

Also by Hari Kunzru

The Impressionist

TRANSMISSION

HARI KUNZRU



A PLUME BOOK

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As Leela02 died down and samples of Leela09 started to hit the Virugenix GSP, June temperature records were broken in several places around the world. There were a few spectacular events—the suspension of the Bolsa de Valores in Lima, the Olympic ticketing fiasco, but on the whole the effect was cumulative, an accretion of frustration, a furring of the global arteries. Simple tasks took on new levels of difficulty. You wanted to book a railway ticket but the site was down. The Social Security department was unable to process your claim. Your new TV was redirected to the crackheads downstairs but the company's records said you signed for it, so sir, you *must* have gotten it. Breakdowns, closures, suspensions and delays, all taking place in the sweltering heat. New York City ran out of electric fans, but whether it was simply the spike in demand or the container truck that somehow went missing on the New Jersey Turnpike, no one could say with certainty.

Over the Desert Creek golf course in Dubai tall steel poles tipped with fanned arrays of nozzles sprayed a fine mist of humidity into the air. From the ground came a regular thumping sound, the chug-chug of eight thousand sprinklers irrigating two hundred acres of dwarf Bermuda grass, a solid mat of vivid paintbox-green like a mold on the red skin of the desert. Beneath it, veins and arteries, ran miles of plastic tubing connecting the green mat to a site down the coast where a vast desalination plant boiled Arabian Gulf seawater to a thousand degrees centigrade, filtered it and pumped two and a half million gallons of it here daily for the grass and the golfers.

Like all golf courses the landscape was a ghost of Scotland, an environmental memory abstracted into universal signs. Bunker, fairway,

rough. To this the poles, defoliated silver birches, added the suggestion of forest. At one side, this virtuality peeled away to reveal artful vistas of the sea. At the other it rose up in a lip to shield itself from the windblown sand of the dunes.

Under his sun visor, Guy felt immensely disoriented.

Abdullah was driving the golf cart like he drove his Lexus, bouncing it across the bright green landscape with maniacal intensity. The cart's little electric engine gave off an angry whine. Guy held on tighter to his laptop.

As soon as he had landed at the airport and met Abdullah he had known it was going to be a difficult pitch. His contact was standing beneath a Dubai development agency billboard: *"Move your company to the gateway of the globe. 1.5 billion consumers await you at your arrival. A business base with a first-world infrastructure—at a third-world cost."* He was a young, fuzzy-cheeked man wearing a black-banded headdress and a white dish-dash from beneath which peeked the toes of a pair of handmade penny loafers. Grinning under the lenses of his oil-slick Ray-Ban Wayfarers he finished his call. Then he slipped the phone back into a voluminous pocket and told Guy he was welcome in Dubai and to please follow him to the car. He did not offer to help with the bags.

As they exited the terminal building the heat hit Guy like a solid object. Sweat started to percolate up through his skin, trickling down his back under his shirt. Abdullah led him across the parking lot to a barn-sized black car. In a gesture of politeness, he turned up its aircon to Arctic levels and with a screech of tires turned out onto an eight-lane blacktop highway that seemed to lead to nowhere.

"Nice weather we're having," he said cryptically. The thermometer on the dash put the outside temperature at 41°C. Out of the window an expanse of red sand flashed past. There were almost no cars on the road, but Abdullah deliberately tailgated those that were. By the time the speedometer touched 155 kph they were a foot behind a 4x4 with an "I♥Islam" sticker in the rear window. Abdullah punched the horn and flashed his lights until it pulled over.

"You should be a rally driver," Guy joked nervously.

"This is already my hobby. For two years I am driving desert races. It is good, except I crash too much."

To take his mind off this answer Guy peered through the gray tint of the windshield. In the distance a city skyline was approaching, and half-built skyscrapers soon started to appear at the roadside, their skeletons crisscrossed by plastic lines hung with the drying dhotis of Indian laborers. Construction was taking place all over the city, and the architectural thrust appeared to be toward the creation of some kind of Islamic Las Vegas. There were huge bank towers incorporating pointed arches and minarets, thirty-story office blocks faced in green and gold smoked glass like giant onyx writing sets. One building appeared to be topped with a gargantuan dimpled golf ball. Another had a portico shaped like the front of a 747. The whole insane mess rose up out of the sand like a mirage, and even once he was among it Guy had a lingering sense of disbelief. Here was the future, arriving at mouse-click velocity, CAD/CAM sketches cloaking themselves in concrete and steel before his eyes.

