

INTRODUCTION:

WHY I WRITE

My name is Michael M. Hastings, and I'm in my twenties. I'm sitting in a studio apartment on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. Second floor, overlooking Orchard and Rivington. There's snow dropping by the streetlights. It's three a.m., and I just got off work.

My magazine has a policy, a little item in the fifty-seven-page Human Resources manual called the "outside activities clause." It prevents employees from publishing journalism without the magazine's permission. That could apply to writing books like this one. So I want to say right now: This is fiction, it's all made up.

This book is a story about the media elite. Maybe you're interested in that world. I have the cc's and the bcc's and the reply-alls. Three years' worth, from 2002 to 2005, time- and place-specific, a very recognizable New York, at least for now.

I do have themes, too. Love, in a way, though it's not my love, and I can't say I understand it too well. Not murder, at least not in the whodunit sense. No ghosts or supernatural horrors or serial killers. Sex, yes, I have a bunch of sex scenes. There's war in the backdrop, looming and distant and not real for most of these characters, myself included.

Maybe I'm talking genres, and maybe the genre is *corporate betrayal*. Including the big decision that the entire media world is so interested in: Who and what is left standing?

It'll take me about 300 pages, approximately 85,000 words, to get to that. By turning the page, you're 1 percent closer to the truth.

PART I

The Intern

1.
Morning, Tuesday, August 20, 2002

What's our take?"

That's Nishant Patel talking. He's the editor of the international edition of our magazine, available in eighty countries.

"It's a real genocide. We got A.E. Peoria there, got some great reporting. Guys on horseback burning a village, cleansing the place, poisoning wells. An interview with the IFLNP rebel leader."

"And?"

"Uh, we'll be talking about the genocide, that the UN called it that, great detail, how the catastrophic—"

"That's not new."

"The genocide?" "Yes."

"It's new, it only started last week—" "We've read it before."

Nishant Patel is hearing story pitches for next week's magazine. Tuesday mornings, ten a.m., in the sixteenth-floor conference room. He sits at the head of the table, thirteen swivel chairs in length. The section editors sit around him.

"It's an on-scener," continues Jerry, the World Affairs Editor. "Horseback riding, the rebel leader's got a motorcycle—"

"What are we saying? To have spent thousands of dollars so Peoria can land at an airport in Khartoum, tell us how hot and sunny it is, and bump his head in a Land Rover so we can read what we've already read in the *Times*?"

"Nishant, the *Times* only did one story on it—"

My job as an intern—or as a just sort of promoted intern—is to sit in the meetings and write down the story list, divided into the proper sections, with a note on how long the story might actually be. Length is measured in columns. There are approximately three columns to a page, about 750 words total, depending on photos. It's a rough list that changes throughout the week. On Tuesdays at ten a.m., I have to make a best guess at what stories are most likely to survive.

Jerry's story on the genocide is already on deathwatch.

The other editors are looking down, shuffling reading material, pretending to take notes. It's not proper etiquette to gawk at a drowning man. And if another section editor does speak up, it won't be to rescue Jerry. It will be to throw a life preserver with the intent of cracking the drowning man's skull so he sinks even quicker.

Like so:

"You know, Nishant," Sam, the Business Editor, says, "you're right. That story is stale. I saw a report this week that showed the fastest growth industry in East Africa is mobile phone sales. Up like eight hundred and thirty-three percent from two years ago. If that's going on across the continent, that's a story with regional implications."

Sam emphasizes the word "regional."

Nishant Patel nods.

“An outsourcing angle too,” says Sam. “Americans outsourcing to the Indians, the Indians outsourcing to the Chinese, and the Chinese outsourcing to the Africans.”

“Who are the Africans outsourcing to?” Nishant asks himself. “A great question. Yes, get Peoria to talk to someone who sells mobile phones there.”

I write down the potential story: Mobile Phones/Outsourcing/ E. African Genocide (Peoria, 3 Columns).

Next up is Foster, the Europe Editor.

“The Islamic Wave Recedes. We have numbers showing that Islamic immigration is dropping. A huge drop, off a fucking cliff. Fears of Islamophobia? Unfounded. Townsend is writing from Paris.”

“My sense is that the Islamic wave is cresting,” says Nishant.

“Exactly. The Islamic Wave Is Growing. The numbers don’t tell the whole story. Other factors that aren’t being looked at show a real significant increase. Townsend can get that in by Wednesday.”

“That sounds fine, yes,” says Nishant.

“Cover: The Global Housing Boom,” says Sam for Business. “The most expensive house in the world was just sold for two hundred fifty-three million dollars. It’s happening everywhere.”

“Good, good,” says Nishant.

“Didn’t we just do that story,” says Jerry from World Affairs, but Nishant has moved on.

“We’re reviewing three women novelists,” says Anna from Arts & Entertainment and Luxury Life. “All are writing about ethnic marriages—I mean, they are, uh, beautifully written, and they take place in these settings that are just, really, they’re about the experience of two cultures and how—”

“Fine, fine, but let’s cut down on the novels.”

