

## GERARD WOODWARD

### *The Fall of Mr and Mrs Nicholson*

On the twenty-sixth of January, at two o'clock in the afternoon, two men arrived at my house, with orders to take me to Mr and Mrs Nicholson. I had been working late the night before and had only just risen. I was still in my dressing gown and holding a tub of fish food in my hand when I opened the door. The men didn't show any sign of disapproval or even surprise. It seemed to be what they expected.

They were casually dressed. I guessed they were in their late forties. They had unshaven, baggy faces, and were both a little overweight. They were wearing sweatshirts, jeans, mushroom-grey bomber jackets, filthy trainers. I told them they would have to wait until I got dressed, and they came in, without my invitation, as if to make sure I did get dressed.

'Do I have time for a shower?' I asked. The men shook their heads. I went to my bedroom and pulled fresh clothes over my sweaty skin. I felt very uncomfortable. When I returned to my living room I found the men examining my tropical fish tank. One of them was bending down to peer at the fish through the glass, the other was playfully dipping his finger into the water and swirling it around.

'Carmen might bite,' I said, half-jokingly. Carmen could bite, but with her soft little teeth she couldn't do much damage. The man withdrew his finger more sharply than he had intended, then tried to cover the embarrassment by using the same wet finger to beckon me towards the door. 'Do I need to take anything with me?' I asked. The men shook their heads. 'They have everything you need,' the shorter one said.

I had only met Mr and Mrs Nicholson once, and that was about ten years previously. They had been presenting the prizes at an awards gala and I had been awarded the Nicholson Star for Short Stories. As was

usual at these occasions, it was Mrs Nicholson who did the presenting, while Mr Nicholson made the speeches and read out the nominations. It was widely believed that Mr Nicholson read very little fiction, while Mrs Nicholson was a keen reader of detective stories and symbolist poetry. At that particular ceremony she had clasped my hand and held my gaze with her blue eyes and smiled warmly as she handed me my certificate, speaking to me so quietly I could hardly hear her above the applause that filled the hall. 'Very well done,' she said, and repeated the phrase two or three times, until she had made sure I had heard it. She held on to my hand with such a firm grip I had to pull myself away from her. At one point her face was so close I could smell her breath. It smelt sweet and sugary, as though she had been eating a cake with lots of icing.

I didn't ask why Mr and Mrs Nicholson had sent for me. I knew that it would be pointless troubling the men who collected me with questions like that. They wouldn't even know, anyway. So I obediently followed them down the path to the street where their car was waiting, and where another man was at the wheel.

For most of the journey across the city there was little sign of unrest. Passing through the familiar districts we could see mothers and children playing in parks, people shopping, visiting the library, or using the swimming pool. At one of the police stations we passed there was a protest taking place, but the crowd was very small in number. None of us passed any comment on the spectacle, even though the sight was an unusual one.

Mr and Mrs Nicholson lived in a building known as the People's Palace, which had once been the city's main hospital, and overlooked the central square. A much larger hospital had been built in the Kleverdam District to replace it, and so no one minded about the change of use to which the old hospital had been put. In fact the people were rather proud of the new palace, and the term People's Palace was the informal name adopted by the general public. Its official designation was simply Kleverdam Square.

Today the square itself was inaccessible due to the large crowds that had gathered there. I was quite taken by surprise by the number of people assembled, kept in place by a thick cordon of police who maintained a thoroughway for traffic to move between the square and the parliament

building. Nevertheless, it was not possible, for safety reasons, to use the palace's main entrance, and instead we entered by one of the many back gates, which had been heavily fortified.

There had been very little information about the protest. There was nothing about it on the television or in the newspapers. And as I had been out of the house very rarely over the previous few weeks, I had heard very little by way of gossip. So much so that at first I couldn't be sure that the crowd gathered in the square was there for reasons of celebration or protest. I wondered if I had forgotten that it was Mr or Mrs Nicholson's birthday, or if there was some other important anniversary to be celebrated. But a closer look at the crowds, as much as I could see them from the darkened windows of our vehicle, showed unhappy faces, and banners bearing slogans of an anti-government flavour.

