

AN OLD PATH TO  
A NEW FUTURE

PAUL JAMES

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*Paul James*

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For more information, email: [pj4429358@gmail.com](mailto:pj4429358@gmail.com)

Or visit my Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/Paul-James-Author-1051013848391460>

or my website: <http://www.oldpathnewfuture.com>

## BONUS CONTENT

What made a worldly-wise Russian billionaire spend his fortune on schools for boys? I've given only the introduction to Dean's short book, *A Modest Proposal*, in my book *Old Path to a New Future*. If you want to know more, here it is.

Get your FREE copy of Dean Swift's  
A Modest Proposal for Saving the Western World  
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## Chapter 1: The End

Alexis knew this book by heart—even now, more than a hundred years after first reading it. The transparent case he'd carefully retrieved the relic from was dusty and cracked, but the slim volume inside was unmarked by time and neglect. Its paper was dry but surprisingly supple, which suggested the vacuum seal of the case could only have been broken recently. He smiled as he gently flipped the pages, skimming through the headings and well-known phrases. After all, he'd had to read and write seemingly endless essays on its contents for all his time here in this, the first, school.

The school today made Alexis frown as he looked around the abandoned, derelict room that had once been so full of excitement and, he now realized, hope on the part of his grandfather and the author, Dean Swift. His frown turned to a quiet chuckle at the memory of Dean's answer when he'd been asked about his name. Dean's father, a *Gulliver's Travels* fan, had saddled his son with a name that would likely only cause him annoyance throughout life. Fortunately, Dean had been born late enough in Britain's slow decline that the problem hardly arose, simply because most of his peers were too ill-educated to have ever heard of the literary Dean Swift.

"The ship is on standby, sir," Captain Harriman said, entering the room and breaking into Alexis's thoughts.

"I appreciate your concern for me, the crew, and your ship, Captain," Alexis replied, "but this stop is the sole reason for my trip. I don't think we need to worry too much about our safety, for our enemies are too weak now to be a real danger to us. Still, to your point, I will be as quick as I can."

Captain Harriman nodded and left the room. Silence once again returned and Alexis strove to recapture his thoughts.

The problem Alexis was wrestling with, and the reason he was here in this long-abandoned schoolroom, was a simple one: Should he or should he not write a history of the Modest Proposal Institute? Many others had done so and Alexis felt most captured its essence adequately. However, he had been there at the start—in a way, he *was* the start—and he knew the Founders better than anyone.

The downside was, of course, obvious—to him, at least. The Earth of 2125 was not such a different one from the Earth he recalled from 2020: words and thoughts that were deemed to be wrong could destroy you and those whom you held dear. Alexis felt it was too late in life for him to become a martyr to anyone's cause.

He shook himself mentally. What was he thinking? His being here, the memories crowding his brain, the growing list of aches and pains, the weariness of body and spirit had already made his decision for him. But he wouldn't write a history, as such; he'd write a novel, a story, something boys and men would read.

He looked about the abandoned room once again, its walls green with damp and mold, and crossed the floor to sit on an old chair against the far wall. It creaked but held his weight. He opened the book and read it once again, though the words were as familiar today as they had been throughout his life. With a swift motion, he started the recorder and began to speak.

## *A Modest Proposal for Saving the Western World*

By  
Dean Swift

### **Part 1: Introduction**

Here's a story every man can remember or relate to.

When he was young, five or six, he and the other boys of the neighborhood would invent a new game. The game included lots of pushing and shoving, arguing and fighting, kicking and punching, a ball, and sometimes a stick. As you can imagine, this

was rather noisy; that attracted attention, unfortunately, because sooner or later along would come a girl who'd say, 'Can I play?'

The boys would say no. The girl would ask, 'Why not?' and the boys would reply, 'Because you'll spoil the game.' The girl would insist she would do no such thing, but the boys would remain unconvinced. She'd leave, certainly, but only to come back on the following day with other girls who'd say, 'We want to play too.'

The boys would still say 'No,' but, after a few days of this, the girls would bring in all the parents and they would insist the boys let the girls play. The boys' complaint that 'the girls will spoil the game' would be dismissed, and now the girls would be allowed to play – with the parents as referees, of course.

Play would restart and in minutes, the girls would protest, 'You play too rough' or 'You hit too hard' or 'You throw too fast' or 'Why don't we ever get a turn with the ball?' and so on and so forth. The boys would explain that it's rough because they like roughhousing and the ball is thrown or hit hard because that's how they improve their strength and agility ('Pain is the best teacher,' they said), and you only get a turn with the ball if you can take it off the person who has it.

