

MARTIN DOBROVODSKY

Appointment

PHILMORE STOOD BEFORE THE MINISTRY of Social Stability and Control and looked up to where it broke through the ceiling of clouds high above him.

The glass pillar had no architectural merits of its own but rather appropriated the qualities of the aesthetically superior older buildings around it by, literally, mirroring them. It towered over these buildings, which seemed to cower under it in abject obeisance.

Philmore cowered under it too.

Appropriation: the modus operandi of governments as they assimilate the virtues of smaller entities either through coercion or incentive.

He mustered sufficient nerve to pass through the revolving glass door, and found himself in an expansive lobby—so expansive that he imagined he had passed through a wardrobe and entered Narnia.

Now he had only to find the White Witch and free the land from her evil spell, a permanent winter—and avoid being turned to stone in the process.

He wasted no time in locating the building directory and scanned it for the Centre of Unemployment Assistance. The CUA was on the fourteenth floor—which was in reality the thirteenth floor.

Because of superstitious fears associated with the number thirteen, there was, officially, no thirteenth floor. The building went from floor twelve to floor fourteen. There was nothing extraordinary about this. It was common practice to deny the existence of a thirteenth floor.

That's not to say that it didn't concern Philmore to be in such a large structure envisioned and commissioned by people with an irrational fear of a rational number.

He found the elevator and went up. On the fourteenth floor, on the wall opposite the elevator, was another directory. Under the words CENTRE OF UNEMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE were several arrows pointing

either left or right down the corridor. One of these arrows indicated that the Work Insurance Office was to the left. Philmore followed the corridor around four left-hand turns before he found a door marked WORK INSURANCE OFFICE. Then he saw the elevator he had taken, a couple of metres further down the corridor. He had been sent around in a circle.

One thing you can count on from the government is the runaround.

He took a deep breath and pushed through the door.

A few paces inside was a desk with a sign over it saying RECEPTION. He reported to the woman behind the desk, stating his name and identification number. The woman ran a finger down then up an appointment book and then looked up at him with such a surly expression that he was sure he had done something wrong.

Have I violated the sacred Work Insurance Regulations, offended the country at large and insulted this woman personally, all at the same time?

Or is this the White Witch?

"You're not here," the receptionist said.

"But I'm here as much as you're here."

"Your name, it's not in my book."

The self-righteous gatekeeper wore such a smug expression that Philmore cringed. And in his mind he heard her voice.

How dare you come before me without prostrating yourself.

He clutched his head with both hands against a searing pain as she branded chapter and verse numbers from the Book of Revelation on the soft, gray, cauliflower-like tissue of his cerebrum.

Rev 20:15—"And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire."

He caught the distinct smell of burning flesh.

Then he was fortunate to see the receptionist for what she was: a wizened gorgon with a thin mouth tightened against years of breathing stale, re-circulated air in a hermetically sealed office block, defiantly drumming her fingers on a desk as though with real authority, living out a miserable fate sealed long before.

Her attitude had nothing to do with him personally and he might even have felt compassion for her—for this self-loathing harridan—were it not an attitude all too common among the ranks of overpaid public servants. So common was it that one had to assume it was an approach sanctioned by those in charge. Philmore himself had known superiors to use the same technique.

It was institutionalized arrogance.

"And whose fault is it that my name's not in your little book?" Philmore didn't wait for a response. "No, I know what's going to happen now,

you're going to treat me like some small, gullible child and try to convince me that it's somehow my fault. Well," he offered, "I'll tell you whose fault it is. Obviously, your minions have, once again, made a mistake. I have my appointment written down right here." He produced a piece of paper from his pants pocket and swept it before the receptionist's face before returning it to the pocket. "So, if you'll kindly show me to my next station—"

"We're booked," the receptionist said, and tried to make herself look busy straightening some papers on the desk.

The move prompted Philmore to recount, at considerable length and volume, a history of incompetence he had endured at the hands of government employees, going back five years. He was prepared, and would have liked, to go back another five years, but he was seized by two security guards and escorted out of the building.



