



Little

Liberia

AN African Odyssey in
New York City

JONNY STEINBERG

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Jonny Steinberg

Maps

Dedication

Title Page

Preface

Part One

1. Jacob

2. Rufus

3. Jacob

4. Rufus

Part Two

5. His Great-Grandfather's Beard

6. The Americo-Liberians

7. Duazuahtay

8. School

9. Coup

10. Taylor

11. To Monrovia

12. The Sergeant

13. St Peter's

14. Taylorland

15. Nassa's Mother's House

16. Azariah

17. April 6

18. Online

Part Three

19. Tailor

20. Roza

21. Half a Chicken

22. War Far and Near

23. Advance

24. Roza Across the World

25. Roza Boys

Part Four

26. Liberia on Park Hill Avenue

27. Refuge

28. Roza

29. Antoinette Tubman Stadium

30. Duazuahplay

Epilogue

Notes

Index

Acknowledgements

Further Reading

Copyright

About the Book

Liberia is a country built on the promise of freedom, and Africa's first republic: founded and colonised by freed slaves with the aid of America in 1847. In 1980 a military coup led by Samuel Doe ended Americo-Liberian rule, marking the beginning of a period of dictatorship and instability that would lead to years of brutal civil war and human rights abuses, dividing communities along tribal lines, and pitting neighbour against neighbour. Hundreds of thousands were killed in the internecine battles, and millions displaced.

From the chaos a growing number of survivors have implanted themselves in communities on the east coast of America. Here Jonny Steinberg meets two men from Monrovia with very separate experiences of the war, but with similar ambitions in their new home. He lives and works with the two men: in their social groups, business ventures and the community initiatives they have established, eventually visiting the homes that they have fled. Through them, and the network of connections and rivalries that span the two countries, he is able to document the trauma that many Liberians have lived through in the past thirty years, and explore its continuing impact on their lives.

Mixing history, reportage and a wealth of extraordinary personal stories Jonny Steinberg takes up the tale of a fractured African nation and its diaspora to remarkable effect. This is a unique and important book, told with clarity and compassion, by one of our best and brightest young writers.

About the Author

Jonny Steinberg was born and bred in South Africa. He is the author of critically acclaimed *Three Letter Plague*, published by Vintage, and *Midlands* and *The Number*, which both won South Africa's premier non-fiction literary award, the *Sunday Times* Alan Paton Prize. Steinberg was educated at Wits University in Johannesburg, and at Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He has worked as a journalist on a national daily, written scripts for television drama, and has been a consultant to the South African government on criminal justice policy.

ALSO BY JONNY STEINBERG

Midlands
The Number
Three Letter Plague
Thin Blue

Exile immobilises to some degree the minds of those who suffer it. It imprisons them for ever within the circle of ideas which they had conceived or which were current when their exile began.

Alexis de Tocqueville





To Sheila

Little Liberia

An African Odyssey in New York City

Jonny Steinberg



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

Preface

The first time Rufus Arkoi walked onto Park Hill Avenue, in the summer of 1988, the very idea of it amused him: Liberians piled on top of one another, quite literally, from ground floor to sixth floor, in one building after the next. He had met many Liberians here in the United States during the last two years: in Newark, in Trenton, in Elizabeth. But they lived in a highly diluted state, barely discernible among the Ivorians, Nigerians, Ghanaians, Haitians and Jamaicans. In Elizabeth, you pass a black man on the street, you have no idea what will issue from his tongue: French, the whiny English of the Caribbeans, even Spanish. Here on Park Hill Avenue in New York, the Liberians were thick and unadulterated, like orange concentrate. You walked into the street and the women selling dried fish and chilli on the sidewalk were Liberian. Their customers were Liberian. His imagination ticked over. How many Liberians were there here? 200? Enough to field a soccer team of able-bodied men?

