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Ghosting

Andrew O'Hagan

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On 5 January 2011, at 8.30 p.m., I was messing about at home when the phone buzzed on the sofa. It was a text from Jamie Byng, the publisher of Canongate. 'Are you about?' it said. 'I have a somewhat left-field idea. It's potentially very exciting. But I need to discuss urgently.' Canongate had bought, for £600,000, a memoir by the WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange. The book had also been bought for a high sum by Sonny Mehta at Knopf in New York and Jamie had sold foreign rights to a slew of big houses. He said he expected it to be published in forty languages. Assange didn't want to write the book himself but didn't want the book's ghostwriter to be anybody who already knew a lot about him. I told Jamie that I'd seen Assange at the Frontline Club the year before, when the first WikiLeaks stories emerged, and that he was really interesting but odd, maybe even a bit autistic. Jamie agreed, but said it was an amazing story. 'He wants a kind of manifesto, a book that will reflect this great big generational shift.' He'd been to see Assange in Norfolk and was going again the next day. He said he and the agent Caroline Michel had suggested me for the job and that Assange wanted to meet me. I knew they'd been talking to other writers, and I was at first sceptical. It's not unusual for published writers to get requests to write things anonymously. How much did Alex Haley protect Malcolm X when he ghosted his autobiography? To what extent did Ted Sorensen create the verbal manner of John F. Kennedy when he wrote *Profiles in Courage*, a book for which the future president won the Pulitzer Prize? And are the science fiction stories H.P. Lovecraft ghosted for Harry Houdini not the best things he ever wrote? There would be a touch of all this in the strange case of Assange. But there is something else about the genre, a sense that the world might be more ghosted now than at any time in history. Isn't Wikipedia entirely ghosted? Isn't half of Facebook? Isn't the World Wide Web a new ether, in which we are all haunted by ghostwriters?

I had written about missing persons and celebrity, about secrecy and conflict, and I knew from the start that this story might be an insider's job. However it came, and however I unearthed it or inflected it, the Assange story would be consistent with my instinct to walk the unstable border between fiction and non-fiction, to see how porous the parameters between invention and personality are. I remembered Victor Maskell, the art historian and spy in John Banville's *The Untouchable*, who liked to quote Diderot: 'We erect a statue in our own image inside ourselves – idealised, you know, but still recognisable – and then spend our lives engaged in the effort to make ourselves into its likeness.' The fact that the WikiLeaks story was playing out against a global argument over privacy, secrets and the abuse of military power, left me thinking that if anyone was weird enough for this story it was me.

At 5.30 the next day Jamie arrived at my flat with his editorial colleague Nick Davies. (Mental health warning: there are two Nick Davies in this story. This one worked for Canongate; the second is a well-known reporter for the *Guardian*.) They had just come back on the train from Norfolk. Jamie said that Assange had poked his eye with a log or something, so had sat through three hours of discussion with his eyes closed. They were going to advertise the book for April. It was to be called *WikiLeaks versus the World: My Story* by Julian Assange. They said I would have a percentage of the royalties in every territory and Julian was happy with that. We talked about the deal and then Jamie went into detail about the security issues. 'Are you ready to have your phone tapped by the CIA?' he asked. He said Julian insisted the book would have to be written on a laptop that had no internet access.

When I arrived at Ellingham Hall Assange was fast asleep. He'd been living there, at the house of Vaughan Smith, one of his sureties and founder of the Frontline Club, since his arrest on Swedish rape allegations. He was effectively under house arrest and wearing an electronic tag on his leg. He would sign in at Beccles police station every afternoon, proving he hadn't done a runner in the night. Assange and his associates kept hackers' hours: up all night and asleep half the day, one of the little bits of chaos that would come to characterise the circus I was about to enter. Ellingham Hall is a draughty country residence with stags' heads in the hall. In the dining room there were laptops



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everywhere. Sarah Harrison, Assange's personal assistant and girlfriend, was wearing a woolly jumper and kept scraping her ringlets off her face. Another girl, maybe Spanish or South American or Eastern European, came into the drawing room where the fire was blazing. I stood at the windows looking at the tall trees outside.

Sarah made me a cup of tea and the other girl brought it into the room with a plate of chocolate biscuits. 'I'm always trying to think of new ways to wake him up,' she said. 'The cleaner just barges in. It's the only way.' He soon came padding into the room in socks and a suit.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' he said. He was amused and suspicious at the same time, a nice combination I thought, and there were few signs of the mad unprofessionalism to come. He said the thing that worried him was how quickly the book had to be written. It would be hard to establish a structure that would work. He went on to say that he might be in jail soon and that might not be bad for writing the book. 'I have quite abstract thoughts,' he said, 'and an argument about civilisation and secrecy that needs to be got down.'

He said he'd hoped to have something that read like Hemingway. 'When people have been put in prison who might never have had time to write, the thing they write can be galvanising and amazing. I wouldn't say this publicly, but Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* in prison.' He admitted it wasn't a great book but it wouldn't have been written if Hitler had not been put away. He said that Tim Geithner, the US secretary of the Treasury, had been asked to look into ways to hinder companies that would profit from subversive organisations. That meant Knopf would come under fire for publishing the book.

I asked him if he had a working title yet and he said, to laughter, 'Yes. "Ban This Book: From Swedish Whores to Pentagon Bores".' It was interesting to see how he parried with some notion of himself as a public figure, as a rock star really, when all the activists I've ever known tend to see themselves as marginal and possibly eccentric figures. Assange referred a number of times to the fact that people were in love with him, but I couldn't see the coolness, the charisma he took for granted. He spoke at length about his 'enemies', mainly the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*.

Julian's relationship with the *Guardian*, which appeared to obsess him, went back to his original agreement to let them publish the Afghan war logs. He quickly fell out with the journalists and editors there – essentially over questions of power and ownership – and by the time I took up with him felt 'double-crossed' by them. It was an early sign of the way he viewed 'collaboration': the *Guardian* was an enemy because he'd 'given' them something and they hadn't toed the line, whereas the *Daily Mail* was almost respected for finding him entirely abominable. The *Guardian* tried to soothe him – its editor, Alan Rusbridger, showed concern for his position, as did the then deputy, Ian Katz, and others – but he talked about its journalists in savage terms. The *Guardian* felt strongly that the secret material ought to be redacted to protect informants or bystanders named in it, and Julian was inconsistent about that. I never believed he wanted to endanger such people, but he chose to interpret the *Guardian's* concern as 'cowardice'.



His relationship with the *New York Times* was every bit as toxic. He believed its editor, Bill Keller, was determined to treat him as a 'source' rather than a collaborator – which was true – and that Keller wanted to hang him out to dry, which was not true. Keller wrote a long piece in his own paper saying Julian was dirty, paranoid, controlling, unreliable and slightly off his head, which naturally made Julian feel his former collaborator was out to get him. But both newspapers, in concert with others, had given over vast numbers of pages to the leaks and given WikiLeaks top billing in bringing the material. I always felt the involvement of the *New York Times* would save Julian from prison, and I still believe that. Even the US authorities see that it would be impossible for them to convict Assange without also convicting Keller and Rusbridger. But instead of seeing that, Julian could only see the men in personal terms as dissemblers or something worse.

He had a strange, on-the-spectrum inability to see when he was becoming boring or demanding. He talked as if the world needed him to talk and never to stop. Oddly for a dissident, he had no questions. The left-wingers I have known are always full of questions, but Assange, from the first, seemed like a manifestation of the hyperventilating chatroom. It became clear: if I was to be the ghost, it might turn out that I was the least ghostly person in the enterprise.

He was avoiding 'our book'. He wanted to talk about the other books about to be published. 'There's this book by two guys from *Der Spiegel*,' he said. 'It will be more high-toned than the others. The two guys are friendly towards me but the book will contain new allegations.' He spoke about another book

to be published by the *Guardian*. He said it would come from journalists he'd worked with there. He was obsessed with David Leigh and Nick Davies, two of the main reporters. 'Davies is extremely hostile to me,' Assange said. 'The *Guardian* basically double-crossed the organisation in the worst way.' (The *Guardian* denies this.) 'We left them with a cache of cables – to act as security in case any of us got it in the neck – and they made a copy of the data. They were against my getting other media organisations involved, so they leaked the data to the *New York Times* and others and they behaved abominably. Davies has a known personal animosity towards me.'

'Why?'

'Because he's an old man who's basically at the end of his career. He can't bear it that a one-time source of advancement has gone away. He wrote a smear about me and none of the *Guardian* management stood in his way.' He mentioned Ian Katz as failing in this regard. He said the *Guardian's* behaviour would likely be laid out in the *Der Spiegel* book, and that the *Guardian* journalists were obviously keen to put out their version. 'They have scheduled the book to come out at the time of my legal hearing, to cause maximum damage.'

'Surely not,' I said, incredulous. 'Wouldn't they wait, just for old time's sake?'

'You're joking.'

He said the third book was by his former colleague Daniel Domscheit-Berg. 'This will be a complete smear,' he said. 'The guy is working from hatred of us and he will seek to make it as damaging as possible.'

'Embarrassing or damaging?'

'Both probably. He has chatroom stuff ... conversations.'

'Between all of you?'

'Yes,' he said. 'He put out one of them before, about having been suspended. He printed all the stuff in the conversation except the parts that related to why he was suspended. There is also a book by the *New York Times* journalists and several other quick books. But these will be damaging too because they would just repeat the worst allegations.'

I'd never been with a person who had such a good cause and such a poor ear, nor had I met a head of an organisation with such an unending capacity to worry about his enemies and to yawn in one's face. I asked him how he thought the court case would turn out. 'I have, I'd say, a 40 per cent chance of being freed,' he said. 'If they free me on 6 February, I'll leave the country immediately because in this country there would be a second arrest and the US will be determined to have me extradited. I would sooner be in a country where no extradition treaty exists with the US, such as Cuba or Switzerland. A lot of people in America want me dead and there was an article in the *Washington Times* which showed my face with a target on it and blood coming out the back of my head.'

He suggested I came with him to the police station at Beccles. We went outside and waited for Sarah to get the car. Standing there, I saw that the contradictions might just work out well for the book. I saw he had problems but he could be funny and I liked him. Ellingham Hall is surrounded by barns and outhouses. 'I would like to convert one of those stables into an office,' he said. He smiled. 'And a book was born in a manger.'

'You'd never find three wise men and a virgin in Norfolk,' I said. He made another joke about Norfolk, about local social workers stamping cases N.F.N. – 'Normal for Norfolk'. He phoned ahead to the police station to tell them he was coming. There were two phones on his lap but he answered neither one himself. A French journalist was following the car but lost us. At the police station, Sarah stopped and said: 'Shall I do the honours?' I watched as she went out and searched the bushes.

'Is she checking for paparazzi?' I asked.

'I wish,' said Julian.

'What then?'

'Assassins.'

I said I would write the book on condition that I could do it for the interest alone, the thrill of getting the story right and learning something in the process. I thought I would have a kind of authorly freedom by not being the author on the cover. I told Jamie I didn't want my name anywhere on the book and that I wouldn't give interviews or talk about the project. I wouldn't become a WikiLeaks spokesman or go on *Newsnight* or confirm anything with the newspapers. I wanted to let the work speak for itself. I was assured this would work and Julian agreed.

*

On Monday 17 January 2011 I drove to Norfolk. It was dark and drizzly by the time I got to Ellingham Hall. I stopped the car and got changed in a lane, putting a hoody over a T-shirt, while rabbits hopped in the headlamps. I'd been told there were journalists everywhere and indeed there were lights around the fields and sometimes helicopters overhead. I looked at the driveway under a full moon, it felt almost comically filmic, a strange technological distortion of Jane Austen's novels, with character and power waiting to combust. The house loomed through the fog, as they say, and I texted Sarah to say I was two minutes away from the door.



The kitchen was the usual thing: blue Aga, double sink, farmhouse table, plates everywhere. On top of the Aga a garlic loaf was warming and on the table a little bowl of tomato salad. I could hear American voices through the door that led to the drawing room, and one Australian voice, Julian's. On the walls of the dining room there were many paintings hung on brass rails. One of them showed a 19th-century gentleman. I later found out he was Vaughan Smith's ancestor who had expanded the estate after marrying into it. Vaughan's father was ruddy-faced and in uniform. Julian later told me the white thing he was holding was a diplomatic bag.

Filming was going on. There was always filming or the possibility of filming, which was odd for people who liked to think of themselves as hiding in the shadows. 'You want a book to read?' Sarah asked. 'I've got tons of your books upstairs.' The television people were from the US show *60 Minutes* and were making a film about WikiLeaks. I heard Julian say to them that this was his gilded cage, the same thing he had said to me several days earlier. While Julian continued to deal with the interviewer in the drawing room, Sarah and I had a drink in the kitchen. She said she was from South London and had come to work for the organisation the previous July. She brought up the rape allegations and said they were 'the most massive cliché'. 'We expected flak from the Pentagon,' she said, 'but not smears based on two weeks in Sweden.' She said it was bizarre what the Swedes considered to be rape but that some of her friends couldn't believe she worked for WikiLeaks, because of these allegations, which she said were mad. She asked me about my career and we spoke about the writing business. 'I thought I'd get to do a lot of travelling in this job,' she said, laughing, 'but instead I've been stuck in one house in the English countryside since last October.'

We sat down to dinner at ten. Vaughan joined us, pulling baked potatoes out of the oven and lasagne that had been prepared by the housekeeper. We had a joking conversation about movie rights in general and they all larked about who should play them in the movie. Vaughan was most concerned about the movie company hiring the house for filming. I told them about Battle Bridge Road, the place in King's Cross where I lived in my twenties, which was used all the time as a film set. I told them about the day they were making a film about Oswald Mosley and doing the Battle of Cable Street in our street. The hippies who squatted nearby thought the revolution had begun and ran out and joined the fray. 'Who's Mosley?' Julian asked.

