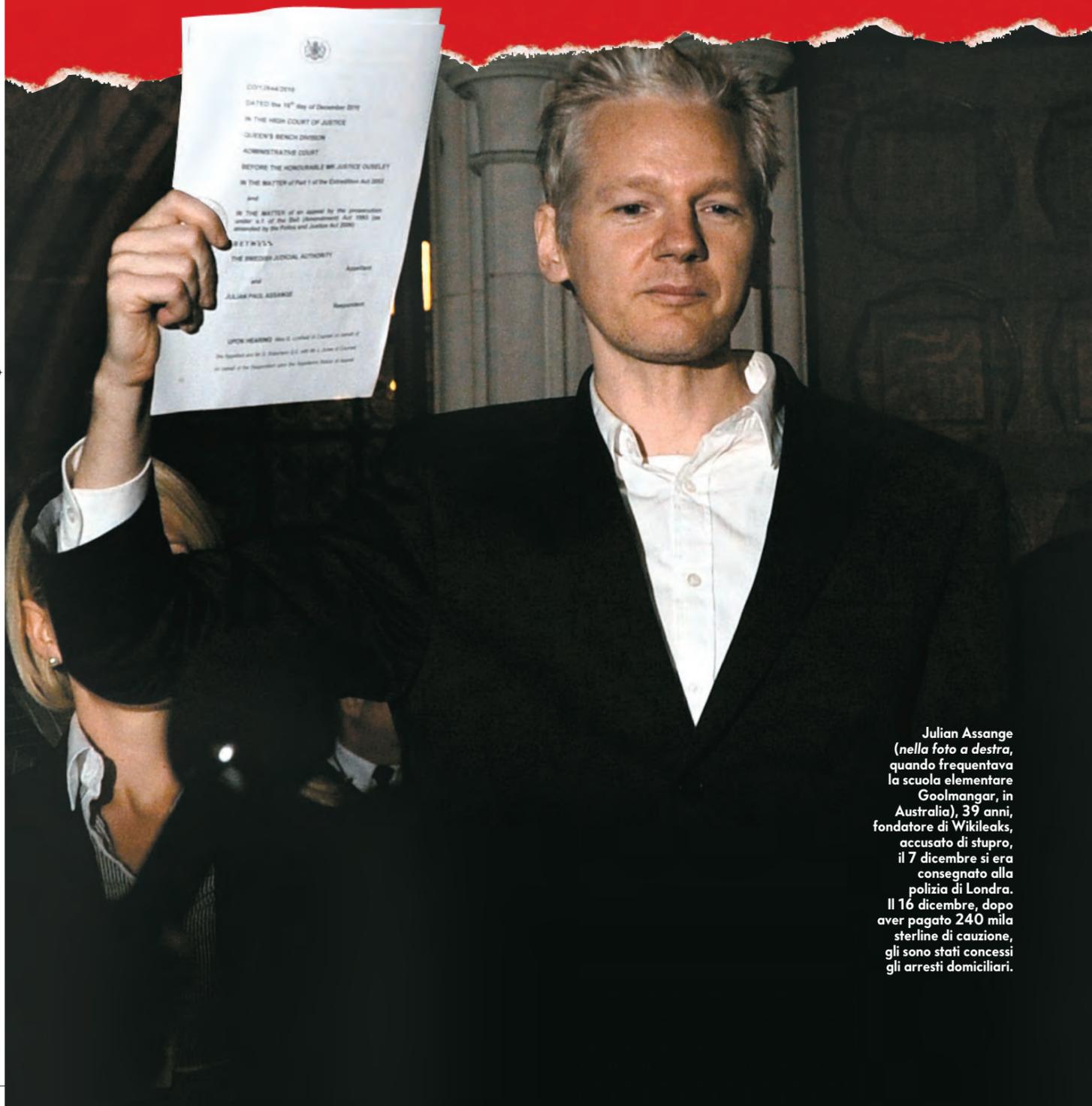


Julian Assange È STATO BELLO GIOCCARE CON VOI

VANITY RISERVATO

A 18 anni entrò nei computer della Nasa e si ritrovò sotto sorveglianza, inseguito, ricercato. D'altra parte, lui alle fughe era abituato da sempre: costretto a scappare da un patrigno pericoloso, abbandonato da moglie e figlio a 20 anni, impegnato a difendere i suoi file (anche con l'aiuto di un alveare). Dall'isola di Tom Sawyer ai capelli bianchi, ecco il passato che ha fatto di lui il guru di Wikileaks, e l'uomo dell'anno

DI DAVID LESER



Julian Assange (nella foto a destra, quando frequentava la scuola elementare Goolmangar, in Australia), 39 anni, fondatore di Wikileaks, accusato di stupro, il 7 dicembre si era consegnato alla polizia di Londra. Il 16 dicembre, dopo aver pagato 240 mila sterline di cauzione, gli sono stati concessi gli arresti domiciliari.



