

Linehan's Ordeal

Bryan Murphy

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Dark Future Books

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Sean Linehan stares up at the Buddha, but the Buddha does not deign to let Linehan catch his eye. Instead, its bronze face gazes serenely over Lantau

Island to the sparkling waters that pull Hong Kong's concentrated pollution into the broad, cleansing sweep of the South China Sea.

As Linehan continues to stare, the Buddha starts to shimmer in his vision, as though it were a holographic projection gone slightly out of focus. One of Linehan's hands wipes perspiration from his eyelids; the other rests over the micro-drive stitched into the waistband of his trousers. He blinks hard. The giant statue is again immobile. Linehan breathes his relief out into the humid air and breathes in the aroma of Cantonese cooking. He pushes his way through the crowds of pilgrims and tourists in search of its source.

The source turns out to be a series of fast-food stands set up amid tacky souvenir stalls. The former all look new, and they all bear a plethora of sponsor logos. Today, Linehan has time to contemplate the world, so he chooses the stand with the longest queue in front of it, reasoning that the locals will know the best one and give it their custom. Most of the tour guides have herded their charges off to the vast restaurant at the adjacent monastery. Linehan is thinking of the gentle nature of Buddhism, and what that might offer him in his quest to change his nature and become good, when he reaches the head of the queue. He glances at the menu pasted on the wall behind the owner and orders a spicy soup and a hot dog, a blend of East and West.

"Vegetarian dog," the owner tells him as he hands Linehan a sausage in a steamed bread bun.

Linehan looks round to see the strange creature, but then realizes the man is talking about the food. He pays more than he had anticipated for the meal and takes it to a designated eating area, where he finds a concrete table and plastic seats with a view of island greenery and grey-blue sea. He asks if he may join the people already ensconced there. They break off their argument to gesture him to sit down, then resume it with equal volume. The hot dog tastes of spicy pork. Linehan washes it down with the soup, which burns the back of his throat and brings tears to his eyes, but leaves a pleasant after-taste.

Linehan's neck prickles with more than perspiration from the late morning heat. He feels he is being watched, but not by anyone at his table. He looks around, but everyone he sees is minding their own business or anybody else's but his. He turns back to his food, finishes it and wants to be away from the crowds on the peak. He decides the monks can maintain the statue without the contribution of his entrance fee to view its insides, and sets off to take the cable car down to sea level. Only when he is in the relative solitude of the cabin, drinking in the stunning bird's-eye views it offers, does he feel free of watching eyes.

The cable car deposits its passengers at sea level, where Linehan picks up the Mass Transit Railway. He finds a seat and observes his fellow passengers for a while. They are calm and self-absorbed. The younger ones smile at their

thumbs as they fly backwards and forwards over plastic rectangles like machines in perpetual motion.

Linehan pulls out the fake ThaiPad he bought in a back street the day before and finds the EBC News site. The top story is from Burma: Buddhist fundamentalist monks have instigated a pogrom against Christian and Muslim minorities in the commercial capital, Yangon, allegedly with the connivance of the military, which recently ceded power to the democratic opposition. Linehan shakes his head in disbelief and flicks over to the sports news. There is a short item about the inauguration of the SplattaDome in Hong Kong. Linehan smiles: his mission here is to prepare the stadium's opening ceremony, using the hologram of his late, lamented chief that he carries on the micro-drive stitched into his trousers for safe keeping. No-one must know that the head of the World Football Authority, though still kicking with full force, is no longer alive.

Half an hour later, Linehan has alighted on Hong Kong Island and is strolling from the business district called Central towards the entertainment district of Wanchai. He is passing through an area studded with government buildings, officially named Umbrella Square, when a light, cool rain starts to fall. The rain refreshes him, but he has not brought an umbrella with him, so he picks up his pace. He passes Hong Kong's Parliament, but does not recognise it as the graceful former Legislative Council building he has seen pictures of, for enormous swathes of canvas disguise its features. He wonders whether this is due to a renovation of the façade to reflect its upgraded status, or whether the Bulgarian artist Hristo is in town. Only the phalanx of heavily armed police who guard it against urban guerrillas or demonstrators hints at its importance. Linehan imagines a hologram of Franz Splatta floating above it, embodying the traditional virtues of harmony, enterprise and fair competition, but knows that such an apparition will have to wait for better technology, as well as clearer recognition by the populace of who is really in charge.