The hotel was a glass wave, sprawling along an artificial beach whose white sand, as Abdullah proudly pointed out, had been imported from the Caribbean. The car door was opened by a Filipino dressed in dusky pink plus fours, a pink Argyle jumper and an oversized urchin cap. Pinned to his chest was a badge which identified him as *Gary*. By his side was *Carolyn*, a Singaporean woman dressed as a pink explorer, complete with rose-colored pith helmet. Together they showed Guy and Abdullah into the lobby. Once Guy had checked in, a time-consuming process because of a fault in the hotel's reservation system, Abdullah handed him his business card and told him he would return in the morning to drive him to his meeting with Mr. Al-Rahman. In the meantime, he was to make himself comfortable in his room. Abdullah's politenesses had an odd way of sounding like orders. When he read the full name on the card, Guy understood the reason for this. Abdullah bin Osman Al-Rahman was no ordinary junior driver. This was obviously a family that liked its younger members to start at the bottom.

The lift took Guy and a pink South Asian bellhop (*Bruce*) to the twentieth floor. Once he had found his room and gotten rid of *Bruce* he slung his stuff on the bed and switched on the TV. Almost at once there was a knock at his door. *Doug*, a dark-skinned young man who was perhaps Indonesian, arrived with a plate of fruit. Would there be anything else? Guy didn't think so. A minute later there was a second knock.

Calvin with a spare bathrobe. Then came *Keiran* to fluff his pillows. Always they ended with a direct look in the eyes and the same question: "Is there anything *else* I can do for you?" Guy told himself he was imagining things. After the fourth time he stopped answering the door.

The phone went and a voice asked whether his accommodation was to his satisfaction. For a moment he thought it was another room service rent boy, until the voice identified itself as Abdullah and asked his shoe size. He told him. It was only after he put the receiver down that he thought to wonder why.

With a choice of seventeen restaurants (Lebanese, Argentinian, the Viennese Café, the Dhow and Anchor British Pub . . .), he somehow ended up eating at the Main Street USA Bar and Grill, where it was New Orleans week. The space was hung with bunting and in the center of the room was a two-thirds scale model of a Mississippi riverboat. He sat down at a little table and *Carey-Ann*, who was maybe Chinese and was dressed as a pink Norman Rockwell soda jerk, gave him a menu. He chose the gumbo and looked around. A group of elderly men in Hawaiian shirts were crammed with their instruments onto a corner stage, playing light jazz funk. Above them a sign read RETAIL THIS WAY, which for a brief moment he mistook for the name of the band.

Around him was a landscape of small round tables, each one occupied by a shirtsleeved businessman. In front of each businessman was a cell phone, a menu and a tall glass of juice topped with a cocktail umbrella and a pair of jaunty straws. Guy ate his gumbo and watched the row of Caribbean palms outside the window. Afterward, in his brightly lit bathroom he took twenty milligrams of a prescription sedative and got an early night, falling unconscious to the jabber of a rolling news channel on the TV.

The next morning he was woken by a knock on his door. He put on his bathrobe and let in *Burt*, who had brought him a wrapped rectangular box "courtesy of Mr. Al-Rahman." Yawning, Guy opened it to find a pair of golf shoes and a leaflet drawing his attention to certain of their technical features, which included a temperature-responsive waterproof membrane and a visible heel air-sole unit. The sight of the shoes sent his guts into immediate spasm, and he took Abdullah's morning call from a doubled-up position on the toilet.

"But you don't seem to understand. I have visuals. There's a Power-Point presentation. For God's sake, there are handouts. How am I supposed to do handouts on a golf course?"

Abdullah said that his uncle was a man who loved golf above all things, and pointed out that the choice of venue was appropriate to the nature of the conversation. There was no way Guy could object.