The last Liberian team he had seen take the field was very close to his heart: they were called the Sinkor Defenders. It was 20 September 1986, a Saturday, his very last afternoon in Liberia before leaving for the United States. He had woken a little after dawn in his bedroom in his father's house on Twelfth Street, Sinkor, and then gone to the stadium. Nobody who watched him going about his morning ritual would have imagined that by the following day he would be gone.

The Sinkor Defenders were to play the last match of the season at noon. Rufus was one of the men who had founded

the club three years earlier. Their fortunes soared almost immediately, and he had become famous across the eastern suburbs of Monrovia. As he walked up Twelfth Street that morning, it is likely that everyone who crossed his path would have known him by face and by name.

The Defenders drew 1-1 that afternoon. Rufus had prepared the team with his usual pre-match talk, had spoken briefly about tactics at half-time, and then left soon after the game. At 5 p.m. he hailed a taxi and went to the airport. Only two people in the world knew where he was going: his childhood friend, Ben Richardson, who would run his soccer club, and a man named Dave Jackley in Newark, New Jersey, at whose house he would spend his first night in the United States.

His exit had taken many months of planning. Thanks to his growing influence in the city's soccer administration, he had managed to attach himself back in April to an official cultural expedition to Atlanta, Georgia. When the group applied for United States visas, he went along with them to the embassy and was duly granted one. They left for Atlanta in July without him. He remained at home, a valid United States visitor's visa in his passport. All he required now was an air ticket. He had savings. He could borrow a little without drawing attention to his plans.

It was clear to him from the start that he must tell nobody. Already, he was a fabulously successful young man. Most of the men his age on Twelfth Street were unemployed or in unskilled work. Rufus was in another league. He was his own boss, a dazzlingly successful tailor, owner of a soccer club, and increasingly respected in this section of the city. He had courted more than his fair share of envy. To have it known that he was going to America would be foolhardy. Although he had been educated at a fine Catholic high school in Monrovia, he had spent much of his childhood in the countryside, and he knew first-hand the power of witchcraft

and sorcery. He was much too young and far too talented to die.

Now, two years later, the idea of Park Hill Avenue quickened his pulse. You go to America on a training basis, Rufus always said. You go because when you come home you have dealt in hard currency: nobody can offer you anything you haven't seen before; nobody has anything valuable enough to buy you.

But the danger, the risk you take, is that you drift, you dilute, you lose your touch: you come back to Liberia so rusty you can no longer function there. Here, on Park Hill Avenue, he thought, you can cheat geography. During the day you go and pick the riches of America. At night, the ferry takes you all the way home, as if a piece of Liberia had drifted across the ocean and docked in New York Bay.

Fourteen years later, almost to the day, another young Liberian arrived on Park Hill Avenue. His name was Jacob D. Massaquoi II. Like Rufus, he had left Monrovia quietly, although it was not envy he feared, but the anti-terrorism unit of President Charles Taylor. Shortly before his departure, an uncle of his, a senior figure in Taylor's administration, had come knocking on his door. 'Son, you gotta go,' he'd said. 'Don't stay here.' Staring at his uncle, imbibing his words, it had flashed through Jacob's mind that the world was guaranteed to surprise him; just as good people had once left him to rot, so a callous man in an evil regime had now taken the trouble to save his life.

Once he had dropped off his bags, he went downstairs and made his way along Park Hill Avenue leaning heavily on his wooden crutches. He imagined Liberian eyes watching him from the apartment block windows, watching closely, close enough to see that his right leg was several inches shorter than his left. He knew that they would draw fast conclusions, that in the length of his leg was an often-told story, one that could not easily be untold.

A curious man, he felt an urge to see the street on which he now lived in its context, preferably from a height. Over the following weeks, he caught buses; he got rides in private cars; sometimes, he set off with a cane, or on his crutches. One morning, he went to the summit of the ridge that stretches along the spine of Staten Island's North Shore. From there, he looked right across New York Bay onto downtown Manhattan, a huddle of skinny giants, it seemed, giggling at something they had spotted in the water. The houses up here were grand: they were three, four storeys tall, and they stood in large, manicured grounds.

