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# QUICHOTTE

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*A Novel*

SALMAN RUSHDIE



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

## A QUIXOTIC NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

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*Quichotte*, pronounced 'key-SHOT' in French and 'key-SHOT-uh' in German, and *Chisciotte*, pronounced 'key-SHO-tay' in Italian, are alternative spellings/pronunciations of the Spanish *Quixote* or *Quijote*, pronounced 'key-HO-tay'. Portuguese also uses a 'sh' sound rather than a 'h' sound for the *x* or *j* in the middle of Don Quixote/Quijote's illustrious name. Cervantes himself would probably have said 'key-SHO-tay' in the Spanish of his time. For the purposes of this text, the recommended pronunciation is the elegant French 'key-SHOT', for reasons which the text itself will make clear; but, gentle reader, suit yourself. To each his/her/their own articulation of the universal Don.

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**PART ONE**

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CHAPTER ONE

*Quichotte, an old Man,  
falls in Love, embarks on a Quest  
& becomes a Father*

*T*HERE ONCE LIVED, AT A SERIES OF TEMPORARY ADDRESSES across the United States of America, a travelling man of Indian origin, advancing years and retreating mental powers, who, on account of his love for mindless television, had spent far too much of his life in the yellow light of tawdry motel rooms watching an excess of it, and had suffered a peculiar form of brain damage as a result. He devoured morning shows, daytime shows, late-night talk shows, soaps, situation comedies, Lifetime Movies, hospital dramas, police series, vampire and zombie serials, the dramas of housewives from Atlanta, New Jersey, Beverly Hills and New York, the romances and quarrels of hotel-fortune princesses and self-styled shahs, the cavortings of individuals made famous by happy nudities, the fifteen minutes of fame accorded to young persons with large social media followings on account of their plastic-surgery acquisition of a third breast or their post-rib-removal figures that mimicked the impossible shape of the Mattel company's Barbie doll, or even, more simply, their ability to catch giant carp in picturesque

settings while wearing only the tiniest of string bikinis; as well as singing competitions, cooking competitions, competitions for business propositions, competitions for business apprenticeships, competitions between remote-controlled monster vehicles, fashion competitions, competitions for the affections of both bachelors and bachelorettes, baseball games, basketball games, football games, wrestling bouts, kickboxing bouts, extreme sports programming and, of course, beauty contests. (He did not watch 'hockey'. For people of his ethnic persuasion and tropical youth, hockey, which in the USA was renamed 'field hockey', was a game played on grass. To play field hockey on ice was, in his opinion, the absurd equivalent of ice-skating on a lawn.)

As a consequence of his near-total preoccupation with the material offered up to him through, in the old days, the cathode-ray tube, and, in the new age of flat screens, through liquid-crystal, plasma, and organic light-emitting diode displays, he fell victim to that increasingly prevalent psychological disorder in which the boundary between truth and lies became smudged and indistinct, so that at times he found himself incapable of distinguishing one from the other, reality from 'reality', and began to think of himself as a natural citizen (and potential inhabitant) of that imaginary world beyond the screen to which he was so devoted, and which, he believed, provided him, and therefore everyone, with the moral, social and practical guidelines by which all men and women should live. As time passed and he sank ever deeper into the quicksand of what might be termed the unreal real, he felt himself becoming emotionally involved with many of the inhabitants of that other, brighter world, membership in which he thought of as his to claim by right, like a latter-day Dorothy contemplating a permanent move to Oz; and at an unknown point he developed an unwholesome, because entirely one-sided, passion for a certain television personality, the beautiful, witty and adored Miss Salma R, an infatuation which he characterised, quite inaccurately, as love. In the name of this so-called love he resolved zealously to pursue his 'beloved' right

through the television screen into whatever exalted high-definition reality she and her kind inhabited, and, by deeds as well as grace, to win her heart.