Bouncing around in the cart he reflected that at the end of the day, all factors being taken into consideration, this was Yves Ballard's fault. When setting up Tomorrow* Guy had felt inclined to stick to what he knew: to pitch for British youth sector business and maybe reach out occasionally into alternative demographics. Instead, Ballard and the other Transcendenta partners had pushed him in a different direction. There had been a reception in Barcelona, with canapés in the shapes of dot-com logos and waiters dressed as Antonio Gaudi. He had stood at a poolside bar and they had asked him to imagine a truly globalized branding agency, concentrating on the local needs of transnational clients. If Tomorrow* placed itself at this node, it would potentiate the synergetic emergence of something, thus maximizing feedback in something else and placing everyone at the apex of a place they all wanted to be. They stood, they told him, on the crest of the latest Kondratiev wave. Transcendenta, nine months old, was already valued in the hundreds of millions. Who was Guy to argue? So instead of being wedged in a West End toilet cubicle with a couple of nightclub PRs, he now found himself on the other side of the world, being driven around in an unstable electrical vehicle by a rich kid with a death wish. About to play golf.

Two men were waiting for them at the first tee, both dressed in immaculate Prince of Wales checks. As the cart skidded to a halt Guy was almost blinded by a glint from the older one's wrist, which resolved itself on closer inspection into a diamond-encrusted Rolex Oyster watch. Muammar bin Ali Al-Rahman, a heavysset man in his sixties, shook Guy's hand and introduced him to Mr. Shahid, his VP of marketing. Mr. Shahid smiled briefly.

"Welcome, welcome," said Al-Rahman. "How do you like my place?" he asked, making a sweeping gesture that took in the course, the clubhouse and quite a lot of sea.

Guy nodded vigorously. "It's beautiful, Mr. Al-Rahman. Very impres-

sive. And may I say what a lovely day it is today. I can see why you would rather be here than stuck in the office." The two men laughed, displaying expensive orthodontic work beneath their flourishing mustaches.

Abdullah produced a bag of clubs from the back of the cart and stood respectfully to one side. Guy declined the invitation to tee off first. He knew he would not be saved for long, but at that moment any delay seemed like a good thing. If he was honest (a condition he had hoped to avoid for the duration of his stay in Dubai) golf had never been his thing. It was not a sport he had ever actually *played*, as such. Or even watched on TV. This blind spot in his recreational prowess had never previously been an issue, and probably would not matter now were Mr. Al-Rahman not the owner of a leisure group that specialized in golf resorts, which in fact owned twenty-four scattered across the world from Osaka to British Columbia. The resorts for whose business he was here to pitch. And putt.

Al-Rahman lofted his ball down the middle of the fairway. Shahid did the same, his drive diplomatically landing a few feet behind that of his boss. They looked expectantly at Guy, who realized that he was facing one of those moments in which you can either go forward in bad faith or trust in honesty to carry you through.

He decided to wing it.

His first attempt at a drive hacked a large divot in the tee. On the second he sliced the ball hard to the right, sending it off in the direction of the water. He laughed self-consciously.

"Bad luck," said Mr. Shahid, in a slightly stunned tone.

"Bad luck," said Mr. Al-Rahman.

It took him nine strokes to reach the first green.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Al-Rahman, watching him line up his third putt, "you should tell me what you feel you can do for my company."

Guy considered retrieving his laptop from the cart. His creatives had spent hundreds of hours preparing audio, video and still imagery to accompany this pitch, but the sun was beating down, and even if Al-Rahman were receptive to visual stimuli it was doubtful he'd be able to see the screen. So he swallowed hard and began. "What I do," he told them, "is take a business and transform it from being an abstract thing into an entity that consumers can feel emotional toward."

"Bad luck, Mr. Swift," said Mr. Al-Rahman.

"I didn't make a shot yet."

"Oh, my apologies. Perhaps you are fatigued by the game. You would maybe prefer just to walk and talk?"

"Yes, absolutely. Great. Yes."

"You were saying?"

"Um, right. You see, there's a virtuous circle. Perhaps later I could show you a picture of it."

"Of the circle?"

"Yes. You see a happy brand is a learning brand. A brand should make you feel good, because if it knows what makes you feel good then it can position itself correctly and help you to make your choice. And if once you've made your choice the brand nurtures and protects you like a caring parent—and here I'd really like you to imagine some emotional imagery of a baby—then you feel good about the choice you've made and the brand learns from your good feelings."

"And the circle?"

"Exactly, it's a circle."

"I'm afraid I don't see what you mean."