As he made his way back down the ridge, the homes grew more modest. They were still utterly suburban: clapboard, two storeys, with wide driveways and basketball hoops above the carport doors.

In the valley, approaching the ocean, the suburbs vanished without warning and he was on Park Hill Avenue. Identical apartment blocks as far as the eye could see; fragments of hip-hop ricocheting from the cabriolets that cruised around and around. You crossed the street, went on another block, and you were back in the suburbs, the car stereos replaced by birdsong. It was as if Park Hill was a thin sliver of somewhere else spliced onto the surface of Staten Island.

Within a week, he had come to the conclusion that things were not right here. His visitor's visa would soon expire; he needed to apply for asylum. He was introduced to a Liberian who was said to be an expert in these matters, but after five minutes with the man, it was clear that he was a con artist. He looked around for more expertise. It appeared that there was none, not in all of Park Hill Avenue. Many of the Liberians on this street had immigration trouble. Could it be that between all of them and the Immigration and Naturalization Service stood one dodgy man?

The more he saw, the more troubled he became. There were unemployed people who knew nothing of the food

stamps he had come across in Florida. There were sick people who had not stepped into an emergency room because it was two miles from Park Hill Avenue, and, for them, it may as well have been in a foreign city. And yet there were Liberians right here on Staten Island who had lived in America ten, twenty years; Liberians who were doing well, who knew the city like the backs of their hands, who knew everything there was to know about food stamps and health care and the INS. Why was this knowledge not being spread around?

Many of these well-off Liberians, Jacob noted, held positions on the Staten Island Liberian Community Association. Others, like the big man, Rufus Arkoi, ran organisations offering services to immigrants. Arkoi's outfit was well funded. It occupied much of an entire building down on Bay Avenue. When the newspapers wanted to know something about Liberians, they went to Arkoi. When the philanthropists came looking to save Liberian child soldiers, they knocked on Arkoi's door. Arkoi, it seemed, *was* Liberia.

Stepping off the bus at lunchtime one day, having spent the morning in Manhattan, Jacob looked up at the buildings of Park Hill Avenue, and it came to him in a flash that what was spliced onto the surface of Staten Island was a piece of Liberia. His countrymen and women had travelled across the Atlantic Ocean; they had settled in a metropolis littered with universities and hospitals and night schools and degrees by correspondence. Yet between them and the city stood big men with broad shoulders and loud mouths, just as, at home, the big men stood between Liberia and the world.

At first, he marvelled at this doubling, this little Liberia away from Liberia, and his thoughts turned to mental prisons. If his compatriots were to settle at the North Pole, would the big men monopolise access to the seals, to the fish, to the ice and snow itself? Soon it became a constant

thought, living with him, tapping away at the inside of his head. By the time he had been on Park Hill Avenue a month, the idea that his street was a country had become quite familiar to him. What does one do in a country where things are not right? One contests power, of course. One gets busy.

PART ONE

1

Jacob

I walked into the Park Hill housing project in Staten Island, New York, on a stinging cold afternoon in January 2008. The weather had chased everyone indoors, and the neighbourhood, so animated when I last visited, was perfectly still. Each building I passed was precisely like the last: a deadweight block of dark brown brick, sharp cornered and six storeys high.

I walked deeper into Park Hill Avenue, and still there was not a soul, and the buildings looked as if they might go on for ever. For some time I allowed myself the fancy that I could be walking anywhere, on any continent, that perhaps I was on the streets of some abandoned utopia, that this place had once been crowded, but that nobody lived here any more.

My reverie was broken by the sight of a pitch-black van parked on the side of the road, a satellite dish on its roof, a familiar sign emblazoned on its sides: 'ABC Eyewitness News'. As I drew nearer, the buildings on either side of the road at last came alive with sound: a disembodied voice, a reply, then another – a veritable commentary tossed from one window to the next.