Soon, Wanchai has crowded around him. Its buildings, considered low-rise here, tower over him; its neon reflects in the faces of the crowds that threaten to force pedestrians off the narrow pavement into the tumultuous traffic. Even in Geneva, his workplace, Linehan is deemed a big man, and he uses his physical presence to keep on a straight trajectory. He is not particularly wet when four flags of St. George outside an open-fronted pub tell him he has reached his destination, a bar called Me Old China. Linehan ducks into it, out of the rain. He strides to the counter, orders a pint of bitter and takes it to an unoccupied table from which he can watch both the old English FA Cup match being re-run on a giant screen on one of the walls and the people passing in front of the pub. This way, when Wayne arrives, Linehan will see him in good time to get to the bar before him and order him his Guinness. Wayne is not due for an hour yet, so Linehan watches the screen. He already knows the result – Spurs will lose – so he turns his attention to his fellow drinkers. Although it is

mid-afternoon, the place is rather full. Most of the clients are men. Those that are standing look shorter than Linehan, though he guesses that they weigh more. The majority of the male-only groups are concentrating on the serious business of swilling beer, though some are glancing at the females standing or sitting near the bar counter, and commenting to each other on the women and their imagined proclivities. Linehan notices that the women tend to be both darker and pudgier than the local ones. Occasionally there is a braying from groups of better-dressed young business people, but Linehan is used to that and it barely registers on his consciousness.

What does register is a sudden increase in the volume of rain falling outside, and a further dulling of the light that accompanies it. Then he is transfixed by the gaze of someone who has just come in off the street. She stands there, just inside the doorway, her high cheekbones illuminated by the lighting inside the pub. The rain has pasted her short, thick, jet-black hair to her forehead and her neck, and welded the front of the white blouse below her soaked green jacket to the shapely breasts it covers. Linehan understands why he is staring at her, but not why she is staring at him. She glides over to his table. Linehan's heart misses two beats.

“You get me drink, please, before wind is changing direction.”

Linehan stands up fast, steadies his chair, steadies himself.

“What... would you like?”

“Gin tonic good enough. Same colour as rain.”

When Linehan returns with the gin and tonic, he has calmed his breathing. He feels due for a change of luck with women, someone and something to console him for Veronica's dumping him by intercontinental text-only message.

The woman has seated herself at Linehan's table. She takes the glass with her fine hands, her fingers brushing his as she does so. Her touch electrifies him: if her fingers are so silky ...

“Sláinte!”

“How did you know?”

“Know what? My English teacher Irish. May you having nicer legs than yours under the table before the new spuds are up.”

Linehan laughs. He sits down opposite the woman, raises an eyebrow and takes a good look under the table. Her bare legs, pressed firmly together, are lovely. A rivulet of rain still makes its way down one calf from her skirt.

“I do having. I mean, I have, and it's not yet Spring.”

The woman produces a mellifluous laugh and leans back in her chair.

“Thank you, Mr. ...”

“Sean. Sean Linehan.”

He extends a hand. The woman takes it; her touch makes Linehan glad he is not on his feet. He forces himself to let go of the hand.

“OK. Mr. Sean Linehan, you tell me yourself.”

Linehan leans in towards her and, in a low voice modulated by countless conferences and committee meeting, gives her an abridged version of his life story so far: his birth in north London, the third child of Irish immigrant parents, his childhood fixation with soccer, the long legal studies, his fortuitous job with the International Olympic Committee, the move to Switzerland, his head-hunting by the World Football Association after its takeover of the game’s former governing body, and his rapid rise up its ranks. He avoids mentioning the perks of that job: the stuffed envelopes, the high-class tarts, all things he has now resolved to do without. Nor does he mention the failure of his first attempt since then to find a real steady girlfriend of his own. That hurts too much, but maybe his luck is turning. The woman’s gaze focuses on Linehan’s mouth, as though reading the lips better to understand his words. Suddenly, she is looking behind him, startled. A calloused hand falls on Linehan’s shoulder.