It makes no difference, of course. Their parents step in and change the rules of the game to accommodate the girls and their way of playing. The boys continue to play along for a short time, but the game no longer meets their needs; they slip away around the corner to invent a new game, which, I can assure you, includes lots of pushing and shoving, arguing and fighting, kicking and punching, a ball, and sometimes a stick.

Unfortunately, the boys have so much fun at their new game, they become loud and boisterous and, needless to say, the story plays out in exactly the same fashion as before. Along comes a girl who asks, 'Can I play?' She's unhappy that the girls have been left to themselves with the old game and a few wimpy boys. She wants to play with the rougher boys at their new game. Before long,

parents have been called in and the whole sorry cycle is repeated.

Fast-forward a few years. These same boys are now fifteen and are at it again, inventing new games. These new games still involve pushing and shoving, arguing and fighting, maybe even some kicking and punching – but now they also contain a lot of pictures of naked women doing interesting things, and a lot of tanks, planes, ships, and guns blowing things up, or being blown up. Unfortunately, even hiding in their basements and bedrooms, they can't escape. Along comes a girl who wants to play. The boys say 'No,' and she goes off to get a responsible adult, which by now is the government who insists she be included. For the boys, there's no use in pointing out she'll ruin the game. The government is always on the lookout for new ways to make themselves important.

Within days of the girls joining in, they're complaining again. The government's new policies are further enhanced to insist everyone must behave as the girls want and work is now only to take place from nine to five on Monday to Friday. The game is soon reduced to a mundane everyday experience and the incredible innovation and productivity that the game had before is gone – and, of course, soon so are the boys.

This happens over and over again and has become a predictable cycle all over the modern Western world. No matter that the girls could have invented their own games and made a success of them, or that they could have played the boys' games following the boys' rules – the 'responsible adults' say boys and girls must play nicely together in the sandbox using the rules that fit the girls' nature.

I've spent some time on this modern parable because you need to read everything that follows in my *Modest Proposal* with this story in mind. Not every boy can claim to be the inventor of something new or different, but century after century many of them do. In the modern era, they were the inventors of steam engines and spinning machines, electrical generators and motors, internal-combustion engines and cars, motorbikes and planes, radios and TVs, fertilizers

and pharmaceuticals, phones and computers, the internet and social media, and so on. In fact, almost everything any of us see, do, listen to, or touch comes to us courtesy of the inventiveness of men.

Fast-forward to today's world. It's no secret that boys throughout the Western world are failing at school. Since the education system was made more female-friendly, girls everywhere are doing better than boys.

Men are also doing worse at work, partly because of the educational handicap they now carry and partly because the only jobs remaining in the West are service-oriented, and poorly educated men aren't good at being service-oriented – all that pushing, shoving, bumping, and bruising doesn't train men for endless days of helpfulness.

So how do we capture the best qualities of men in our modern world?

That's the subject of my *Modest Proposal*. I've called it a 'modest proposal' because I hope it will be as shocking to today's complacent leadership as Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* was intended to be to the leaders of 1729, when he suggested that maybe starving Irish people could eat their own babies instead of receiving help from the government. Swift's proposal was satirical, sarcastic, and cruel. He aimed to give national leaders the boot up the backside they needed to make changes. He didn't want them to consider his proposal of eating children seriously. He just wanted the government to help. This, however, is where his proposal and mine differ. I absolutely want mine considered and, for the good of the Western world, acted upon. The need is urgent and the time is now.

Alexis gave a weary sigh as he closed the book; he'd take it with him for a memento. One hundred and thirteen years was no party, despite the advances in health and medicine. But when he closed his eyes he could still remember, as clearly as if it were yesterday, the moment he'd first seen the *Modest Proposal* . . .

## Chapter 2: The Beginning

“Alexis, how would you like to go to a school on an island? A school where you can study all day and night if you want to, where you can wrestle and fight if you want to, play sports as they were intended to be played if you want to, and just be a boy, and become a man?”

“Will you be there, Grandfather?” he’d asked.

“As often as I can be,” his grandfather had replied.

“Then I’d like to go there.”

“Read this and tell me what you think.” The plain-covered volume his grandfather had handed him was slim, and his heart had raced on reading bold title, *A Modest Proposal for Saving the Western World*. If the Western world needed saving, then he, Alexis Abramski, was the knight who could do it.

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As Alexis was struggling, on a wet London afternoon, to get his mind around what he was reading, the author was enjoying a warm sunny morning in his Canadian backyard when the phone rang. Dean, grimacing, got out of his lounge, entered his house through the patio doors, crossed the kitchen and pick it off its cradle. Someday he’d get the hang of mobile phones and dump the landline, he promised himself—as he always did when he found himself at the wrong side of the house when someone called. It wasn’t that he couldn’t get to the phone quickly enough—he was still active, even at nearly seventy years of age—but finding it was a sales call just made him hate the modern

world more than he already did. He regularly told himself to ignore *all* calls and let the answering machine do the work, but his mind was still stuck in a more polite and responsible time—a time when decent people tried their best to answer phones when they rang, for no one would make a call unless it was important, would they?