'Where the TV man?'

'He in the TV van.'

'The fuck!'

'Say what? The Eyewitness Man?'

‘Yeah. He in the van in his coat ‘n tie.’

‘Why he here?’

‘Dunno, man.’

I passed the van and went into 185 Park Hill Avenue, walked along the ground-floor corridor, wide and gloomy and pungent, and knocked on the door of the African Refuge Walk-In Center. Feet scuffed and shuffled, and bolts were unlocked. The door opened. Standing before me was Jacob D. Massaquoi II. I had a one o’clock appointment with him; I was hoping to write his story.

Jacob smiled a wide, sweeping smile, one that involved most of his face, and opened his arms.

‘My African brother,’ he crowed. ‘My *white, South African* brother.’ He laughed very deliberately, a rapid cackle like a rusty machine gun, and squeezed and slapped my arm.

Jacob Massaquoi was in his late thirties and barely more than five feet tall, the only short man I have known whom one forgets is short, for he inhabits a self a good ten inches taller than the body he has inherited. He is an anti-Napoleon, I would come to learn, unthreatened to his very core.

We chatted. He brandished his knowledge of my country’s politics, declaring with surprising passion his distaste for Jacob Zuma, the man who would soon be South Africa’s president.

‘What happened here today?’ I asked.

‘What happened?’

‘There’s a TV truck right outside,’ I said. ‘Eyewitness News.’

‘You’re serious? Where?’

‘Right outside.’

He tugged at a window until it opened, perched on the ledge and poked his head through, his polished black shoes looping in the air. The ground floor of 185 is below street level, and he could see no more than I: car tyres and a pair of passing shoes.

He wriggled back inside and picked up his coat and hat. 'Let's go and see,' he said.

We made our way outside, and Jacob knocked politely on the window of the black van. It opened about halfway down, to reveal a man's face. He was Barbie's Ken to a tee, full-bodied hair scooped impressively behind his ears, his face chiselled-pretty and frozen in sincerity, his coat an immaculate black over a colourful tie.

'What's brought you here?' Jacob asked.

'Sexual assault,' he replied with troubled earnestness. 'In this building.' He nodded in the direction of 185.

'What happened?' Jacob asked.

'I don't feel comfortable talking about the details,' he replied, and to his sincerity was now added a grave professionalism. 'Have you read this morning's *Staten Island Advance*?'

'No,' Jacob replied.

'Go and get it. The story's all over the *Advance*.'

The window closed, and through the glass we watched Ken face front once more and pick up a clipboard.

We took a shortcut to Vanderbilt through the tiny park on Bowen Street and bought a copy of the *Advance*. It was on page three.

'Read it to me,' Jacob asked.

A Clifton father opened the door to his home and a horrifying scene Wednesday night – his eleven-year-old daughter and her thirteen-year-old friend naked with four older male teens.

Now the teens – one eighteen-year-old, two seventeen-year-olds, and one sixteen-year-old – face a variety of rape charges.

The younger girl alleges they held her down while they took turns having sex with her, and the older girl says the sixteen-year-old forced her into having sex with him.

The scene unfolded at about 3:30 p.m. Wednesday, in an apartment on the 100 block of Park Hill Avenue.

The youngest of the four teens, Patrick Gross, sixteen, also of Park Hill Avenue, is dating the thirteen-year-old girl, and has had sexual relations with her in the past, according to a law enforcement source.

The thirteen-year-old initially agreed to have sex with Gross Wednesday, but she changed her mind. He continued anyway, cops allege.

Jacob fumbled in his pocket for his cellphone. 'Patrick Gross! I know that boy. I know him. He has attended our youth activities at African Refuge.'

Now he was on the phone talking in rapid Liberian English, helping verbs expunged, consonants elided, leaving a thick soup of vowels I found utterly opaque.

