

The Insane Ones

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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Ten miles outside Alexandria he picked up the coast road that ran across the top of the continent through Tunis and Algiers to the transatlantic tunnel at Casablanca, gunned the Jaguar up to 120 and burned along through the cool night air, letting the brine-filled slipstream cut into his six-day tan. Lolling back against the headrest as the palms flicked by, he almost missed the girl in the white raincoat waving from the steps of the hotel at El Alamein, had only three hundred yards to plunge the car to a halt below the rusting neon sign.

„Tunis?“ the girl called out, belting the man’s raincoat around her trim waist, long black hair in a Left Bank cut over one shoulder.

„Tunis—Casablanca—Atlantic City,“ Gregory shouted back, reaching across to the passenger door. She swung a yellow briefcase behind the seat, settling herself among the magazines and newspapers as they roared off. The headlamps picked out a United World cruiser parked under the palms in the entrance to the war

cemetery, and involuntarily Gregory winced and floored the accelerator, eyes clamped to the rear mirror until the road was safely empty.

At 90 he slacked off and looked at the girl, abruptly felt a warning signal sound again. She seemed like any demibeatnik, with a long melancholy face and grey skin, but something about her rhythms, the slack facial tone and dead eyes and mouth, made him uneasy. Under a flap of the raincoat was a blue-striped gingham skirt, obviously part of a nurse's uniform, out of character, like the rest of her strange gear. As she slid the magazines into the dashboard locker he saw the home-made bandage around the left wrist.

She noticed him watching her and flashed a too-bright smile, then made an effort at small talk.

„*Paris Vogue, Neue Frankfurter, Tel Aviv Express*—you've really been moving.“ She pulled a pack of Del Montes from the breast pocket of the coat, fumbled unfamiliarly with a large brass lighter. „First Europe, then Asia, now Africa. You'll run out of continents soon.“ Hesitating, she volunteered: „Carole Sturgeon. Thanks for the lift.“

Gregory nodded, watching the bandage slide around her slim wrist. He wondered which hospital she had sneaked away from. Probably Cairo General, the old-style English uniforms were still worn there. Ten to one the briefcase was packed with some careless salesman's 289 pharmaceutical samples. „Can I ask where you're going? This is the back end of nowhere.“

The girl shrugged. „Just following the road. Cairo, Alex, you know—“ She added: „I went to see the pyramids.“ She lay back, rolling slightly against his shoulder. „That was wonderful. They're the oldest things on earth. Remember their boast: *Before Abraham, I was?*“

They hit a dip in the road and Gregory's licence swung out under the steering column. The girl peered down and read it. „Do you mind? It's a long ride to Tunis. „Charles Gregory, MD—“ She stopped, repeating his name to herself uncertainly.

Suddenly she remembered. „Gregory! Dr Charles Gregory! Weren't you—Muriel Bortman, the President's daughter, she drowned herself at Key West, you were sentenced—“ She broke off, staring nervously at the windshield.

„You've got a long memory,“ Gregory said quietly. „I didn't think anyone remembered.“

„Of course I remember.“ She spoke in a whisper. „They were mad what they did to you.“ For the next few minutes she gushed out a long farrago of sympathy, interspersed with disjointed details from her own life. Gregory tried not to listen, clenching the wheel until his knuckles whitened, deliberately forgetting everything as fast as she reminded him.

There was a pause, as he felt it coming, the way it invariably did. „Tell me, doctor, I hope you forgive me asking, but since the Mental Freedom laws it's difficult to get help, one's got to be so careful—you too, of course...“ She laughed uneasily. „What I really mean is—“

Her edginess drained power from Gregory. „—you need psychiatric assistance,“ he cut in, pushing the Jaguar up to 95, eyes swinging to the rear mirror again. The road was dead, palms receding endlessly into the night.