He spoke slowly and moved slowly too, dragging his right leg a little when he walked – the lasting consequence of a dramatic Interior Event many years earlier, which had also damaged his memory, so that while happenings in the distant past remained vivid, his remembrances of the middle period of his life had become hit-and-miss, with large hiatuses and other gaps which had been filled up, as if by a careless builder in a hurry, with false memories created by things he might have seen on TV. Other than that, he seemed in good enough shape for a man of his years. He was a tall, one might even say an elongated, man, of the sort one encounters in the gaunt paintings of El Greco and the narrow sculptures of Alberto Giacometti, and although such men are (for the most part) of a melancholy disposition, he was blessed with a cheerful smile and the charming manner of a gentleman of the old school, both valuable assets for a commercial traveller, which, in these his golden years, he became for a lengthy time. In addition, his name itself was cheerful: It was Smile. *Mr Ismail Smile, Sales Executive, Smile Pharmaceuticals Inc., Atlanta, GA*, it said on his business card. As a salesman he had always been proud that his name was the same as the name of the corporation whose representative he was. The family name. It lent him a certain gravitas, or so he believed. This was not, however, the name by which he chose to be known during his last, most foolish adventure.

(The unusual surname *Smile*, by the by, was the Americanised version of *Ismail*, so the old travelling salesman was really Mr Ismail Ismail, or, alternatively, Mr Smile Smile. He was a brown man in America longing for a brown woman, but he did not see his story in racial terms. He had become, one might say, detached from his skin. This was one of the many things his quest would put in question, and change.)

The more he thought about the woman he professed to love, the

clearer it became to him that so magnificent a personage would not simply keel over with joy at the first declaration of *amour fou* from a total stranger. (He wasn't as crazy as *that*.) Therefore it would be necessary for him to prove himself worthy of her, and the provision of such proofs would henceforth be his only concern. Yes! He would amply demonstrate his worth! It would be necessary, as he began his quest, to keep the object of his affections fully informed of his doings, and so he proposed to begin a correspondence with her, a sequence of letters which would reveal his sincerity, the depth of his affections, and the lengths to which he was ready to go to gain her hand. It was at this point in his reflections that a kind of shyness overtook him. Were he to reveal to her how humble his station in life truly was, she might toss his letter in the trash with a pretty laugh and be done with him forever. Were he to disclose his age or give her details of his appearance, she might recoil from the information with a mixture of amusement and horror. Were he to offer her his name, the admittedly august name of Smile, a name with big money attached to it, she might, in the grip of a bad mood, alert the authorities, and to be hunted down like a dog at the behest of the object of his adorations would break his heart, and he would surely die. Therefore he would for the moment keep his true identity a secret, and would reveal it only when his letters, and the deeds they described, had softened her attitude toward him and made her receptive to his advances. How would he know when that moment arrived? That was a question to be answered later. Right now the important thing was to begin. And one day the proper name to use, the best of all identities to assume, came to him in that moment between waking and sleeping when the imagined world behind our eyelids can drip its magic into the world we see when we open our eyes.

That morning he seemed to see himself in a dream addressing himself awake. 'Look at yourself,' his half-sleeping self murmured to his half-waking self. 'So tall, so skinny, so ancient, and yet you can't grow anything better than the straggiest of beards, as if you

were a teenager with spots. And yes, admit it, maybe a little cracked in the head, one of those head-in-the-clouds fellows who mistakes cumulus, or cumulonimbus, or even cirrostratus formations for solid ground. Just think back to your favourite piece of music when you were a boy! I know, these days you prefer the warblings you hear on *American Idol* or *The Voice*. But back in the day, you liked what your artistic father liked, you adopted his musical taste as your own. Do you remember his favourite record? Whereupon the half-dream-Smile produced, with a flourish, a vinyl LP which half-awake-Smile recognised at once. It was a recording of the opera *Don Quichotte* by Jules Massenet. 'Only loosely based on the great masterpiece of Cervantes, isn't it?' mused the phantom. 'And as for you, it seems you're a little loosely based yourself.'