Jacob hung up and put his phone back in his coat pocket and frowned and looked at the ground.

'Complicated,' he said, as much to himself as to me, as we walked back to Park Hill Avenue. 'One of the suspects is the victim's dad's stepson. Which means he has had his wife's child thrown in jail. She is not pleased. She turfed him out the house. He had to sleep outside last night.'

'So what do you do?' I asked.

He did not reply. He appeared to have forgotten my presence beside him. He stared at his shoes as we walked.

Somebody must have told Ken that Jacob was a community leader; by the time we got back to Park Hill Avenue, he was standing next to the van, snapping shut a silver business-card holder.

'You see now, sir, why I didn't want to tell you?' Ken said. 'I felt more comfortable you reading about it quietly and in private.'

'It's a very nasty business,' Jacob agreed.

'You run that centre in 185?' Ken asked.

'African Refuge, yes.'

'Will you comment?'

'Aaah, very busy,' Jacob replied bashfully.

'A quick comment on what has happened?'

'Sorry. Must go. Got to go home and eat.'

But no meant yes, really, which Ken immediately understood. 'It will just take a minute,' he said, tapping on

the van's window and signalling to his cameraman. 'We'll do it right here, right now. It will be over before you know it.'

And to the cameraman now, who was shuffling out of the car. 'Let's be brisk, Mr, ah, the gentleman needs to get home to a late lunch.'

A minute later, Jacob and Ken were on camera.

'Sad! Sad! Sad!' Jacob was saying, staring at a spot just to the left of Ken's face. 'This leaves me sad, sad, sad. I know those boys. They are good boys. Really good boys. Parents in this neighbourhood must work all day to pay their bills. These kids are on the streets with nobody to raise them. In Africa, the villages were filled with adults during the day, and every adult was every child's parent. These kids should be coming to the after-school programmes we are providing. We have interventions here, psychosocial interventions tailored to problems these kids have.'

'I understand that these children are refugees,' Ken said, 'from Liberia, right? From the civil war there.'

'Yes, they are. We concentrate on programmes for victims of trauma, as well as for kids afflicted by poverty.'

'Will you please tell us the name and address of your programme,' Ken requested.

'African Refuge. African Refuge at 185 Park Hill Avenue. We are open every afternoon to kids like the ones who are in trouble now.'

Ken lowered his mic, shook his head gravely and made a tut-tutting noise with his tongue.

'Thank you so much for your time, sir. You understand why I was uncomfortable telling you what had happened?'

'I understand, I understand,' Jacob muttered.

'You know,' Ken continued, 'I've reported on Sierra Leonians before, and there were even *child soldiers* among them. Is it the same with you guys? Are there child soldiers here?'

Jacob nodded again, this time with great concentration.

‘That is not something I’ll talk about on camera,’ he said softly, staring at the ground.

‘Of course not,’ Ken replied. ‘Yes, of course not.’

I marvelled at the economy of this exchange. These men had never met before, yet each knew precisely what the other needed. Between them lay the words ‘refugees’ and ‘civil war’. With those words, Ken could file a report on a teenage gang rape transported across the ocean from some God-awful African Armageddon to a Wednesday afternoon in New York. And Jacob could be the one who knew how to heal these children, the question of what he himself had seen and done in that Armageddon lying unanswered in the background.

Late that night I sat in on a meeting of the Staten Island Liberian Community Association executive. It took place in a closed and windowless room on the ground floor of a Park Hill apartment block. The members of the executive, many of them heavysset men, crammed themselves into chair-desk contraptions designed for much smaller people. Opposite them sat the fathers of the two girls who had allegedly been raped.

It was 11 p.m. when the members of the executive began pressing the visitors to drop the rape charges. Both said no at first. Slowly, patiently, the members of the executive began to wear them down, quite prepared, it seemed, to go on until sunrise. By 2 a.m., one of the fathers had relented, while the other had walked out in protest and gone home.