I had never been inside the People's Palace before, and I was struck by the lavishness of the interior decoration, and how this contrasted with the squared bleakness of the outside. There were chandeliers of cascading crystal, towering golden statues of working men and women, mosaics of common folk as Titans and Olympians. There were swirling carpets, exquisite tapestries filling walls as big as tennis courts. The lifts were like jewelled caskets, the floors were deep with soft woollen carpets. What had been wards were now long rooms full of opulence, but entirely empty of any sign of people or activity. One was described as the state reception room, and contained a single enormous table, but no chairs. Another was to house the Nicholsons' art collection, but so far the walls were empty. I was shocked at the general emptiness of the place, the wide unfurnished spaces, the tall empty vestibules over which Tiffany domes hung, casting their multi-coloured shadows on nothing. I had expected the bustle of ministers and civil servants conducting the business of state. I had expected a sense of urgency and energy. Instead it was as though the power had drained from the great machine of state, to leave the glamorous shell empty and devoid of function.

I was shown into a room before whose doors stood four armed guards. It was of a more plain design than the rest of the palace, being not much bigger than a respectable suburban living room, with a large desk, two sofas, a television, bookcases and conventionally patterned wallpaper.

There were several people in the room, including a military figure in

full dress uniform, with a breastful of medals. There were some men in typical politician's suits, and a small group of media people, one with a small camera, another with a microphone. A large camera on a fixed stand was pointing towards the empty desk, behind which hung the national flag and a rather spindly araucaria. In the centre of all this was Mr Nicholson, wearing his overcoat, scarf and woolly hat, as though he had been out for a long walk in the cold. It was because, I later learned, that he had just come in from the balcony, where he had been speaking for an hour and a half to the crowd in the square. That crowd could be heard through the tall curtained windows that gave on to the balcony, but which had been firmly closed since Mr Nicholson came in. He was sitting on a stiff-backed chair, one elbow resting on the back of the sofa against which he was positioned, and talking with one of the men in suits. The man in the suit was by far the more animated of the two, not to say agitated; he talked in a fast, pleading voice, bending down so that he could talk directly into Mr Nicholson's face. One got the impression he would have liked to have taken hold of Mr Nicholson by the shoulders and shaken him. Mr Nicholson, on the other hand, talked with a quiet but firm voice, as though explaining the uselessness of the other's point.

The two men who'd accompanied me drifted off into different parts of the room without giving me any indication of what I was supposed to do. People carried on with their business without taking any notice of me. One of the men sauntered over to the tall curtains and tentatively parted them, to peep out into the square. Even this tiny movement was spotted by the crowds, and a cry went up, then a chant whose words were impossible to make out. The other man went up to a bookcase and casually leafed through a leather-tooled volume. There was no sign of Mrs Nicholson. I decided to sit on one of the sofas, clearing a space for myself among the heap of newspapers that were spread out on it.

Eventually the conversation between Mr Nicholson and the man in the suit came to an end, and at that point the man at the bookcase indicated my presence to the old man with a jerk of the head. Mr Nicholson turned to me and gave me a long stare, but his expression was of a sort of tired indifference, as though I was just another thing he had to deal with. He gestured with a turn of the wrist that I should come over to him. He gave the impression of a man who was too tired to even stand

up. So I went over to him and sat on another stiff-backed chair that one of the men put in position.

'You are the writer?' he said.

'Yes.'

'Good. I need you to write me something.'

'OK.'

'You are one of my wife's favourite writers. She advised me to call you in. She will be here in a minute.'

'What do you want me to write?'

Mr Nicholson looked puzzled. 'A speech.'

'I see.'

'What did you think you were going to write? A detective story? No, I need a speech. A good one. The best one I have ever made. I will be speaking from that balcony in one hour. The crowd outside are hostile. Ridiculous. I would call them barbarians but they are gaining influence. I have to do something to appease them. Just half an hour ago I made a speech promising a wage rise of twenty per cent. Across the board! They laughed at me. They jeered and booed. Barbarians. These are people who laugh at a wage rise. You see, then, what I need is a speech that will get to their hearts more than money can. You understand? And I need another speech for the television broadcast I will make one hour later.'

'Mr Nicholson, I have never written a political speech before.'

'So? My previous speechwriters have written hundreds, and they were still no good. You write stories to move people. That is what I need. What's the difference?'

I couldn't answer at first.

'It's a difference of genre, I suppose.'

'That sounds like prevarication. If you are a writer, you can write anything. All that matters is that you are good with words. Don't worry, I will give you a few facts I want you to include. My wife will be here in a minute. She will be better at explaining. She is a big admirer of your tales.'