“We have our story on Space Tourism,” says Gary from Sci/Tech. “Our crack intern Hastings is working on it.”

“Who’s Hastings?” says Nishant.

Let me say that my heart—well, I like the attention. After working over the summer as an unpaid intern, I’d been hired as a temp just last week. I’d never had my name mentioned in a meeting before. Nishant Patel is about to see me for the first time. His gaze trails nine swivel chairs to his right. The eyes of Nishant Patel are deep brown, a set of chocolate emeralds that a profile writer for the *New York Herald* said were like an Indian Cary Grant, his lashes fluttering in sync with his melodious voice, British with a hint of the refined castes of New Delhi—the voice of an internationally flavored school tie.

“Thanks, everyone,” Nishant says, and stands up.

Everyone thanked stands up too, and walks along the sides of the conference room, passing by the great big windows that look across 59th Street to a massive construction site of dual glass towers in Columbus Circle. Our competitor, the other weekly newsmagazine we call Brand X (and they call us Brand X), is getting ready to move into the towers when construction is complete. Brand X, as usual, is

following our lead. We were here first. (You can also see an apartment building on Central Park West where everyone says Al Pacino lives.)

I step out into the hallway, and as I'm walking away, I overhear a brief exchange. I look back to see who's talking.

"Professor Patel," says a voice in the hallway with a southern drawl.

"Mr. Berman," Nishant Patel says.

It is the first time I see them side by side, Nishant Patel and Sanders Berman, sizing each other up.

2.

Tuesday, August 20, 2002

Magazine journalist A.E. Peoria is kneeling on top of a 1994 Toyota Land Cruiser in eastern Chad. It's night, and he's up on a small hill to get reception. The engine is running so that the electronics he has plugged into the jeep stay charged. A.E. Peoria is swearing. He believes that his Uniriya mobile satellite phone must be pointed 33 degrees southeast, and that should make it work.

The Toyota Land Cruiser is making a beeping sound because the keys are in the ignition and the door is slightly ajar. It's actually more like a dinging sound than a beep, and Peoria would close the door but he needs the interior ceiling light from the car to see what he is doing. His seven-inch black Maglite, which he usually would be gripping in his teeth, has run out of batteries. Or so he thinks.

Before climbing onto the roof of the Land Cruiser, he had tried to turn on the flashlight. When the light didn't come on, he checked the batteries to make sure the + and - were correctly in place. Unscrewing the top, he saw that the two double-A batteries inside weren't the Energizers he'd purchased at the Dubai Duty Free Travelers' Shop and Market at the Dubai International Airport. These were batteries with Chinese characters on them, the word MAJORPOWERY in pink English.

Someone had switched his Energizers for MAJORPOWERYS.

Why hadn't the person just taken the flashlight—that would have made more sense. Why did the thief bother replacing the Energizers with dead knockoffs? The thief either was trying to be clever and/or knew him, swapping dead batteries so he wouldn't notice the difference in the flashlight's weight. The prime suspect, he reasoned, was his translator, David D. Obutu from N'Djamena.

"It's dark, man, don't go up there. It's stupid shit," David D. Obutu had told him twenty minutes before Peoria had decided to drive the Land Cruiser to the top of the small hill.

"I have to get reception to check if there's anything from New York."

"Stupid shit, man. You have a light up there they can see for fucking kilometers, man. They'll start shooting again."

"They haven't shot in three days. I should be okay. I'll do it quick."

"It's some stupid shit, man."

"This *is* stupid shit. I'm here to do stupid shit. I'm not asking you, I'm just telling you."

"The villagers aren't going to be very happy with you."

"Fucking villagers have more to worry about than me checking my email for twenty minutes."

That was how he'd left things with David D. Obutu, translator turned battery thief.

Now kneeling atop the Land Cruiser, Peoria understands why David D. Obutu didn't want him to go up to the hill. Obutu knew he'd need his Maglite. When the Maglite didn't work, he might check the batteries. David D. Obutu's motives, A.E. Peoria thinks, were not pure. His motives were not to protect Peoria's

well-being, or the well-being of the village (really a refugee camp), but to prevent the detection of the theft.

Still, magazine journalist A.E. Peoria knows that Obutu did have a point, even if it was secondary to hiding the double-A rip-off—kneeling atop a Land Cruiser at the crest of a hill next to the refugee camp that had been victimized, in the strongest sense of the word, by various tribal/warlord/bandit factions in the previous weeks, was stupid shit. Especially with the door to the Land Cruiser left slightly ajar.

He had thought he'd need the light for just a few moments—a minute at most—while he plugged the Ethernet cable connection into the Uniriya, then booted up his laptop, then aimed the Uniriya in the appropriate direction to pick up the satellite signal.

But the fucking thing isn't working, and he needs the light on as he keeps trying different angles and different settings.

It is doubly bad, MAJORPOWERY bad, because now the screen on his laptop adds to the illumination.

Ten minutes I have been fucking around with this thing, A.E. Peoria thinks.

He feels like he is being watched. What is that kind of feeling anyway? How does that work?