“Sean, you dirty so-and-so! Can’t leave you for half a minute and you’re seducing some beauty. Some very special beauty. Well, go on mate, introduce me.”

Linehan has recognized Wayne’s voice. He keeps his eyes on the woman in front of him, but realizes he has not asked her name.

“You call me Beauty, I’m happy. Kind man, must be police. But my name is Hypatia.”

Linehan’s mouth goes dry as his new acquaintance shakes the hand of his old friend. He takes a gulp of his beer, which has warmed to room temperature. He turns to Wayne and gives him a warning look. Wayne laughs, showing bad teeth, and Linehan decides to take advantage of having failed to get his friend’s drink in. He stands up.

“You having the usual, Wayne? Same again Hypatia?” *Funny bloody name.*

But Hypatia’s gin and tonic is untouched.

Linehan puts an arm around Wayne’s shoulder and guides him to the bar counter, out of earshot of Hypatia, who watches them coolly. When they return to the table, Linehan is carrying a large bottle of mineral water and Wayne a pint mug of Guinness that already holds less than half a pint.

“What makes you think I’m a policeman, Hypatia? We ain’t famous for our kind words.”

“Hong Kong police is learning to keep iron fist inside velvet glove. And I see you walk: like police.”

“What else do you know about me?”

“You and Sean Linehan old friends.”

“OK. Yeah, body language would tell you that.”

“You his landlord. I saw you giving him key.”

“Well, I’m putting him up while he’s here. Clever girl, you are.”

“You got funny religion.”

“What?”

“Strange pendant under shirt. Not Christian on Cross. Say quick prayer before drink, not just Sláinte or Cheers.”

“No, that was like *Here’s to you, mate, best of luck*. But I did have a soft spot for old Sai Baba, before he ruined his act by dying. The pendant is just a mojo. I’m sure you know what *that’s* for.”

Wayne empties his glass.

“Anyway, I gotta go. Here’s to you, mate, best of luck. Don’t wait up for me.”

Wayne gives Linehan a stage wink, takes his leave of Hypatia by grinning at her, collects his umbrella from the doorway and ambles out into the rain like a constable on his beat.

Hypatia stares at Linehan until she is sure his attention is fully back on her.

“Good. Now I have you all to myself, Mr. Sean.”

“Hypatia ... beautiful name.”

He knows they have the place to themselves. Wayne has promised to sleep at a girlfriend’s. Linehan does not bring Hypatia immediately into the guest room of the spacious flat which the Hong Kong Police grants an upper-echelon officer. He sits her in the lounge, presses a glass of gin and tonic into her hand, and talks to her. And listens to her. By the time he leads her into the bedroom, he is under the impression they know each other well.

Linehan is already impressed by her life history of overcoming poverty, prejudice and ill-health to become the attractive, successful business woman

that she is now, but as he gets to know every centimetre of her silky skin, his appreciation of Hypatia reaches new heights.

Hypatia shakes Linehan awake early the next morning.

“Sean, I have to get up.”

“What? No. Stay a while. Make love with me again.”

“Cannot. I have a big deal to put to bed.”

Cheap puns spring to Linehan’s mind, but he does not voice them. Instead, he gets up and makes tea and toast for Hypatia while she has a quick shower and puts on yesterday’s clothes, which Linehan has dried for her overnight. The sky outside is grey, but no rain is falling. Thick double glazing muffles the rising sound of harbour and road traffic. Hypatia ignores the toast, but drinks the tea, without milk, while it is piping hot. She fetches her handbag, opens it, pulls out a business card and, with both hands, gives it to Linehan. The card affirms that she works for “Hypatia Agency Import Export”. Linehan turns it over and sees that she has hand-written an extra mobile phone number on the back.

“For *personal* personal calls.”

She gives Linehan a chaste kiss on the cheek and moves to the door.

“Now you see me, now you don’t. Tomorrow you see me.”

Linehan’s palms tingle as he watches the back of her leave the flat. He feels bereft. He moves to the window and looks down to the street. It is a couple of minutes before Hypatia appears at the entrance far below and saunters off into the morning human traffic of Causeway Bay.

Linehan is light-headed. He has not felt this way since he was a teenager. He finds his mobile phone and keys in Hypatia’s “*personal* personal” number. She answers straight away.