I wondered if I had the option of refusing the commission. Mr Nicholson seemed to read my mind, because he said, 'You needn't think you have any choice in this matter. Now that you are here you are trapped, along with the rest of us. The only way out of here is by cutting a path through

that crowd out there, and I would much rather do that with words than bullets. To put it quite simply, the future of our great country rests on the words you can produce in the next sixty minutes.'

'Fifty-five,' said the military man, who had shuffled over and was listening to our conversation. 'And the crowd is still growing. There are coaches arriving from every corner of the country. They are bringing people in on the backs of vegetable lorries.'

'Then the city must be sealed off. How many times have I told you?'

'We have road blocks on all the main roads. But what can they do if a lorry doesn't stop?'

'They can shoot the driver.'

'I confess some of the troops are reluctant to kill their own people in cold blood.'

'Then let them kill in hot blood. It is your job to produce fighting men.'

Just then Mrs Nicholson entered the room, and the atmosphere changed abruptly. She issued a long string of oaths, the colour and tone of which I had never heard coming from the lips of a woman before, nor the volume and pitch, which was attenuated and loud. She immediately began issuing commands and commentary, at such speed I was unable to follow what was happening. She beat her fists upon the decorated breast of the military man, and sent him from the room with orders to talk some sense into the army he was, supposedly, in charge of. Having voiced her anger and frustration, she then stalked about the room muttering and drawing her stole, a fine check-patterned piece of fabric, carefully about her. I felt as though I had intruded upon a private marital dispute, because she continually hurled comments and criticisms at Mr Nicholson, as though she was complaining about him not pulling his weight in the housework. Had he had a shed to retire to, I feel he would have done so at that moment, but husband and wife were trapped in the room, along with the rest of us.

It was some time before Mrs Nicholson noticed me. By then I had moved away from the part of the room occupied by her husband, and was standing by the desk near the window. Her demeanour seemed to change immediately, a warm smile bloomed on her face and she held out both arms as she came towards me. She took me by the shoulder and delivered her face to my lips to be lightly kissed, once on each cheek, and then once more on the left cheek. Three kisses was a sign of great affection and affinity.

'I am so glad you were able to come,' she said, as I blinked away the strong smell of eau de Cologne, 'we are in such desperate need of a good wordsmith. My husband has sacked all his speechwriters, and his advisers as well. Do you mind me using the term "wordsmith"?' I had hardly time to shake my head before she went on, 'I think it is a very dignified and noble term, for someone who fashions artefacts out of words, just as a blacksmith does with iron. You may take that analogy to heart. We need words as strong as iron to come from your pen. We want words that will rain down on the ears of the great public like bullets, like hammers.'

I began to wonder if either Mr or Mrs Nicholson were familiar with my work at all. What she demanded seemed the very opposite of my usual writing practice. I had never thought of words as hammers or bullets. I thought back to my quiet little stories, with their gentle metaphors and subtle (so I liked to believe) observations, and tried to imagine their words raining down from the sky like missiles. It was impossible. Mrs Nicholson seemed to detect my doubts. 'Is something the matter?'

'I was just wondering why you chose me, among the very many excellent writers who live in this city.'

This produced a look of charming imprecision on Mrs Nicholson's face, of the type that one never sees on leaders of any nations. I felt a sudden thrill of connectedness with the woman, an entwining intimacy so unexpected that I could hardly breathe for a few seconds. It was as though a painting in an art gallery had reached out and touched me.

'But your writing is of a very different order from that of anyone else. You have a very special power – to move people, to stir their passions, to persuade them of the truth of something. In your stories the worlds you have invented come to life with such persuasiveness, you can only feel, as a reader, that you have been there.'

I was distracted, momentarily, by what sounded like a burst of rifle fire outside, but which was quickly identified and dismissed as firecrackers.

'I think there are many writers who are like that. It is a basic requisite of the job.'

'No. You are very wrong. Some writers are full of wonderful ideas, but lack the skills to bring them to life in a believable way. But you – you can bring people and places to life as much as if they really existed. And that is what is lacking in the kinds of speeches that my poor husband had to deliver

to the general public earlier today and yesterday. Long strings of facts and figures, but with nothing to persuade the audience of their truth. There was not even the slightest metaphorical tinge to them. They didn't even speak of the nation as their mother. Even the most basic political thinker should understand that the nation is their mother. Then they will realize – those people outside – that in directing their impatience towards the leadership of their country they are slapping their own mother in the face.'