“Yes?” he said curtly, expecting the typical disturbing duct-cleaner or funeral services salespeople.

“Dean Swift?” the voice at the other end of the phone demanded. The accent was British, tinted with an unmistakable foreign flavor.

“Yes.” This was different, Dean thought. He’d never had an Eastern European salesman call before; they were usually from Bangalore or somewhere close to there. Maybe it was for roofers or landscapers this time.

“I read your book, *A Modest Proposal*. Are you a teacher or lecturer?”

“Neither,” Dean replied, then, realizing how monosyllabic his answers were, added, “I’m an engineer by profession and a concerned Western man by observing.”

“So, what can you bring to the table to make this idea work?”

“I laid my thoughts out in the book,” Dean said warily. He didn’t like the forcefulness of the questions and suspected there was some scam about to be played on him. “My role, if there were one for me, would be steering and administration. Not a glamorous role, admittedly, but a necessary one until the students can take over the running of the organization themselves. Why, what role did you see for yourself?” he added, thinking he might get some sense of who this man was and why he was calling.

“I put up the money and I own the organization,” the man replied.

“Then you haven’t thought about my book properly.” Dean paused. He decided to be frank because the likelihood that he was speaking with an actual billionaire investor was the square root of nothing at all, and so there was no risk of this nutcase walking away and taking his billions with him. “This can’t be about some rich man owning the organization or it will be destroyed from within as well as from without.”

“We’ll talk,” the voice said. “How soon can you be in London?”

“I could be in London very quickly because I’m a retired widower, but I’m

not flying over there to talk to a fan when I can do it a lot cheaper on Skype or whatever.” He hoped it sounded like he was getting lots of calls from readers wanting to discuss the book—although nothing could be further from the truth—and he was too busy to jet around the world talking to all of them.

“I’ll have my secretary book you on a flight tomorrow and put you up somewhere near my offices. She’ll be in touch soon.”

The man rang off and Dean was left pondering the oddness of the conversation. Was someone really prepared to lay out billions of dollars or pounds on a pipe dream? He hadn’t long to wait for confirmation. He’d only just returned to his seat when the telephone rang again. This time it was a pleasant young woman who identified herself as Mr. Abramski’s secretary and said he was booked on British Airways, business class, the following day. He’d be met at Heathrow and brought to the meeting with Mr. Abramski.

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Dean and Alexander Abramski sat side by side in comfortable chairs in the Clarendon Hotel lobby. This meeting, on the evening of Dean’s arrival, was as abrupt as the first phone call had been. Abramski’s secretary had called Dean’s room to say her boss was on his way and would be at the hotel in ten minutes. Now, drinks in hand, they were each gauging the other’s worth.

“Why are you considering my proposal?” Dean asked as he sized up the man. He couldn’t say he entirely liked what he saw. The man looked thuggish, well-dressed but tough.

“Because like you, I think we in the West are finished as a civilization unless we change course soon, and I know from the people I meet—the ones who are steering the West today, anyway—that they aren’t going to change course. They really believe in what they’re doing and don’t care that it means the end of all we hold dear. I want to float a lifeboat for us to recover what has been lost when the ships of state go down. I think your idea has the best chance of being that lifeboat.”

“Have you got billions to invest in this?”

“Yes, but I don’t think it will take billions. In fact, I think it will pay for itself quickly.”

“Then why do you need me?” Dean asked. He felt a man capable of making and keeping billions could find a better leader for the project than a long-retired middling engineer.

“It’s your idea. You put it out there. I assume that means you believe in it and have spent time thinking about how it will work. That’s what makes things happen, people who believe. But if you don’t impress me over the next days, I’ll find someone who can make it work.”

That sounded much more like a multi-billionaire, Dean thought, though he had no experience of such people to draw on. He calculated his options, unsure if he wanted to impress the gangster sitting before him. At least, that’s what Abramski looked like Dean decided: a Russian Mafioso, solid, squarely built, with long, powerful arms and a thick neck supporting a large shaved head. There were even scars on his face. All in all, Dean was beginning to feel that he’d have preferred a middle-class, liberal, dotcom, whizz-kid American as a potential future savior of the Western world.

He shook his head. What was he thinking? It was just such “liberal, dotcom, whizz-kid” billionaires who were complicit in the ruination of the West. What he had before him was what he’d had in mind: an old-fashioned, ruthless alpha male who would drive the project to succeed. It was just that reality was a little scarier than it had been in his imaginings.