The girl choked on her cigarette, the stub between her fingers a damp mess. „Well, not me,“ she said lamely. „A close friend of mine. She really needs help,

believe me, doctor. Her whole feeling for life is gone, nothing seems to mean anything to her any more.“

Brutally, he said: „Tell her to look at the pyramids.“

But the girl missed the irony, said quickly: „Oh, she has. I just left her in Cairo. I promised I'd try to find someone for her.“ She turned to examine Gregory, put a hand up to her hair. In the blue desert light she reminded him of the madonnas he had seen in the Louvre two days after his release, when he had run from the filthy prison searching for the most beautiful things in the world, the solemn-faced more-than-beautiful 13-year-olds who had posed for Leonardo and the Bellini brothers. „I thought perhaps you might know someone—“ He gripped himself and shook his head. „I don't. For the last three years I've been out of touch. Anyway, it's against the MF laws. Do you know what would happen if they caught me giving psychiatric treatment?“

Numbly the girl stared ahead at the road. Gregory flipped away his cigarette, pressing down on the accelerator as the last three years crowded back, memories he had hoped to repress on his 10,000-mile drive... three years at the prison farm near Marseilles, treating scrofulous farm-workers and sailors in the dispensary, even squeezing in a little illicit depth analysis for the corporal of police who couldn't satisfy his wife, three embittered years to accept that he would never practise again the one craft in which he was fully himself. Trick-cyclist or assuager of discontents, whatever his title, the psychiatrist had now passed into history, joining the necromancers, sorcerers and other practitioners of the black sciences.

The Mental Freedom legislation enacted ten years earlier by the ultraconservative UW government had banned the profession outright and enshrined the individual's freedom to be insane if he wanted to, provided he paid the full civil consequences for any infringements of the law. That was the catch, the hidden object of the MF laws. What had begun as a popular reaction against „subliminal living“ and the uncontrolled extension of techniques of mass manipulation for political and economic ends had quickly developed into a systematic attack on the psychological sciences. Overpermissive courts of law with their condoning of delinquency, pseudo-enlightened penal reformers, „Victims of society“, the psychologist and his patient all came under fierce attack. Discharging their self-hate and anxiety onto a convenient scapegoat, the new rulers, and the great majority electing them, outlawed all forms of psychic control, from the innocent market survey to lobotomy. The mentally ill were on their own, spared pity and consideration, made to pay to the hilt for their failings. The sacred cow of the community was the psychotic, free to wander where he wanted, drooling on the doorsteps, sleeping on sidewalks, and woe betide anyone who tried to help him.

Gregory had made that mistake. Escaping to Europe, first home of psychiatry, in the hope of finding a more tolerant climate, he set up a secret clinic in Paris with six other migr-analysts. For five years they worked undetected, until one of Gregory's patients, a tall ungainly girl with a psychogenic stutter, was revealed to be Muriel Bortman, daughter of the UW President-General. The analysis had failed tragically when the clinic was raided; after her death a lavish show trial (making endless play of electric shock apparatus, movies of insulin coma and the testimony

of countless paranoids rounded up in the alleyways) had concluded in a three-year sentence.

Now at last he was out, his savings invested in the Jaguar, fleeing Europe and his memories of the prison for the empty highways of North Africa. He didn't want any more trouble.

„I'd like to help,“ he told the girl. „But the risks are too high. All your friend can do is try to come to terms with herself.“

The girl chewed her lip fretfully. „I don't think she can. Thanks, anyway, doctor.“

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For three hours they sat back silently in the speeding car, until the lights of Tobruk came up ahead, the long curve of the harbour.

„It's 2 A.M.,“ Gregory said. „There's a motel here. I'll pick you up in the morning.“

After they had gone to their rooms he sneaked back to the registry, booked himself into a new chalet. He fell asleep as Carole Sturgeon wandered forlornly up and down the verandas, whispering out his name.

After breakfast he came back from the sea, found a big United World cruiser in the court, orderlies carrying a stretcher out to an ambulance.