I thought back to the stories I had written, and in particular the one for which I had been awarded the Nicholson Star. If Mrs Nicholson had read any of my stories, that would most likely be the one. 'The Button'. It was about a city that was terrorized by a giant button. Whenever there was some calamity in the city – whenever there was a fire or a street accident or a power failure or a riot or disturbance of any kind, a giant button could be seen running away from the scene, glimpsed down a side street, or on a bridge, or scampering along a concrete walkway, or disappearing into a pedestrian underpass. The button was a typical button, an archetypical button, you might say – round, brown, four-holed, the sort you see on a sturdy overcoat. The button had a pair of legs – so people reported – but descriptions of the legs differed from eyewitness to eyewitness – some said the legs were in trousers, some that they were in tights, some that they were bare. The city was driven mad over speculation as to who the button might be. There were suggestions that he was a rogue advertising mascot for a button or clothing manufacturer, who'd stolen his costume and gone out of control. But no such manufacturer could be found to account for the rogue button. Meanwhile there was speculation about what the button could mean, that it was the insignia of a revolutionary group, or an underground movement of some sort. In the newspapers there were long editorials on the symbolism of buttons – how they represented a coming together, the joining, the fastening of two halves. How did that work politically? Could it be a symbol of fascism, or communism, or anarchism?

'The Button'. It ends badly, that story, for the city. Struck by a plague of paranoia, both for what the button portends and for speculation as to its identity, the populace eventually consume themselves in a tide of slaughter and burning, until there is nothing left but ashes and blood. And a button, watching from the mountaintop overlooking the city.



As a story it was very unlike anything I had ever written before, or have since.

'There you are,' said Mrs Nicholson, pointing to the table, 'we have everything you need. You will write a speech for my husband at this table. Or if you prefer, you can sit on one of the couches. Or on the floor. I don't know how writers work. Would you like to use the colonel's laptop? I don't think he'll be needing it. Or do you like to work on paper?'

It seemed that I had forgotten how to write, or what I needed in order to think of stories. Did I work on paper normally, at home? Or did I use a computer? Suddenly I thought of the fish. How long would I be here? Would I be back in time to give them their food? How long can a fish live without food? I once left them for a whole day without any food, and I have to say, they didn't look well.

I decided that I worked with pen and paper. A pad of paper was provided, but it was wide ruled, which I hate. And no margin. The pen was a good old-fashioned fountain pen which Mrs Nicholson fished out of Mr Nicholson's inner breast pocket, without Mr Nicholson seeming to notice.

'Astonishing isn't it, really? A pad of paper and a pen, and with that you can change the course of history. I suppose that is why you like being a writer really, isn't it? The power?'

I laughed inwardly again. Mrs Nicholson accusing me of having a hunger for power? This was a woman who had desired nothing else all of her adult life, and for a good part of that life she had wielded near-total power. No one knows how much influence she exerted over Mr Nicholson, although from what I could see in the room at this moment I felt the rumours to be confirmed, that she was the real power behind the throne, and that Mr Nicholson was nothing more than a cardboard president. She continued to work the room like a hostess at a cocktail party, though instead of idle chitchat she was dictating the orders of state and planning the future of our country, which would be determined in the next few hours. She moved from minister to minister discussing and planning, commanding and berating. I could see that everyone in the room was in awe of her, was even frightened of her. Of Mr Nicholson, there was nothing to note. He continued to sit in his chair with a glum look on his face. He rested his elbow on the chair back, just as if he was in the back room

of a coffee shop discussing the racing form, having just lost a few pounds on a frisky nag. But he was passive. He had given up. He was letting everyone else do the work and the worrying, and he was going to do nothing but wait until someone had come up with a plan.

The blank paper stretched before me like a cement path. Rarely had a pen felt so heavy in my hand, or as blunt. Unused to my grip, its nib scratched and scored the paper, spluttered, juddered, nearly split. Blobs of ink fell and formed black abscesses on what few words I'd managed to write. I thought back to my story about the button and realized that I had written it without once attempting to understand or answer the questions it put into so many of my readers' minds. Who was the button? That simplest of questions. My readers thought there must have been clues as to who it was, and they searched everywhere for them. They wondered if the button was someone famous in the real world – some dared even suggest he was Mr Nicholson himself, or (given details about the slenderness of the button's legs) that he was Mrs Nicholson. Others that he was a figure from history, that he was Trotsky, or Christ, or Socrates, or Dante. Many candidates for the identity of the button were suggested, though I had never even given the matter any thought. I had not considered the question, because the identity of the button was as much a mystery to me as it was to the citizens of the little city in which he appears. And therein lay my problem with Mr Nicholson's speech. How was I, a writer of fiction, expected to bring forth facts into the world in such a way they could be believed, when my natural inclination is to pose questions?