As I was to learn later, in the subtext of the executive’s urgings was a piece of knowledge common to everyone in the room: for four of our boys to spend a long stretch of time in a United States penitentiary is to turn them into African-Americans, and the worst sort, to boot.

I returned to Park Hill Avenue a few days later for a 4 p.m. appointment with Jacob. This time the street was busy, a steady flow of cars cruising slowly in both directions,

disparate strands of hip-hop colliding briefly in the middle of the road.

Jacob and I arrived at his apartment building at precisely the same time. He was getting out of a taxi; a fidgety, hurried figure in an ankle-length checked coat and a checked hat. Once we were upstairs in his apartment, he took my coat hurriedly, made straight for a couch in front of his television set and invited me to sit with him. He turned to CNN, rewound to the start of the afternoon news programme presented by Wolf Blitzer, and then sat there transfixed for the next half-hour, his hand rubbing in constant agitation against his thigh.

It was 21 January 2008. The barely believable results of the Iowa Democratic primaries were less than a month old, and America was still new to the prospect that Barack Obama might beat Hillary Clinton and run against a Republican for the presidency of the United States. The two had debated the previous evening. Jacob had watched every moment, he told me. Now he wanted to absorb the commentary.

‘He de-*stroyed* her,’ Jacob pronounced. It was clear just from the tone of his voice that he was not talking about last night’s debate; he had dashed ahead to the future and was looking back at the whole story.

‘You see what is going on? You see what is happening in front of us? She has the whole Democratic establishment behind her, West Coast to East Coast. It is a machine, a huge, powerful machine. Her husband is *the* major figure, *the* dynasty man. Obama is taking them on.’

‘Is it because he’s black?’ I asked. ‘Is that what’s exciting? Or because his dad was African?’

He looked at me dubiously for a moment, then threw his arms up in exclamation.

‘One generation! Just one! Have you seen where his grandmother lives? Have you seen her place? One generation! And the man is taking on the *Clintons*; he is

taking on the *machine*. And he has *poise*. He is *foxy*. He is *outwitting* them.' He let out a raw, uninhibited laugh, grabbed my thigh and shook it. 'I am suffering *badly* from Obama fever.'

In the half-hour we watched Wolf Blitzer, Jacob's cellphone rang half a dozen times. His calls were hooked up to his landline and routed through the speakers of his desktop computer, and so the ringing filled the entire apartment whenever he received a call. Sometimes he would frown at the screen and then ignore it. Other times, he took the call, fumbled for the remote control to turn Wolf Blitzer down, then paced about the apartment as he spoke and listened. I had not noticed it the other day, but he could not sit still; there wasn't a moment when each part of his body came to rest at the same time.

The housing project's apartments were all big and vinyl-floored. Jacob's displayed the inattention and practicality of a bachelor's home. The vinyl underfoot was naked, the large space of his living room largely unfilled: an old couch, two mismatching chairs, a coffee table, a dark-panelled television stand. His walls were empty save for a framed copy of a *Staten Island Advance* story about his life during the Liberian civil war.

A workspace was positioned in the corner of the room: a desk and chair; a large old desktop computer with the two speakers from which Jacob's phone rang; ill-sorted piles of papers spilling onto the keyboard and the floor and under the desk. This was clearly the centre of Jacob's home, the rest of the apartment just a backdrop.

As he took one phone call after another, so his calendar for the following afternoon began to fill.

'Tomorrow was meant to be a schoolday,' he said to me between calls. 'I had cleared the entire day for schoolwork.' A look of panic briefly crossed his face, and then he banished it and returned his mind to Obama.

Schoolwork was a PhD in Leadership Studies by correspondence from the University of Phoenix. On an average day, he put aside the late-night hours for study; he'd start at about eleven, and end at two or three in the morning. Except, like now, when he was falling disastrously behind and needed to use part of the day to catch up.