It was settled. He climbed out of bed in his striped pyjamas – more quickly than was his wont – and actually clapped his hands. Yes! This would be the pseudonym he would use in his love letters. He would be her ingenious gentleman, Quichotte. He would be Lancelot to her Guinevere, and carry her away to Joyous Gard. He would be – to quote Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* – her verrey, parfit, gentil knyght.

It was the Age of Anything-Can-Happen, he reminded himself. He had heard many people say that on TV and on the outré video clips floating in cyberspace, which added a further, new-technology depth to his addiction. There were no rules any more. And in the Age of Anything-Can-Happen, well, anything could happen. Old friends could become new enemies and traditional enemies could be your new besties or even lovers. It was no longer possible to predict the weather, or the likelihood of war, or the outcome of elections. A woman might fall in love with a piglet, or a man start living with an owl. A beauty might fall asleep and, when kissed, wake up speaking a different language and in that new language reveal a completely altered character. A flood might drown your city. A tornado might carry your house to a faraway land where, upon landing, it would squash a witch. Criminals could become kings and kings be



unmasked as criminals. A man might discover that the woman he lived with was his father's illegitimate child. A whole nation might jump off a cliff like swarming lemmings. Men who played presidents on TV could become presidents. The water might run out. A woman might bear a baby who was found to be a revenant god. Words could lose their meanings and acquire new ones. The world might end, as at least one prominent scientist-entrepreneur had begun repeatedly to predict. An evil scent would hang over the ending. And a TV star might miraculously return the love of a foolish old coot, giving him an unlikely romantic triumph which would redeem a long, small life, bestowing upon it, at the last, the radiance of majesty.

Quichotte's great decision was made at the Red Roof Inn in Gallup, New Mexico (pop. 21,678). The travelling salesman looked with desire and envy upon Gallup's historic El Rancho hotel, which in the heyday of the Western had hosted many of the movie stars filming in the area, from John Wayne and Humphrey Bogart to Katharine Hepburn and Mae West. The El Rancho was out of his price range, and so he drove by it to the humbler Red Roof, which suited him just fine. He was a man who had learned to accept his lot in life without complaint. That morning, the TV was on when he awoke with his bright new identity – he had fallen asleep without remembering to turn it off – and the KOB-4 weatherman Steve Stucker was on the air with his Parade of Pets, featuring the celebrity weather dogs Radar, Rez, Squeaky and Tuffy. That meant it was Friday, and the newly named Mr Quichotte (he did not feel that he had earned or merited the honorific *Don*), energised by his new resolve, by the opening up before him of the flower-strewn pathway that led to love, was full of excitement, even though he was at the end of a tiring week visiting the area's medical practices in Albuquerque and elsewhere. He had spent the previous day at the locations of the Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services, the Western New Mexico Medical Group and the Gallup Indian Medical Center (which cared for the town's substantial Native population, drawn

from the Hopi, Navajo and Zuni tribes). Sales had been good, he thought, although puzzled frowns and embarrassed little laughs had greeted his jovial hints that he would soon be taking a vacation in New York City itself (pop. 8,623,000) with a new girlfriend, a Very Famous Lady, the queen of Must See TV. And his little quip at the Indian Medical Center – ‘I’m actually Indian too! Dot, not feather! So I’m happy to be here in Indian country’ – hadn’t gone down well at all.

He no longer had a fixed abode. The road was his home, the car was his living room, its trunk was his wardrobe, and a sequence of Red Roof Inns, Motel 6’s, Days Inns and other hostelries provided him with beds and TVs. He preferred places with at least some premium cable channels, but if none were available he was happy with the ordinary network fare. But on this particular morning he had no time for the local weatherman and his rescue pets. He wanted to talk to his friends about love, and the lover’s quest on which he was about to embark.