A tall Libyan police colonel was leaning against the Jaguar, drumming his leather baton on the windscreen.

„Ah, Dr Gregory. Good morning.“ He pointed his baton at the ambulance. „A profound tragedy, such a beautiful American girl.“

Gregory rooted his feet in the grey sand, with an effort restrained himself from running over to the ambulance and pulling back the sheet. Fortunately the colonel's uniform and thousands of morning and evening cell inspections kept him safely to attention.

„I'm Gregory, yes.“ The dust thickened in his throat. „Is she dead?“

The colonel stroked his neck with the baton. „Ear to ear. She must have found an old razor blade in the bathroom. About 3 o'clock this morning.“ He headed towards Gregory's chalet, gesturing with the baton. Gregory followed him into the half light, stood tentatively by the bed.

„I was asleep then. The clerk will vouch for that.“

„Naturally.“ The colonel gazed down at Gregory's possessions spread out across the bedcover, idly poked the black medical bag.

„She asked you for assistance, doctor? With her personal problems?“

„Not directly. She hinted at it, though. She sounded a little mixed up.“

„Poor child.“ The colonel lowered his head sympathetically. „Her father is a first secretary at the Cairo Embassy, something of an autocrat. You Americans are very stern with your children, doctor. A firm hand, yes, but understanding costs nothing. Don't you agree? She was frightened of him, escaped from the American Hospital. My task is to provide an explanation for the authorities. If I had an idea of what was really worrying her... no doubt you helped her as best you could?“

Gregory shook his head. „I gave her no help at all, colonel. In fact, I refused to discuss her problems altogether.“ He smiled flatly at the colonel. „I wouldn't make the same mistake twice, would I?“

The colonel studied Gregory thoughtfully. „Sensible of you, doctor. But you surprise me. Surely the members of your profession regard themselves as a special calling, answerable to a higher authority. Are these ideals so easy to cast off?“

„I’ve had a lot of practice.“ Gregory began to pack away his things on the bed, bowed to the colonel as he saluted and made his way out into the court.

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Half an hour later he was on the Benghasi road, holding the Jaguar at 100, working off his tension and anger in a savage burst of speed. Free for only ten days, already he had got himself involved again, gone through all the agony of having to refuse help to someone desperately needing it, his hands itching to administer relief to the child but held back by the insane penalties. It wasn’t only the lunatic legislation but the people enforcing it who ought to be swept away—Bortman and his fellow oligarchs.

He grimaced at the thought of the cold dead-faced Bortman, addressing the World Senate at Lake Success, arguing for increased penalties for the criminal psychopath. The man had stepped straight out of the 14th-century Inquisition, his bureaucratic puritanism masking two real obsessions: dirt and death. Any sane society would have locked Bortman up for ever, or given him a complete brain-lift. Indirectly Bortman was as responsible for the death of Carole Sturgeon as he would have been had he personally handed the razor blade to her.

After Libya, Tunis. He blazed steadily along the coast road, the sea like a molten mirror on the right, avoiding the big towns where possible. Fortunately they weren’t so bad as the European cities, psychotics loitering like stray dogs in the uptown parks, wise enough not to shop-lift or cause trouble, but a petty nuisance on the caf terraces, knocking on hotel doors at all hours of the night.

At Algiers he spent three days at the Hilton, having a new engine fitted to the car, and hunted up Philip Kalundborg, an old Toronto colleague now working in a WHO children’s hospital.

Over their third carafe of burgundy Gregory told him about Carole Sturgeon.

„It’s absurd, but I feel guilty about her. Suicide is a highly suggestive act, I reminded her of Muriel Bortman’s death. Damn it, Philip, I could have given her the sort of general advice any sensible layman would have offered.“

„Dangerous. Of course you were right,“ Philip assured him. „After the last three years who could argue otherwise?“

Gregory looked out across the terrace at the traffic whirling over the neon-lit cobbles. Beggars sat at their pitches along the sidewalk, whining for sous.