“Is there a problem?” Abramski asked, interrupting his thoughts. His gray eyes swept over Dean with cold and calculating speed; he was used to summing people up and acting accordingly. Dean, he decided, was a man who’d done okay in life, was moderately successful but not outstanding, but who had a strong sense of discipline. Despite his age, he was slim and upright. His clothes were the average adult male’s wear, but they were scrupulously maintained—no sloppiness there, and none in his grooming either. His chin was closely shaved, lacking any fashionable stubble, and his hair was well cut. He was a man with a strong sense of purpose and a clear idea of what was expected of himself and others. He might just do.

“Not really,” Dean said. “I just never expected to be having this conversation.”

Abramski nodded curtly. “Well, you’re here now. What do you think of my proposal?”

“I think, since it is my idea, you should have me on board and we should own the project equally.” Dean said, growing bold. “I can be the hands-on leader and you can live back here in the wider world and focus on growing your billions so we don’t run out of money before it’s successful.”

“As hands-on leader, how would you start?” Abramski asked, his tone was harsh and intimidating.

Dean frowned. Abramski’s question, his whole manner, was that of a man who was used to command. Dean was glad he’d never had to put a proposal before the man as a subordinate. At this moment, he didn’t care if Abramski was serious or not. He really didn’t want to work with him. Still, there was no reason why he shouldn’t explain his favorite fantasy to the man. Who knew where ideas went after you’d shared them. With that in mind, he continued, “I’d hire a construction company to research for an island, shoal, or reef that meets our needs. I’d like a few sites to select from.”

“Then what?”

“Once we’ve chosen sites, I’d have a product research company look into which would be the best site for attracting the most students and teachers. We’d start with the best site, because the first school must run well. If it does, more will follow quickly.”

Abramski shifted in his chair and signaled the barman to bring them another drink. He turned back to Dean. “But then what? Beyond construction?”

Dean waited as the waiter brought their drinks. The hotel lobby where they were sitting was growing busier as the after-work crowd reached a peak and the first of the evening crowd began drifting in. The general background noise made their conversation as private as if they were in an office.

The waiter left and Dean continued, “We set up the technology school first. That’s where the ideas and action are right now so we’ll get more young men with ideas than we’ll get parents willing to let their precious sons go off to sea. For the first year or so, I think that’s where we’ll get the best return for our investment.”

“*Our* investment?” Abramski asked, his eyebrow lifting slightly.

“You’re investing money, I’m investing my life,” Dean said firmly. “I think that makes us equal investors.”

“Perhaps. Go on. How are we to get these young entrepreneurs?”

“That’s where you and I start working,” Dean said. “We advertise and we interview. Once people know they will be fed, housed, and supported in their projects, there’ll be more applicants than we can handle. At first, we’ll need to choose those whose ideas have the quickest return on our money. After that, we can be more long-term in our choices.”

“How do you see us getting the right lecturers and teachers?”

“Advertising in the educational media. My guess is there are hundreds, if not thousands, of top-notch educators who are sick of what passes for education in the West these days. We’ll have to be careful here, of course, and search out references and work histories to be sure they’re the right ones.”

“And you’re prepared to give up everything and work on this right now, if I invest?”

Dean hesitated. Up until this moment he’d never considered this as something serious. He wasn’t rich enough to lay out billions in investments at a moment’s notice and somehow never seriously believed there were people who could. All his life he’d been a careful, cautious man so what he said next surprised even himself.

“I am, once we’ve come up with an organizational structure that we both agree will work. This isn’t about turning out employees for your companies, whatever they may be, and it’s not about steering kids into our own chosen directions. I want them to do what men are supposed to do—create the future without any concern for the past or the very possible social upheaval.”

“What if they build a new kind of atom bomb?” Abramski asked, smiling wolfishly. He hadn’t really expected Dean to agree. Dean seemed such a mild man he’d assumed he didn’t really have it in him. Throwing the verbal equivalent of a hand grenade into Dean’s happy fantasy appealed to Abramski’s sense of humor. The answer, however, was even more surprising.

“We learned to live with the present bombs and we’ll learn to live with the new one,” Dean replied with almost a shrug. “Anyhow, if this is as successful as I believe it will be, we may need something like that to deter aggression.”

“Do you really think the West would attack an island of schoolboys?”

“I think they will just be verbally abusive, at first, but when their young

men abandon them for our increasingly successful society, they will try to fight back. I hope by the time they grow desperate enough to use physical violence, their military capacity will be so degraded they are ineffectual in their response. It's basically a race between our growth and their decline."

"Then why not go straight to devising new weapons so we can be sure of safety?"