When we began speaking about the book, I was concerned to get a sense of what the elements were, so that I could think about how to build the picture. I said that perhaps there should be a narrative in which the past and present alternated. 'What did you think of *Anna Karenina*?' Assange said. 'I just thought it took too much of my life away. But then there's this scene where the dog begins to speak, and I thought, yes, this is beginning to make sense.'

The biggest surprise for readers of his book, I suggested, would be to discover it wasn't written luridly or defensively but quite frankly.

'Maybe it should be experimental,' he said, 'like chapter one has one word; chapter two has two words ...'

'The real innovation,' I said, 'would be to come up with a book that sums up the relationship between the individual and the state as it seems from your position now.'

'But I am not a complete person yet,' he said.

'It will be the book you can write now.'

He wanted his book to be like Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*.

I noticed he tended to eat pretty much with his hands. People in magazine articles say he doesn't eat, but he had three helpings of lasagne that night and he ate both the baked potato and the jam pudding with his hands. He turned from being very open and engaged to being removed and sort of disgusted. About midnight, he and Sarah, while continuing to talk, lifted over their Macbooks and opened them and began to type with their faces strangely lit. After a while, Sarah exclaimed.

'What?' I asked.

'Bloody hell.' She looked at Assange.

'What?' he asked.

'The *Guardian* have redacted the following from a cable about Tunisia,' she said.

'Read what they've redacted,' said Julian.

She read two sentences about a deposed president having sought cancer treatment abroad. 'They're taking them out,' she said.

Julian made a face. 'They're disgusting.'

'Why do it?' Sarah asked. Julian said they were obviously worried about being sued.

'Come on,' Sarah said.

Julian: 'British courts.'

Julian always behaved as if he was being pushed onto the back foot over 'redactions'.

The issue was this: on 28 July 2010, Major General Campbell, a US commander in Afghanistan, said that 'any time there's any sort of leak of classified material, it has the potential to harm the military folks that are working out here every day.' The notion got under the skin of many people, including many of the journalists dealing with the leaks, and a feeling grew that WikiLeaks must avoid having 'blood on its hands'. Julian gave several answers to the question of how the leaked material should be 'redacted'. Sometimes he appeared to suggest that editing it was wrong, but he admitted to me that they wanted to 'improve when it came to having a better focus on redactions'. He denied ever saying, as reported by others, that informants' names should not be taken out and that 'they deserved to die.' He would go over these positions again and again, but the interviews I conducted contain many inconsistencies. And horrible longueurs.



At 10 p.m. one night I drove over to the house and Julian spoke for nearly three hours without pause. At one point he looked quite moved as he spoke about 'backstabbers'. He talked about Domscheit-Berg. In some way he found it impossible to imagine how another person could have a view of him, or of themselves, that didn't accord with his own. 'Every good story needs a Judas,' he said, and 'nearly everybody is a fucking wanker.' He spoke about other people he'd worked with, and felt it would be different with me. (I was never certain it would be, though I hoped so.) 'You are in artistic control of this book,' he said. I replied that I felt the book could become an argument about disclosure, about the difference between secrets of a political kind, on the one hand, and the tabloid hunt for salacious details about private lives, on the other. The book, I said, should be revealing on all fronts, but also be frank about revelation itself. If he could not discuss a matter of importance – his son, for example, and the custody battle, or what happened in bed with the two Swedish girls – we should seek to explain why in a statement about sleaze. I said what we shouldn't do was close our eyes and hope no one would notice. Making the ends meet in a moral sense was the project's great conundrum, and he agreed to let me say what happened.

*

On Wednesday, 19 January, it rained all day. I was beginning to wonder about the time-wasting. I couldn't understand the slow and lazy way they went about things. They always talked about the pressure of work, about how busy they were, but, compared to most journalists, they sat on their arses half the day. Julian's favourite activity was following what people – especially his 'enemies' – were saying about him on the internet. When I told him I'd sooner cut my balls off than Google myself, he found a high-minded reason for explaining why it was important for him to know what other people were saying.

That night, a guy from al-Jazeera was talking to the group. The group was usually just Sarah, who lived there, and Joseph Farrell, a pleasant twenty-something whizz kid who came and went. Another guy, an activist and academic from Canberra University, was drinking wine and talking about how to mobilise the world. It turned out that the guy from al-Jazeera was hoping to strike a deal with WikiLeaks – that's to say, with Julian. He was offering \$1.3 million to get access (via encryption keys) to the data. He also wanted to organise a conference in Qatar on press freedom. There were Russian cigarettes on the table and everyone took turns to go outside and smoke. Julian was on cigars. Sarah did a lot of the negotiating over the al-Jazeera deal – it got quite heated at one point – but Julian would intervene and in the end everything was signed, though we have no knowledge if the money was actually paid or if any of the material was used by al-Jazeera. The man from Canberra was telling everyone they should have links with the new anarchists in Paris, who had the lowdown on how badly

the French government had behaved in relation to the former colonies. 'It would be good to do better in France,' Julian said.

Kristinn Hrafnsson, an Icelandic investigative reporter and WikiLeaks spokesman – who appeared to have survived Julian's many culls of his old friends – was sitting next to me with his laptop open. He turned it to show an email from David Leigh of the *Guardian*. Someone said Leigh had just been quoted in *Vanity Fair* saying that Assange was 'out of money and out of leaks'. The email from Leigh was asking for two clarifications for his book. One was to do with a dating website Assange was once a member of. And the second was a question about the identity of his father. At the close of the email, Leigh said he wanted to be 'fair-minded' and said that he really meant it.

'What a sleazy cocksucker,' Julian said. 'Who does he think he's talking to?' It wasn't the first time I noticed how deeply adversarial WikiLeaks was in its relationship with its friends. Julian treated his supporters as subjects, and learned nothing when they walked away. He hardly mentioned the right-wing press that called him a criminal and a traitor: he expended all his ire on the journalists who had tried to work with him and who had basic sympathy for his political position. In a bank safe, I have dozens of hours of taped interviews with Assange in which he rails maniacally against the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*. After many of these long nights, I would wonder if the job wasn't getting closer to fiction than I'd suspected. Before my eyes, and with no regard for me or my tape recorder, he snapped the olive branch proffered by those he hated.

I picked up my papers and went into the dining room with Julian. After a little while, Sarah joined us. I wanted to discuss the book's structure. Julian said we should consider having a chapter called 'Women'.

'I thought this was going to be like a manifesto,' Sarah said.

Julian bristled slightly. They were a proper couple: flirting and fighting and not-saying. 'It is,' he said, 'but with personal history woven through.'

'I just think ...'

'Don't worry about it.'

'Just ...'

'Don't worry.' She turned to me. 'He's got such appalling, sleazy stories about women you wouldn't believe it. I don't want to hear all that.'

'Hold on,' he said.

'No. Sorry. I don't think that's what the book's about, your stories of sleeping with women.'

He wanted again to discuss Nick Davies, the *Guardian* reporter who had worked with him on the initial newspaper deal to publish the leaks. 'The problem was he was in love with me,' said Julian. 'Not sexually. But just in love with me. Like I was this younger guy he wanted to be.' He said the same thing about the Icelandic politician and activist Birgitta Jónsdóttir: 'She was in love with me.' I knew from then on that any understanding of him would involve a recognition of his narcissism. 'I went to the local pub,' he said, 'and the people in the bar were gossiping about me, while I was there. One of them said: "The local ladies will be pleased."'

*

'Did you miss me?' Julian asked when I came back from a spell in London. He was eating two bars of Violet Crumble (Australia's answer to the Crunchie). I said there'd been speculation in the press about my involvement with him, that it was quite difficult, a lot of these people I'd known for years, they were friends, and not answering emails or confirming stories was tough.

'Well, you could just come out in support of me,' Julian said.

'That's not the deal,' I said. 'I'm anonymous. There's no point in this otherwise.'

Sarah was clicking on her laptop. 'That's quite good,' she said. 'I've got you £20,000 for doing an hour's interview by Skype.' It was for some group of company presidents.

'That's not much,' Julian said.

'Ingratitude.'

'Well,' Julian said, 'if Tony Blair – a war criminal – can get £120,000, I should get at least £1 more than him.'

'You want me to write back to them and say you want more money?'

'Yes,' said Julian.

Later, Julian was on the phone trying to instruct Alan Dershowitz – 'the ultra-Zionist American lawyer' – to represent WikiLeaks in its fight with the US federal government over its attempt to subpoena the organisation's Twitter account. 'It's good politics to get him,' Julian said. 'Even if we lose him later. The middle right-wing faction in America will respond to him fighting on our behalf.'

I looked in the visitors' book at Ellingham Hall. Under 29 November 2010, Julian had signed his name and written a message. 'Today with my friends we tried to bring modern history to the world.' It was

the day after WikiLeaks began publishing 251,287 leaked United States embassy cables, the largest set of confidential documents ever released into the public domain. I wanted to get a lot of his childhood stuff down but he spent the night going off his head about the forthcoming edition of *Panorama*. It seems the reporter John Sweeney had put together 'a swingeing attack'. Julian flames up when confronted with stuff like this.

Another afternoon, I was trying to get him to stop his undergraduate lecturing about freedom. I knew there was nothing I could use: it was all standard-grade Voltaire with a smattering of Chomsky. Sarah came in with a couple of FedEx boxes. A few weeks earlier, the billionaire (and Jimmy Choo financier) Matthew Mellon, for whom Julian was a hero, had landed his helicopter in the field outside the house and come in to have lunch. He said it was a pity a CEO such as Julian only really had one suit. Mellon said he would send him some clothes in the post. They'd forgotten about it until the FedEx boxes appeared. 'Oh my God,' Sarah said, 'they're actually in here.'

There were two suits by Oswald Boateng, a white shirt from Turnbull & Asser and a couple of ties, both from the gift shop at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The suits had bright linings, one pomegranate-coloured, the other aqua. I told Julian that Boateng was the famous black British suit-maker of Savile Row. 'That's great,' he said. 'It fits the blacksploitation theme I'm hoping for with the film of my life. I want Morgan Freeman to play me.' He began stripping off and I saw he had a pair of Tesco's trackie bottoms under his old suit. He donned each suit in turn and asked us to tell him how he looked. He was anxious to know if they fitted properly. 'Isn't this one a bit baggy on the arse?' he asked. I looked at the note Matthew Mellon had sent. 'Julian: Hope this finds you well. Some Savile Row suits I thought you might find useful. Hopefully there is a Taylor [*sic*] nearby ... All the best to you and the gang.'

I spoke to Jamie Byng, who made the point that Julian didn't appear to see how unattractive he could seem. He said the book would fail if we didn't know how to temper or transform that; if the book didn't save him from himself and go deeper than his defences. I knew what he meant. I told him I was trying to give Julian a crash course in self-deprecation, and would continue to insist that he not make himself the hero of every anecdote. I told Jamie the work WikiLeaks was trying to do might be bigger than Julian's ability to articulate it.

There was this incredible need for spy-talk. Julian would often refer to the places where he lived as 'safe houses' and say things like, 'When you go to Queensland there's a contact there you should speak to.'

'You mean a friend?' I'd say.

'No. It's more complicated than that.' He appeared to like the notion that he was being pursued and the tendency was only complicated by the fact that there were real pursuers. But the pursuit was never as grave as he wanted it to be. He stuck to his Cold War tropes, where one didn't deliver a package, but made a 'drop off'. One day, we were due to meet some of the WikiLeaks staff at a farmhouse out towards Lowestoft. We went in my car. Julian was especially edgy that afternoon, feeling perhaps that the walls were closing in, as we bumped down one of those flat roads covered in muck left by tractors' tyres. 'Quick, quick,' he said, 'go left. We're being followed!' I looked in the rear-view mirror and could see a white Mondeo with a wire sticking out the back.

'Don't be daft, Julian,' I said. 'That's a taxi.'

'No. Listen to me. It's surveillance. We're being followed. Quickly go left.' Just by comical chance, as I was rocking a *Sweeney*-style handbrake turn, the car behind us suddenly stopped at a farmhouse gate and a little boy jumped out and ran up the path. I looked at the clock as we rolled off in a cloud of dust. It said 3.48.

'That was a kid being delivered home from school,' I said. 'You're mental.'

'You don't understand,' he said.

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There was plenty of laughter at the table in Ellingham Hall, followed by long periods of boredom. The laughter had a lot to do with Sarah, who had a nice way of teasing Julian, and a lot to do with the man himself, who responds well to jokes. It was all part of that discontented winter, when the book kept sliding back on itself. On a good day, it was inspiring to see them go after some lying politician or some corrupt tin-pot government. It was exciting to think, in that very Jane Austen kind of house, that no novel had ever captured this new kind of history, where military lies on a global scale were revealed by a bunch of sleepy amateurs two foot from an Aga.

Eventually, I found a house to rent in Bungay, ten minutes away from Ellingham Hall, a place to work quietly and get away from the general stagnation. I was driving a lot and trying to find a way into the book, but the delaying tactics on Julian's part had become insane. When I tried to talk to him about dates, he talked about his forthcoming trial hearing and told me Fidel Castro had sent a message to say WikiLeaks was the only website he liked. The *60 Minutes* programme went out in America and the response was massive. One commentator said Julian should win the Nobel Peace Prize; another said he had set back the cause of democracy by decades. In the midst of all the kitchen chaos, Julian puffed a cigar and reminded me, as if I needed reminding, that nobody is simply one thing: history was full of messy characters exercising their rudeness and eating with their hands while changing the world. I tried to keep that in mind as the days passed. 'In one fell swoop,' said *Foreign Policy*, 'the candour of the cables released by WikiLeaks did more for Arab democracy than decades of backstage US diplomacy.'

One of the things Julian found it hardest to admit to was the amount of hacking he did himself. He had worked out that being an 'editor' was somehow a necessary front for much that he did. He objected to the idea that WikiLeaks 'stole' secrets: according to him they simply understood, at a deeply sophisticated level, how the flow of information in society could be altered. Far from being a slave to machines, he doubted their morality, feeling that computers were already being used all over the world to control us, and that only the moral and the wise and the fleet of finger, such as those at WikiLeaks, had the requisite understanding. At the time of the Egyptian uprising, Mubarak tried to close down the country's mobile phone network, a service that came through Canada. Julian and his gang hacked into Nortel and fought against Mubarak's official hackers to reverse the process. The revolution continued and Julian was satisfied, sitting back in our remote kitchen eating chocolates.

