

THE SINECURE

There are some subjects, however, to which dialogue-writing is peculiarly adapted, and where it is still preferable to the direct and simple method of composition.

David Hume (1776)

Life's a piece of cake.

Ogden Nash (1935)

Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other.

Somerset Maugham (1938)

Deciding on a book's beginning is a matter as complex as determining the origins of the universe.

Amos Oz (1999)

The machine, the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), aims to recreate the conditions of the Big Bang, when the universe is thought to have exploded into existence about 14 billion years ago.

Jonathan Leake (2007)

The elevator comes to rest about 400 feet below Commune de Crozet. A man steps out. Having left the car in a lot just off the road from Crozet to Saint-Genis he has passed Security at Point 3—PZ-33, building 2395 to be precise. It's just after 3 a.m. He's known to all the night shift so his presence troubles no one. He walks south through Sector 2-3, carrying an item like a lidded thermos. Its jacket might be stainless steel. The Sector, ever-bending slightly left, is two miles long. Behind him lies the sector where a big explosion shut the whole thing down. Now it's back on line.

He is on the French side of the border. Ahead of him near Point 1 the well-lit tunnel with its fat vacuum pipe passes into Switzerland. He has no need to go that far. He has a rendezvous with ALICE at the next collision point. She's one of the smaller, special-purpose particle detectors. Smaller meaning only 50 feet in height and some 10,000 tons. Her special purpose is to study what went on in the Big Bang. She will serve his purpose too. The thing in his hand is a magnetic bottle. Its special purpose is to capture a black hole. Three kilometers to go. He glances at his watch but there's no need to hurry. Even in the tunnel it's a pleasant evening for a walk.

It's just a job. It isn't clear how come I got it as I'm not exactly qualified. A hacker with creds bumming round the surfing world. A lost philosopher, you might say, of the ocean road. It's even less clear why I took it. Not for money, though the money's very good.

There was a short ad for an assistant in the *Daily News* under Science/Research, a short interview with *her*, a mention of 'sponsors' whom she never says a word about again. I've come to think that she—she gives no name at first and afterwards I cannot ask—must be some sort of physicist but doesn't say. Accent is northeast but not New England. Direct about her wants but saying almost nothing about why.

Next day, a tad sarcastic, she mentions just in passing, like, a Word. The Establishment is what I think I hear—an *attitude*. Or, thinking later, maybe not? Maybe the innuendo's in my head. She's moved to a hotel out by the airport. I am looking for an office for her firm.

She calls my job research. Upmarket label. Mostly lots of reading, which is fine because I read a lot. Making notes. And Web stuff; fine too as the Web is where I live. General gofer. Answering the phone. Then there's briefing the detective. Hiring him is her plan from the get-go.

But within days she's like: Let's not bring him on board just yet. So already the detective is a 'him.' Does she have someone in mind?

A *very* big bank draft. She hands it to me! It's made out to Axiam Associates. This is, she says, the business name.

Set up an account, she says. Oh, and make a list.

Three desks, two Dell desktops—she has an old MacBook—a file server and a local intranet. A printer. High-speed hookup for the Dells. No email; she says it is insecure. Cellphones and a landline. A budget for 'research' including books. Her travel. And some salaries, she says. And business cards, low key, with a slogan—'cutting-edge cosmology'—all lower case. She signs the checks. She needs receipts for everything. Though I'm not irresponsible I've never had responsibility.

My title is 'executive director.' Like the janitor is a custodian. This is embarrassing. Truth is, I am, like Holden was, a corny kind of guy.

But . . . she does seem to have money. Maybe it *is* the money? Anyway, this is how it all began.