“Sean Linehan. You a good man. We see wechother soon.”

The line goes dead.

Linehan basks a while in the sweet sadness of solitude, then remembers that he has his own business to see to today. He phones Lim Sa-Choi, the events manager at the Hong Kong Football Association, and arranges to inspect the SplattaDome right after lunch.

Good, eh? Hypatia called me good! I must be getting somewhere.

It is cloudy but hot when Linehan emerges from the MTR’s brand new SplattaDome station in the New Territories. The site is still sealed off behind its imposing, electrified perimeter fence, but everything is ready for the grand

opening ceremony, to which Linehan is bringing the immortal Franz Splatta not in the flesh but in hologram form. The armed men on the gates recognise Linehan and usher him in. One of them accompanies him in silence to the executive suite inside the stadium, where Lim is waiting for him.

“Mr. Linehan! Welcome to our little marvel! You are very prompt. I take it you were not inconvenienced by the demonstrations.”

“Good to see you again, Mr. Lim. No, I came through Umbrella Square yesterday, but nobody was demonstrating for democracy, as far as I could tell.”

“Well no, they would not need to, since the government in Beijing met most of their demands. It is the Maoists who take to our streets these days. They demand *less* democracy.”

Linehan does not care about degrees of democracy. He just wants demonstrators, or the people sent in to deal with them, not to incinerate foreigners and interfere with soccer.

“Whatever. Are you ready to show me the SplattaDome?”

“With the greatest of pleasure. You will love it.”

Linehan does. It is a magnificent stadium, though its capacity is limited to 40,000 for safety reasons. It has a retractable roof, an all-year hybrid grass-and-plastic pitch of deepest green, a comfortable seat for every spectator, an array of eateries for every taste and pocket, executive suites for those who can pay and for dignitaries, and its own conference hall. Brimming with infectious enthusiasm, Lim brings Linehan to the conference hall last.

“Down here is where Herr Splatta will address the world. The world wants to hear him, but unfortunately the people of Hong Kong do not. They just want to get on with the show, so while the show goes on outside, our leader will address the world game’s elite in glorious Mondovision.”

Linehan nods vigorously.

“And since we haven’t yet mastered 360-degree holographic projection, that is very handy for us, too. We just line them up in front of the pyramid so that none of the great man’s charm gets blurred or distorted. You’re a genius, Lim!”

“No, no, Linehan, just a humble servant of our master and his enduring legacy.”

“OK. Well, let’s make sure it works.”

This is what Linehan has come to Hong Kong for. He had unstitched the micro-drive from its hiding place before leaving Causeway Bay. Now he brings it out of his shirt pocket and shows it to Lim, who grins.

“Magnificent!”

Lim leads him up a ramp to the concealed projection area at the back of the hall. The projection room is full of state-of-the-art equipment. Lim indicates a sturdy Lenosoft computer placed in the middle of an uncluttered table.

“Go ahead. It is on. All is ready.”

Linehan inserts the micro-drive. His procedural memory guides his fingers over the keyboard. He is in his element.

In the auditorium, the chubby figure of Franz Splatta appears to rise from below the stage into the glass pyramid. It acknowledges non-existent applause, then launches into a speech enhanced by his endearing mannerisms, a speech that warms the hearts of all those who love the Beautiful Game and its ability to bring the peoples of the world together in peace and harmony and joyous competition. Splatta goes back the way he came, and Linehan ejects the micro-drive.

“Perfect! No living double could match that, could they, Mr. Linehan?”
The two men beam at each other.

“Well, it’s a waveguide-based platform, Mr. Lim, so you wouldn’t expect anything else.”

“A major advance on every other type of spatial light modulator. And the designers have learned from the Billy Graham revival fiasco.”

“I should bloody well hope so!” The two men crack up laughing at the memory until Linehan forces himself to look serious.

“Tomorrow we’ll do it with an audience. You’ve had them all sign a confidentiality agreement, right? Each and every one?”

Lim nods, still beaming.

“For safety’s sake, we’ll run a fire drill before Franz appears. We just need to make sure there are no infiltrators on the big night.”

“That is not a problem in Hong Kong, China.”

Linehan hands the micro-drive to Lim.

“Guard that with your life.”

“I will. Thank you for trusting me.”