That is why I didn't walk out. The story was just too large. What Julian lacked in efficiency or professionalism he made up for in courage. What he lacked in carefulness he made up for in impact. In our overnight conversations, he told me about the mindset of the expert hacker. He described how, as a teenager, he'd wandered through the virtual corridors of Nasa, Bank of America, the Melbourne transport system or the Pentagon. At his best, he represented a new way of existing in relation to authority. He wasn't very straightforwardly of the left and couldn't have distinguished dialectical materialism from a bag of nuts. He hates systems of belief, hates all systems, wants indeed to be a ghost in the machine, walking through the corridors of power and switching off the lights. I found myself writing notes culled from what he said to me about himself. 'When you're a hacker you're interested in masks within masks,' and 'We could undermine corruption from its dead centre. Justice will always in the end be about human beings, but there is a new vanguard of experts, criminalised as we are, who have fastened onto the cancer of modern power, and seen how it spreads in ways that are still hidden from ordinary human experience.'

But he was also losing touch with promises he had made and contracts he'd signed. His paranoia was losing him support and in a normal organisation, one where other people's experience was respected and where their value was judged on more than 'loyalty', he would have been fired. I would have fired him myself if I hadn't been there merely to help him straighten out his sentences. But his sentences too were infected with his habits of self-regard and truth-manipulation. The man who put himself in charge of disclosing the world's secrets simply couldn't bear his own. The story of his life mortified him and sent him scurrying for excuses. He didn't want to do the book. He hadn't from the beginning.

I sat back and watched. The night of Sarah's birthday there was champagne and jokes, but it ended with Julian and Sarah poring over the WikiLeaks book written by David Leigh and Luke Harding, which had been published that day. Sarah would read out the 'bad bits', and he would say, 'it's disgusting,' or 'that's malicious libel.' I thought it was all quite lowering, the book's interest in his sex life and their interest in the book's interest. 'It says here you carried abortion pills around with you that were really just sugar pills.'

Julian: 'What?'

Sarah: 'And that you set out to impregnate girls. It says you said to one of them you would call their baby "Afghanistan". Well, that does sound like you. I've heard you say that sort of thing, about naming babies after your campaigns. But you wouldn't leave all these girls to have babies on their own, would you?'

Julian: 'Sarah.'

Sarah: 'I'm just asking. Have you been at the births of all your children?'

Julian: 'All except one.'

But I thought he only had one son? Was he lying to me about his life? He started following Leigh's Twitter feed and I saw, over his shoulder, many of the replies he was making on WikiLeaks's behalf. I could see he thought I was bonkers not to think the *Guardian* a force of evil. 'You don't understand the extent of the problem,' he would say. But I believe I understood it all too well.

'Is this a good use of our time?' I said it again and again and it had no impact. One of his strategies was to invent, on the spot, new avant-garde styles that the book should adopt. One day he said the book should contain 'parables' and he suggested the paragraphs should be numbered, like verses. 'You've got to get yourself and staff to see the book as a priority,' I said. 'A great book will set things right. It will constitute a much bigger thing than turf wars or Tweets.'

'But it can't be the priority,' Julian said. 'Ending wars and starting a revolution in Libya is the priority.'

He started coming to the house in Bungay every day. I'd make lunch, waiting for him to get off the phone or stop ranting about Mark Stephens, his lawyer. Sometimes he was ranting at Stephens, and I have a tape where you can hear each side of the conversation as they talk about money. During those days at the Bungay house I would try to sit him down with a new list of questions, and he'd shy away from them, saying he wasn't in the mood or there were more pressing matters to deal with. I think he was just keen to get away from Ellingham Hall. I had the internet. I made lunch every day and he'd eat it, often with his hands, and then lick the plate. In all that time he didn't once take his dirty plate to the sink. That doesn't make him like Josef Mengele, but, you know, life is life.

I wasn't only struggling to get him to commit to the book, I was struggling to keep the project dark. I didn't answer any of the calls I received. There was clearly a leak, which is poetic justice I suppose when you're working with WikiLeaks.

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Julian came up to London for the appeal hearing on Sunday, 6 February 2011. At midnight I went over to the house he was staying at in Southwick Mews in Paddington. The house was Vaughan's office, near the Frontline Club, and was full of office equipment; a large conference room was filled with 'friends' of WikiLeaks. I went up to a small bedroom at the top of the house and found Julian lying on an unmade bed. There were clothes on the floor and books about internet amateurs on the nightstand, along with David Remnick's book on Barack Obama. Julian was cutting his nails. 'Do you know why I'm doing this, cutting my nails?' he asked.

'Nope.'

'So the court doesn't look at my nails and think they are the nails of someone who rips condoms' – one of the Swedish women had alleged that he had ripped off a condom during sex. Like everyone else, the Swedish women were merely figures passing by on the other side of the glass.

A group of pro-WikiLeaks protesters were lined up outside Belmarsh behind fences and began to cheer when we arrived. Julian was wearing one of the Boateng suits but the effect wasn't great because he insisted on wearing a grey duffel coat on top. We went upstairs to the consultation room and everybody seemed to be there. The lawyers were headed by Stephens, an ebullient, red-faced mucker straight out of Dickens, saturated in media savvy. He stood among the sureties and supporters: Tony Benn, Jemima Khan, Bianca Jagger, James Fox and Bella Freud, and the five or so young people I associated with WikiLeaks. We were led up to seats in the gallery they'd saved for friends. As soon as I sat down and looked down at the court I saw Esther Adley of the *Guardian*. She saw me, smiled, and I smiled back and she lifted her Blackberry. 'Tweeting,' I thought, and, sure enough, within minutes she tweeted that I had come in with the Assange party. 'Rumoured ghostwriter. Rumour confirmed?' she wrote.

Geoffrey Robertson, for Assange, argued that the person in Sweden who issued the warrant, Marianne Ny, was not, as she described herself, the 'chief prosecutor', but a minor prosecutor not qualified to do what she did. This seemed weak to me. I also wondered whether Justice Riddle would feel antagonised by Robertson's class posturing. Julian sat behind glass in the dock and joked with the guards. Sarah was sitting beside me and pretty much slept for two hours. At lunchtime, I headed home and then reappeared at the mews at midnight. Julian was lying on the bed again, going over the day's events while Sarah cut his hair with a pair of fairly blunt-looking scissors. Julian was critical of Robertson's opening. 'He failed to go for the heart before going for the head,' Julian said. 'And I wasn't happy with him not using the words "beyond reasonable doubt" enough.' Sarah opened a box of Ferrero Rocher and we lay on the bed discussing it all. I repeated the phrase I'd used weeks before when I talked to Jamie Byng. 'I want to give you a crash course in self-deprecation.' He said he had been far more self-deprecating before the custody battle for his son, which damaged him.

Some time in the early hours, he showed me a webpage. It said: 'Assange Kept Touching My Pussy, Says Ex-WikiLeaker.' He was chortling like mad. It was a story from the Domscheit-Berg book *Inside WikiLeaks*, which told how Assange was always trying to control everything, including D-B's cat, which, the book alleged, kept being strangled by Julian in a playful way.

People turned up out of nowhere. No one introduced them properly, and they didn't have titles anyway: they were just Carlos or Tina or Oliver or Thomas. One night in Ellingham Hall, a French guy called Jeremy came in with a sack of encrypted phones. Julian always seemed to have three phones on the go at any one time – the red phone was his personal one – and this latest batch was designed to deal with a general paranoia that newspapers were hacking all of us. It was always like that: sudden bursts of vigilance would vie with complete negligence. There was no real system of security or applied secrecy, not if you've read about how spy agencies operate. Julian would speak on open lines when he simply forgot to take care. The others kept the same mobiles for months. And none of them seemed to care about a running tape recorder. Granted, I was there to ask questions and record replies, but still, much of what they said had nothing to do with the book and they simply forgot about it. Only once was I asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, when Julian gave me a hard-drive containing very sensitive material, but they forgot I had the drive and never asked for it back.

He's not a details guy. None of them is. What they love is the big picture and the general fight. They love the noise and the glamour, the history, the spectacle, but not the fine print. That is why they released so many cables so quickly: for impact. And there's a good argument to support that. But, even today, three years later, the cables have never had the dedicated attention they deserve. They made a splash and then were left languishing. I always hoped someone would do a serious editing job, ordering them country by country, contextualising each one, providing a proper introduction, detailing each injustice and each breach, but Julian wanted the next splash and, even more, he wanted to scrap with each critic he found on the internet. As for the book, he kept putting it off.

Carelessness is a 'tell'. For months, Julian thought he was in control of his relationship with his publishers, agent, lawyers, and writer, but he was demonstrating every day in a hundred ways that he couldn't face the book. He'd signed up for it, he was pretending to work on it, but, even before the lies, he was dignifying his denial with higher appointments and legal struggles. The book became his evil 'other', his nightmare 'autobiography', and rather than being haunted by me, his ghost, he decided to convert me into a quietly ineffective follower. In a moment of helpfulness, he asked his mother to send a load of photographs from his childhood. He gave me the disk and completely forgot about it.

Julian lost the appeal against extradition and promptly lodged a further appeal. It was ordained that he would continue at Ellingham Hall. I'd been in Australia doing some writers' festivals, and when I got back there was a different atmosphere in Norfolk. I'd always been amazed at how Vaughan Smith and his family had been able to cope with the whole studenty WikiLeaks charabanc in their house – the Smiths have small children – with its all-night rituals and almost comically bad table manners. Julian

had a way of making himself, in his own eyes, impervious to the small matters that might detain others. If you told him to do the dishes he would say he was trying to free economic slaves in China and had no time to wash up. He stood at the centre of a little amateur empire and any professional incursions, from lawyers, from film-makers, from publishers – all of which he had encouraged – were summarily dismissed. His pride could engulf the room in flames. And if you asked him why he had no experienced people, nobody in their forties or fifties or sixties or seventies working alongside him, authoritative people who might contradict him, he would argue that those people had already been corrupted. I was often the only person over 35 near him, apart from himself, of course, and he didn't see the problem. He didn't see the cult-leader aspect.

But there was trouble brewing at the house. It first emerged when he told me that they might move to Jemima Khan's house in Oxfordshire. He said the situation at Vaughan's was becoming untenable. His 'body language' was terrible and he was clearly turning against them, Julian said. A lot of it appeared to be to do with how much Vaughan was charging him to be there. Julian also said that Vaughan was busy making a documentary that he was supposed to have been making for WikiLeaks. 'The footage is mine,' said Julian, 'and he has now got it into his head that it's his. He's still got all sorts of self-value issues to do with not being credited by the BBC when he was a cameraman in Afghanistan, even when he got shot, and it's all coming out with this.'

Harry Stopes, my research assistant, pointed out to me how weird it was that Julian kept going on about Vaughan's obsession with lost credits when he, Julian, was also obsessed with credits and was willing to fight an almost continuous war about them. The hardest fact, however, was that the Smiths had been incredibly kind to Julian. They stood bail for him and gave up their house – Julian said this was mainly to gain publicity for the Frontline Club.

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I interviewed Julian in stolen hours in the middle of the night, in the backs of cars and at my house in Bungay, while Harry gathered childhood material, but we knew we were up against it. Canongate was keen to publish before the summer and had no idea, despite my warnings, how unwilling Julian was. Caroline, his agent, believed he still wanted to produce the book but I knew he didn't: I'd seen the lengths he would go to get on another topic, and knew he'd rather spend hours Googling himself than have his own say in the pages of his autobiography. I'd come into this fascinated by the 'self' aspect of it all, but the person whose name would be on the cover had both too much self and not enough. Still, we staggered on.

I wrote through the night to assemble what we had. The thinness could become a kind of statement, I asserted; it could become a modernist autobiography. But the jokes wouldn't hold and Julian, despite promising his publishers and me that he'd produce pages, paragraphs, even notes towards his book, produced nothing in all the months I was there. Not a single written sentence came from him in all that time. But at the end, from all those exhausting late night interviews, we assembled a rough draft of 70,000 words. It wasn't by any means great, but it had a voice, a reasonable, even-tempered, slightly amused but moral voice, which was as invented as anything I'd ever produced in fiction.

Yet it hadn't felt like creating a character in a novel, so much as writing a voiceover for a real person who isn't quite real. His vanity and the organisation's need for money couldn't resist the project, but he never really considered the outcome, that I'd be there, making marks on a page that would in some way represent this process. The issue of control never became real to Julian. He should have felt worried about what he was supplying, but he never did – he had in this, as in everything, a broad illusion of control. Only once did he turn to me and show a glint of understanding. 'People think you're helping me write my book,' he said, 'but actually I'm helping you write your novel.'

The publishers were keen to have a draft of the book ready by 31 March and he took that even less seriously. But I had to take it seriously – we had a contract. I closed the first draft on time and we sat, Harry Stopes and I, in Bungay with the laptop hot and a heap of manuscript marked with indications of where new chapters might come. That night Harry spell-checked it and added stuff and we took it over to Ellingham Hall on a memory stick. This was intended to be the copy that Julian would add to, subtract from and approve. When we arrived, the kitchen was full of WikiLeaks staff, all gathered excitedly around a laptop. They were drinking mojitos and Skyping with an Australian producer who wanted to make a cable show about WikiLeaks's 'adventures' around the world. Before leaving the house in Bungay that afternoon, Julian had become hot under the collar about the idea of the draft being shown to the editors in London. We were driving back that night and it was decided Harry would deliver the draft to Canongate the next day. The American editor, Dan Frank of Knopf, had flown over for the purpose, and the Canongate editor Nick Davies was waiting with him in London. You have to remember this was all very close to the intended date of publication.

'They shouldn't be allowed to read it at all,' Julian suddenly said.

'They're the editors,' I said. 'They've commissioned this thing. And they have to read it.'

'No. They will only prejudice it.'

'That's their prerogative.'

'No. Give me the phone.'