The truth was that he had almost no friends any more. There was his wealthy cousin, employer and patron, Dr R. K. Smile, and there was Dr Smile’s wife, Happy, neither of whom he spent any time with, and there were front-desk clerks at some of the motels he regularly frequented. There were a few individuals scattered across the country and the globe who might still harbour feelings similar to friendship toward him. There was, above all, one woman in New York City (she called herself the Human Trampoline) who might once again smile upon him, if he was lucky, and if she accepted his apologies. (He knew, or thought he knew, that apologies were due, but he could only partly remember why, and at times he thought that perhaps his damaged memory had got things upside down and it was she who needed to apologise to him.) But he had no social group, no cohort, no posse, no real pals, having long ago abandoned the social whirl. On his Facebook page he had ‘friended’ or ‘been friended by’ a small and dwindling group of commercial travellers like himself, as well as an assortment of lonelyhearts, braggarts,

exhibitionists and salacious ladies behaving as erotically as the social medium's somewhat puritanical rules allowed. Every single one of these quote-unquote 'friends' saw his plan, when he had enthusiastically posted it, for what it was – a hare-brained scheme, verging on lunacy – and attempted to dissuade him, for his own good, from stalking or harassing Miss Salma R. In response to his post there were frown emojis and Bitmojis wagging fingers at him reprovingly and there were GIFs of Salma R herself, crossing her eyes, sticking out her tongue, and rotating a finger by her right temple, all of which added up to the universally recognised set of gestures meaning 'cray cray'. However, he would not be deterred.

Such stories do not, on the whole, end well.

IN HIS YOUTH – which was long enough ago for his recollection of it to have remained clear – he had been a wanderer of a purer kind than the salesman he eventually became, had adventured far and wide simply to see what he could see, from Cape Horn and Tierra del Fuego, the ends of the Earth where all the colour drained out of the world so that things and people existed only in black-and-white, to the eastern wastes of Iran, from the cockroach-ridden town of Bam to the wild border city of Zahedan in the vanished time of the Shah, from Shark Bay in Australia, where he swam amid the sentimentality of dolphins, to the great wildebeest migration across the incomprehensible Serengeti plain. He played Holi with the Bhojpuri-speaking descendants of Indian indentured labourers in Mauritius and celebrated Bakr Eid with shawl weavers in the high mountain village of Aru near the Kolahoi glacier in Kashmir. However, at a certain point in early-middle age the Interior Event changed everything. When he came to his senses after the Event he had lost all personal ambition and curiosity, found big cities oppressive, and craved only anonymity and solitude.

In addition, he had developed an acute fear of flying. He remembered a dream of first falling and then drowning, and was con-

vinced after that that air travel was the most ridiculous of all the fantasies and falsehoods that the comptrollers of the Earth tried to inflict on innocent men and women like himself. If an airplane flew, and its passengers reached their destination safely, that was just a question of good luck. It proved nothing. He did not want to die by falling from the sky into water (his dream) or onto land (which would be even less comfortable), and therefore he resolved that if the gods of good health granted him some sort of recovery he would never again board one of those monstrously heavy containers which promised to lift him thirty thousand feet or more above the ground. And he did recover, albeit with a dragging leg, and since then had travelled only by road. He thought sometimes of making a sea journey down the American coast to Brazil or Argentina, or across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe, but he had never made the necessary arrangements, and nowadays his unreliable health and fragile bank account would probably not be able to take the strain of such a voyage. So, a creature of the road he had become, and would remain.