Sitting cross-legged, Native American style, on the roof of the Toyota Land Cruiser, he can see the tent village/refugee camp to the west and to the east he can't see anything clearly but knows there is a border. He sees that about one hundred of the refugees have crowded together near the bottom of the hill. It's so dark he knows people are there only because they are a mob of blackness, and he thinks this might be taken as a reference to skin color, but it's actually a reference to the fact that the gathered crowd has just taken on a shadowy shape. They are watching him; he is entertainment.

He uncrosses his legs and kicks the driver-side door shut. The interior car light stays on a few more moments, then turns off.

The dinging, too, ceases.

He decides to use his laptop screen for light, which is annoying because the dial that adjusts the angle of the Uniriya satellite modem is very small. The digital glow, even after he opens the laptop like a book, flattening it out so that he can get the screen close to the dial, isn't very helpful.

The laptop and the satellite modem are tethered together by a blue Ethernet cable, making the movement even more awkward. Other wires come down off the car through the rolled-down window on the driver's side to stay charged in a contraption hooked into the Land Cruiser's cigarette lighter. The cigarette lighter is rarely used for lighting cigarettes anymore, A.E. Peoria thinks.

What is that noise?

Oh, it's just a new dinging. It's his laptop making the new dinging noise, no longer the car door, which means the software for the Uniriya is trying to "acquire" the satellite, *ding, ding, ding*.

He presses the mute button on his laptop so it stops making the dinging noise. He's sweating and worried and very much discomfited. That fucking David

D. Obutu. The country to the east, where the refugees came from and where the attackers came from, looks very flat and peaceful and serene and unthreatening—though admittedly he can't really see much of it in the dark. And A.E. Peoria knows that scenery in this region is not a good way to judge the chance of catastrophic violence occurring at any moment.

Satellite found. 123 bps.

Is that a whistling?

No.

He gets on his email. The web browser allows him to pull up his account, and there's the email he's been waiting for, the story list from some kid named Michael M. Hastings. Must be an intern.

He sees the list:

Cover: Global Housing Boom

Nishant Patel on TK

Rise of Islam In Europe?/townsend

Mobile Phones/Outsourcing/E. Africa Genocide/peoria

The Swedish Model

TK Columnist on Financial Scandal

Three Novels on Exile

Space Tourism

Mobile phones? Out fucking what? What moron wrote up this story list?

He refreshes his screen, and there's a new email from Jerry, the World Affairs Editor.

Hey A.E., the story is on for this week—just going to make it more of a business story pegged to a new report about the increase in mobile phone sales across Africa. Would be good if you interview a mobile phone vendor or talk to some Africans about their use of mobile phones. What colors, styles? What kind of brand? How many phones do most families have? How much do the phones cost in USD? What are the Chinese really up to? We'll have an intern here call the authors of the study, so no need to worry about that. We'll wrap your on-scene reporting lower down in the story. Can file thursday ayem? many thanks, j

A.E. Peoria is about to hit Reply, about to cc the entire top editorial staff. He gets only to the words "Jerry that sounds like" and doesn't get to "absolute bullshit" when he notices that the crowd that had gathered to watch him from the bottom of the small hill has dispersed. To move silently away, in a herdlike fashion, as if sensing an earthquake or a thunderstorm or some kind of major weather or geological event. He listens closely. There is actually a deep and frightening whistle. He understands that perhaps a mortar shell or a rocket is on the way. Right when he thinks that, he hears a very loud boom and grabs his laptop and satellite modem, and while flipping the screen down, he hits Send by accident and falls off the roof of the Toyota Land Cruiser. He protects his laptop, falling on his back, but the Uniriya satellite mobile modem, which looks like a gray plastic box, falls on the ground next to him. Peoria scrambles to his feet and opens the door to get back in the car and the overhead light goes on, and he thinks, Oh fuck,

fuck me, this is stupid shit.

He slams the door and puts the Toyota Land Cruiser in reverse and starts driving down the hill, thinking he should try to get back to the refugee camp. The electronics he had been charging in the cigarette lighter are tangled on his lap, and the interior of the car is a fucking mess. He feels liquids, like spilled water bottles or something. *Ka thunk, ka thunk, ka thunk*. Without a seat belt, each twenty-foot stretch on the dirt path down to the village sends him up high in his seat. He keeps bumping his head. Finally he gets to the bottom of the small hill and stops outside the tent that he and David D. Obutu are sharing. David D. Obutu is standing outside the tent and smiling and shaking his head.

“You lucky the Ibo tribe can’t shoot RPGs for nothing,” David D. Obutu says.

“That was an RPG? I thought it was a mortar.”

A.E. Peoria and David D. Obutu smoke a cigarette.

“We have to get back to N’Djamena tomorrow. We need to go to the market and talk to someone who sells mobile phones.”

“No problem. Everyone in Chad has mobile phones now. Two years ago, nothing! Now we are all talking on the mobile phones. Makes a good story—I worked with Granger from *USA Today* last week, and we did a big report on how Africans love mobile phones. Big business. Fucking Chinese.”

“That’s what I hear. Did you take my fucking batteries?”