„Philip, you don’t know what it’s like in Europe now. At least 5 per cent are probably in need of institutional care. Believe me, I’m frightened to go to America. In New York alone they’re jumping from the roofs at the rate of ten a day. The world’s turning into a madhouse, one half of society gloating righteously over the torments of the other. Most people don’t realize which side of the bars they are. It’s easier for you. Here the traditions are different.“

Kalundborg nodded. „True. In the villages up-country it’s been standard practice for centuries to blind schizophrenics and exhibit them in a cage. Injustice is so widespread that you build up an indiscriminate tolerance to every form.“

A tall dark-bearded youth in faded cotton slacks and rope sandals stepped across the terrace and put his hands on their table. His eyes were sunk deep below his forehead, around his lips the brown staining of narcotic poisoning.

„Christian!“ Kalundborg snapped angrily. He shrugged hopelessly at Gregory, then turned to the young man with quiet exasperation. „My dear fellow, this has gone on for too long. I can't help you, there's no point in asking.“

The young man nodded patiently. „It's Marie,“ he explained in a slow roughened voice. „I can't control her. I'm frightened what she may do to the baby. Postnatal withdrawal, you know—“

„Nonsense! I'm not an idiot, Christian. The baby is nearly three. If Marie is a nervous wreck you've made her so. Believe me, I wouldn't help you if I was allowed to. You must cure yourself or you are finished. Already you have chronic barbiturism. Dr Gregory here will agree with me.“

Gregory nodded. The young man stared blackly at Kalundborg, glanced at Gregory and then shambled off through the tables.

Kalundborg filled his glass. „They have it all wrong today. They think our job was to further addiction, not cure it. In their pantheon the father-figure is always benevolent.“

„That's invariably been Bortman's line. Psychiatry is ultimately selfindulgent, an encouragement to weakness and lack of will. Admittedly there's no one more single-minded than an obsessional neurotic. Bortman himself is a good example.“

As he entered the tenth-floor bedroom the young man was going through his valise on the bed. For a moment Gregory wondered whether he was a 1.5W spy, perhaps the meeting on the terrace had been an elaborate trap.

„Find what you want?“

Christian finished whipping through the bag, then tossed it irritably onto the floor. He edged restlessly away from Gregory around the bed, his eyes hungrily searching the wardrobe top and lamp brackets.

„Kalundborg was right,“ Gregory told him quietly. „You're wasting your time.“

„The hell with Kalundborg,“ Christian snarled softly. „He's working the wrong levels. Do you think I'm looking for a jazz heaven, doctor? With a wife and child? I'm not that irresponsible. I took a Master's degree in law at Heidelberg.“ He wandered off around the room, then stopped to survey Gregory closely.

Gregory began to slide in the drawers. „Well, get back to your jurisprudence. There are enough ills to weigh in this world.“

„Doctor, I've made a start. Didn't Kalundborg tell you I sued Bortman for murder?“ When Gregory seemed puzzled he explained: „A private civil action, not criminal proceedings. My father killed himself five years ago after Bortman had him thrown out of the Bar Association.“

Gregory picked up his valise off the floor. „I'm sorry,“ he said noncommittally. „What happened to your suit against Bortman?“

Christian stared out through the window into the dark air. „It was never entered. Some World Bureau investigators saw me after I started to be a nuisance and suggested I leave the States for ever. So I came to Europe to get my degree. I'm on my way back now. I need the barbiturates to stop myself trying to toss a bomb at Bortman.“

Suddenly he propelled himself across the room, before Gregory could stop him was out on the balcony, jack-knifed over the edge. Gregory dived after him, kicked away his feet and tried to pull him off the ledge. Christian clung to it, shouting into the darkness, the lights from the cars racing in the damp street below. On the sidewalk people looked up.