I glanced over from my desk towards Mr and Mrs Nicholson, at the other end of the room. To my surprise they were drinking tea from delicate white china cups while perusing some documents. Mrs Nicholson noticed me and came over with a sheet of paper.

'How are you getting on?' Her face went stony when she saw the page I'd been working on, empty but for a few words and ink blots. 'Is this all you've done? Where's the rest of it? Do you realize if we don't have a speech in the next thirty minutes we will have no alternative but to order the army into the square? Here, perhaps this will help you.' She handed me a sheet on which there were lists of numbers, figures that showed how inflation had been brought down in a steady curve for the length of the Nicholsons' presidency; they showed also the figures for crime, which

were as low. All the other measures – unemployment, obesity, divorce rates, all these had fallen steadily. The only things to have risen were longevity and incomes. And the projected figures were even healthier. Prosperity was rising steadily. Prices were coming down. Homes were being built all over the country. Very impressive figures. But of course they were rubbish. Had I not seen it for myself, I would never have believed it. The figures were simply plucked out of the air by Mr and Mrs Nicholson. I had seen them in the act, making up the numbers, jotting down whatever looked like a reasonable and believable number for whatever economic sector they were considering. It contradicted the evidence of one's eyes in the most striking way. I had seen the dole queues and the bread queues. I had seen the homeless people on the streets and I had seen how heartlessly they were dealt with by the authorities (high-pressure water hoses). I had seen the people driven out of their homes, which were then cleared away for some grandiose structure or other – the great stadia in which no sports are played, the empty-walled palaces of culture curated only by rats and small bears, libraries of empty shelves. And now I was being asked to write as though I had seen none of these things. I was not one to be disloyal to the Nicholsons, but I began to quaver at the thought of incorporating these spurious 'facts' into my speech.

'Can these figures be backed up?' I asked Mrs Nicholson.

'Of course they can. Why do you ask such a ridiculous question?'

'I just want to make sure.'

'But you are a writer of fiction. Why should you care?'

'I didn't think you wanted me to write a work of fiction. You wanted me to write a speech that had the power of fiction.'

'If you don't write something in the next twenty minutes you will lose the power to live, I can tell you that. Now just incorporate these facts without making the speech boring, and I think you will now need to work very fast, we want an hour's worth of words from you. Would you like an incentive?'

She glared at me in such away that I felt my heart withdraw into a shell. When she left me I began writing, but I wrote as if I was writing the first draft of a piece of fiction – spontaneously and with little thought about what I was writing or where it was going. I free-ranged across what areas of my imagination had not been locked down with fright. At

last the pages began to fill. The words came so quickly I was tripping over my own handwriting. My imagination was freed up by the fact that I began to sense that the speech I was writing would never be delivered. The crowd outside was now reaching a new pitch of volatility. The barricades between the square and the palace were beginning to crumble. The protesters spilled out beyond the square to fill the streets as far as could be seen. The whole city, it seemed, was becoming a site of protest. Mr Nicholson did nothing but sit with his head in his hands. The feeling was that it would be too dangerous for him to make a personal appearance on the balcony. Mrs Nicholson, who had been absent from the room for a few minutes, appeared with blood sprinkled across her face.

'On learning that the army is no longer taking orders from him, I have just personally executed the commander-in-chief of our armed forces.'

At this, Mr Nicholson lifted his head from his hands, but only in order that he could look at the ceiling in despair. Mrs Nicholson took a tissue out of her handbag and, using the glass over an eighteenth-century portrait that hung on one of the walls, dabbed at the blood on her face, having dampened the tissue with spit. From then on what little control I had over my life receded beyond reach. I was at the mercy of Mr and Mrs Nicholson and the small world that was left to them. Did they mean to utilize some sort of evacuation plan, and if so, would I be part of it? Or would I be left in the palace when the mob finally broke through – and what must I do then, hide in a cupboard, or pretend to be an innocent orderly, a cleaner or janitor or odd-job man? I was at the mercy of this late-middle-aged, childless, married couple. And it was against all reason that I felt a certain affection for them, even as Mrs Nicholson wiped the blood from her cheek. I realized I was watching a rare moment in history, the evaporation of the aura of power from a couple who had possessed it for most of their lives. The panic and despair and depression that the couple were exhibiting only served to render them more human. I heard Mr Nicholson suddenly blurt out – 'Forty per cent. If we cut defence, foreign aid, bureaucracy, sack the civil service except for the vital functions, we could make wage rises across the board of forty per cent. Tell your writer friend to tell them that.'