"I don't believe that would ensure anything of the sort. Weapons production would present more of a clear and present threat than an educational and entrepreneurial society would. The West would be galvanized into much swifter and harsher action. Our students will, I believe, create enough desirable products and services for the world to buy while simultaneously developing enough hidden systems to defend our increasing wealth and strength from the world's gaze." Dean paused. Abramski had been watching him closely, listening, asking questions, but had still not given away his own motivations. Dean felt it was time for him to get some answers. If, as Abramski seemed to be suggesting, this was real, he needed to understand more about Abramski.

"My turn to ask some questions, I think. Beyond an altruistic desire to save Western civilization, why are you really interested in this?"

Abramski shrugged. "I have a grandson. He'll be eight on his next birthday. He's a bright kid, too clever for the British private school he goes to, one of those whose buildings are hundreds of years old but which is now just a fee-paying state school. I looked around for others and they're the same, even in the U.S. They're not what a boy should be stuck in. Your idea meets my idea of what a boy's school should be, and Alexis's too. Like any real boy his age, he wants to be a Viking or a pirate, and I intend to see that spirit isn't crushed in him."

Dean laughed. "That's exactly what I have in mind, a pirate school on a pirate island. Still, it's a lot of money for one child's schooling. Why not homeschool to university?"

"Have you seen what passes for a university today?" Abramski cried.

Dean was surprised at the agitation in the man. Up till now, Abramski had been businesslike, probing, harsh even, but entirely without emotion. Clearly there was more here than just his grandson's education.

“I’ve read some horror stories, yes,” Dean said. “That’s why my institute is a school, university, and invention development center all in one.”

“I care about the future for us all. There can be no future with these useless educational factories. I won’t have my grandson or my businesses destroyed by these people. I want competent staff for me and Alexis when he takes over. And I will have them, even if I have to educate them myself.”

“It’s about business then?”

“It’s about the future and, yes, that includes my and in time my grandson’s business,” Abramski said fiercely, “and you seem to have the right idea for that. I’ve never heard anyone else provide a better idea, anyhow.”

“Even if we start tomorrow, I don’t think we could be ready to take your grandson or any other younger student for another three to four years.” Abramski’s impassioned outburst had sealed it for Dean. If Abramski was prepared to build, he was prepared to work. Since his wife had died, retirement was dull anyhow.

“I’ll have him homeschooled until we’re ready. At that point, he can help with setting things up. If I get the right tutors, they could be our first lecturers too. Anyhow, ten or eleven is a good time to be starting out on a man’s life. Boys started in the Royal Navy around that age when things were done right.”

“Then all we need is an organizational charter that we can both agree on,” Dean said.

“It’s late. We’ll start on that tomorrow,” Abramski said, rising and shaking Dean’s hand.

Dean watched him leave and couldn’t decide if he was elated at the challenge he’d just taken on or dismayed. When he’d written his *Modest Proposal* he’d never expected it to be acted on and especially not with him managing it. He’d hoped some multi-billionaire would take the idea and run with it and he, Dean, would just have the satisfaction of seeing it used. The actual details of how to make it happen, he’d assumed would be worked out by others, if it was ever worked on at all.

He headed back to his room. Between jet-lag and the overpowering weight of Abramski’s personality, he was exhausted.

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Alexis stopped the recorder and stared at the ceiling for a moment. He shivered. It was cold and damp in the still air. When the school was abandoned, the dehumidifiers had been shut off and despite the clear domes that still sealed the island against the elements, air and water had crept in. The ceiling dripped and salty pools lay on the floor.

He'd always felt himself to be the beginning because it was almost as if Grandfather had built it all for him. That's how he'd felt at the start, anyhow, but now he could see the story wasn't his at the beginning. Years later, there were times he'd felt it wasn't for him at all.

He shook his head, frowning. He was getting ahead of himself again.

## Chapter 3: The Idea Becomes the Reality, or, Pirate Schooling Begins

The Modest Proposal Institute quickly took shape. Hiring companies to do the research wasn't difficult. Alexander Abramski had many links to civil engineering and global consulting companies. He'd used them all before and when someone like him called, they jumped. Locations were selected, and in the end, the first site was not a mid-ocean rocky shoal or islet but a substantial island just far enough off a relatively poor non-Western country, one that was happy to grant the new project considerable autonomy in managing its affairs.

Alexis hadn't been much involved at that stage, he was too young and still at home in London, though he often was privy to conversations between his grandfather and Dean. He did remember not having to go back to school, which he was glad of. Instead, his grandfather hired multiple tutors. He had one for English, one for mathematics, one for computing, one for history, and so on. He didn't know it at the time but they were top academics in their fields—his grandfather didn't do anything by halves. They taught far above young Alexis's grade level, but he was a quick student and soon he was learning beyond his grade year. Looking back, Alexis realized his tutors must have been bored out of their minds teaching a child, but if they were, they hid their dismay.

By the time the first island was ready for Alexis, he was ready for it.