Quasi vent'anni fa, sulle colline di Melbourne, Julian Assange si addormentava all'alba, sognando incursioni di polizia. Sentiva passi sulla ghiaia del vialetto, vedeva ombre aggirarsi intorno alla casa, immaginava di vedere la porta sul retro abbattuta dal calcio di un agente. Dopo aver passato la notte a infiltrarsi nei computer di mezzo mondo, era esausto, e questo aumentava le sue ossessioni. Era convinto di essere spiato, intercettato, assediato. E aveva ragione.

Alla fine di ottobre del 1991, il ventenne maghetto del computer era da molto tempo parte degli International Subversives, forse il più sofisticato gruppo di hacker dell'intero pianeta. Tre ragazzi brillanti e un po' paranoici, figli di famiglie disgregate che, dopo essersi conosciuti online in un Bulletin Board System - le reti collegate via modem che costituivano la «preistoria» di Internet -, da Melbourne avevano penetrato alcuni dei network più protetti del mondo, compreso quello del Pentagono; il loro codice di comportamento: «Mai danneggiare i sistemi, mai cambiarne le informazioni (se non per coprirci le tracce), sempre dividerle». Assange stesso lo avrebbe raccontato, sei anni dopo, in *Underground*, scritto da Suelette Dreyfus. Nel libro, metà ritratto della cultura tecno-ribelle australiana, metà autobiografia di Assange, Julian non era indicato con il suo vero nome ma con il nickname di battaglia Mendax, dai

versi di Orazio *splendide mendax*, «mentitore a fin di bene».

A fine '91, il gruppo era sotto la sorveglianza della polizia australiana. Due anni prima, la Nasa era stata attaccata alla vigilia della partenza di una missione Shuttle: una mattina gli ingegneri dell'agenzia spaziale avevano accesso il computer e si era materializzata sui monitor la scritta «WANK» - gergale per «masturbarsi», oltre che acronimo di «Worms Against Nuclear Killers» («Vermi contro gli assassini nucleari») - e un verso della rock band australiana Midnight Oil: «Dite che questi sono tempi di pace e vi preparate alla guerra». I colpevoli non avevano lasciato tracce, ma i sospetti si erano addensati sull'Australia. «È stato bello giocare con voi», aveva scritto Assange all'amministratore di sistema della Nortel per comunicargli che la rete di sicurezza del gigante canadese delle telecomunicazioni era appena stata violata, «e non abbiamo fatto danni, anzi ci siamo divertiti ad aggiustare qualche cosa che non funzionava. Ma per favore, non chiamate la polizia australiana».

Il 29 ottobre 1991, qualcuno bussò alla porta di Julian. Lui stava leggendo *I fratelli di Soledad*, le lettere dal carcere di George Jackson, il Black Panther morto in circostanze mai chiarite nella prigione californiana di San Quentin (dove scontava una condanna a detta di molti ingiusta) - la classica storia di oppressione che appassionava Assange. «Vattene», gridò, pensando fosse un amico. «Polizia. Apra la porta. Ora». Julian aprì e si trovò di fronte una decina di agenti in borghese. «Mia moglie mi ha appena piantato. Non potete tornare più tardi?». La sua moglie diciottenne in effetti lo aveva lasciato pochi giorni prima, portando con



sé il loro figlio neonato, i mobili, persino il lettore cd che gli aveva regalato pochi mesi prima per il suo ventesimo compleanno. Assange era uno straccio, da giorni stava senza dormire né mangiare.

Normalmente, i dischetti con le tracce dei suoi exploit di hacker li avrebbe tenuti nascosti dove nessuno si sarebbe sognato di andare a guardare: dentro un alveare. Apicoltore appassionato, aveva addestrato le api a non attaccarlo quando andava ogni giorno a tirare fuori i dischi e a rimmetterli dentro. Per riuscirci, aveva raccolto campioni del suo sudore su fazzolettini di carta che aveva poi imbevuto di acqua zuccherata e dato «in pasto» alle api, così che imparassero ad associare il suo odore ai fiori invece che all'orso, il loro nemico naturale. (La stessa tecnica la applicò più tardi alle donne. «Una volta mi sono innamorato di una ragazza caffeinomane», raccontò su *iq.org*, il suo sito ormai defunto, «e prima di portarla a letto, per farle perdere la testa, ogni volta mi spalmavo di nascosto sul collo e sulle spalle una pasta di acqua e caffè macinato, in modo che associasse il mio corpo alla sua voglia di caffè»).