Julian then called Davies and stood up to walk into the hall. 'This is not an editorial event,' he said. 'As a favour, we'll let you read the manuscript in its present form.' He then proceeded to tell Davies that Harry would invigilate during the reading, and would destroy the copies when the reading was over. I told Julian this was a terrible idea. Harry was mortified and said so immediately. But Julian

insisted. I appealed to Sarah, saying this was the sort of high-handed stuff that turned allies into enemies. She said nothing. I decided to wait until I heard from Jamie Byng. Julian's previous suggestion, I forgot to say, was that the editors come to Norfolk and read it in front of them. I nixed that as being a complete insult, and so he came up with the idea that Harry should invigilate. Jamie duly texted me: 'Is he suggesting that Dan, Nick, me and Harry all read in the same room? Madness. Nick will ensure the manuscripts are shredded. But at this rate I'm thinking we probably just tell Julian a white lie. Or to stop being ridiculous!'

As we were getting set to leave Ellingham, Julian came up to me beside the Aga and hugged me. 'Thanks,' he said. We were still talking about possible titles. Earlier on, I had come up with *Disclosure* but he said he didn't like one-word titles. He preferred *Ban This Book*. (I told him it was too like Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*.) He also liked, bizarrely, *Wet Cement*. (Don't ask.) I countered with *My Life in Secrets*. And Harry felt it could be called *Assange by Assange*, before admitting this sounded too much like a perfume. On the laptop the gang was communally molesting, the producer had gone out into the Australian sunshine to have a fag and the others were booing, jealous of the good weather. Julian came to the door with a drink in his hand and waved us into the dark. 'Andy,' he cried as I made for the car. 'Don't let them push you around.' He was talking about his publishers, who had collectively paid \$2.5 million for his autobiography.

Jamie's white lie had taken effect, and all the editors took custody of the manuscript on Friday. They began reading immediately and the texts came soon afterwards. Nick said he and Dan were thrilled and it was just what they'd hoped for. Jamie was excited and I just felt relieved that we hadn't opened with a disaster. I knew that Julian would have much to alter, and would introduce untold delays – they were now hoping for June – but the book contained the basic material culled from those dozens of hours of infuriating interviews and the thing had moved forward.

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Julian had promised to read the draft over the weekend and the publishers were coming to see him on Monday morning. I'd agreed to have the meeting at my house in Bungay because Julian was too easily distracted at Ellingham Hall. Jamie and Nick from Canongate arrived early. Julian and Sarah were due at 9.30 a.m. but turned up an hour late. There was endless tea. Julian eventually sat at the table and turned to Jamie. 'How was Friday?'

'Friday was good. The weekend was good ...'

I looked at Jamie. 'He means the reading,' I said.

'Oh yeah,' Jamie said. 'I'm amazed at what's been achieved. It's really good and ... what did you think?'

Julian fixed him with a fuck-you stare. 'I've read about a third of it and it's clear to me it needs a lot of work and won't be ready for June.'

There were other statements, preliminary remarks about schedules and timetables, while the realisation sunk in that Julian hadn't bothered to read the manuscript. 'You haven't read it?' Jamie said. 'We all agreed to read it over the weekend. You had three whole days to read it. It takes eight hours.'

'I had some dangerous things happening around the world,' Julian said. 'Matters of life and death I had to take care of. These things have to be prioritised.'

'That's fine,' I said, 'but we can't have a discussion about a book you haven't read.'

'Well, I've read enough to know that it needs a lot of work and this June date is impossible.'

At a guess, I'd say he had read the first three pages. He'd never wanted June as a publication date and the whole project gave him the willies. That hunch was confirmed by everything he said and everything he didn't say. Byng suddenly became furious. 'I'm disappointed. I'm dismayed. Andy worked his arse off to get this manuscript ready and we all travelled up here to discuss it – all having read it over the weekend – and you haven't even bothered to read it.'

'I appreciate all the work Andy is doing,' Julian said, 'but I can't rush into print with something so important. There are legal issues to do with this and my enemies are poised ...'

I was neither hurt nor surprised. Julian's default position is to assert himself under fire. He had signed up for a book he didn't really want to publish because – as he alleged to me separately – Mark Stephens had suggested it might help cover costs. Now he was forced to take the book seriously for the first time. At some level, it was a kind of ethical disaster for him. He had jogged along with the project and even got to enjoy the process – he loved having an audience, a pupil, an analyst, and a father – but now the thing had become real and he was totally shocked. Jamie asked him point-blank if he wanted the book to happen.

'I do want it to happen,' Julian said, 'but on my terms. I never agreed to this June publication date.'

Under pressure, Julian agreed that we would sit down with the book from Monday, 11 April. He said he would have read it through twice by then, once to get the style of it and a second time to make amendments. He said he would clear whatever time was necessary.

The following Monday was High Noon at the breakfast table in Bungay. Julian was back to his old self, castigating his publishers, but singing at a higher pitch now, saying the art of autobiography was hateful. Men who reveal their private lives in books are 'weak', he said. People who write about their

family are 'prostitutes'. And so it went on for hour after excellent hour. 'I really like the writing and everything,' he said, 'but it's too apologetic. There are too many qualifiers.' And again: 'I can see something you can't see, which is that my opponents will use this material to undermine me. They will dive on this stuff to say I'm weak.'

'No they won't,' I said. 'They'll see that you know yourself. You can't write an autobiography that merely attempts to second-guess your opponents.'

I felt quite sorry for Julian. And I continued to feel sorry for him. He was in a horrible predicament. He had signed up to a project that his basic psychology would not allow. In the smart and admirable way of emotional defence, he dressed his objections in rhetoric and principles, but the reality was much sadder, and much more alarming for him. He didn't know who to be. His remarks, as always, were ostentatiously conceived and recklessly stated. He didn't know what to believe. 'These books are used by your enemies to show you in a certain light,' he said. 'I would never say my stepfather was an alcoholic ...'

'But you did say it, Julian. All of the material in these chapters is suggested by what you actually said. You said it to me in dozens of interviews over many late nights. I have them all on tape.'

'I was tired.'

'But you weren't tired when you allowed them to be transcribed. You weren't tired when you sought an agent to make this deal and signed the contracts. You spoke personally throughout, and never once suggested you didn't want that material used.'

'I didn't manage things properly.'

'No, you've changed your mind. That's fine. Not fine, but that's the way it is. But you can't say you were tired.'

'I was tired. And I was busy.'

'Julian. You signed on to write an autobiography and you chose a writer to help you do it. You might consider what you are doing by now saying you didn't want the material you gave to be used in a narrative.'

'But private writing is cheap.'

'So be it. Don't publish it.'

'All these books where men spill their guts and write about their intimate lives ...'

'That's the story you told. You spoke these words freely into a recorder. You spoke about Brett's drink problem. You spoke endlessly about the cult leader who followed you and your mother ...'

'But I didn't want it in the book.'

'Okay. Then it should be removed.'

I could have raised several flags on top of each of his sentences. They showed he was at home. But at home to Julian means he is fully inhabiting his paranoia and fully suspicious about people and things he thinks are out to get him. In some fundamental way he could never have someone write an email for him, let alone a book. As somebody once wrote of somebody else, he is the sort of person who is always swimming towards the life raft. I threw him a line. 'What do you want from this book?'

'Facts. Some feelings. But it should be a manifesto. It can have some reflections from childhood and whatever, but the book should be a manifesto of my ideas. It should be like moral essays. And it should have like a plot. Not with personal stuff but a sense of transition.'

'And what is this plot of your life that you'd like to relate?'

'I'm not at all interested in a book that is personal. I've always known this.'

'So now you're talking about a book of ideas?'

He just stared at me, as if he were a child who had lost his homework and I were an admonishing teacher.

'Need more manifesto.'

'Okay,' I said. 'But you have to write that. A manifesto comes from belief. It can't be second-guessed or ghostwritten.'

'I agree. I'm going to sit down and do that. I want to get my ideas about justice and power into it. It's like those writings political leaders often did in prison.'

'That's fine. It's your book. But you have to tell the publishers very clearly that what you're writing is not an autobiography.'

'It's got some personal elements.'

'But you've railed against autobiography. You must make it clear to them or they won't accept it. Jamie and his colleagues have been selling this around the world on the understanding that it's your life story. You've allowed them to do that and you've allowed me to write that based on my interviews with

you these last two months.'

'This will sell even better. And Sonny Mehta seemed much more excited by the idea of a manifesto than some standard autobiography.'

'Okay. Make it clear to them.'

'The book I'm describing is the book I've always said I would write.'

'It wasn't the book you were writing when you stayed up with me all night telling me your stepfather was an alcoholic.'

'That's not going in the book. None of that was meant for the book and that's why it was a mistake ever to let them see this early draft, because it has contaminated their minds.'

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Even if you were the most radical dude on campus, there was always some tight hippie ready to tell you you were bourgeois for liking, say, Earl Grey tea or for reading Anthony Powell. In that same vein, Julian scorns all attempts at social graces. He eats like a pig. He marches through doors and leaves women in his wake. He talks over everybody. And all his life he has depended on being the impish one, the eccentric one, the boy with a bag full of Einstein who liked climbing trees. But, as a forty-year-old, that's less charming, and I found his egotism at the dinner table to be a form of madness more striking than anything he said.

The next day when Julian turned up at the house in Bungay there was soup. He nodded for some and Harry put it down. Julian continued tapping into his laptop. My head was full of the previous night, when Jamie had called after midnight to discuss the problem. 'We've sold this book to forty publishers around the world on the basis that it's his autobiography,' he said, 'and if this motherfucker wants now to denounce that kind of book we'll cancel the contract. I have such a strong feeling for what they've done as an organisation, but if he does this he will hurt Canongate and all the others. It's unbelievable.' Jamie kept coming back to the 'irresponsibility' of someone signing and taking large sums to write a book they couldn't countenance. 'We love this early draft and it has the makings of a bestseller that will rescue his reputation. What is he thinking? I'm going down to see Sonny right now.'

In the morning, Jamie had sent me a copy of the contract between Canongate and Knopf and Julian. It contained an addendum, written by Sonny, which detailed what the book must contain. It was all standard autobiography stuff plus a paragraph about his ideas. The clear expectation was that he would deliver a life story with childhood, parents, the hacking years, the trial, and the setting up of WikiLeaks.

This was all in my head as we sat down at the table in Bungay, me, him, Sarah and Harry the researcher. After a few minutes of Julian tapping into his laptop, I asked him if he'd heard anything from Caroline, his agent. 'They're all panicking,' he said. 'They're such schoolgirls.'

'Jamie sent me the contract,' I said. 'It's clearly different from what you were discussing yesterday.'

Julian: 'Have we got it?' [Sarah produced a copy on her laptop.] He looked at it and immediately homed in on the one clause that mentioned his philosophy and said: 'See, it's there.'

Sarah: 'No. Look at the first few clauses. That's what Andy's talking about.'

Julian: 'See, there it is. My philosophy.'

Me: 'You're homing in on the bit that suits you. The rest of the addendum stipulates your life story.'

Julian: 'I don't see what the problem is. Something like that can be interpreted as the book I'm writing. We can give them any book and they'll like it: the food will cause the appetite.'

Sarah: 'You're now saying a manifesto, a very different sort of book from what they're suggesting here.'

Julian [shouting]: 'I'm fucking never talking to anybody again. They take what they want to hear and twist it through their own paranoia to only hear what fits.'

I looked at Harry. 'Julian, you said that Sonny would be happy with a manifesto but it's clear what he expects.'

Julian: 'They need to stop interfering with the soup while it's being cooked. Who's actually read it?'

Me: 'Jamie Byng, Nick Davies, Dan from Knopf and Sonny Mehta.'

Julian: 'I thought it was just the two editors?'

Me: 'No. Jamie was always going to read it. And then they must have given it to Sonny.'

Julian looked at Harry. 'I thought you were invigilating. You were supposed to take the manuscript away.'

'At the end of the day,' Harry said, 'I'm employed by Canongate. I couldn't refuse when they wanted to keep it. They're my employers.'

Julian: 'I gave you strict instructions not to let them boss you around. You should have taken it and walked out.'

Harry: 'They're my employers. I couldn't do that.'

Me: 'You can't expect him to go against them. This is ludicrous.'

Julian: 'I'm unspeakably angry. I didn't know your loyalty was to them ... a publisher's spy in the drafting process.'

Harry: 'Do you mean me?'

Julian: 'Yes.' At which point he went into the garden slamming the door behind him.

Harry: 'What a prat.'

Julian stood in the garden and stared over the fields. In the past, Sarah had covered for him when he was out of order, but now she didn't. She just apologised and said it was crazy. After a few minutes, Julian came back and picked up his things saying nothing. Eventually: 'Sarah, pack up.' He left the house and they drove away. About ten minutes later I got a text from him saying he wasn't angry with me and was sorry not to have said goodbye. Harry asked if he'd done anything wrong. Of course, he hadn't. He didn't even remember calling Julian a prat.

Caroline Michel was due to arrive for an 11 a.m. meeting at Ellingham Hall. Julian called me and asked if I'd sit in. 'That's fine,' I said, though I felt it was yet another irregularity. He came and picked me up on the way for his signing-in at Beccles police station. In the car, he railed against his lawyers, alleging Mark Stephens had brought in his own team. He asked me how a writer normally gets an agent. 'Well, you go and see a few of them. Then you make a decision about which one's best for you.'

'See. That's what I mean. I didn't see anyone. Mark Stephens brought in Caroline and now I've got this whole situation ... Everyone's making money out of this.'

Back at the house, Sarah was more depressed than I'd seen her. She implied that last night had been difficult and she'd had to take some of the blame for seeming to agree with us in the dispute over who got to read the manuscript. Julian's habit was to turn these young staff members on and off like a tap: he knew they were devoted to him and he took pains to outmanoeuvre them, even when there was no real need. She sat very sullen on the sofa in the drawing room and barely looked up.

'What's wrong with Sarah?' Caroline whispered when she arrived from the station.

'A bit depressed,' I said. We went into the kitchen and I stood with my back to the Aga.