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Alexis had read Dean's book when his grandfather gave it to him. Being only eight years old, parts of it were hard for him to understand. He thought lots

of what the book was calling for already existed—at least, some of it had at his last co-ed private school in London. Still, it sounded a whole lot more interesting than that school had been. If he had to sit through one more lecture about playing nice with his classmates, he felt he'd run away to sea or the circus, or whatever was still possible in 2020.

"I've read it, Grandfather, but it says the school doesn't exist, so how can I go there?" he remembered asking.

"It doesn't exist yet, Alexis, but it soon will," the old man said, before adding quietly, "It soon will."

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And it did come to exist, but to Alexis it seemed to take a lifetime. He was nearly eleven years old when he stepped into the Abramski-owned private jet that was to carry him, and all the first-year students, from London to the island. The flight wasn't long, only around three hours, but it was enough for him to get the measure of some of his new schoolmates. After the past years of homeschooling, it felt odd to be talking to kids again. They were a bit childish, in his opinion. At first, they were silent and nervous, which was actually better than later when they were loud and boisterous. The kid sitting next to him in the paired seats was a quieter guy who also found the growing noise irksome. At times, when the guide had once again had to stride down the aisle silencing the rabble, Alexis wished he was back at home with his elderly tutors.

The plane flew around the island before landing so the boys could crowd round the windows to see their future home. The island was larger than he'd imagined from seeing it on his computer monitor back in London. From the air, its most striking feature was the runway that ran through the center, giving the island the appearance of a London Underground symbol—a circle overlaid by a broad, long rectangle. Near the island and linked by cables and walkways were ships: a cruise ship, white and stately; an aircraft carrier, gray and businesslike; a cargo ship loaded with containers; and another disgorging some product by pipe, possibly fuel oil, into a connection on the island. On and around the ships people were at work; otherwise, the surface of the island was deserted.

When Alexis had watched the island being built over the web, he'd imagined something smaller and less island-like—more like the concrete islands the Chinese had built in the South China Sea. Not only was this island larger than he'd expected, it was more natural than he'd expected, and he could tell the other boys peering out of the plane's windows thought the same. Beyond the runway, twisted trees and stunted bushes filled any empty spaces the landscape had to offer. Of course, none of this was truly natural—Alexis has watched most of the island grow out of the sea, great ships dumping piles of rock and rubble and concrete, lifting the underwater reef that had surrounded the land above the waves. Alexis wondered how many of the boys even knew this was mainly man-made. *He* knew because his grandfather had built it—but the others? How much did they know?

The plane landed and rolled to a stop opposite a low building. Stepping off the plane, Alexis glanced around, confused. This was supposed to be a boarding school but there were no buildings in sight. The runway stretched before him, a long concrete path that seemed to reach the horizon when looked at from the ground. The trees he'd seen on their approach and imagined they were small turned out to be regular size, just twisted and bent by the salt-laden wind that was sweeping across the island. He was still puzzling about the accommodation and had just decided that it must be in the cruise ship or the aircraft carrier when the guide demanded their attention.

Their guide had gathered them up in London at the start of their flight, and now he led them into the small airport terminal, more like a shipping container than a real building, and into an elevator big enough to take all twenty of them. They plummeted down into the belly of the island. When the doors opened, they stepped out into a lounge where a group of young men were waiting, as well as his grandfather and Dean Swift. The lounge was spacious and almost circular, with corridors leading off like spokes from the hub of a wheel. The only wall decorations were giant screens, while the ceiling was almost entirely pale translucent light, which gave the room the appearance of being outdoors. Alexis was to learn later the light was the wavelength of sunlight and varied by time of day and season.

“Welcome!” Dean said and gestured to the couches before him. “We hope

you had a comfortable flight. Please take a seat and we'll give you some information to help you find your feet here."

Alexis sat on a broad couch. On either side of him sat a skinny, nervous-looking boy and the kid with whom he'd talked on the plane. The other seats were soon filled and the group eyed the welcome party with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation. The landing and arrival on the island seemed to have taken the excitement the boys had worked up during the flight and replaced it with anxiety.

When they were quiet, Dean began to speak. "I'd like to begin by introducing everyone here to you all, starting with the university men who have been here three years now helping to establish the institute. You will be working with them very soon but, for today, it's enough for you to know they are what you will be in only a few short years." As Dean named each person in the welcoming party, they acknowledged the boys by a raised hand or nod of the head.

On reaching Alexis's grandfather, Dean called him only by his first name, and introduced him as his fellow Founder. He made no mention of Alexander's relationship to Alexis. "Everyone here will be helping you get settled in over the next couple of days. We'll learn all your names during that time, so we'll leave those introductions for later."