The two men return to the executive suite and toast to the success of Lim’s arrangements and Linehan’s mission.

Linehan still feels the after-taste of the Chinese white spirit, made from millet, burning the back of his throat as he rides the MTR back to Causeway Bay. He realizes he has left his jacket and his briefcase at the SplattaDome, but it does not matter: he can collect them tomorrow. Lim has the only really important thing he has brought to Hong Kong, in safe keeping. Meanwhile,

Linehan has the keys to Wayne's flat in his trouser pocket, and some money in the back pocket, as well as more at the flat.

At Causeway Bay, Linehan leaves the station and walks in the direction of Wayne's government condo. His friend has taught him a short cut, and he turns down a narrow alley with the backs of small shops and restaurants on either side. It is poorly lit and the odour of used cooking oil assails his nostrils. Linehan conjures up the light in Hypatia's eyes and her enticing aroma when he had aroused her. He hears a car behind him and moves well out of its way without turning. He is smiling to himself when a sharp pain spreads from the back of his head, a medicinal stench fills his nose and the whole world turns pitch black.

He is in darkness more complete than he has ever known. His brain hurts. He wonders where he is and realises that he is awake. He opens his eyes but does not see anything. Linehan focuses his senses and understands that he has been blindfolded and gagged. His hands and feet are tied. He is on his back. He reasons that he must have been abducted, and this knowledge calms him, because it is better than not knowing. He relaxes as much as the pain inside his head allows him to, and tries to expand his awareness of his situation.

First of all, it is only his head that hurts, so he has not been beaten up. The fact that he is still alive tells him that his captors have a use for him. His limited movements have produced no response from anyone else, so they are probably not in the same room as him. He seems to be on a mattress, on the floor. *Could be worse.* He listens for sounds outside, and hears cicadas and birds but no televisions or radios, so he is probably away from the city. He picks out muffled voices. They do not come nearer or die away, so that could be his captors, or neighbours, in another room. It will have taken more than one person to get him away from the scene of the attack. Whether the voices are those of captors or of neighbours, it is time to make his presence felt.

Linehan rolls off the mattress and keeps rolling. A wall soon stops him. He bangs his tied feet against the wall and makes what noise the gag will let out of him. It works. The voices rise; he hears a door open and feels his body lifted from the floor and deposited back on the mattress. A voice bellows.

“Shut up!” A stream of invective follows, in both English and Cantonese.

A local man.

A brief silence follows. Linehan is pulled into a sitting position. The blindfold is unwrapped and he sees two masked men staring at him. The masks are the best sign yet. If they don't want him to recognize them, they must imagine a future in which he is free. He turns his head away from them, but he has already noted their height, build and eye colour.

“You want shut up now? You know what’s good for you? You shut up!”

Linehan nods. He sits in silence.

“OK. Good boy. You stay shut up, maybe we untie you, let you piss.”

Linehan’s bladder is full but not bursting. He looks around for a bucket, but the room is empty except for its occupants and the mattress. The tiny, high-set window is shuttered and barred. A light-bulb burns but he can see no switch.

The shorter man, the one who has spoken, turns and makes a sign to his companion. The second, less bulky man, is carrying a self-loading revolver. He points it at Linehan and holds it in both hands.

Mantis, thinks Linehan, naming the man after an insect. While Linehan is transfixed by the gun, the stocky man slowly unties Linehan’s legs. Linehan looks down at the top of a bald head.

Slug, he thinks. Now is the time to start making a connection, to remind them he is human and no threat to them. Linehan does not move his legs. The man removes the gag.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now get up. We go toilet.”

He pulls Linehan to his feet. Linehan staggers.

“Excuse me, sir. I think I may need some help walking.”

“Walk!” But the man stays close enough to Linehan to be able to catch him if he falls. They lead Linehan through a large room containing three camp beds and two sofas. Linehan notices the remains of a meal on a central table. It does not look appetizing, but he feels a pang of hunger. *Slug* pushes him into a small room beyond it. It holds a shower, basin and sit-down toilet. Linehan feels his trousers and underpants being pulled down.

“Do your business!”