'The first thing I have to say is this is a brilliant read,' she said. 'So exciting. Gosh. Just fabulous.'

'Please don't say that,' Julian said. 'If you say that to the publishers they'll just want to publish it.' Caroline looked at me as if she had just taken a wrong turning into the Twilight Zone. 'How did you get the manuscript anyhow?' he asked.

'Sonny gave me his copy.' Julian immediately went white and began to shake with rage.

'See! That's what I fucking mean,' he said. 'Passing round the manuscript! No one except those two editors were supposed to see it and I'm just fucking furious.'

'Don't be furious,' said Caroline. 'It doesn't matter ...'

'It does matter! Manuscripts flying across the Atlantic!'

'Julian, come on,' I said. 'You can't complain about your *agent* reading it.'

'I don't mind her reading it, but WHO ELSE is reading it?'

She had tactfully started calling the 'manifesto' stuff the 'vision part', which was likely to appeal more to the publishers. But whenever she spoke of what she liked about the autobiographical material in the autobiography, he shut her down. She plunged on, trying to sew the various bits of opposition into a seamless pattern, but there was a lot of optimism in what she said. He said he thought the book could come out in 2012. 'How about July for delivery?' she said.

'Impossible.'

'But let's try.' He said more about how he'd like the book to be and she brought out the part of the contract written by Sonny. She said what he was saying met the requirements of the contract. It didn't, and I wondered what her strategy was, but I'd said as much as I wanted to say. Eventually, Julian agreed to two things. He would mark up the draft, showing what was publishable, by his lights, and striking out what wasn't. And then he would sit down and write the 'vision bit'. He said he would start right away and in three or four weeks, if we left him alone, he would have it.

I spent most of the next few weeks in Scotland on family business. Julian sent me a message while I was in the Highlands saying 'Big up, Mr O'Hagan,' a reference he knew I would get to what a convict had written to him in prison: 'Big up, Mr WikiLeaks.' Other than that, and a few hellos through Sarah, we hadn't spoken since the day he agreed to start writing.

I rang Caroline on 9 May and repeated that the book could be completed but Julian had to want it to happen. Then Jamie rang. He said Julian hadn't done much at all and was on 'radio silence'. Jamie, as often on this project, went from being conciliatory to being outraged, and again began to talk about cancelling the contract. 'He's in breach,' Jamie said, 'and if the book is pushed beyond September the

publishers around the world will begin cancelling.'

Julian was getting a lot of flak in the press for making Wiki-employees sign contracts threatening them with a £12 million lawsuit if they disclosed anything about the organisation. It was clear he didn't see the problem. He has a notion that WikiLeaks floats above other organisations and their rules. He can't understand why any public body should keep a secret but insists that his own organisation enforce its secrecy with lawsuits. Every time he mentioned legal action against the *Guardian* or the *New York Times*, and he did this a lot, I would roll my eyes, but he didn't see the contradiction. He was increasingly lodged in a jungle of his own making and I told Jamie it was like trying to write a book with Mr Kurtz.

Caroline and I made another visit to Norfolk. When we arrived, Julian hugged us both. 'Hello, friend,' he said to me, in a rather formal way – clearly he was gesturing towards my father having died since we last met. The Boateng suit was now grubby and he seemed imprisoned in it. That morning was the point where it all went to another level of ghastliness. He had developed a proper siege mentality. I thought this must have to do with Vaughan and the bad atmosphere at Ellingham Hall, but it was more than that: he had grown to feel his lawyers were the enemy. 'It's disgusting,' he said, when we sat down with Caroline in the drawing room. 'I'm not doing any more work on the book until it's guaranteed that the money is not going to the lawyers.'

'Well, it goes where you want it to go.'

'Disgusting ...'

'Nobody pays their full lawyers' bill,' Caroline said.

'I'm not paying it. They've charged me for sitting on a fucking train. I should never have stayed in this country in the first place: I should have flown this jurisdiction.'

'Yes, well, let's ... There's a lot of pressure coming from the publishers.'

'I'm on strike. I would rather hack my leg off than let someone fuck me. Do you know how much the whole Max Mosley case cost? £400,000. Do you know how much *Tesco v. the Guardian* cost? £400,000.'

Caroline: 'How much do you think they should be paid?'

Julian named a figure.

Caroline: 'I think it's going to have to be a bit more than that.'

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A week later Julian called to say there 'might be time' to look at the book. The question of time was always bizarre. He said he couldn't meet these impossible deadlines, but while the ship was going down, he didn't miss a single interview, festival, or award ceremony, and he gave fancy reasons for that about feeding his public.

After snow and what seemed like months of rain, the garden at Ellingham Hall was now in full bloom. Nobody was up when I arrived except Vaughan Smith, who opened the door and chatted to me in the kitchen. Vaughan wasn't aware I knew anything about the tension between him and Julian and he understandably fished for detail about how it was all going. I didn't tell him much, though it must have been obvious to him how chaotic things were. He was critical of the people around Julian and said that nearly everyone who came into contact with him was looking to make something. Whether he knew it or not, Smith himself was constantly accused of this, mainly by Julian.

Julian came downstairs laughing and asked me to come with him to the police station. We jumped in the car with Sarah driving and he started excitedly telling me about some people he'd got in Afghanistan who were trying to find out about bias in the Afghan media. It emerged, over a few telephone calls in the car, that the guys in Afghanistan had no contacts and were stuck for something to do, so Julian called Kristinn Hrafnsson, his Icelandic colleague, who tried to drum something up. I later heard Julian call a contact at an activist group to find some people on the ground who might direct his people to a story. It was impressive to see him, on the way to the police station, doing the work of a journalist, and he was good at it. When he wants, he can deploy a kind of ethical charm that gets things done. The woman gave him some numbers and he passed them on to his crew. I say 'crew', because I believe they were the ones doing the cable TV show based on WikiLeaks's work around the world. Along with legal arguments and his fights with various media groups, this was his major preoccupation for months. In the car, we also discussed Alex Gibney, the Oscar-winning documentary film-maker who was slated to do a film on Julian (it came out last year). 'There's a problem of editorial input,' Julian said. 'We want to have some control. But the guy is like quite underhand. He has that arrogance. Then he sent a colleague to talk to us and we're so used to people recording me that we had her frisked for recording devices, and he sent this furious message about what a terrible insult etc.' Julian was always very interested in the movie arrangements being cooked up. 'Movie rights' on the book were always uppermost in his mind. He talked about them a lot, though he also spoke critically of the film-makers who had expressed interest in him. He was happy to dismiss Paul Greengrass, Alex Gibney or Steven Spielberg with a flick of the tongue.

The three of us went to a very pink café in the town and ordered sandwiches and cakes. We sat outside, and Julian got distracted by some young girls walking past. 'Hold on,' he said, and turned his gaze. 'No,' he said. 'It was fine until I saw the teeth.' One of the girls was wearing a brace. When Sarah came back and asked what we were talking about, Julian said he'd been admiring some

14-year-old girls, 'until they came close'. I record this not to show how predatory Julian is – I don't believe he is any more predatory than hundreds of men I've known. It's not that: I tell it to suggest how self-delighted he can be. He doesn't at all see how often his self-delight leads him into trouble. He doesn't understand other people in the slightest and it would be hard to think of a leader who so reliably got everyone wrong, mistaking people's motivations, their needs, their values, their gifts, their loyalty, and thereby destroys their usefulness to him. He was always very solicitous of me when I was with him, but I could tell he responded much more to the fact that I like a joke than to the notion that I was a professional writer. The latter mattered to him for five seconds when he was trying to find a writer to work with, but it was the time-wasting, authority-baiting side that really kept our relationship alive. He thought I was his creature and he forgot what a writer is, someone with a tendency to write things down and perhaps seek the truth and aim for transparency.

He was in a state of panic at all times that things might get out. But he manages people so poorly, and is such a slave to what he's not good at, that he forgets he might be making bombs set to explode in his own face. I am sure this is what happens in many of his scrapes: he runs on a high-octane belief in his own rectitude and wisdom, only to find later that other people had their own views – of what is sound journalism or agreeable sex – and the idea that he might be complicit in his own mess baffles him. Fact is, he was not in control of himself and most of what his former colleagues said about him just might be true. He is thin-skinned, conspiratorial, untruthful, narcissistic, and he thinks he owns the material he conduits. It may turn out that Julian is not Daniel Ellsberg or John Wilkes, but Charles Foster Kane, abusive and monstrous in his pursuit of the truth that interests him, and a man who, it turns out, was motivated all the while not by high principles but by a deep sentimental wound. Perhaps we won't know until the final frames of the movie.

Sitting outside the café, he was mulling over some more recent wounds. 'I suppose it would look right, to show leniency. He should be told I am making a gesture of generosity.' He was talking about Harry Stopes.

'Whatever,' I said. 'He's a research assistant and this should be forgotten about.'

'He shouldn't have called me a prat behind my back.'

'He didn't do it behind your back. He said it to your face, but you were busy slamming the door at the time.'

'Well ...'

'The much more important thing is how we get this book done. I've got to move on soon. I was only supposed to be helping you until the first of April. The trouble is you're just not focused on this book.'

'I am. It just needs to be done in a certain way. There's a big fan-base out there. They will buy this book if it contains the right message and inspires them.'

'What do we need?'

'It needs to be more like Ayn Rand.'

I was stunned for a second. This was new. 'I don't know if I can help you with that,' I said. He took out his phone and made another call about Afghanistan.

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Back at Ellingham Hall the sun had chased all the gloom out of the dining room. I looked at the table next to the window and remembered, back in January, laying all the chapter cards there and trying to visualise a shape for the book. I hardly knew Julian then, but he looked over the layout and agreed to it, and I remember thinking this might be a good collaboration. At first, as we inspected those cards in the middle of the night, I thought he saw an opportunity laid out before him, to tell it like it was, to step out of all the bluster and tell the truth. But now, on this bright morning, I saw he liked fame more. He was talking to Sarah and me about his forthcoming trip to the Hay Festival. 'You've been there, right?' he said.

It seemed mad to me that he was considering going to a book festival to talk about a book that wasn't done, wasn't published, and might never be published.

'I'll read one of those good writing parts of yours,' he said. 'And then I'll read a new political thing. The latter will get the headlines and the first will surprise people.' I was astonished. The *Daily Telegraph* was sending a helicopter to take him down to Hay. He wanted me to come with him.

'I hate helicopters,' I said. 'I'm not coming to Hay to talk about a book that isn't written. Even less, to talk about a book I was supposed to be helping you write in secret. Why would I do that?'

'It might be good for fly on the wall,' he said. 'I'd like more fly on the wall in the book.'

He kept saying he'd done some work on the early draft but he couldn't find it. That afternoon, as I laid out a second draft plan for the book, Julian searched the laptops in the room – about eight of them – for his 'marked-up' version. There was something pathetic about the search: it was clear he had never marked up any version.

He couldn't really bear to think about it. He was relentlessly autobiographical in his speech, but he clearly felt trapped by the requirement to commit to a narrative that would become the 'story'. The business of the marked-up text seemed to be decisive and I felt we were fucked. By now, he had found at least half a dozen major obstacles. When it wasn't deadlines, it was his view that all

biography is 'prostitution'; when it wasn't that, it was not having the time to read the material or being too tired to do the interviews, or needing six weeks on his own just to sit down and 'focus' on his vision, or hating the idea of all the money going to his lawyers. I've never been with anybody who made me feel so like an adult. And I say that as the father of a ten-year-old.

We agreed I'd come back in a few days and all his marking up would be done. 'I'm going to look for this for a while longer and then give up,' said Julian, still examining laptops. At the same time, Tristan, one of his random young assistants, who was studying video production at Bournemouth, was looking through film footage that we might use for 'scenes' in the book. He gave me a hard drive to take away. When I got it home, I saw the main piece of footage (there are 300 hours more) was of Julian having a shave as everyone watched.

Under his bail conditions, Julian could make trips in the daytime so long as he was back at Ellingham Hall by 10 p.m. It was my birthday and I was having dinner with friends in the St Pancras Hotel when Julian rang to say he wanted to come to London. He arrived at my place the next day with two of his colleagues, a nice albino bloke whom I'd never met, and a shy American girl. As soon as he came into the flat, Julian went off checking for bugs, he said, or exits, or the sleepover situation – these appear to be his priorities wherever he goes. I took him into the sitting room and he slumped on the sofa. He looked absolutely shattered, his clothes were done in, and he seemed hunted. I asked if he was hungry and got him a slice of cake.

By now he was referring to his lawyers as 'cunts'. He told me Stephens accused him of hanging his arse out to dry by asking for the bill to be cut. 'He's made little cuts – £20,000 here, £40,000 there, but the bill remains disgusting,' Julian said. In an hour's time he was due to go down to Camden Town for a meeting with Gareth Peirce, the human rights lawyer, who he hoped would take on the job of representing him at the next appeal hearing.

He hadn't found the marked manuscript and hadn't done any of the things we agreed. We'd lost another four days. I handed him a draft of the 'personal vision' stuff and he said he would read it that evening. 'No, you won't,' I said. 'This book isn't going to happen, is it?' He looked at me with a degree of honesty, I felt, for the first time. 'You haven't put pen to paper once in all these months. You find the whole thing difficult and you can't face it. You now have to tell the publishers straight, you can't do it.'

'I know.'

'You've got to lead this thing. There's over two million dollars and over forty secondary publishers. You can't keep mucking everybody about and thinking it's going to be okay. Just stop the train now.'

'The book will happen, but later ...'

'I know. But your contract is for now. And your contract is for an autobiography. Pay Canongate back the money you've taken from them. It's important you pay them back. The others ...'

'Can sue me.'

'Whatever you say. But nobody died. Just pay back the money and maybe you'll have a book to write in a few years further down the line. There's a reason many people don't publish their memoirs until the end of their careers.'

'Let's leave it for a week,' he said. 'I'll know my legal position better soon.'

'Have a present,' he said at the door. He gave me a tin of General White Portion, a kind of snuff. 'From Sweden,' he said with a smile. I shook my head and closed the door.