"Oh, OK. Well, this would probably be easier with the graphic, but in essence what I am proposing to do is to help Al-Rahman Resorts get a GPS reading on its location in the heart-and-mind topography of the consumer. The method Tomorrow* uses, which is a proprietary process, is called TBM. This stands for Total Brand Mutability, and like I say, it's our thing. No one else will be able to do TBM analysis for you, or will provide Brand Mutation Vector Maps, which are the tool we use to help our clients achieve their full Brand Evolution Potential. Tomorrow* will generate a full ongoing set of vector maps—in fact I've got a sample on the computer if you'd like to see it?"

Mr. Al-Rahman was practicing his tee shot. He shook a finger at Guy. Guy made the thumbs up.

"OK. Well, maybe I'll show you the vector maps in a bit. But um. . . ." He watched Al-Rahman drive his ball down the fairway. Shahid and Abdullah congratulated him on the shot. Guy was embarking on an explanation of the increasing importance of brand definition in an uncertain leisure climate when without warning Al-Rahman leaped into his cart and sped off in the direction of the next green.

They followed, with Abdullah at the wheel, his dish-dash ballooning up as they flew over the bumps, exposing a pair of long, black kneesocks. "You are not a golfer," he said accusingly to Guy. Guy admitted that this was true, technically speaking. Abdullah snorted.

"Please," said Mr. Al-Rahman, when they finally caught up with him, "explain to me clearly what you can do for my business."

"Right," said Guy, trying to concentrate. "A question for you, sir. Do you think your employees are living the Al-Rahman brand in a holistic way? What does Al-Rahman actually stand for?"

"We are a very old family, Mr. Swift."

"Sure, sure. But you know, at the moment Al-Rahman stands for—well, for *golf*. And that's it. Golf is great, don't get me wrong. But is it really something your people can get behind? At Tomorrow*, my team came up with a kind of banner heading about where we feel your company is at now. We think of you as "the faithful." We have this great animation for the concept. You see this guy hitting a hole in one and it says in, like, your traditional Arabic calligraphy style, "There is no game but golf and Al-Rahman is its prophet!"

There was a silence. Guy tried to fill it.

"You have to go under the surface and think about why people play golf. Golf means freedom. Golf means, um, style. The way Tomorrow* sees it, the Al-Rahman 'faithful' should become the Al-Rahman 'rangers.' Rangers, that's our heading, right? For being able to get out there and do your thing. Anyhow—the basic thrust of our plan is to take Al-Rahman beyond golf and into the realm of total leisure experience. That way your employees, golfers or not, will have feelings of greater identification and inclusivity about the Al-Rahman brand. Your consumers too."

Mr. Al-Rahman looked at Guy, then called Shahid aside and whispered something in his ear. Shahid nodded and whispered something to Abdullah, who made a phone call.

"Mr. Swift," said Al-Rahman, shaking Guy's hand, "I am very grateful to you for taking the trouble to come out here and share with us the benefit of your experience."

"Thanks very much. No problem. I just hope that later on I can show you the creative work we've done."

"That won't be necessary," said Shahid. Al-Rahman walked away and started to settle himself in his cart.

Guy opened his mouth, and closed it again. Al-Rahman steered the cart in a wide arc, drawing up next to Guy. Shahid put his bag of clubs in the back and got in beside his boss. Al-Rahman, for the first time during the meeting, removed his thick black sunglasses to reveal a pair of weary, heavy-lidded eyes.

"Mr. Swift," he said, "the green fees on this course are the highest in the Middle East. We have a driving range that can accommodate up to two hundred people at once. We have a swing-analysis lab that utilizes software developed by our own experts. It is a question of respect, Mr. Swift. I like to do business with people who respect the things I do. You, I suppose, respect other things, such as your circles and maps. So I say to you, go and do business with men who like circles and maps. In the meantime, please accept the hospitality of the beach resort. Abdullah will be pleased to dine with you and perhaps share with you the appreciation of some of our world-famous nightlife. I wish you a safe flight home."

With that, he drove away.