Linehan obeys. He looks for toilet paper. There is some. With the minimal scope for manoeuvre that his bonds allow him, Linehan uses it. *Slug* hauls his underpants and trousers back up, then shoves him roughly through the large room and into his cell, under the watchful eyes of *Mantis* and the revolver. The door slams.

Linehan lies back on the mattress. He is scared, but he consoles himself with the thought that most kidnap victims live to tell the tale. *Who said so?* He pictures himself talking to a policeman after his release, giving him all the details he has gathered of his captors and the place where they kept him. He struggles to remember the content of the half-day security course the WFA put him through in Geneva before it started to send him around the world on missions. What he does recall is not welcome: his best chance of escape has

gone, because it was the moment of the kidnap. If he hadn't been distracted by thoughts of Hypatia, he might have screamed or struggled, got the attention of bystanders or even the police, jammed the ignition of the getaway car. No, he was already unconscious by then, if indeed there even was a getaway car. He goes back to the post-liberation policeman, turns him into a policewoman, and gives her the features and voice of Hypatia. The throbbing in his head eases, and he relaxes.

A key turns. The door is thrown open. The gun-bearing Mantis enters, checks Linehan's position, then steps aside for Slug to come in carrying a ceramic bowl from which a plastic spoon protrudes. He sets this down next to the mattress, then he unties Linehan's arms and handcuffs his wrists in front of his body so that he can, with difficulty, wield the spoon to eat the rice gruel that the bowl contains. It is lukewarm and the greasy taste appals him, but Linehan pretends to gulp it hungrily.

If they're feeding me, they can't be planning to kill me immediately.

"You're very kind. I needed that."

Slug picks up the empty bowl and leaves the room, covered by Mantis and his revolver. Mantis exits, closes the door quickly and quietly. Linehan hears the key turn in the lock. Hoping he can digest what he has just eaten, he lies back and falls asleep.

When he wakes, Linehan wonders what time it is. They have taken his watch. It is eerily quiet outside. No sounds come from the floor above, so it could be empty, or non-existent. Linehan thinks he hears the horn of a large boat, a ferry perhaps. Could they be on one of the outlying islands? He listens intently for seagulls, but hears none. What if they are away from Hong Kong altogether? In China? He remembers Wayne saying something about Maoists, but he knows that Maoists are even less welcome in today's China than in Hong Kong. He will have to find out from his captors.

Time passes slowly. To distract himself, Linehan tries to call up the names of all ninety-two of the English League's football grounds. He used to subsidise his beer drinking with this feat, but maybe the blow he took to the head has made it harder, for half a dozen names elude him.

Hours must have passed, because he feels hungry again. No food arrives. Low voices send unintelligible words in Cantonese through the locked door. Linehan does not bother to rattle it; he wants his captors to believe he is resigned to his captivity. Instead, he starts doing silent sit-ups and press-ups on the floor, as best he can. His body lets him know how out of condition it is, so he switches to stretching exercises. When even those prove tiring, he lies on his side and evokes the sight and scents of Hypatia.

The door opens. Slug brings in a plastic cup of steaming instant noodles and a large jar of weak green tea. His armed escort has a plastic bucket and a roll of toilet paper in his free hand. They set these down near the mattress. Below his mask, Slug grins.

“You lucky man. In and out both taken care of.”

“What time is it? What day?”

“It’s later than you think. Maybe last day of your life.”

“Don’t say that. Please. And thank you for this.” He gestures at the food and the bucket. Silently, they leave him to it. The key turns.

Hypatia glides into his cabin and approaches him in the bunk. They are on their honeymoon cruise. Her eyes are alight with lust; her lips tremble with love. “Wake up, Mr. Linehan,” she murmurs, then repeats, sharply.

Linehan opens his eyes. His captors are looking down at him. This time, they are both carrying revolvers.

Slug addresses him.

“Get up, Mr. Linehan. Photo call.”

“How do you know my name?”

“We are an organisation. We have sources. And you will help us get more re-sources.” *How did his English improve so fast?*

They motion him into the next room. Linehan obeys. They have him sit on one of the camp beds. Slug picks up a newspaper and a camera from the table. He hands the paper to Linehan.

“Hold this in front of your chest. Don’t smile. Look exhausted, if you can.”

“I *am* exhausted.”