'You're the person holding this together,' Jamie said when I eventually spoke to him. But I wasn't happy to be that person. I didn't sign up to be the executive producer. Then news came that the Icelandic publishers wanted to cancel their contract. Foreign publishers were getting cold feet. Jamie wrote a letter to Julian and Caroline Michel and sent me a copy, with a covering note. 'If this doesn't wake Julian from his slumber,' he said, 'then I fear it is Game Over.'

Julian phoned to ask if I'd reconsider and come on the helicopter to Hay the next day. I said I was looking after my daughter. He said to bring her too. 'No,' I said. With Julian, in every case, spectacle overrules tactics, and he couldn't see that me stepping out of a helicopter at Hay with him was not a good idea. He also told me he had signed on the dotted line with Gareth Peirce.

Sarah called to say she wanted to meet me and give me a hard drive. It was full of secrets and she had to hand it to me personally. She was having lunch with a friend in London and we arranged for her to come up in the afternoon. She arrived about 3 p.m. I made coffee and she sat at the kitchen table and unloaded about the organisation and Julian for two hours. 'He's like threatened to fire me a few times,' she said, 'and always for crazy reasons. One of the times was literally because I had hugged another member of staff. Hugged him, like a friend hug. Julian was like "that's so disrespectful to me" and went off on one. He said I'd said the guy smelled nice and that was humiliating. He did smell nice; he'd just had a bath. Julian was furious. And once he was like "you're the new Domscheit-Berg" and you could do some damage if you left. He won't tell the others what my role is, so one time he's like "you're my number two" but he won't say to the others. So, if I try to speak to Kristinn he's like "who do you think you are?" because I've got no like official authority. Only Julian has that.'

She told me there had been a big bust-up over a deal in Canada because Julian, having negotiated with CBC and some Canadian press, was about to double-cross them at the last minute and she'd spoken up. He wouldn't just overrule her: he had to spend hours convincing her he was right. 'It

happens all the time,' she said. 'He won't do anything and I'll keep reminding him, and then, like with the Canadian elections, he'll jump into action at the very last minute. And he was about to make a massive mistake and I told him. Afterwards, he blamed me for the whole thing and said he'd come close to firing me over that but he probably wouldn't.'

We turned to talking about the book. 'In fairness,' she said, 'he never wanted to do it. Mark Stephens was going on about a book and before you knew it Caroline Michel was involved and it was all this money and the thing was signed. He didn't want to write a book but now he's just letting it get worse and worse. He goes on the phone to Jamie to say stuff and then doesn't say it.'

'That's a disaster,' I said.

'I know,' she said. 'He doesn't want people to see how his mind works.'

I implied that it was weird for someone who liked the sound of their own voice to ask for a ghostwriter. As the conversation went on you could see she was strung between loving him and being baffled. She said she knew that he was only loyal to her because they were 'stuck in that house'. As soon as he was free he would chase other girls. 'He openly chats girls up and has his hand on their arse,' she said, 'and goes nuts if I even talk to another guy.' She said he couldn't stand her being away from him and didn't think she should see friends or go on holiday or 'abandon' him at all.

I asked about the sex allegations. I said that in all my time with him he hadn't really clarified what happened. 'It was weird,' she said. 'Like, why was he even staying with those girls? He didn't rape them but he was really fucking stupid.'

She said she now understood that people like Domscheit-Berg had a basic point. 'I don't agree with the way he did it,' she said, 'but you can tell he was probably just trying to say something true and got hated for it. That's the way it is with Julian: he can't listen. He doesn't get it. He'll try to get me to ring John Pilger at three in the morning. Some of these sureties gave fifty grand, basically because they were friends of Jemima's, and he thinks he can get them to do stuff for him in the middle of the night. It's crazy.'

She said Julian had told her to try and persuade me to come to Hay tomorrow. I said I couldn't. I had my daughter. I said I thought the whole trip was mad. Jamie thought he was going to read from the book and promote it in advance. In fact, he was just going to be interviewed and do the celebrity bit. All the discussions, all the threats, all the attempts at persuasion, and all my work, had come to nothing. Julian had known all along he would scupper the book. He just didn't have the balls to tell us all he couldn't do it.

'I don't think he's got the right kind of psychology to be able to put his name to a memoir,' I said.

'I know,' she said. 'But he might want it to become like a fly-on-the-wall record of him.'

That's what this is, but he'll hate this too. The impulse towards free speech, like Sarah speaking freely in my kitchen or me speaking freely now, is only permissible if it adheres to his message. His pursuit of governments and corporations was a ghostly reverse of his own fears for himself. That was the big secret with him: he wanted to cover up everything about himself except his fame.

Reports reached me from Hay. Reactions to his appearance were mixed. He was described as looking puffy and unkempt. Ralph Fiennes, who was in the audience, described the event as 'compelling' but suggested it also made him feel deeply uncomfortable.

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On 5 June I picked Julian up at Ellingham Hall and drove him to the police station. He got into the car with the print of bedsheets still on his face and his hair sticking up. 'Life is so unjust,' he said. 'I was dreaming I was walking down this very long, steep, rickety path on a beach, many thousands of metres going down into the ocean. I got to a point where there were abandoned pieces of wetsuit, especially feet, and I was in bare feet and really wanted to go into the sea below. I went through the wetsuits and there were some Russian ones and some French ones that must have belonged to crab fishermen. I found one and was just pulling it on – I could see down into the water, and then this terrible alarm clock, Sarah, woke me up.'

We called in at a breakfast place in Beccles. He said we should cancel the contract. He said he didn't care what effect this decision would have on the Americans or on his agent, but he did feel bad for Jamie Byng and Canongate. I said again that he must make sure he paid Canongate back. He said that would happen and that his agents held the money. 'You and I can keep working together,' he said.

'That's fine,' I said, 'but this contract has either to be honoured or cancelled. There's no middle way.'

'I know,' he said. 'And it will be cancelled. I regret it because I think it would be good to pre-empt the Swedish case. There's going to be a lot of shit about me in the press there during the trial and they're waiting to give their version, and I should get the truth out there before then.'

He asked me to work for him as a kind of 'official historian', 'coming in and out of the various countries and projects'. He said he thought there was a masterpiece of narrative non-fiction lying in wait. 'You get to that over time,' he said.

'Not in a handful of months.'

'Correct.'

At that point, Sarah wrote to Caroline Michel that the contract should be cancelled. Jamie tried to persuade me to write about Assange with Julian's authorisation, offering me half the royalties in advance (about one and a half million dollars), but I refused. Jamie had written to Sonny Mehta hoping the 'rescue' book could still be done. But, on the other line, as it were, Julian was telling me there would never be a second book.

A meeting at Ellingham Hall attended by Mehta and others was excruciating. Sonny had to sit for two hours while Julian lectured him about power, corruption, the police state and the truth about publishing. The editor in chief of Knopf said almost nothing.

The charade of Julian Assange writing a book finally came to an end at one o'clock at Cigala in Lamb's Conduit Street. It was 159 days after Jamie had arrived at my flat to lay out the plan, and he came into the restaurant the same guy, not much defeated, and ready to go for another 12 rounds. During that time, Egypt and Tunisia had won a questionable freedom, Libya had gone to war, I'd toured Australia, my father had died, I'd given up smoking, and I'd managed to say nothing about the fact that Julian Assange had asked me to help him find his voice and then asked me to help him unfind it. It was a good season to be a listener and a bad one to be a talker, so I'd followed that ethos to the letter.

It was Evelyn Waugh who said that when a writer is born into a family the family is over. And why would it be any different when a second family comes to call? Julian wanted a brother, a friend, a PR guru, a chief of staff, a speechwriter, and he wanted that person to be a writer with a reputation. When he was working with those fellows from the *Guardian*, the *New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*, he allowed himself to forget that they were journalists with decades of experience and their own fund of beliefs. To him they were just conduits and possible disciples: he is still reeling, even today, from the shock that they were their own men and women. My discussions with him would go on, in private, long after the idea of 'collaboration' was over. But he consistently forgot that I am foremost a writer and an independent person. Julian is an actor who believes all the lines in the play are there to feed his lines; that none of the other lives is substantial in itself. People have inferred from this kind of thing that he has Asperger's syndrome and they could be right. He sees every idea as a mere spark from a fire in his own mind. That way madness lies, of course, and the extent of Julian's lying convinced me that he is probably a little mad, sad and bad, for all the glory of WikiLeaks as a project. For me, the clarifying moment in our relationship came when he so desperately wanted me to join him on the helicopter flight to Hay. He wanted me to see him on the helicopter and he wanted me to assist him in living out that version of himself. The fact he was going to a book festival to talk about a book we both knew he would never produce was immaterial: he was flying in from Neverland with his own personal J.M. Barrie. What could be nicer for the lost boy of Queensland with his silver hair and his sense that the world of adults is no real place for him? By refusing the helicopter I was not refusing that side of him, only allowing myself the distance to see it clearly for what it was. And to see myself clearly, too: I have had to fight to grow away from my own lost boy, and it seemed right that day to fly a kite with my daughter and retain my independence from this man's confused dream of himself.

For the lunch with Jamie at Cigala, I asked that my agent Derek Johns come, too, and suggested Caroline Michel should also be there. Before Caroline arrived, Jamie said he hoped the book could now become *Assange* by Andrew O'Hagan. He said he'd already begun to persuade Julian that this was not a book he could have a veto on, and that it would be the best chance of getting his message out. 'He's never going to be in this position again, with a writer he trusts, a writer who already knows the material. He says as long as he could help set out what the book should contain.'

'He might agree to that now,' I said, 'but he will make every effort to injunct that book come publication. Believe me. You are setting yourself up for a major nightmare by imagining that this first-person book, which he hates, can just be shunted into the third person and published. It's the same material and he will oppose it.'

Derek agreed. Jamie eventually saw that the book would not happen on those terms. The question of collaboration in that sense was over: even to pay Julian a penny would assume his authorisation and wouldn't work on another book given how the present attempt had failed. I told him I would continue to follow the activities of the organisation in my own time and with no certain end in mind.

'Did Julian ever get those emails to you,' Caroline asked, 'the ones about the setting up of WikiLeaks?'

'No,' I said. He never located any material. Just like he never located the marked-up manuscript. 'And what would be the point in having them? He doesn't want a book.'

'But he does want a book. Every time I speak to him he says: "I want a book."'

'And what does that mean, "I want a book"? He wants a book by not allowing it to be written? By not doing the work? By not committing himself to the interviews or liking what emerges from them? In what sense does he want a book?'

'I don't know.'

'He doesn't want a book. And all basis for a collaboration as defined by this contract is over.'

'That's right,' Jamie said. 'You've already explained to him we expect the money paid back in full. And the same for Knopf. And sadly the contracts are cancelled.'

'He prefers to say "suspended".'

'No,' said Derek. 'You have to be clear. This is not suspended and it is not postponed. It is cancelled.'

'But he says he wants to continue working with Andy,' Caroline said. There was a pause in which Caroline and I exchanged long glances. I think she wanted me to save the day somehow. 'It's just so frustrating,' she added, 'because there's a very good book waiting there.'

'I know,' I said. 'But he can't handle it.'

'Mark Stephens thinks he's having a nervous breakdown.'

'That's possible, too,' I said.

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One of the issues that bugged me was how far all this had taken us from the work WikiLeaks had started out doing. I believed at this stage that the organisation could regroup after the legal appeals and the autobiography battle, returning to the core work that had made Julian's name. But there was strong evidence now that he was devoted to his legal problems as well as to skirmishes with former collaborators over his reputation. The Bradley Manning issue was very much on his mind but he didn't seem able to lead the charge in defending Manning, and for a good reason: it remained important to him to pretend not to know Manning was the source for the Apache helicopter video, the cables and the Afghan war logs that had justified WikiLeaks's presence as a new moral force in the world. I remained sure that the real research on the cables hadn't been done, that the implications of so much military and diplomatic plotting though it could change the map, hadn't been looked into. I thought, if Julian was serious and strategic, that WikiLeaks should not only bale stuff out onto the web, but should then facilitate the editing and presenting of that work in a way that was of permanent historical value. Perry Anderson of Verso Books had the same thought, and I put it to Julian that the *WikiLeaks Map of the World* should be a series which provided for a proper academic study of what the biggest security leaks in history had revealed, with expert commentary, notes, essays and introductions. It would provide the organisation with a lasting, grown-up legacy, a powerful, orderly continuation of its initial work.

Julian came to lunch at my flat in Belsize Park. Tariq Ali came and so did Mary-Kay Wilmers, the editor of the *London Review*, as well as an American editor for Verso called Tom Mertes. Anderson's idea was that Verso would publish a series of books, or one book in which each chapter showed how the US cables released by WikiLeaks had changed the political position of a particular country. A writer who knew, say, Italy, would introduce the chapter and the same would be done for every country and it would be very meticulous and well-made. Julian gave a big speech at the beginning, the middle and the end. He clearly liked Tariq but had no sense of him as someone who knew a lot more about the world than he did. Although the idea for the book had come from Verso, Julian preferred to give a lecture about how most academics were corrupted by their institutions.

During the lunch I asked Julian if he had done anything about Canongate. He said everything was fine over there. 'Not so,' I said. 'The problem isn't going to go away. You owe them half a million pounds.' He wanted a cigar and I found him one. 'It'll be fine,' he said. Anyone else would have jumped at the chance of the Verso project but as Julian drove off in a taxi I knew he would never call Tariq about this or lay any of the groundwork they'd agreed. Julian was already more concerned about claiming the idea for himself, an idea that he would never see to fruition. The meeting had called for responsible action, when what Julian loved was irresponsible reaction.