In an old knapsack, carefully wrapped in tissue paper and bubble wrap, he carried with him a selection of modestly sized objects gathered on his travels: a polished 'found art' Chinese stone whose patterning resembled a landscape of wooded hills in the mist, a Buddha-like Gandharan head, an upraised wooden Cambodian hand with a symbol of peace in the centre of its palm, two starlike crystals, one large, the other small, a Victorian locket inside which he had placed photographs of his parents, three other photographs depicting a childhood in a distant tropical city, a brass Edwardian English cigar cutter made to look like a sharp-toothed dragon, an Indian 'Cheeta Brand' matchbox bearing the image of a prowling cheetah, a miniature marble hoopoe bird and a Chinese fan. These thirteen things were numinous for him. When he arrived at his room for the night he spent perhaps twenty minutes arranging them carefully around his quarters. They had to be placed just so, in the right relationship to one another, and once he was happy with the

arrangement, the room immediately acquired the feeling of home. He knew that without these sacred objects placed in their proper places his life would lack equilibrium and he might surrender to panic, inertia and finally death. These objects were life itself. As long as they were with him, the road held no terrors. It was his special place.

He was lucky that the Interior Event had not reduced him to complete idiocy, like a stumbling, damaged fellow he had once seen who was incapable of anything more demanding than gathering fallen leaves in a park. He had worked as a commercial traveller in pharmaceuticals for many years, and continued to do so in spite of his post-retirement age and his incipiently unstable, unpredictably capricious, increasingly erratic and mulishly obsessional cast of mind, because of the kindness of the aforementioned wealthy cousin, R. K. Smile, MD, a successful entrepreneur, who, after seeing a production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* on TV, had refused to fire his relative, fearing that to do so would hasten the old fellow's demise.\*

Dr Smile's pharmaceutical business, always prosperous, had recently catapulted him to billionaire status because of his Georgia laboratories' perfection of a sublingual spray application of the pain medication fentanyl. Spraying the powerful opioid under the tongue brought faster relief to terminal cancer patients suffering from what the medical community euphemistically called breakthrough pain. Breakthrough pain was unbearable pain. The new spray made it bearable, at least for an hour. The instant success of this spray, patented and brand-named as InSmile™, allowed Dr R. K. Smile the luxury of carrying his elderly poor relation without worrying unduly about his productivity. Strangely, as it happened, Quichotte's descent towards lunacy – of which one definition is the inability to separate *what-is-so* from *what-is-not-so* – for a time did not materially

\* But Dr Smile was by no means kindly in all matters. As we shall see. As we shall presently see.

affect his ability to perform his professional duties. In fact, his condition proved to be a positive boon, helping him to present, with absolute sincerity, the shaky case for many of his company's offerings, believing wholeheartedly in their advertised efficacy and superiority over all their rivals, even though the advertising campaigns were decidedly slanted, and in many cases the products were no better than many similar brands, and in some cases decidedly inferior to the market in general. Because of his blurry uncertainty about the location of the truth-lie frontier, and his personal charm and pleasant manner, he inspired confidence and came across as the perfect promoter of his cousin's wares.

The day inevitably came, however, as the full extent of his cousin's delusions became known to him, when Dr Smile finally put him out to pasture. He gave Quichotte the news in the kindest possible way, flying out personally from General Aviation at Hartsfield-Jackson Airport in his new G650ER to meet Quichotte in Flagstaff, Arizona (pop. 70,320), after receiving a worried call from the director of West Flagstaff Family Medicine, D. F. Winona, DO, MBA, FACOFP, to whom Quichotte had improbably confided during their appointment that he was thinking of escorting the delectable Miss Salma R to the next *Vanity Fair* Oscars party, after which their clandestine romance would finally become public knowledge. Quichotte and Dr Smile met at the Relax Inn on Historic Route 66, just four miles from Pulliam Airport. They were an odd couple, Quichotte tall, slow, leg-dragging, and Dr Smile small, bristling with dynamism, and clearly the boss. 'What were you thinking?' he asked, sorrowfully but with a note of finality in his voice, *this time I can't save you*, and Quichotte, confronted with his nonsensical statement, replied, 'It's true, I got a little ahead of myself, and I apologise for getting carried away, but you know how lovers are, we can't help talking about love.' He was using the remote in his room to flick back and forth between a basketball game on ESPN and a true crime show on Oxygen, and his manner struck Dr Smile as affable but distracted.