Linehan notices the SAR China Morning Post’s lead headline: CEO’s Bromide Run Over. The picture is of a poodle.

Slug takes several photos of Linehan.

“Can I keep the paper? I’d like something to read.”

“Can. You won’t find your name in it. Or ours.”

“Would you mind telling me who you are, and what you want?”

Slug and Mantis exchange glances. Mantis answers.

“We belong to the New China Maoist Revolutionary Front. We want the British government to pay us one million British sterling for the safe return of its vanished citizen, Sean Linehan.”

“Or we kill you,” Slug adds. They both laugh. Linehan does not join in.

“So these photos are to prove I’m still alive?” Slug nods.

“Look, I’m not a political man, but I’m willing to learn. Can you tell me what the New China Maoist Revolutionary Front stands for?”

Again, Mantis answers.

“The government of our China is no longer revolutionary. It must become revolutionary again, like it was in the time of Chairman Mao Zedong. Simple.”

“But why are you here in Hong Kong, instead of mainland China?”

Slug gives a bitter laugh.

“The government of our China is using Hong Kong as a laboratory for experiments in so-called democracy. That is very bad, but it makes it very much easier for us to continue the struggle here. And to raise funds. Especially with your help.”

Slug laughs again, this time without bitterness.

“Can you tell me more about your aims?”

They do so, interminably, it seems to Linehan. He would like to think of Hypatia, or listen to the sounds coming from outside his prison-house, but he knows he must listen carefully and memorise what he can so that he can regurgitate it to deceive them into thinking that he is coming round to their view of things. In fact, he acknowledges they do have a point when they denounce the obscene inequalities in society in both Hong Kong and China itself. He has seen them for himself.

The indoctrination session ends. His captors have Linehan fetch the jerry-bucket from his cell and empty it in the toilet. He asks if he can wash, without the handcuffs, and they let him, keeping him in the line of fire of Mantis’s revolver while he does so. Then they boil up more instant noodles and tea for him. As ordered, he takes these into his cell. When Mantis comes to collect the empties, he throws the SAR China Morning Post onto the mattress. As soon as Linehan hears the key turn in the lock, he lays out the paper as best he can with the handcuffs back on his wrists, and scans every page.

The absence of any mention of his abduction he takes as a good omen: a sign that negotiations are under way and a news blackout has been imposed. He cannot imagine the British government abandoning its long-standing policy of refusing to pay ransoms to “terrorists”, but then he has heard of cases where British hostages were released. He does not rate the chances, either, of Hong Kong’s Mayor Hines or the Chinese government paying a ransom to free foreign hostages, though they might take other action. Whether he would survive such action himself seems to him far from certain. He comes to the

sports pages, and is greeted by the smiling face of his boss, the late Franz Splatta, reported as gracing Hong Kong tomorrow with his august presence at the opening of Asia's finest sports venue.

Linehan decides it is evening. Even if it is dawn or early afternoon, he will choose for himself what hour of the day it is, to give time some structure and keep him rooted. He gets down to some physical exercises. Press-ups are hard as hell with handcuffs on, so he concentrates on sit-ups and stretching. He takes consolation from the idea that when he gets out of this, he is going to be leaner and meaner. Then he remembers his pledge to become good. He ponders the conundrum of release or escape. Hypatia only comes to him once he is asleep, and his dreams are disturbing.

Mantis and Slug do not reply to Linehan's greetings when they bring in the next offering of noodles and tea. A bad sign: have negotiations stalled? He has to give them a helping hand, information that will boost their bargaining power.

"Please look at this," he says, pointing to the sports page of the newspaper, at which he has left it open. Slug glances in its direction. The picture of Splatta is prominent.

"I work for that man!"

"We know who you work for."

"But don't you realise how much money he has in his hands? The World Football Association has more loose cash than most of its member states. And far fewer scruples."

"We have analysed the capitalist-sporting complex."

Linehan notes no emotion in the voice, but when his captors leave, the door slams hard before the key turns.

Linehan's plan A is still to make himself feel human enough to his captors so that negotiating his release will seem a better option to them than killing him, but now he turns his attention to Plan B: escape. However he tries it, it will need an intense physical effort, so he gets back to his exercise regime, whose mindlessness allows him to think. Every way he imagines escaping hinges on being able to overpower his captors or seize a weapon that he has never learned to use.