Philmore managed to get a new appointment for just two days later.

Round two.

Getting an appointment so soon after his failed appointment involved a great deal of wrangling—and time. He spent over an hour on the phone pleading his case, being bandied about from one department to another.

A fine example of passing the buck—a cyber runaround.

When he arrived at the Work Insurance Office, he was relieved to see a different face behind the reception desk.

"What happened to the other woman?"

"Stress leave."

The new woman didn't look up. She was writing in the appointment book.

"Name?"

"Yes," Philmore said, sniggering.

"Look, mister, this isn't Comedy Central. Tell me your name and stop holding up the line."

She had still not looked up. Philmore looked behind him; there was no one there.

"Tell me, were you hired because you demonstrated a discourteous nature at the interview, or is that something that developed after you took the job?"

She looked up. "Excuse me?"

"There, that's better."

"What exactly is it that you want, sir?"

“Gray. Philmore Gray.”

The receptionist just stared at him. She wore such a stupefied look that Philmore wondered whether she had slipped into a state of catatonia. He imagined an army of paramedics emerging from behind an office partition, strapping a straightjacket over her and carting her away on a hospital gurney. He grew concerned that he would have to reschedule his appointment yet again.

“My name ...” he encouraged. But the receptionist remained unresponsive. “My name is Philmore Gray,” he tried at last.

“Oh yes!”

She ran a finger down the book, stopping a third of the way down. “There you are,” she said in a lilting voice, as though locating a pet cat. She put a little red check mark beside his name and began rummaging around in the desk. “If you’ll just wait behind that wall over there,” she said, again without looking up, “someone will be with you shortly.” Her hand found a ruler and she commenced drawing a red box around his name.

She had not so much as twitched a finger to indicate to Philmore where he should go. He looked behind him, where there were several office partitions in a maze-like formation; one partition caught his attention—he thought it was likely the wall the receptionist had meant.

He wasn’t finished with the receptionist, though. “Um, excuse me, which wall was that?”

With artful insolence, the receptionist raised her arm and pointed, with the red pen as well as with her eyes, at a padded apple-green office partition. “That one,” she said.

“Oh, you mean that *green* one over there—the only *green* one around.”

But the receptionist had gone back to work on her little red box. Before he left her for the green wall, Philmore gave her desk a swift kick. She started and gasped and carved a deep red line across the page with a single spastic movement.

Behind the green office partition were a dozen chairs—perhaps half of them occupied—facing a counter partitioned into four cubicles. Each cubicle had a seat in it. Only one of the cubicles had a clerk behind the counter—an elderly man with white bristling eyebrows. He was with a client. Suddenly the client stood up and brushed past Philmore, and the clerk called, “Seventy-two!” It was then that Philmore realized he had to take a number (the receptionist, of course, hadn’t thought to tell him).

The Turn-O-Matic ticket dispenser—a postmodern floor lamp, a *War of the Worlds* Cyclops—was located across the way. The number on the pink paper tongue sticking out the front was seventy-eight. He tore

numbers seventy-eight to ninety-two out of the dispenser, but still didn't have a number.

With his left hand, he pinched ticket number seventy-nine of the lascivious tongue as though holding a snake behind its head, and between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, gripped number seventy-eight. At the count of three he yanked number seventy-eight, and the two numbers—seventy-eight and seventy-nine—separated. He put his number in a safe pocket and then attempted to stuff the rest of the tongue back into the clenched mouth of the Turn-O-Matic ticket dispenser, but he only succeeded in crumpling it so that it dangled from the dispenser like a battered concertina.

He decided to take a seat.

Quite some time passed before he heard the elderly clerk call seventy-three. He was in for a long wait; but, of course, he had known to anticipate this. He produced Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* from his inner jacket pocket and began reading.

Over an hour later, he heard the magical sound of his number being called. He leapt from his seat and clambered over slumped and snoozing bodies to get to the elderly clerk. He sat across from the man with the bristling eyebrows as though in a dream, unable to believe he'd made it.

The man's mottled hands were folded in front of him. "How can I help you, sir?"