'You understand,' Dr Smile said as gently as he could manage, 'that I'm going to have to let you go.'

'Oh, not a problem,' Quichotte replied. 'Because, as it happens, I have to embark immediately on my quest.'

'I see,' Dr Smile said slowly. 'Well, I want to add that I am prepared to offer you a lump sum in severance pay – not a fortune, but not a negligible amount – and I have that cheque here with me to give you. Also, you'll find that Smile Pharmaceuticals' pension arrangements are not ungenerous. It is my hope and belief that you'll be able to manage. Also, any time you find yourself in Buckhead, or, in the summer months, on the Golden Isles, the doors of my homes will always be open. Come and have a biryani with my wife and myself.' Mrs Happy Smile was a zaftig brunette with a flicked-up hairdo. She was, by all accounts, something of a whizz in the kitchen. It was a tempting offer.

'Thank you,' Quichotte said, pocketing the cheque. 'May I ask, will it be all right to bring my Salma with me when I visit? Once we get together, you see, we will be inseparable. And I am sure she will be happy to eat your wife's fine biryani.'

'Of course,' Dr Smile assured him, and rose to leave. 'Bring her by all means! There's one other thing,' he added. 'Now that you are retired, and no longer in my employ, it may be useful to me, from time to time, to ask you to perform some small private services for me personally. As my close and trusted family member, I know I will be able to rely on you.'

'I will gladly do whatever you ask of me,' Quichotte said, bowing his head. 'You have been the finest of cousins.'

'It will be nothing onerous, I assure you,' Dr Smile said. 'Just some discreet deliveries. And all your expenses will be covered, that goes without saying. In cash.'

He paused in the doorway of the room. Quichotte was watching the basketball game intently.

'What will you do now?' Dr Smile asked him.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ Quichotte said, flashing that happy smile. ‘I’ve got plenty to do. I’ll just drive.’

DOWN THE LONG ITINERANT years, when he was on the road in his old gunmetal grey Chevy Cruze, Quichotte often wished he had married and become a father. How sweet it would be to have a son sitting beside him, a son who could take the wheel for hours while his father slept, a son with whom he could discuss matters of topical worldly import and the eternal truths as well while the unfurling road beneath them brought them close, the journey uniting them as the stillness of a home never could. Deep bonding is a gift the road alone gives to those who honour it and travel down it with respect. The stations along their road would be pit stops on their souls’ journey toward a final, mystical union followed by eternal bliss.

But he had no wife. No woman had wanted him for long and so there was no child. That was the short version. In the longer version, which he had buried so deep that even he had trouble locating it nowadays, there had been women for whom he had had feelings, whom he had adored almost as much as he now revered Miss Salma R, and these had been women he had known personally. He knew himself to be a man with a true capacity for adoration, an area in which most of his fellow men, being uncivilised ignorant brutes, were sorely deficient. It had therefore been painful to him that almost all the women he pursued had, quite quickly after his pursuit began, done their best to run away.

And he had quarrelled with the Human Trampoline. Whoever had done what to whom, they had not parted on friendly terms. But maybe he could make amends, if he could remember his sins. This he would try to do.

But the ‘romantic’ associations – those ladies were gone for good, and were they even real? Now, as he dedicated himself to the quest for the hand of Miss Salma R, it seemed to him that a small