'You're dreaming,' Mrs Nicholson said. 'They don't care about their

wages any more. They have been fed so many lies by our enemies they no longer believe anything we say to them. You, you –' she pointed to the two men who had brought me – 'get everything ready, we need to go now.' The men looked troubled, doubtful, unsure of procedure. 'Well? Are you just going to stand there?'

The people in the room began getting ready. The film crew had begun filming the events as they were happening. Having removed the camera from its tripod where it had been carefully set up to film the broadcast that would now never be made, they pointed it at whoever was talking, and no one in the room seemed to mind, or notice. Gradually we began moving towards the main doors, shuffling together without any clear sense of purpose or where we were going. Once out of the doors and into the large concourse that led back towards the dome, two of the men in politicians' suits suddenly began to run off in the opposite direction, without a word. 'Let them go,' said Mrs Nicholson, not that anyone was trying to stop them. Mr Nicholson didn't even seem to notice. 'And you,' she pointed to the camera crew, 'you can follow them. We don't want you.' The camera crew were slow to respond, and just pointed their camera at Mrs Nicholson. She signalled to the bodyguards and they immediately pounced on the film crew, taking their camera and knocking the people to the ground, and giving them a severe beating. One of the men fiddled with the innards of the camera, and pulled its memory out, which he then bent in his teeth. Mrs Nicholson laughed. The crew were semi-conscious on the floor, their faces rapidly swelling with bruises, and coagulating blood. My bowels were chilled, as I wondered if I would be next in line for such treatment, but to my surprise I was ushered along with the dwindling party, along a narrow corridor to a service lift.

Then up several levels, the five of us, and out through cluttered corridors, up a narrow staircase and through some heavy doors, suddenly we were out in the open, among the house-sized air-conditioning vents and lift-shaft winding houses. Rounding a block we saw the helicopter, its rotors spinning at a steady rhythm. It looked pitifully small, hardly bigger than a model, I thought at first. The pilot was wearing headphones and reading a map. His face seemed to drop as he saw us approach. He shook his head and held up a hand, fingers spread, meaning there were too many of us. In the noise and the light breeze of the rotor blades I could not hear

anything that was being said, but I got the gist of the conversation. The pilot was saying he didn't have enough fuel to take us very far, and that the fewer passengers he had to carry, the further the fuel would take them. The bodyguards suddenly ran off, and the pilot took off his headphones, as if he was about to join them, but Mr and Mrs Nicholson were already climbing into the helicopter. Mrs Nicholson physically restrained the pilot, by placing a firm hand on his shoulder. The pilot continued to shrug and shake his head. He was now saying that the flight would be too dangerous. If the Nicholsons had lost control of the army, it was likely the helicopter would get shot down by surface-to-air missiles. I don't know how it happened but suddenly I was in the helicopter as well. Mrs Nicholson had urged me in to join them, when I had had half a mind to join the bodyguards and take my chances with the crowds. But an unaccountable loyalty had sprung up in my feelings, and I felt duty-bound to stick with the Nicholsons, and see them safely out of the city. And perhaps it was my writer's curiosity that persuaded me to stay with them, to see where they had it in mind to go, to find out what sanctuary awaited them, to see what power looked like when it had lost all the instruments for the exercise of that power.

