ruins in a complex street theatre that did not fool him for one second.

A week of mixed fortunes. An earthquake in Peru had caused damage to Sacsayhuaman. Archaeologists at Halicarnassus said they had found the ancient Mausoleum. During an attack by helicopter-borne drug agents in Cambodia, Angkor Wat had regrettably been collateralised.

Investigative Head (Asia Division) Bob Kashi, wearing check trousers and a Hawaiian shirt, a camera resting on his expanding stomach, smiled as he folded his magazine and walked stiffly across the Beijing Hyatt parking lot with his wife, Anne, plump in her tight shirt and red-faced. It had been an interesting day out at the Great Wall - thousands of Chinese tourists and quite a few Americans swarming and gawping at the marvellous section of ancient defences.

Bob and Anne knew that most of the two thousand miles of wall was a barely recognisable heap of stones that

could have been shovelled together in an afternoon by children. Final proof, enough for Director Carey to protect himself, was hard to come by amongst the inscrutable Chinese, but they were working on it.

Entering the lobby, Bob glanced at the Deng State Travel Services bureau and noticed that the poster of New York - Statue of Liberty, Empire State and all - had peeled off the wall in their window display.

"Hi!" he said breezily to the crew-cut Chinese travel agent at the desk, trim in his white short-sleeved shirt. "Your great picture of my home town has fallen down!"

"I'm sorry sir?"

"New York! Fall down!"

"Oh sorry sir! I'll see to it at once."

"I bet you send a lot of tourists to New York."

"No sir! The Chinese people prefer to experience the rich joys of their own cultural heritage."

"Say it ain't so! Why?"

"They don't care to be murdered, sir."

Bob rested against the counter, forcing a smile. "Son, they shouldn't believe all they read about the USA."

The agent leaned forward, his eyes hard and glittering. "Oh, but we think they should. Sir."

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