corner of the veil obscuring the past lifted up and reminded him of the consequences of lost love. He saw them pass before his inward eye, the horticulturist, the advertising executive, the public relations dazzler, the Antipodean adventuress, the American liar, the English rose, the ruthless Asian beauty. No, it was impossible even to think about them again. They were gone and he was well rid of them and he could not have his heart broken by them any more. What had happened had happened – or, he was almost sure it had happened – and it was right to bury them deeper than the deepest memory, to place their stories on the funeral pyres of his hopes, to seal them up in the pyramid of his regret; to forget, to forget, to forget. Yes, he had forgotten them, placing them in a lead-lined casket of forgetting far beneath the bed of the remembering ocean within him, an unmarked sarcophagus impenetrable even by the X-ray vision of a Superman, and along with them he had buried the man he had been then, and the things he had done, the failures, the failures, the failures. He had eschewed all thoughts of love for what seemed like an eternity, until Miss Salma R. reawakened feelings and desires in his breast which he had thought he had suppressed or even destroyed along with his destroyed liaisons – if indeed they were real, from the real world, and not echoes of the greater reality of women on the screen? – whereupon he recognised a grand passion as it was born in him one last time, and he ceased being an ordinary nobody and became, at long last, the great man he had it within him to be, which was to say, Quichotte.

He was childless, and his line would end with him, unless he asked for and received a miracle. Maybe he could find a wishing well. He clung to this idea: that if he acted according to the occult principles of the Wish, then miracles were possible. Such was his tenuous grasp on sanity that he had become a student of the arts of wishing; as well as wishing wells, he pursued wishing trees, wishing stones and, with more and more seriousness, wishing stars. After he completed his investigations, both in dusty library books specialising in astro-arcana and on a number of admittedly dubious web-

sites, several of which triggered an ominous dialog box reading *Warning: this site may damage your computer*, he grew convinced that meteor showers were the best things to wish upon, and 11.11 p.m. the best time, and that he would need a quantity of wishbones.

There were seven meteor showers a year, in January, April, May, August, October, November and December: the Quadrantids, Lyrids, Eta Aquarids, Perseids, Orionids, Leonids and Geminids. Over the years he had hunted them down one by one, to catch a falling star with a good timepiece on his wrist and a generous supply of chicken bones in his pocket. He could be determined when he wanted to be. He had already, in years past, chased down the Quadrantids near Muncie, Indiana (pop. 68,625), the Lyrids in Monument Valley, and the Eta Aquarids in the Rincon Mountain District of the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. So far these expeditions had failed to bear fruit. Never mind! he told himself. One day soon, Salma R. would bear him three, no! five, or why not? seven magnificent sons and daughters. He was sure of it. But, having the impatience of his grey hairs, he decided to continue his pursuits of meteor showers, for which he had more time now that his cousin had relieved him of his duties. The heavenly bodies must have been impressed by his persistence, because that August, on a hot night in the desert beyond Santa Fe, the Perseids granted his wish at the Devils Tower near Moorcroft, Wyoming (pop. 1,063). At 11.11 p.m. precisely he snapped seven wishbones while fire rained down from the skies from the direction of the constellation Perseus – Perseus the warrior, Zeus and Danaë's son, the Gorgonslayer! – and the miracle occurred. The longed-for son, who looked to be about fifteen years old, materialised in the Cruze's passenger seat.

The Age of Anything-Can-Happen! How overjoyed he was, Quichotte exclaimed inwardly, how grateful he was to live in such a time!

The magic child manifested himself in black-and-white, his natural colours desaturated in the manner that has become fashionable in much modern cinema. Perhaps, Quichotte surmised, the boy was

astrologically related to the monochrome inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego. Or perhaps he had been seized long ago and now returned by the aliens in the mothership hiding in the sky above the meteors illuminating the Devils Tower, after many years during which he had been studied, drained of colour by their experiments, and somehow failed to age. Certainly, as Quichotte came to know the boy, he seemed much older than his years. He strongly resembled the boy in the photographs Quichotte had saved of his own childhood far away across the world. In one of those pictures, Quichotte aged nine or ten was seen in a white kurta-pyjama wearing his father's sunglasses. In another an older Quichotte, about the same age as the apparition, had a faint moustache on his upper lip and was standing in a garden with his promiscuous Alsatian bitch. Quichotte when young had been a little short, a little chubby compared to other boys his age. Then, in late adolescence, as if an invisible divine hand had grabbed him and squeezed him in the middle like a tube of toothpaste, he shot up to his present height and became as skinny as a shadow. This monochrome boy was evidently at the post-toothpaste-tube-squeezing phase, as long and narrow a fellow as his father, and he was wearing the sunglasses Quichotte had worn all those years ago. He was not wearing a kurta-pyjama, however, but was dressed like a good all-American boy, in a checked lumberjack shirt and denim jeans with turn-ups. After a moment he began singing an old advertising jingle. His voice was cracking. A new Adam's apple bobbed in his throat.