Christian was doubled up with laughter as they fell back into the room, slumped down on the bed, pointing his finger at Gregory, who was leaning against the wardrobe, gasping in exhausted spasms.

„Big mistake there, doctor. You better get out fast before I tip off the Police Prefect. Stopping a suicide! God, with your record you'd get ten years for that. What a joke!“

Gregory shook him by the shoulders, temper flaring. „Listen, what are you playing at? What do you want?“

Christian pushed Gregory's hands away and lay back weakly. „Help me, doctor. I want to kill Bortman, it's all I think about. If I'm not careful I'll really try. Show me how to forget him.“ His voice rose desperately. „Damn, I hated my father, I was glad when Bortman threw him out.“

Gregory eyed him thoughtfully, then went over to the window and bolted out the night.

Two months later, at the motel outside Casablanca, Gregory finally burned the last of the analysis notes. Christian, clean-shaven and wearing a neat white tropical suit, a neutral tie, watched from the door as the stack of coded entries gutted out in the ashtray, then carried them into the bathroom and flushed them away.

When Christian had loaded his suitcases into the car Gregory said: „One thing before we go. A complete analysis can't be effected in two months, let alone two years. It's something you work at all your life. If you have a relapse, come to me, even if I'm in Tahiti, or Shanghai or Archangel.“ Gregory paused. „If they ever find out, you know what will happen?“ When Christian nodded quietly he sat down in the chair by the writing table, gazing out through the date palms at the huge domed mouth of the transatlantic tunnel a mile away. For a long time he knew he would be unable to relax. In a curious way he felt that the three years at Marseilles had been wasted, that he was starting a suspended sentence of indefinite length. There had been no satisfaction at the successful treatment, perhaps because he had given in to Christian partly for fear of being incriminated in an attack on Bortman.

„With luck, you should be able to live with yourself now. Try to remember that whatever evils Bortman may perpetrate in the future he's irrelevant to your problem. It was the stroke your mother suffered after your father's death that made you realize the guilt you felt subconsciously for hating him, but you conveniently shifted the blame onto Bortman, and by eliminating him you thought you could free yourself. The temptation may occur again.“

Christian nodded, standing motionlessly by the doorway. His face had filled out, his eyes were a placid grey. He looked like any well-groomed UW bureaucrat.

Gregory picked up a newspaper. „I see Bortman is attacking the American Bar Association as a subversive body, probably planning to have it proscribed. If it succeeds it'll be an irreparable blow to civil liberty.“ He looked up thoughtfully at

Christian, who showed no reaction. „Right, let’s go. Are you still fixed on getting back to the States?“

„Of course.“ Christian climbed into the car, then shook Gregory’s hand. Gregory had decided to stay in Africa, find a hospital where he could work and had given Christian the car. „Marie will wait for me in Algiers until I finish my business.“

„What’s that?“

Christian pressed the starter, sent a roar of dust and exhaust across the compound.

„I’m going to kill Bortman,“ he said quietly.

Gregory gripped the windscreen. „You’re not serious.“

„You cured me, doctor, and give or take the usual margins I’m completely sane, more than I probably ever will be again. Damn few people in this world are now, so that makes the obligation on me to act rationally even greater. Well, every ounce of logic tells me that someone’s got to make the effort to get rid of the grim menagerie running things now, and Bortman looks like a pretty good start. I intend to drive up to Lake Success and take a shot at him.“ He shunted the gear change into second, and added, „Don’t try to have me stopped, doctor, because they’ll only dig out our long weekend here.“

As he started to take his foot off the clutch Gregory shouted: „Christian! You’ll never get away with it! They’ll catch you anyway!“ but the car wrenched forward out of his hand.

Gregory ran through the dust after it, stumbling over half-buried stones, realizing helplessly that when they caught Christian and probed down into the past few months they would soon find the real assassin, an exiled doctor with a three-year-grudge.

„Christian!“ he yelled, choking on the white ash. „Christian, you’re insane!“