An invitation arrived for his fortieth birthday. 'Come and celebrate with the "Most Dangerous Man in the World",' it said. In London, there had been a touch of the old radical chic-ery when people heard there was to be a party. A film director, a therapist, a writer, left messages on my voicemail asking if I was going to the 'big party'. When it came to the day I brought a friend full of curiosity and we arrived in the kind of tent that is popular at your average big fat gypsy wedding. Julian's dad was there, and I spoke to him, not gleaning anything, just capturing the sense of this rather proud and gentle man. The party was curiously unfestive, somehow, like one of those family occasions where nobody has really thought about the music or the fact that the kids will want different things from the adults. There was a lame auction of stuff Julian had in prison, too egotistical I thought, and, again, a little off-key. Vivienne Westwood was waving her arms around and bidding. Jennifer Robinson, the lawyer who assisted Mark Stephens, and I had a brief chat and she was literally rolling her eyes about what had been happening. 'We need to talk,' she said. 'What's happening? The whole thing is running out of control.' From the next table, Jemima Khan crooked her hand in the way that means 'call me'.

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At the end of July 2011, Canongate told me they intended to publish the first draft of the book without Julian's say-so, and with an unsigned foreword by Nick Davies, the editor, outlining the reasons it was being published despite being incomplete and not having Julian's authorisation. As far as I was concerned it felt right neither to help them with the book nor to hinder their efforts to get their money back. The dispute was between Julian and the people whose contract he signed.

On 7 August Davies came to the flat I was staying at in Glasgow (I had a play in rehearsal) from his office in Edinburgh. He was worried about his foreword and about the manuscript more generally, and I agreed to look at it with a view to protecting each side from warfare. Nick's foreword made every attempt to be decent, stating clearly how Canongate felt the book met their intentions and the letter of the contract, but making clear it was not being published with Julian's authorisation. I made several suggestions. I advised him to admit that the book was too personal for Julian, which is what Julian had said to me, so as to pre-empt suggestions that his objections were political.

I flipped through the manuscript and advised Nick also to remove the names of the *Guardian* journalists David Leigh and Nick Davies. It wasn't at all clear whether Julian was being fair to them

and I felt the parties might be litigious. Both Leigh and Davies had sent me emails saying they would sue if the book libelled them, and I felt that Jamie, despite being generally gung-ho, should not land himself in a legal mess. The editor agreed to make these changes. We didn't discuss the Swedish chapter, containing Julian's counterstory of the rape allegations, but I reckoned they might have to come back to it. The case was still pending.

Caroline Michel phoned. She said Jamie would not return her calls. Julian now 'wanted to talk', and later he would settle on this unwillingness of theirs, ignoring the fact that all the unwillingness had been his for four months. How far was he willing to go in order to fuck everybody off? The answer came on 1 September. Having canvassed his followers on Twitter, Julian decided to dump the whole cache of 250,000 US cables supplied to him by Bradley Manning on the internet. He blamed the *Guardian* – a tactic I recognise from many of his sorties – and especially David Leigh. He insisted Leigh had included a password in his book that could decrypt the files WikiLeaks had left online. Leigh has always said this is nonsense. The manoeuvre brought so many infamous Julian tropes together: the hatred of the US; the showing off about security while having no real sense of how it works (why were the files left online?); the 'blame culture' in which any enemy of his must be shown to have failed. By then, Leigh's book had been out for seven months, and not once during that time – or during his dozens of interviews with me – had Julian mentioned that the book might contain the password. Not once did he refer to it or try to put it right. He either ignored it, as he does so many pressing issues, because he can't be bothered, is not diligent, thinks things will go away just because he wants them to, or – my personal belief – he never read Leigh's book, only excerpts fed to him by his colleagues or the web. This would be unforgivable in any company member or security group, never mind one dealing in hundreds of thousands of secrets. But Julian is unsackable, and, like the unsackable all over the world, he makes decisions with the kind of hubris that trumps clear-sightedness and experience. There was no point in dumping those cables. By doing so, he risked exposing people mentioned in them. (No privacy is necessary, according to Assange, but he's wrong about that.) After he released all the cables, many of his allies turned against him. He had ruined the last of his reputation as a responsible publisher, just to get one over on the *Guardian*. I hung my head when I learned what he'd done, feeling it spelled long-term disaster for him.

I was getting a lot of calls asking me to speak about all this, but I didn't answer them. I'd failed not only to get the fascinating book I imagined, but to keep my involvement helpfully dark. The emails kept coming about doing a tell-all; they appeared to come from everywhere and I froze. It wasn't just the usual reluctance to write too much, it was a sense of loyalty to my original idea of ghosting. Plus a kind of loyalty to Julian's vulnerability, especially (not in spite of) his role as enemy to himself. I just couldn't stand the scale of the errors he was making and didn't want to describe them. Not then. I knew it would take years and it has.

Jamie called to inform me they were about to tell Julian the book was going to be published. Canongate wanted to face down an attempted injunction before they printed the book, not after. According to their lawyers, Julian had breached the contract, and if he injuncted they would fight for the right to publish. On 7 September 2011, a letter was sent to Assange telling him 'that we will be publishing your autobiography this month and the book will be going to press on the 19th September ... It will lack your formal imprimatur and you are entitled to distance yourself from our publication. However, in proceeding with publication under our original contract with you, the book will carry your copyright and we will honour your royalty payments once our costs have been recovered.'

Julian called me in Glasgow and I spoke to him in a lane off Renfield Street. It was hard to hear what he was saying, but he was ranting against Canongate and saying he would seek an injunction. I already knew from Caroline Michel that he and WikiLeaks were in financial trouble and that he could not afford this – in the UK you have to prove to the judge that you can afford the costs if you lose. 'But you've had the manuscript since April,' I said, 'and you did nothing about it.'

'No. I've been trying to contact Jamie for weeks,' he said. 'And he wouldn't return the calls. He's obviously been planning this since early in the summer.'

Lawyers' letters were exchanged.

I tried to convince Julian that legal steps would not work. It might be better to get hold of the book and make any crucial changes before it was too late. I said I could help him do this – to ensure that he was less vulnerable to attack or prosecution. I told him I had already redacted the names of the journalists who had been named by him but whose side of the story Julian hadn't accounted for. We agreed on two areas where the manuscript might endanger him: 1. On the issue of Bradley Manning. He insisted 'alleged source' be placed before Manning's name and I said I would pass that on. And, second, the whole Swedish chapter would have to be looked at with a view to protecting his case there. 'Spend the next day or two looking through the manuscript making amendments,' I said. 'And give them to me, and I'll force Canongate to make the changes. It's your best course of action.'

'We might try both. We might try this method and an injunction,' he said. But I knew this would require more effort than he was ever going to put in. His default position was to let the whole thing run out of control and then get into a Twitter war with the parties afterwards.

'If you don't do this marking,' I said, 'and if you disappear into your bubble, there is nothing we can do to fix this. They will publish the book as it is.'

'Okay,' he said. 'I agree.' He then did nothing and made no marks to the manuscript.

I eventually told Jamie he should be ready to make some changes and it would then be possible to get Julian onside. 'That should be fine,' he said.

Julian asked me if I could get the Swedish chapter of the book sent to Helena Kennedy. Kennedy was by now advising Assange on a number of legal issues. I said I would try and I asked Caroline to put pressure on Jamie. I also asked Jamie. He said he thought that would be fine. But Jamie was keen to protect his publication and the rights of those to whom he had sold it. Understandably, he wouldn't put up with further delays and wouldn't pass on the manuscript unless Julian agreed to sign a letter saying he wouldn't oppose the book. Julian was resisting this and preparing for war. I called Jamie: 'You don't want his changes, do you?'

'At this stage I don't trust him to make them.'

'That's fair enough. You won't have a book before Christmas. But I can see you wouldn't be convinced by anybody, not Leo Tolstoy himself, to delay the book.'

'No, we couldn't. It's gone too far and he's had too many chances. We're publishing the book and this is the book we want to publish.'

Geoffrey Robertson was then hired by Julian to check the book, completely missing the point that Canongate were about to push the button. There wasn't time.

On 19 September Canongate set the presses rolling. 'We're proud of the book and he left us no choice but to publish,' Jamie said. Caroline was engaged in a last-minute effort to stop publication but even at this crucial stage, her client was barely returning her calls.

Word was leaking out. Before I went to bed I saw messages on my phone from Nick Cohen at the *Observer* and several from the *Scotsman*. There was a text from Esther Addley of the *Guardian*. Jamie said someone at Waterstone's had phoned the *Guardian* to say they had a copy of the book. The *Independent* put a story online. Jamie had arranged for them – and the BBC's *Today* programme – to have an exclusive the next morning, with the paper running two extracts. But fearing a spoiler, and having read a story on their website, which named me as the writer but said I'd bowed out after feeling 'uncomfortable' with the way things were going, I turned my phone off.

The National Theatre of Scotland's adaptation of my book *The Missing* had opened in Glasgow that week. After the curtain one night, Jamie met me in the theatre bar. He said he wanted me to get the first copy of the book. Holding it, I realised I felt nothing. I didn't feel it was by me and the ghost's prerogative, to live a half-life in a house that wasn't mine, was all I had.

'We should seek maximum publicity and maximum debunking,' Julian said the next day, 'and I think both things can be done at the same time.'

'How?' I said.

'By making as much publicity as possible; the book will sell. This is good. And by showing that the publishers jumped early, when we were working on a first draft, we can question the book's authority. We will choose five inaccuracies in the book and thereby invalidate its integrity. We will say you oppose the book ...'

'Hold on,' I said. 'I'm not comfortable with that. I am not willing to be a pawn in this. The book was at an early stage and you didn't make changes. This is a matter between you and them and it won't work to tell people I simply disapprove. It is not of any account whether I approve or not. I did my work, and Canongate will say, rightly, that you did not.'

'That doesn't matter. Readers won't care about that. The thing to communicate is that we were on a journey that was interrupted.' He said he was writing a press release and would send it to me. An email came via the *London Review*, from the *Wall Street Journal*, asking me to speak about what had happened. The *Sunday Times* magazine left a message to say I could have the cover to say whatever I wanted to say. During the evening, Julian, through his Twitter account, sent a bizarre message about truth being stranger than fiction, linking his followers to the book's Amazon page. Later that night he sent a 'statement' – i.e. a rant – to the Associated Press. Jamie Byng was staying in the spare room of the Glasgow flat and I could hear him up in the night responding to texts and messages. In the morning, he told me he had been seeking the advice of Liz Sich at Colman Getty, the PR firm. He was white with rage about the allegations of misconduct directed at him by Julian in his statement.

I have learned today through an article in the *Independent* that my publisher, Canongate, has secretly distributed an unauthorised 70,000-word first draft of what was going to be my autobiography ... I am not 'the writer' of this book. I own the copyright of the manuscript, which was written by Andrew O'Hagan. By publishing this draft against my wishes Canongate has acted in breach of contract, in breach of confidence, in breach of my creative rights and in breach of personal assurances ... This book was meant to be about my life's struggle for justice through access to knowledge. It has turned into something else. The events surrounding its unauthorised publication by Canongate are not about freedom of information – they are about old-fashioned opportunism and duplicity – screwing people over to make a buck.

On 20 December 2010, three days after being released from prison and while under house arrest, I signed a contract with Canongate and US publisher Knopf. In it I agreed to authorise a 100,000-150,000 word book – part memoir, part manifesto – in order to fund legal defences and to contribute towards WikiLeaks' operating costs. On the 7th of December 2010 Bank of America, Visa, MasterCard, PayPal and Western Union folded to US pressure by arbitrarily and unlawfully cutting WikiLeaks off of its financial lifeline. The blockade continues ... My legal defence fund was similarly targeted and closed.

The draft is published under the title *Julian Assange: The Unauthorised Autobiography* – a

contradiction in terms. It is a narrative and literary interpretation of a conversation between the writer and me. Although I admire Mr O'Hagan's writing, this draft was a work in progress. It is entirely uncorrected or fact-checked by me. The entire book was to be heavily modified, extended and revised, in particular, to take into account the privacy of the individuals mentioned in the book. I have a close friendship with Andrew O'Hagan and he stands by me.

The publisher has not been given a copy of the manuscript by Andrew O'Hagan or me. Rather, as a courtesy they were shown the 'manuscript in progress' by Andrew O'Hagan's researcher, as an act of generosity, and for viewing purposes only – expressly agreed to by Canongate. Canongate physically took the manuscript, kept it, and did not return it to Mr O'Hagan or me.

Contrary to what the *Independent* reports, I did not pull the plug on the deal, nor was I unwilling to compromise. Rather, I proposed on 7 June 2011 to cancel the contract as it stood in order to write up a fresh contract with a new deadline. I informed the publishers ... having explained that with the upcoming extradition appeal in the High Court and an ongoing espionage Grand Jury against me in Virginia, I was not in a position to dedicate my full attention to a book that would narrate my personal story and my life's work. On 9 June 2011 I received an email from my agency, PFD, informing me that the US and UK publishers (Knopf and Canongate) were interested in renegotiating the form of the book, and insisting on cancelling the contract as it stood ... It is this contract, that had been agreed to be cancelled by all parties, that Canongate is basing its actions on.

In a meeting on 20 May 2011 with Canongate publisher Jamie Byng, I verbally agreed to deliver the agreed 100,000-150,000 word manuscript by the end of the year. In a recorded phone conversation on (or the day before or after) 15 June 2011, Jamie Byng gave me assurances that Canongate would never, contrary to rumours given to me, publish the book without my consent. We would agree to restructure the book and the deadline, and draw up a new contract. In correspondence (24 August 2011) my agent wrote: 'We are going to arrange for you to have a one-to-one meeting with Jamie' ... However, Jamie Byng ignored my agent's attempts to arrange a meeting with me. My agent then informed me that Jamie Byng would refuse to take any of my calls. Despite this I and two members of my team tried repeatedly to contact him ... During all this time we were unaware of Canongate's secret plan to publish the manuscript without consent.

On 7 September, Canongate informed my agent that they wanted to print the unauthorised book Monday, 19 September 2011. I was advised by my lawyers that I had grounds for obtaining a *quia timet* injunction to prevent the printing ... on the basis that the proposal amounts to an infringement of copyright, a breach of the agreement, plus a breach of my right not to have my work subjected to derogatory treatment.