Philmore imparted his grievance: "I have not yet received my first benefit payment. In my humble estimation, I should have received it last week."

"I see ..."

Philmore waited, expecting the man to go on, but he only sighed.

He elaborated: "I sent all the required information and followed all the procedures. My rent is due in a few days and I have no money."

Again, all the clerk said was, "I see ..."—and there was another pause.

"And ...?"

"Let me check your file," said the clerk.

The man disappeared into the labyrinth of office partitions behind him. Philmore drew a deep breath through his nose and exhaled through his mouth in an attempt to discharge his exasperation.

Five minutes must have passed before the eyebrows reemerged. The elderly man, punctuating his slow movements with groans and eructations, sat across from Philmore and, with something akin to zeal, began to clear his throat. The guttural sounds rising from deep within the man's esophagus continued for so long, and the man's face took on such a startling range of

hues, that Philmore feared he was struggling for his final breath—and again there welled up in his mind a troubling vision of paramedics and a hospital gurney.

What would happen to his case should this man expire before his eyes?

The clerk said, “I’ve discovered the problem”—and Philmore allowed himself to become hopeful—“You’ve come to the wrong floor”—and the hope vanished. The clerk clarified: “You should have gone to the basement”; then he leaned forward and whispered in a menacing, Oz-like voice, “To the dungeon.” He whispered this last part so softly that Philmore didn’t hear him; he only smelled his sour breath—from which he couldn’t recoil fast enough.

“The basement . . .” Philmore said. “And no one could have told me this on the phone, or when I arrived, so that I would not have waited in vain for two hours?”

But the clerk just called past Philmore, “Seventy-nine!”

Philmore gave the receptionist’s desk another swift kick on his way to the elevator. He heard the receptionist grumbling behind him like an old radiator.

When the elevator doors opened at the basement level, Philmore found himself staring into the yawning mouth of a long, poorly lit corridor with countless doors on each side. Another corridor, just as long and dark and with as many doors, went off to the right; and still another went off to the left. All the elderly clerk had told him was to go to the basement. But where in the basement? Philmore could not see the end of any one of the corridors; each dissolved in darkness at an unfathomable distance. He wished he had been given a room number.

But when he started down the corridor that ran straight off the elevator, he noticed that none of the doors were numbered anyway, or had any distinguishing mark; they were all, like the walls, a plain, flat gray—as far as he could tell. Every second fluorescent light in the tiled ceiling was burned out; of the rest, the majority was flickering with a menacing rhythm, as though to a barbaric beat. Many of the ceiling tiles had broken corners, while others sagged in the middle as though holding water; some had brownish-yellow stains.

There was an indistinct rumbling and chugging as of a train, emanating from an unknown distance. Philmore imagined that behind one of the gray doors was an abominable hell, where slaves in loincloths, glistening sweat, their ankles chained, swung hammers over anvils in a wasteland of vast, fiery pits, forging brands with chapter and verse numbers from the Book of Revelation.

Rev 19:6, "And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

Rev 19:2, "For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand."

Rev 20:13, "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works."

And, of course, Rev 20:15, "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life. . . ."

The stifling heat, the inadequate lighting and the mechanistic sounds in the corridor supported Philmore's apocalyptic vision of bondage and hell-fire. As he walked on, however, he decided—or preferred to believe—that the noise and the heat were rather emanating from something as innocuous and prosaic as a boiler-room.

He had passed perhaps a hundred of the gray doors—fifty on each side, spaced about five metres apart—before he could make out the end of the corridor. Then, quite near the end, he could see that there was just one door remaining, on the right. As he approached it, and despite the gloom, he saw that it was marked. He stood squarely before it and tried to make out the marking as the light flickered overhead. When the light flashed briefly on, he saw a small rectangular metal plate riveted to the door. Three more flashes in quick succession—like lightning—revealed, in turn, three embossed characters.

"One-oh-one!" Philmore exclaimed, his voice echoing down the corridor. What with the flickering lights and the general desolation of the place, he half expected to hear thunder and malicious laughter. He wanted to run back down the corridor and find the street and daylight, but he was frozen with fear.