We lifted off, toppling sideways almost instantly, then lunging forward, clear of the rooftop. Suddenly the ground filled our forward vision, the streets which seemed like gorges cut through cement plains, flowing with rivers of people. It was true, a fact, that the whole city centre was now awash with protestors, the grievances of the people had become a viscous fluid filling every cranny of the capital, had not my heart already fallen through my body thanks to the clumsy aerobatics of our pilot I felt sure it would have lifted to see such a pure expression of popular will. The people had become an architectural phenomenon, filling the space between buildings. I glanced at Mrs Nicholson, who was sitting squashed up against me, and once the helicopter had achieved a more level flight position, I could see, reflected in the window (for she was turned away from me), a look of horror on her face – or was it wonder, awe, terror, as she contemplated the new physical form the city was taking. Mr Nicholson was sitting in the front seat, alongside the pilot, and I could not see any reflection of his face, though I could see his head shake despairingly from side to side, just as it had done for most of the afternoon. Otherwise

he was frequently in close conversation with the pilot, who had repeatedly to shout things in his ear to be heard. He claimed, so I could only just make out, to be taking such a swinging, erratic course in order to dodge any possible strikes from the ground. We swooped low, then swung left and right. We felt almost as if he was trying to throw us out of the vehicle. Now Mrs Nicholson was shouting at him. There were arguments over the flight plan and our final destination. Mrs Nicholson had found a map and was pointing out to the pilot where we should be going, and that we needed to swing round in a different direction. By now we were clear of the city and below us were ploughed fields and quadrilaterals of pine forest. So far the whole journey had been at less than a thousand feet and, most of the time, much lower. Our speed was slowing as well. Mrs Nicholson continually berated the pilot but he kept pointing to his fuel gauge, saying he was running low. They would not be able to get to the destination over the border into our neighbouring state.

In the end the helicopter was brought to land in a field of potatoes, about twenty miles from the city. By now Mrs Nicholson was screaming at the pilot, slapping him on the back of his head, while the pilot protested that it was not his fault that the helicopter didn't have enough fuel. 'I'll get you a car,' he said, 'I just need to get to the phone box. There's one in that layby. That's why I landed here, if you'll just let me.'

'We don't have time to stand in a potato field waiting for a driver, you fool. The army has been following us on the ground. They'll be upon us in five minutes. We have to commandeer a vehicle.'

By now all four of us were out of the helicopter and stumbling through the potatoes towards the nearby road, on which there was little traffic. While the pilot went over to the phone, one of those emergency phones for people whose vehicles have broken down, Mrs Nicholson stepped out into the road to flag down the solitary car that was heading towards us. She stood there, still in her well-to-do housewife's coat with her handbag dangling from her elbow, waving both arms frantically at the approaching car, an expensive-looking sedan, which, for a moment, seemed about to swerve around Mrs Nicholson, but screeched to a halt when she stepped sideways to counter the move. She signalled to us to follow her out into the road, for one of us to take her place while she talked to the driver. The driver, I could see, was a respectable, professional-looking man in his

late fifties or sixties, in casual clothes. He looked severely panicked as we climbed into the car. I figured that he had just been listening to the radio, and had heard about the helicopter on the roof of the palace, and now couldn't quite believe that this outlandish narration had come to life before his eyes. He had probably seen the helicopter itself as it came down.

'I am very sorry,' he said, 'but I cannot drive you anywhere.' His tone was deeply sincere. He may even have once been an ardent supporter of the Nicholsons. But now that they had been ousted, anyone seen to be helping them could find themselves in serious trouble. I too was beginning to realize this, and was spending all my time wondering when would be the right moment to make my escape.

We began moving, the driver, who turned out to be a doctor, hunched and petrified at the wheel, because Mrs Nicholson had produced, from her dainty white handbag, a dirty great revolver, and was pointing it shakily at the back of the doctor's head.

The helicopter pilot was nowhere to be seen when we drove off, so it was just me and the country doctor who formed the Nicholsons' entourage. Once we were going steadily Mrs Nicholson put down the gun and began consulting a road atlas that was on the parcel shelf. We were about a hundred and fifty miles from the sanctuary that had been set up for the Nicholsons, and we were all taking turns to try and read the map and figure out where we were and which way to go, when the doctor saw his chance, slammed the brakes on and fled from the car and into a wood by the side of the road. We were too thrown and confused by the sudden halt to make any attempt to chase the terrified doctor, whose departing cry was, 'I have a family! I have a family!' He had left the keys in the car. Mrs Nicholson turned to me and said, 'You drive.'