The phone calls that echoed through his apartment were from politicians, administrators, non-profit organisations, members of the board of African Refuge, hospital directors, foster parents of Liberian children. Jacob, I was to learn, was neck-deep in Staten Island politics. He served on the District Community Board, was a board member of the local hospital, sat on Staten Island's Immigrants Council, and was invited incessantly to the cocktail and dinner parties hosted by Republican and Democratic grandees alike.

And he was penniless. African Refuge, the organisation he ran, began life in 2005 as a one-year project for survivors of trauma conceived by the staff of a programme at Columbia University's Mailman School. When the project was over, the organisation kept going, a fine and prestigious list of board members on its masthead, a wildly energetic Jacob in its director's office, but almost no money. When I met him, Jacob was drawing a pittance each month from the organisation's shallow coffers, sometimes no more than a few hundred dollars. He was Africa Refuge's only fundraiser, its only full-time employee, and he juggled running it with his Staten Island hobnobbing and his studies. The first time I slept over at his apartment, he was at his desk when I bid him goodnight at about one in the morning, and at his desk again, red-eyed and slouched, when I woke at half-past six.

As I walked away from his apartment in the darkness of early evening, it was the ferocity with which he stared at his television set that stuck in my mind. Obama's story was clearly his own: in what way, I did not yet know. It had been a long time since I had met a soul pointed so sharply and purely at the future. Every moment in his twenty-hour days

was clearly a move in a very long game. Whether he was insane or formidably calculating I didn't yet have a clue. But I wanted to find out.

2

Rufus

I arrived at about 7 p.m. to a room in which there appeared to be no order. At least a dozen little children weaved their way between the furniture, under the tables, through Rufus's legs. They were shouting and screaming their faces off. A gaggle of them played with a dominoes set, quite nicely, it appeared, until one of them picked it up and threw it resoundingly to the floor.

Then there were the teenagers. All I saw were the backs of their do-ragged heads. Each was in his own digital world. I drew close, as discreetly as I could, to look over their shoulders at their monitors. Some were on YouTube, earphones wrapped around ears, heads bobbing and nodding, feet tapping. Or they were on Facebook, a big-toothed grin of a friend here, a group photograph of eight friends there.

At a long plastic table I counted seven elderly people, an exercise book open in front of each of them, pencils grinding paper, heads stooped low in concentration, some very low, ears touching the plastic table.

Somebody unplugged his earphones and there was suddenly poetry and percussion and expletive all over the room. The elderly did not bat their eyelids, except for one old man who lifted his head from the table, shook it with resignation, and stared into space.

Amidst it all there was Rufus Arkoi, a big man lumbering through the anarchy. He wore a black bowler hat on his head and a thick gold chain around his neck; he had just been out to collect his dinner from his wife and he still had on his knee-length winter coat, making him the largest figure in this room by far.

‘Enough!’ he bellowed. ‘Enough! Before I beat you to smithereens!’

He stared downwards, through thick eyelids and imperious lashes, and so one knew that it was the small children at whom he had shouted. They ignored him. They just kept on making their own noise. They did not so much as flinch at the sound of his roar. And I thought to myself: this must be a benign man, his space a comfortable space, for he is so big, the children so small, and yet his enormous voice elicits nothing from them.

I came again two nights later. The mood was different now, and in the gap between this evening and the earlier one it was apparent that what I had taken for anarchy was in fact deeply orchestrated, slowly matured.

There were no youths; the chairs at the computer terminals were empty. The little ones were sitting quietly around a square table, colouring in drawings with coloured pencils. The old ones were at work as before.

There was a knock on the door and a young man came in and made his way across the room. He was twenty-something, lean, powerful, carrying himself with the ramrod straightness one sees only in those who exercise many hours a day.

Rufus looked up at him and raised an eyebrow.

‘Urgent email,’ the younger man said in explanation. ‘Home.’

Rufus nodded. ‘Anyone try to follow you, close the door on him.’

‘Where are the young people tonight?’ I asked Rufus.