*We love baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet,  
baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet . . .*

A broad smile broke out across Quichotte's long face. It was as if his miraculous son, born out of his father's dream like Athena bursting fully formed from the head of Zeus, was singing a song of arrival, a love song to his father. The traveller joyously raised his own voice and sang along with his boy.

*Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet,  
baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet!*

‘Sancho,’ Quichotte cried, full of a happiness he didn’t know how to express. ‘My silly little Sancho, my big tall Sancho, my son, my sidekick, my squire! Hutch to my Starsky, Spock to my Kirk, Scully to my Mulder, BJ to my Hawkeye, Robin to my Batman! Peele to my Key, Stimpfy to my Ren, Niles to my Frasier, Arya to my Hound! Peggy to my Don, Jesse to my Walter, Tubbs to my Crockett, I love you! O my warrior Sancho sent by Perseus to help me slay my Medusas and win my Salma’s heart, here you are at last.’

‘Cut it out, “Dad”,’ the imaginary young man rejoined. ‘What’s in all this for me?’

AFTER THE NIGHT of the Perseid miracle Quichotte spent days lost in a haze of joy because of the arrival of the mysterious black-and-white youngster he had named Sancho. He sent a text message to R. K. Smile, MD, telling him the good news. Dr Smile did not reply.

Sancho was darker-skinned than his father, that was plain even in black-and-white, and in the end it was this that enabled Quichotte to solve – at least to his own satisfaction – the mystery of the boy’s arrival. It seemed that Sancho was of approximately the same hue as the Beloved, Miss Salma R. So perhaps he was a visitor from the future, the child of Quichotte’s forthcoming marriage to the great lady, and had travelled back through time and space to answer his father’s need for a son’s companionship, and end his long solitude. To a person who had gained a deep understanding of time travel from television, this was entirely possible. He remembered the Doctor, the British Time Lord, and guessed that Sancho might have arrived in some sort of TARDIS-like vehicle hidden in the dark sky behind the brilliance of the meteors. And perhaps this colour drainage, this black-and-white effect, was nothing but a temporary side

effect of time travel. 'Welcome, my future son!' he enthused. 'Welcome to the present. We will woo your mother together. How can she resist being wooed not only by the future father of her children, but by one of those children too? Our success is certain . . . What's in it for you? Young man, if we fail, then you will cease to exist. If she does not consent to becoming your mother, then you will never be born, and so it follows that you wouldn't be here now. Does that focus your mind?'

'I'm hungry,' Sancho muttered mutinously. 'Can we stop talking and eat?'

Quichotte noted his son's untamed, rebellious, outlaw-like character. It pleased him. Heroes, superheroes and antiheroes, too, were not made of complaisant stock. They were out-of-step, against-the-grain, different-drummer types. He thought of Sherlock Holmes, of Green Arrow, of Negan. He understood, too, that he had missed the boy's childhood, had not been there for him, wherever *there* might have been. The lad would very likely be full of resentments and even delinquencies. It would take time to persuade him to open up, to stop scowling, to accept parental love and give filial love in return. The road was the place for that. Men on the road together have three choices. They separate, they kill one another, or they work things out.

'Yes,' Quichotte replied to his son, with his heart full of hope. 'By all means, let's eat.'