Then the door to Room 101 swung open and a fusty draught stole his breath. There, in the doorway, stood a very tall man, and again Philmore felt compelled to run—but, highlighting an apparent paradox in nature's fear response, his fear fixed him all the more firmly into place.

Despite the fact that the tall man was in silhouette, Philmore could see that he was frowning and pursing his lips like an angry orangutan.

In a genial voice that was incongruous with his sinister expression, the tall man said, "You must be the Gray fellow. I've been expecting you. Please, come in."

Philmore's legs broke forward as though out of stone. He found himself in a long, brightly lit room with nothing more than an ornate chair

in the middle of the floor. The floor was a hygienic white and sparkled with unnatural cleanliness. The walls were the same hygienic white. The intense brightness of the room—the result of the uninterrupted banks of fluorescent lights overhead—was dizzying. Philmore wished some of the lights were, as in the corridor, burned out, and the corridor now seemed almost inviting compared to this room. He might have fled were he not drawn to the curious high-backed chair in the middle of the room.

The chair had a royal blue seat and the seatback, too, was blue. The seatback ended at two horn-like points, between which was a vitreous bright green orb. The orb was about the size of a tennis ball and glowed with a strange luminosity. The legs of the chair had feet like a large predatory bird's with incisor-like talons, and the arms were like human arms with gnarled hands. The chair was made of wood and was very stiff looking.

Philmore was transfixed by it, as one might be by an oddity in a curio shop.

"We have your cheque ready," said the tall man.

Philmore faced him. "Oh ...? Where is it?"

"I have it here."

The tall man reached in his inner jacket pocket and produced a cheque. He showed it to Philmore and Philmore saw that it was indeed made out to him—"Pay to the order of Philmore Gray." He reached out for it, but it was pulled away.

"Not so fast. Do you really think we're going to make it that easy on you?" The man paused for ten long seconds, as though he expected an answer.

Philmore shifted his weight from one leg to the other and waited.

"You know, Mr. Gray," the man said at last, "we don't actually have the authority to issue this cheque to you now, without approval from the Central Centre of Unemployment Assistance, but there's no reason we can't bend the rules in this case. All we need is a little something from you, and then what we have is more of an exchange than—than an unprincipled and wanton act of beneficence on our part. Think of it as a formality."

He cracked each of his knuckles, one after the other, then proceeded to elaborate.

"What we need is for you to sit in that chair"—he motioned to the wooden chair in the middle of the room—"for as long as we decide we want you to sit there. I'll be just on the other side of that door"—he motioned to a door that Philmore hadn't noticed until then—"watching you on about two dozen screens." He rubbed his hands together and licked his lips. "Now, if you leave that chair before I come back through that door"—he motioned to the chair and the door in turn—"then you don't get this cheque"—he

flapped the cheque in Philmore's face. "I may be back in just a couple of minutes, or I may not be back for several hours or perhaps even days or—who knows?—weeks. That chair"—once more he motioned to the wooden chair—"is specially designed to be uncomfortable—like all the chairs in all our waiting rooms, but much more so. Just sitting in it for a few minutes will make you feel like you've broken your back. In addition, as soon as I step through that door"—yet again he motioned to the door—"the lights go out in this room"—he indicated the fluorescent lights above them. "You see, we like to keep our clients in the dark." He might have been reciting a government slogan. "But then," he said, "you already know that, don't you, Gray?"

Philmore just stared at him.

"Shall we begin then?" the man said.

But Philmore had other plans. He wasn't going to sit in the chair for even a moment.

"Tell you what," he said, "you start without me and wait in your little back room till I come sit in your chair here." He motioned to the chair in a mocking gesture.

"It's a deal!" exclaimed the tall man; then, after a moment, during which he came to understand what he had agreed to, "No, wait, that won't do!"

But Philmore was already gone. He had turned and walked out of the room, and once out in the corridor—surprised to have not been challenged—he ran. He ran as fast as he could down the corridor and up a flight of stairs and, with considerable and unexpected ease, found the main lobby.

He felt empowered in his flight.