I wondered what would happen if I refused. Would Mrs Nicholson take her place at the wheel? Perhaps she couldn't drive. As for Mr Nicholson, he looked in no fit state to drive anything. She didn't point the gun at me when she asked me to drive, and I took a certain pride in that fact. I had won the Nicholsons' trust. They had no one else in the world. Everyone had abandoned them. This made them both heartbreakingly vulnerable and frighteningly dangerous. They could not be left alone, for they seemed to be people with no practical skills. They had been driven everywhere for most of their adult lives. They had lived like well-attended



monarchs with every need met by their retinues. The only thing they possessed was the authority of command, the ability to compel and instil obedience, but now this was lost on everyone in the nation but me. As such, I felt an enormous responsibility to remain obedient, even though I would far sooner be among the revolutionaries who were presumably, at this very moment, dismantling the vestiges of the Nicholsons' regime, room by room. And so without a moment's hesitation I stepped around the car and took my place in the driver's seat. The doctor had left the keys in the ignition, though I could see there was very little fuel left. To avoid the military vehicles and road blocks we turned off onto country lanes that led into the mountains. We thought there might be a way of using very small roads to reach the border, avoiding the main centres of population and the freeways altogether – but the problem was the lack of fuel. After an hour or so in the mountains, we realized we would have to risk turning back towards the main road to find a petrol station.

And it was at such a petrol station that my journey with the Nicholsons ended. We had taken the precautions of concealment as we rejoined the freeway. Mrs Nicholson lay down on the back seat and covered herself with a blanket while Mr Nicholson decided to seclude himself in the boot, while I pulled into a garage and began to fill up. I don't know how it was that the military vehicles were so quickly upon us. Perhaps the doctor had got word to the army that his car had been taken by the Nicholsons, or perhaps the garage owner had thought there was something odd about the car, but while I was in the shop paying for my fuel the forecourt was suddenly alive with the roar of military engines, and an armoured car, a truck and two jeeps pulled in, soldiers in full armour poured out, and the car was surrounded. I watched from inside the shop as all this was happening. Mrs Nicholson was pulled from the car as if she was a hold-all, and thrown to the ground. She screamed with indignation. Mr Nicholson was quickly found in the boot, and likewise pulled out without any thought to his dignity or comfort. The two were then lifted to their feet and marched around the side of the petrol station, where there was a car wash. I cautiously began to leave the shop, anxious to see what would be done to the Nicholsons. I could not believe that they would be dealt with summarily, without trial or right of appeal, but I heard the shots even before I left the shop, a volley of bullets from several automatic

weapons. I was frozen with fear and halted by the flower stand, just next to the night-service window. An acrid fog wafted from behind the building, and I made the corner just in time to see what had been done. Mr and Mrs Nicholson's bodies were lying on the cement at the entrance to the car wash. Mrs Nicholson was lying on her front, her arms spread, her handbag still round her forearm, and her coat spread open like a cape. Mr Nicholson was in an odd position, having first fallen to his knees, and then backwards, so that his lower legs were tucked beneath his body, and his abdomen was pushed up higher than his head. I could see his face had the same fed-up expression it had had all day, though the eyes were firmly closed. Both bodies were oozing little red rivulets. I heard a soldier making a joke about how they should put the bodies through the car wash. Another was carefully recording the scene on a video camera. There was debate about what to do with the bodies. Eventually they were lifted by their arms and legs, two soldiers at each end, and put in the back of a truck. Then the whole squad of vehicles roared into angry life, and with a multiple spewing of blue exhaust, was gone.

The soldiers had taken no interest in the car they had found the Nicholsons in, or who had been driving it. Perhaps they were just so thrilled at having found the pair that they had forgotten about it, or perhaps they thought it was irrelevant. I was no one to be bothered with. Who was I, after all? A writer of whimsical tales that had happened to attract the attention of the first lady of our great country. That had been awarded the Nicholson Star for the short story 'The Button'. I had thought about asking Mrs Nicholson why she had liked that story so much, but I had never got the opportunity. I had wondered if she had any thoughts on who the button was, or what he represented. And now I had lost that chance. One critic had thought the button represented a fascist organization, that it stood for the binding together of the people, just as the bundles of sticks had to the original fascisti. But now I believed that the button represented anarchy, chaos, undirected, unrestrained energy. How can a button, a thing that fastens and contains, represent such an idea? Well, because a button can be undone. A button can liberate as easily as it constrains. It can keep the world in check, or it can release the world to run unchecked.

Odd, how the same thing can be seen so differently. I took myself back

to the car, after a little contemplation, in silence, of the bloodstains by the car wash. Perhaps it would be good to drive on to wherever the Nicholsons had been heading, over the border into the sanctuary of our neighbouring state. I could claim asylum, if need be.

And then I thought of the fish, unfed for a whole day, and I drove back to the city.