Linehan is engrossed in his sit-ups when Mantis comes in, alone. Mantis snorts and signals with his gun for Linehan to go into the other room. Linehan is glad to see that Mantis still wears his cotton balaclava. He gets to his feet and obeys. In the main room, Slug, also masked, uncuffs him and hands him what must be the day's edition of the SCMP. They go through the photo routine again.

The lead story is Splatta opening the stadium named in his honour. He is pictured inside the transparent pyramid, bestowing smiles and words of wisdom on the dignitaries arrayed in front of him. Not a word of criticism or doubt appears in the report. Lim has done it! Even without Linehan at his shoulder, he has pulled it off! Linehan feels only a tinge of envy amid the enormous wave of gratitude that washes over him. At the bottom of the page is an archive photo of Splatta, looking even younger than the WFA's technicians make him look now. Linehan caresses the picture.

“This man is like a father to me!”

Even Slug and Mantis must have, or have had, fathers.

Slug snatches the newspaper from him.

“Well, you better say goodbye to Daddy. Try telepathy. Your time is running out!”

“Better you start praying,” Mantis adds, as Slug puts the handcuffs back on.

Back in his cell Linehan desperately sets about planning instead. He decides he must distract Slug, then attack Mantis and grab his weapon, and use it on both of them if necessary. Only if there is no alternative. However much he loathes them now, he does not want to take their lives merely to satisfy his thirst for revenge. Unless he has to. He imagines them saying something similar over his dead body.

The first problem is how to distract them. If only Hypatia were here; she would grab their attention automatically. He spends hours devising ever more impractical schemes.

Linehan is deep in thought when the door opens. Three people stand in the doorway, all of them armed with semi-automatic weapons which point into Linehan's face. At least they are masked.

The one whose shape he recognizes as that of Mantis speaks first.

“Said those prayers?”

“No. I don't think you want to kill me.” *Famous last words.*

“Famous last words,” says the one Linehan has not seen before, whom he immediately dubs Parrot.

“No-one wants you back,” says Slug.

“I don't believe it!”

“Three governments, three categorical refusals even to negotiate.”

If he rushes them, at least he'll go down in a hail of bullets, not this slow torture. Linehan hesitates a second, then opts for slow torture.

“Even your Daddy won’t speak to us.”

“What?”

“We’ve been trying to speak to Splatta all day. Nobody will even put us through to him. Maybe nobody loves Daddy’s pet.”

Linehan is incredulous. Has he really fooled people with a simple holographic projection? He’d assumed that people just went along with the illusion because it was show business. Well, the proverbial cat has more lives than he has. This is the moment to hoist it out of the bag.

“Splatta doesn’t take your calls because he can’t. He’s been dead for the last two years. What I brought to Hong Kong was a hologram.”

There is a moment of silence before all three of his captors begin to laugh. Parrot moves his hand to his face as though to pull off his mask.

“Wait! I’m serious! You need to speak to someone called Robin Norris, in Geneva. He’s the money man. He knows me.” *All too well.*

Linehan recites a number. “That’s his personal mobile number. He’ll answer that.”

Parrot’s hand moves from his face to his trouser pocket. He pulls out a ThaiPad, has Linehan repeat the number, keys it into his phone’s memory and motions to the others to leave.

So he’s the leader.

“This is your last chance, Daddy’s boy.” Linehan hears the sneer in the voice.

Comes from a broken home, I guess.

Parrot backs out of the room, shuts the door and locks it.

OK, it’ll have to be when I’m in there. Next time we do a photo shoot: that’s already a distraction in itself.

But now there are three of them. At least. And they’ve had a weapons upgrade.

Linehan knows that their patience and his time are depleted resources. He despairs of finding a workable plan. Only Norris can save him now.

Linehan thinks of his dealings with Robin Norris: all the slights, the insults, the jostling for promotion and power – Norris won those – but also the good times, fishing trips, nights on the town together, before Linehan started squandering his money on more mundane things than wine, women and antiques. Linehan’s mind wanders from Norris to Hypatia, and does not return.

His thirst and hunger mount. No food or drink arrives, but Linehan thinks he hears more people come into the house. His mind swirls with escape plans

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