He paused. "The room you're in now is the Common Room for your class. The university guys have their own floors and the future years will have their own floors too. Your private rooms are along the corridors that lead off from here. Your names are posted on the doors of your rooms and there's a list of your names beside the entrance to each corridor, so you'll quickly learn where you and your friends are.

"To be sure we all set off on the right foot," he continued, "you should know we have very few rules here, but we take those few rules very seriously. Don't be foolish enough to break one of them. This is not your school back home; here you will be physically punished if you break our rules or fail to obey our orders. This is a small island surrounded by deep sea and stocked with very powerful equipment in our laboratories and workshops. Not following the rules will put your life—and other people's lives—at risk.

Neither we nor your parents can afford that.”

Alexis listened with only half an ear. His new classmates were much more interesting than Dean’s speech. From the flight, he’d discovered they were almost entirely made up of boys from the English-speaking world: Americans, Australians, Britons, Canadians, a lone South African, and some from other places but who spoke good English. They were all listening intently to Dean’s introduction to the institute, probably, Alexis thought, because they hadn’t heard it before. *He* had. Grandfather and Dean had spoken to him of their plans often, reassuring him that it was what he wanted. He wasn’t now sure it *was* what he wanted, but he knew it had to be better than the schools he’d attended in London.

“That’s it for now,” he heard Dean say, and Alexis’s attention was snapped back to the room. “Any questions?”

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Shane Callaghan watched Dean and Alexander carefully as the two leaders spoke, and listened with only half an ear. It was nothing more than the typical boring adult-speech. What *did* intrigue him was what he was watching—or to be precise, what he wasn’t seeing. At first, he’d thought it was his imagination, but the longer he watched, the more he realized it was true. The two old guys looked at all the boys, fixing each one with stern eyes—except for one kid. The kid called Alexis. His quick intuition told him there was something going on here that no one was supposed to know, and he guessed the kid was related to one of the two speakers—grandson, judging by the age difference.

Shane’s glance flicked from Alexis to Dean and then Dean to Alexander. The kid didn’t look like Dean, that was for sure. Where Alexis was already filling out as a broad-shouldered dark-haired youth, Dean was a tall, slim man, finely made and definitely not of the same mold.

He watched Alexis again and saw the same subtle evasiveness. The kid avoided looking at either man directly. Alexis? A Russian-sounding name, so almost certainly the older, heavy-set man’s grandson. Shane studied the Russian. He looked like he was once a real gangster and was now a rich

gangster. Did that mean there was more to the Modest Proposal Institute than just a school? Was there something here he, Shane, needed to learn and could use?

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When there were no questions, Dean wrapped things up. “Then you can find your rooms and unpack. You have thirty minutes before you assemble back here. At that time, you will be broken into smaller groups and one of these men”—he gestured toward the young men sitting around the edge of the room — “will show you around and outline what you can and can’t do throughout the facilities. Before I let you go, a word about you and your rooms. There are no parents or servants here. You are responsible for you, your room, and jointly for this Common Room. You, your uniform, and your grooming will be inspected daily by your teachers, and your rooms and the Common Room will be inspected on Wednesdays and Sundays. Inside each room, you will find a photo of what the room looks like now. That’s what it will look like when we inspect it. If it doesn’t, you will clean it under the supervision of the inspector in your own time, not the school’s time. Is that clear?”

There was a murmuring of grudging assent.

“When you speak to an older man in this community, you say ‘sir.’ Now, again, was my statement about hygiene, cleanliness, and orderliness clear?”

“Yes, sir.” This time the reply was quick and clear.

“Better! Dismissed.”

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Alexis found his room and discovered that the skinny kid, called Jamie, was right next door to him. He was sorry to find that the one who’d sat next to him on the plane, Ben, was in a different corridor. They’d got along just fine during the flight and he wondered if rooms could be exchanged.

His room was smaller than the room he had at home, but it had space for a bed, desk, cupboards, and a small bathroom. One wall of the room featured a live presentation of a view of outside, despite the room being far beneath

the surface. The above-ground camera streamed a view that looked down on a grassy slope toward the sea, spray regularly splashing up where ocean waves crashed against the rocks edging the island.

Alexis turned his attention back from the false window and unpacked, his mind full of new observations. What had seemed exciting and adventurous when he was living at home now sounded ominous and military-like. He'd always imagined being a knight involved discipline but not until now understood what that might mean for him personally—and it didn't sound like fun.

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Shane dropped his bags on his new bed. He was here, and so far he liked what he saw. The two owners' welcome speech had been plainly spoken and to the point, which is how he liked it. He couldn't understand why anyone didn't like things that way, to be honest, but he knew that they didn't. It was a fact that worked to his cost—and also to his gain. That was why he was here after all. His last attempt to show his math teacher where she'd gone wrong in an example was the final straw.