On 16 September 2011, I wrote a letter to my publisher informing them of my intention to obtain a temporary injunction unless they agreed to make immediately available to QC Geoffrey Robertson a copy of the proposed book. In keeping with my rights under the contract, I requested five days for legal review of the manuscript by my own barrister, so that he could suggest any deletions reasonably required to protect our people from any adverse legal consequences that may arise from this publication. Jamie Byng attempted to extort legal immunity for his actions by refusing to give me even a single chapter of the book unless I signed away my right to take legal action against Canongate ...

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One of Julian's techniques, again borrowed from the spymasters he purports to find criminal, is to tape conversations with friends and colleagues and then use them to 'prove' duplicity. My interviews with him were recorded contemporaneously, either on tape or in notes, and I had tapes running and notepads in my hand all the time I was with him. But his use of private recordings with Canongate seemed to me a new low. As for me, the statement that I 'supported him', that I was his friend etc, was out of order. He was using me. It was against my consistent wish that I not be dragged into the middle of this dispute. But in this dispute Julian considered everybody but himself a pawn. He was the king we were all obliged to protect. The fact was I supported Julian where I could, but I often couldn't, and he knew it. I tried to give him as much encouragement as I could, seeing his point of view and all that, and I continued to do so, but my arguments with him were all in the open. The morning after Julian's press release, Jamie wanted me to refute Julian's claims and I said that he was just doing the same thing as Julian. I would tell my own version when the time was right but my role in this was to be silent. Did any of them understand that?

I got the 6.30 a.m. train to London. The steward offered me a copy of the *Independent*. Coverline: 'EXCLUSIVE EXTRACTS: JULIAN ASSANGE, THE UNAUTHORISED AUTOBIOGRAPHY.' Giant splash. Inside, the story went on to say that I had become 'uncomfortable about the furore' around Julian and his publishers and implied that this was why I'd decided that my name 'will not appear on the memoir'. Nonsense: at my insistence, my name was never intended to appear on the book. I put my headphones on. *Today* programme: Nick Davies of Canongate: 'We gave him a number of opportunities. We took the co-writer off the project.'

Having told me on the phone that he would covertly try to boost sales of the book and then not-too-covertly posting a link to its Amazon page on Twitter, Julian called again while I was standing in the corridor of King's College London on Friday, 23 September. He said that maybe the book should be published in America after all. 'We could call it "The Authorised Version"', he said. I laughed. But later he started to campaign against the book. Jamie felt outraged by the untruths and distortions in Julian's account, and sat down to write an open letter to him. On the advice of Colman Getty, the letter was never sent, but it was scathing and convincing. It pointed out that Julian delivered nothing and

that he was breaching my wish to remain anonymous and that he should wait for my statement, one day, of what actually happened. It also pointed out that all advance money was paid to him via his lawyer and what happened to the money after that was nothing to do with Canongate.

Julian's late-night online campaign had the usual effect of turning a bad patch into a vipers' nest. He never really apologised to anyone, but got busy turning his publishers into the latest enemy, to go alongside Domscheit-Berg, Mark Stephens, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, my researcher, his former host at Ellingham Hall, the government of Australia, his activist friends in Iceland, and a host of others who'd dared to have their own views. There would be many more to come: Jemima Khan, the *Big Issue*, Barack Obama and Assange's own political party in Australia. I only stayed on good terms with him as long as I did because I kept quiet.

He hadn't wanted the book not to sell – vanity operates in odd ways – but the effect of his campaign was to hurt sales. And yet he couldn't stop, printing transcripts of private phone calls between him and Jamie and publishing emails that he claimed showed Canongate's trickiness. I wanted to warn him that they certainly had transcripts of our interviews, sittings in which he'd uttered, late at night, many casual libels, many sexist or anti-Semitic remarks, and where he spoke freely about every aspect of his life. There was little security consciousness at work in those interviews, and I calmed them down when preparing the manuscript and removed things that were said in the heat of the moment or that were too much or too jocular or just banter, but Canongate could have released them to the press at any time, rubbing his notion that he did not want a 'memoir' and devastating him in his own words. I have those tapes still and they can be shocking. Canongate didn't retaliate or wound him. Like me, they imagined he was under pressure and hoped that, through a combination of tolerance and care in the community, he would eventually stop all this and return to the work that had made him so interesting in the first place. 'Why don't you go after some baddies,' I said to Julian, 'and stop fighting with the people on your side?'

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And here's the hard bit. Those of us who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the United Kingdom under Thatcher and Blair, those of us who lived through the Troubles and the Falklands War, the miners' strike, the deregulation of the City, and Iraq, believed that exposing secret deals and covert operations would prove a godsend. When WikiLeaks began this process in 2010, it felt, to me anyhow, but also to many others that this might turn out to be the greatest contribution to democracy since the end of the Cold War. A new kind of openness suddenly looked possible: technology might allow people to watch their watchers, at last, and to inspect the secrets being kept, supposedly in our name, and to expose fraud and exploitation wherever it was encountered in the new media age. It wasn't a subtle plan but it smacked of the kind of idealism that many of us hadn't felt for a while in British life, where big moral programmes on the left are thin on the ground. Assange looked like a counter-warrior and a man not made for the deathly compromises of party politics. And he seemed deeply connected to the web's powers of surveillance and counter-surveillance. What happened, though, is that big government opposition to WikiLeaks's work – which continues – became confused, not least in Assange's mind, with the rape accusations against him. It has been a fatal conflation. There's a distinct lack of clarity in Julian's approach, a lack that is, I'm afraid, only reinforced by the people he has working with him. Only today, he sent me an email – hearing I was writing this piece – telling me it was illegal for me to speak out without what he called 'appropriate consultation' with him. He wrote of his precarious situation and of the FBI investigation into his activities. 'I have been detained,' he said, 'without charge, for 1000 days.' And there it is, the old conflation, implying that his detention is to do with his work against secret-keepers in America. It is not. He was detained at Ellingham Hall while appealing against a request to extradite him to Sweden to answer questions relating to two rape allegations. A man who conflates such truths loses his moral authority right there: I tried to spell this out to him while writing the book, but he wouldn't listen, sometimes suggesting I was naive not to consider the rape allegations to have been a 'honey trap' set by dark foreign forces, or that the Swedes were merely keen to extradite him to America. Because he has no ability to see through other people's eyes he can't see how dishonest this conflation seems even to supporters such as me. It was a trap he built for himself when he refused to go to Sweden and instead went into the embassy of a nation not famous for its respect for freedom of speech. He will always have an answer to these points. But there is no real answer. He made a massive tactical error in not going to Sweden to clear his name.

Up to the present moment, I have done nothing to break with him or unsettle him. I have watched the collapse of a dozen good relationships he had and tried to analyse them, assuaging him much more than I probably should have. I resisted him firmly when he overstepped the mark – by telling me, for instance, that all my taped interviews with him should be destroyed – but I tried a different tack from the others, making myself available to him in the belief that he needed someone outside his immediate circle as he attempted to fight the forces that threatened him, including himself, and get back to his work. That is why I took so long to say what I'm saying now: I knew the truth would hurt him because the truth, after all, was not his friend. It takes a bigger person than Julian to see what they did wrong, and many of us, including several of those who stood bail for him, hung back and continued to flatter him with our tolerance. When Jemima Khan publicly broke with him, he didn't pause to ask why a loyal supporter might become aggrieved; when I raised it with him he simply made a horribly sexist remark.

By this point he was living in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. He entered it in June 2012, a gestative nine months after the autobiography debacle had come to its end. When I first went to see him there he was in a corner room at the back of the embassy, surrounded by hampers from Harrods across the way – well-wishers' presents to the incarcerated – and sitting at a grubby desk covered in snacks and papers. A running machine stood along one wall. He told me about a failed siege by the police and about some projects they were getting off the ground, but quickly, as always, turned to demolishing one of his supporters. He continued with his habit of biting the hand that fed him,

satirising or undermining those who came to his aid. He said the Ecuadorian ambassador was mad and 'stalked the corridor'. He said she thought she was fat and went on a ludicrous diet because she didn't like the way she looked in the photographs taken by the *Daily Mail*. I was nice to him, too nice, asking him what I could do, and mentioned again the Verso project and the idea of me helping them to get that going. He showed interest but you saw it fading in his eyes.

On another visit, again around midnight, he told me I shouldn't tell the police at the door of the embassy my name. 'I didn't,' I told him. 'I'm not obliged to tell them my name.'

'They're keeping a list of my visitors,' he said. And then he asked if I'd heard of a film about him that was being planned by DreamWorks. I told him I had and that it was due to star Benedict Cumberbatch. I told him I knew Cumberbatch and that he was a good guy and a powerful actor. He talked about how the actor looked compared to how he looked. Sarah arrived and we laughed about some of the Ellingham Hall absurdities and all the things that had happened since then. Julian had lost all those appeals that had so preoccupied him, but was no less preoccupied and no less time-wasting. He was obsessing about the DreamWorks film and said it was bound to be a smear. He said he could get to see the script – presumably by hacking into someone's email – but that he wouldn't agree to Cumberbatch's request for an interview because it would appear he was endorsing the film. Cumberbatch wrote to Julian repeatedly and was met with a friendly but hectoring attempt to stop the film they wanted to make. In the end, Julian wanted editorial control and I reminded him that creative people, including creative writers, could not be stopped from going their own way. Cumberbatch was sensitive to the problems, but he wasn't going to be bullied. I could never fathom the distance between Julian's idealism, on the one hand, and his wish to exploit vulnerability, on the other. The film, like the book, would serve to remind people of the important work he had, at his best, been trying to do. But Julian just worried about his enemies and how they would 'use' the ambivalences that any decent artist would bring to such a contradictory figure. His contradictions could rock you off your feet. He called me one day during the making of the DreamWorks movie, when I was in a supermarket in Camberwell. 'I've got an idea,' he said. 'They'll want you as a consultant on this film. Why don't you say yes to that, and split the fee with me?'

'Because I'm not interested in that,' I said, 'and if you want to oppose the film, why would you also want to make a profit from it?'

'Why not?' he said.

He sometimes seems like a cornered animal in the embassy. One day recently he asked me to come in to talk to him. As soon as I entered the room, a new, bigger room but standard-issue, messy, depressing, smelling of laborious boring hours, I could see he was disturbed about something. 'I've received some intelligence that you're preparing a book,' he said. 'That you have tapes and you're going to talk about visiting me here in the middle of the night.' I told him I'd made no plans to write a book, and had, as he knew, turned down massive offers to do so. I reminded him I was a writer and that one day I might, and that it was normal for people to speculate about it. 'Just tell me first if you're going to,' he said. 'Come to me first.'

I said I would. And I said many conciliatory things without really believing them any more. His burst of distrust had shown me he would only ever see me as a servant, and in that moment the account I'm writing here became a reality. He did what he was now famous for doing, building the creature he most feared would come and get him, and I left that night in the knowledge that my time with him, over snowy nights and long crazy afternoons of denial, had brought me back to first position, as a writer. He was a character. It didn't matter to me now whether he continued the work he'd started or stayed true to what he said. He was a figure out of Dostoevsky, a figure out of James Hogg or John Banville, and a figure most vitally out of me. I was now making him into a figment of my imagination and that was perhaps all he could ever really be for me. Sitting in that prison of his own peculiar making, Julian was by then a cipher, a person whose significance can scarcely be grasped by himself, though he is forced to live with it. Planet Julian was now the site of at least a dozen little implosions every month. His bid for the Australian senate was a fiasco, not least because of the kind of inattention I had come to know so well. 'Attending one out of the 13 national council meetings of the party,' the council member Daniel Mathews said as he resigned, 'is a fairly low participation rate in one's own party.'

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There were two last visits. During the first I was led in by a new young assistant, Ethan, who was keen to agree with everything being said. Our conversation was mainly about Edward Snowden. There are few subjects on which Julian would be reluctant to take what you might call a paternalistic position, but over Snowden, whom he's never met but has chatted with and feels largely responsible for, he expressed a kind of irritable admiration. 'Just how good is he?' I asked.

'He's number nine,' he said.

'In the world? Among computer hackers? And where are you?'

'I'm number three.' He went on to say that he wondered whether Snowden was calm enough, intelligent enough, and added that he should have come to them for advice before fleeing to Hong Kong.

A fair reading of the situation might conclude, without prejudice, that Assange, like an ageing movie star, was a little put out by the global superstardom of Snowden. He has always cared too much about the fame and too much about the credit, while real relationships and real action often fade to nothing. Snowden was now the central hub and Julian was keen to help him and keen to be seen to be helping him. It's how the ego works and the ego always comes first. Snowden, while grateful for the advice

and the comradeship, was meanwhile playing a cannier game than Julian. He was eager for credit, too, but behaving more subtly, more amiably, and playing with bigger secrets. Julian said he hoped that others, I took him to mean the *Guardian* and Glenn Greenwald, didn't claim too much credit for the flow of secrets. He said he wanted me to help him get a film going, an account of what actually happened in Hong Kong, how he helped Snowden. He said he had all the inside information and connections and it would make a fantastic thriller. We discussed it at length and I told him the way to get movie interest in such a thing was to get behind a big piece in *Vanity Fair*. He agreed and said he would set aside time to get down to it. But I knew he wouldn't. It was odd the way he spoke about Snowden, almost jealously, as if the younger man didn't quite understand what he was about, needing much more from Julian than he knew how to ask for. I recognised the familiar anxiety about non-influence: 'Snowden should have been with us from the beginning,' he said. 'He's flailing.' But they were now making up for lost time. As we spoke, Sarah was in Moscow Airport, where Snowden was being held without a passport. 'I sent Sarah over,' said Julian in his favourite mode. All he needed at that point was a white cat to stroke.

Snowden was everywhere in the news the last time I decided to drop in on Julian after I'd been out in his neighbourhood. The embassy was quiet. I brought a couple of bottles of beer up from the street and we sat in the dark room. It was a Friday night and Julian had never seemed more alone. We laughed a lot and then he went very deeply into himself. He drank his beer and then lifted mine and drank that. 'We've got some really historic things going on,' he said. Then he opened his laptop and the blue screen lit his face and he hardly noticed me leaving.

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