Sometimes there is fear ahead of the curve. Sometimes in a hotel bathroom you may visualize an immense white-capped wave bearing down on you. Then there is nothing for it but the minibar, the crawl toward the red dot of the TV, the dissected room-service tray silhouetted by the open refrigerator door. Guy poured vodka miniatures over ice and sat on the end of the bed trying to work out what to do. He was fucked. That was all there was to it. Yves had phoned, asking for confirmation that Al-Rahman and PEBA were the only two pitches they were working on. "I really hope they happen for you," he had said. That was clear enough.

Next door there was a party. Through the wall he could hear music and the sound of laughter. There were people out on the balcony. He took his drink to the window and furtively looked out. They were women, five, maybe six of them, all beautiful; European and Asian women dressed in evening dresses. Thigh and cleavage. High heels. A short, middle-aged man was among them, a cell phone in one hand, the other kneading the breast of a tall blonde in a silver sheath dress. She looked down at him

indulgently. The others seemed either not to notice or not to care. The man's white dress shirt was unbuttoned almost to the waist, showing a brown expanse of hairy chest and belly. As Guy watched, he took the blonde's wrist and pulled her inside.

The vodka ran out and he started on the gin. A repetitive bass thud came through the wall, like an amplified racing heart. His life appeared to him as a web or a suspension bridge, each tensed element related to the next. Remove Tomorrow* and what would be left? Downstairs the lobby opened out onto an atrium that reached a giddy twenty stories up toward the little box in which he sat, finishing the gin and moving on to the whisky. A structure wrapped around a vast emptiness. It all seemed part of the same improbable joke, the atrium, the rows of balconies, the restaurants; two thousand rooms full of people like himself breathing freeze-dried artificial air and watching cubes of desalinated water melt in their glasses. And beneath their feet, somewhere under the foundations, the red shifting desert.

The bassline thudded. And another sound, high-pitched and intermittent. A human sound. Either sex or pain.

He needed to speak to Gabriella. He could tell her how things were, how important she was now that everything else was going to hell. Maybe she would be kind. It was a risk letting her hear him like this, but then again she was his girlfriend. She was supposed to make things better. He dialed her number on the hotel phone, drunk enough not to worry about the cost. It diverted to voice mail, so he tried international directory assistance, which was down. Finally he got the concierge to look up the number of her hotel and patch him through.

A Scottish-accented voice confirmed that Miss Caro was in 106.

The phone rang eight times. Just as he was about to give up, she answered. Her hello was breathy, distracted. Mixed in with it was some artifact of the telephone system, a strange electronic rushing noise. It sounded like splintering information, communication space.

"Hello? Hello?"

"Yes?"

"Gaby, it's me."

"Oh God. Guy."

The voice at the other end was muffled, and for a moment he was

left alone with the interstellar howl. He had an idea she had placed a hand over the receiver.

"Gaby. Hello?"

"Guy—I'm . . ."

"Is this not a good time?"

"No. No. Yes, of course it is. What do you mean?" She sounded agitated. Gaby was usually so calm. "I thought you were in Dubai."

"I am, sweetie. I just wanted to hear your voice."

"Why are you calling? I mean, it's very late, you know."

"Not that late, surely. I looked. It's ten o'clock where you are."

"Right," she said. "Right."

"What's wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong. Christ Guy, why are you always like this?"

"What's wrong? Nothing's wrong, OK?"

The volume of the electronic interference increased. Part of it detached to become a feedback whine, a tone rising and falling through the shards of her voice.

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

"Gaby, I just wanted to talk to you. Things aren't so good here."

There was no response. "Gaby? Hello?"

"I hope you didn't call just to talk to me about your work. Because, you know, I'm just not going to be able to do that right now. I have my own world, Guy. I'm working here too, remember?"

The rushing reached a crescendo and fell away again. Through the bedroom wall the boom of the party seemed to grow louder. Weirdly the party sounds seemed to be coming out of the receiver as well. He felt he could not be sure of the source of anything he was hearing. Then the muffling descended, but too late to block out the sound of a man's voice.

Was someone there with her?

"Who is that, Gaby?"

Silence.

"Gaby? Gaby, can you hear me?"

"Guy, I can't talk now. We need to talk, but this is not the right time, OK?"

A little stone formed in the pit of his stomach. "Gaby? What are you talking about?"

"I can't do this now. Not over the phone."

"What's wrong? What do you mean not over the phone?"

"Call me when you get back. Call me when you get to the airport."

"Gaby? Hello?"

Abruptly the noise ceased.