It had happened on two earlier occasions that last school year. Both the principal and his parents had lectured him on politeness and sensitivity when correcting someone's honest errors, and he really had tried. Even now, he couldn't see why she'd run out of the room in tears. He'd said "Excuse me" as he'd been taught, and "Please, may I," but the result was the same as before.

And it wasn't just his math teacher; others also didn't like it when he tried to help them. Somehow, whatever he said just riled people and made them angry. Eventually, he decided, it was better to say nothing at all—or at least as little as possible.

But it turned out all right in the end because, after the last incident, his father had said, "Shane, I hear there's a new school starting up that's just about learning and doing. What do you think?"

"I think that would be good."

"It would mean living at the school, overseas."

"Even better," he'd replied, still angry and upset by the way he'd been

treated by the adults in his life. Even his parents seemed to take the teacher's side. "I've got no friends here anyhow."

"We only want the best for you," his father had said earnestly, but Shane knew his parents would be as glad to be rid of him as the school he was attending would be.

And so here he was, free from whiny parents or crying sisters and teachers, and with lecturers who sounded the way he sounded: blunt and to the point. Even the self-discipline that was expected of the students sounded like how he already lived his life. Why would anyone want to do anything different? Yes, finally, his life was looking brighter.

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The tour they were given was comprehensive. The island was even larger than it looked. On the surface, apart from the dominating runway, coarse grass, and stunted bushes, there were only some ventilation and chimney stacks, a few wind turbines, and solar panels, all of which raised and lowered when the conditions warranted. The ships riding the waves offshore were pointed out and explained. As Alexis had imagined, there were accommodations on the cruise ship, mainly used by the older university men, but the carrier was given over to laboratories, workshops, and other hands-on creative spaces. He was glad to hear that today they weren't going to venture out on the walkways that linked the ships to shore. Alexis hadn't realized until now how much he didn't like heights, and the thought of making his way across the swaying bridge with even calm seas below made his stomach heave. How he'd do it in future, he left for another day.

Even though the air was warm and the season summer, the wind that blew across the island was chilling and they were pleased to return to the warmth of their subterranean world. This too was much bigger than Alexis had imagined when they first arrived, with floor after floor plunging down well below the surface and in places extending out under the sea bed. They were shown the power plant, a gas-and-turbine-driven generator with a diesel backup—hence the tanker lying offshore. They were told this was temporary and that a nuclear power plant would be arriving soon. They were shown the

computer labs and the masses of servers that supported them, which led them to the communications area where IT links to the World Wide Web kept the island in constant touch with the outer world. For the boys, this meant they could use their favorite social media platform to talk to their parents after the evening meal.

Their next visit was to the Sick Bay where a male doctor and female nurse greeted them and showed them the facilities. Alexis was surprised to see the nurse; he'd understood the island was an all-male place. *A Modest Proposal* seemed to him to suggest that and, anyhow, the homes of his grandfather had very few female staff. His and the other boys' surprise obviously showed for the doctor explained to them that the institute had a contract with a hospital back in the West and one doctor and two nurses from that hospital were stationed here on the island at all times. Serious medical problems, however, would be flown back to the mainland hospital for treatment.

Fascinating though the Sick Bay was, Alexis could tell most of his companions were happy to move on to the kitchen and dining area, which were both modern and functional. As with each workplace they visited, the kitchen was busy with chefs and staff moving quickly between the stations, their language and behavior, Alexis noted, was that of the harsher TV chefs that he'd seen.

From the kitchens, they visited the gyms and sports areas where they would be expected to keep themselves fit. The school followed the old precept of "a healthy mind in a healthy body," and, they were reminded, there would be few excuses accepted for absences from school or physical activity. On the floors below, they were shown rooms filled with food being grown in giant greenhouse-like bubbles, and below that, meat being made by strange laboratory-like machines.

After the food areas, they were shown round those facilities that every city needs but which no one wants to visit: sewage and water treatment plants. There machines hummed and whirred with mercifully no unpleasant odors. Finally, when Alexis was sure he couldn't remember where anything he'd seen was, they took the elevator up to visit the classrooms where they would spend the majority of their time in the coming years. The rooms were surprisingly

bare of anything that a modern classroom of the Western world might have.

“Where are the tablets and stuff?” one shocked boy asked.

“They’re here,” the guide said. “They’re just not where we start you out from.”

The most familiar thing in each room was a wall behind the lecturer’s desk that was almost entirely filled by a monitor. The desk itself was also clearly designed to be connected to devices, which mollified the air of grievance that many pupils were demonstrating by scowls or dark mutterings.

“Quiet,” their guide said. “You’ll have all you need when you’re under way. We haven’t built all this and brought you here to hold you back.”