

## Population One

By David Bridge

Andrew Finsbury looked across the vast desert plain. The bright orange sand stretched to the horizon. While the wind snatched at his overalls, sounds of industry came from behind--buzz saws, drills and hammers. The workers were putting the final touches to the factory. This place would make him a millionaire. No doubt about it.

Andrew mopped his brow with his handkerchief and adjusted his goggles. The workers didn't look up as he passed. All told, he had about two dozen of them. He loved these people. They worked without question or complaint as long as he paid them their food and drink coupons at six o'clock every day. Then they would reconvene to a nearby town--about twenty miles down the road--and drink themselves silly. His town didn't have any bars, and it never would.

In the distance, he spied an approaching jeep. The man from the ministry he was expecting--another bureaucratic fool to contend with. Andrew's stomach knotted, but he stood his ground--facing the car head on.

The car stopped and a heavy-set man, dressed in a black suit, emerged from the passenger side of the jeep. The man approached with his hand outstretched and said, in accented English, "Mr. Finsbury!"

Andrew wiped his hand on the front of his overalls then accepted the handshake. "Nice of you to visit. Step into my office."

Was this man as amateurish as he looked? Seriously--a suit in the middle of the desert?

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His office was a large green tarp reinforced with concrete. It spread out over twenty square feet, just big enough to accommodate his bed, computers and a small stove. Andrew had placed his tent about a hundred yards from his workers.

Andrew indicated the camp table and chairs. "Take a seat. Water?"

The man took his place in one of the chairs and set his briefcase on the table. "Anything stronger?"

"Afraid not," Andrew said. "I don't drink alcohol out here. Dehydration can kill you."

"Mm," the man said. "In that case, a glass of water."

Having given the man his water, Andrew set his own glass--a pink mixture of vitamins and water--

on the table then faced his adversary. "Down to business."

The man sipped at his glass and winced. "'Indeed, business.'" Sweat dripped down his forehead. He leant forward and snapped open the locks on his briefcase, producing a brown folder which overflowed with white paper. "What're you planning to manufacture here anyway?"

The question Andrew had dreaded. Why couldn't they just give him the deed to their land? They'd get their cut. Andrew cleared his throat. "Telephone handsets."

"Telephone handsets?"

"Yes, you know, the plastic handsets you plug into the wall."

The man furrowed his brow. "And there is a market for that?"

"Oh, yes."

"It is just." The man paused, resembling a policeman wondering how to break tragic news to a relative. "I did not think anyone used them. Static telephones, I mean."

Andrew smiled. "Well, that's true enough. But I have a plan."

The man took another sip of water then sank back in his camp chair. He didn't remove any papers from the folder.

Andrew's insides submerged in turmoil, but he tried to keep a calm exterior. He couldn't believe everything hinged on this blundering fool. Andrew stirred his vitamin water with a teaspoon. "Who're the people who buy phones?"

The man pouted and shook his head. "I do not know . . . old people? I am sorry I have never been to Europe, so I admit to knowing nothing about the marketing."

"Well, you're right." Andrew cursed him silently. "Old people do buy phones. Did you know that in the last year over six percent of Europeans bought a static telephone for their house?"

"No. I did not."

Andrew nodded. "Imagine that."

Creases appeared on the man's forehead. "And, so what is your idea?"

God damn it! Was this guy looking to invest? Andrew snatched the tea towel hanging off the table.

The man flinched.

"To take that emerging market." He wrung the tea towel, pretending it was the man's neck. "And strangle it for all it's worth."

"I see."

“No, you don’t.” Andrew smirked. “After years of research into this market, including psychiatric surveys and studies into buying habits of this group, I’ve discovered some potential dynamite.”

“What?”

“These people all want one thing. Quality.”

The man gestured with his hand, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Why, of course.”

“But they also want a bargain. Who would pay top price for old technology?”

“No-one.”

“That’s right. But they still want quality. Are you following me? They read the label and see the product comes from here, and they put it back on the shelf.” Andrew took a sip from his glass, talking was thirsty work out here and this guy was wasting his time. “Maybe, they go for a pricier model from a more reputable country, or perhaps they just go home and forget about it.”

The man nodded along.

No turning back now. If he tried for secrecy they’d shut him down for sure. Andrew picked up the teaspoon and stabbed along as he reeled through his idea. “This is where the clever bit comes in. What if someone was able to put whatever they wanted on the bottom of the static handset: Made in Italy, Sweden, UK . . . whatever?”

“You think this would make people buy more?”

What a dumbass. Andrew shook his head. “Not make people buy more, but buy more specifically. You see, if someone sees a plastic handset with the magic word ‘made’ plus ‘your country of reputation’ at a reasonable price, they will take it off the shelf and to the till. What I’m doing is uniting the buyers who, for lack of choice, went for the higher priced models, with those who went home because they could find nothing of quality for the right price.” Andrew held up the teaspoon like a conductor holding the baton to quite the orchestra--at the back of his mind enjoying himself. “What’s more, those who buy the cheaper models, upon seeing a more reputable model for the same price, will invest in my product.”

“But you’re making the product in this country. How will you be able to put on ‘your country of choice?’ Customs will not be fooled here, let alone in Europe.”

It was now or never. This guy could sink him. “That’s where you come in, my friend.”

“I am not sure what you mean.”

Andrew inclined his head toward the brown folder. “I think you’ll find all your answers in there.” The man looked at his brown folder as if it were about to jump up and give an explanatory lecture.

“Inside,” Andrew said.

The man opened the folder and removed the papers. He glanced up at Andrew, still confused.

“Would you like to fill them in now?”

Andrew couldn’t believe only this guy stood between him and his riches. “Ok.”

“All right, here’s the S-T-two-nine-three, which confirms your ownership of the land and gives you the right to administer a mayorship or whatever you wish.” He leant across the table and pointed to the various fields.

“Is it ok to fill the form in English?” Andrew said.

“Yes. I can have an official translation made out in the city when I return.” He grinned. “For a nominal charge, of course.”

Andrew took the form in his hand. “What about the name of the town? Will it retain the English spelling?”

“Yes, sir.” There was a glimmer of recognition in the man’s eye.

This was it. Was Andrew done for?

The man smiled. “May I offer you my pen?”

Andrew exhaled. He placed the teaspoon back on the table and bowed. “Thank you.”

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Dust swirled over the road as the jeep drove off.

The encounter had gone much better than he ever could’ve imagined. He’d expected the man to ask more questions, to be more probing. But, after he led him through the tale, he seemed more awestruck than suspicious--or keen to get a cut. He would send him some money, of course--goodwill gestures never went amiss in this country.

Andrew looked out across the sands, at his goldmine. Who’d have known Switzerland was a desert town?

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