La sera dell'irruzione di polizia, però, i dischi erano in bella vista attorno al suo computer Amiga da 700 dollari. Tredici in tutto, pieni di password decrittate, liste di falle nei sistemi di sicurezza di mezzo mondo, persino dettagli dell'indagine sul suo conto: Assange aveva spiato la polizia mentre la polizia spiava lui. Passarono cinque anni prima che Julian Assange andasse a giudizio con 31 capi

AFP/GETTY

d'accusa. Di 24 ammise la colpevolezza, fu liberato per buona condotta e condannato a 2.100 dollari australiani di multa. «Vostro onore», disse al giudice, «mi è stata fatta una grave ingiustizia».

«Non era motivato dai soldi», ci spiega Richard Guilliat, il giornalista di *The Australian* che all'epoca rivelò per primo la vera identità di Mendax. «Ce l'aveva con il "Grande Fratello", con le limitazioni alla libertà di comunicazione. Il suo punto di vista era: non faccio danni, dunque che male c'è? Dietro la maschera fredda e cerebrale, c'era la convinzione di un evangelista». «Lo ricordo come un idealista», concorda Paul Galbally, l'avvocato che lo rappresentò.

Quello tra l'arresto e il processo fu per Julian un periodo di depressione. Come nel *walkabout*, il rito in cui i giovani aborigeni passano un periodo da soli nella natura per segnare il passaggio all'età adulta, dormiva all'aperto. A volte nel letto essiccato di un fiume, più spesso tra gli eucalipti giganti della Sherbrooke Forest. D'inverno lo tormentava il freddo, d'estate lo divoravano le zanzare e si svegliava con il volto sfigurato dalle punture. «E in quei momenti», ha detto in una rara intervista al *New Yorker*, «la tua voce interiore smette di parlare».

Julian nacque nel 1971 a Townsville, sulla costa australiana nordorientale, ma aveva un anno appena compiuto quando la madre, Christine, lo portò con sé a Magnetic Island – così chiamata perché disturbava le bussole delle navi di passaggio –, uno scoglio nel Pacifico che gli offrì una breve parentesi di spensieratezza. «Ero un piccolo Tom Sawyer», ha raccontato sempre al *New Yorker*. «Avevo un cavallo, mi costruivo una zattera per andare a pescare, esploravo gallerie di miniere». Sua mamma era famosa perché girava in bikini verde e cappello di foglie di palma. Ma non era sempre la valle dell'Eden. Un giorno Christine dovette uccidere a fucilate un serpente velenoso – il taipan – che si era infilato nel letto del figlio.

E poi, iniziarono le peregrinazioni. Prima di compiere quindici anni, Julian aveva traslocato dodici volte e cambiato 37 scuole. Tra le altre, il minuscolo istituto elementare di Goolmangar, dove ancora oggi un vecchio compagno di clas-

se, Peter Graham, lo ricorda come «un ragazzo dal cuore buono, capace di difendere e liberare un ragno quando tutti gli altri lo volevano schiacciare».

Anche Suelette Dreyfus, l'autrice di *Underground*, rimase colpita dalla sua generosità e dal suo amore per gli animali. «È uno che dà da mangiare al gatto randagio, adotta l'uccellino dall'ala spezzata. Ricordo che un giorno – stavamo ultimando un capitolo, eravamo in ritardo – si è fermato in mezzo a una strada di Melbourne per raccogliere un bruco caduto dall'asfalto prima che un'auto lo schiacciasse».

I suoi studi contavano molto poco per Christine, che da sempre diffidava dell'istituzione scolastica. A 17 anni, per lo stupore dei genitori, aveva bruciato i libri del liceo e se n'era andata di casa con la moto, una tenda e una mappa dell'Australia. A Sydney, a duemila chilometri di distanza, si era unita a una comune di artisti, a una manifestazione contro la guerra del Vietnam si era innamorata di un giovane ribelle ed era rimasta incinta. Ma la storia era finita quando il bambino aveva pochi mesi. Julian non ha mai incontrato suo padre, la cui identità non è mai stata pubblicamente rivelata.

Poco dopo, Christine si sposò con un artista, Brett Assange, l'uomo che avrebbe lasciato il cognome in eredità a lei e a Julian. Furono anni molto bohémien per la giovane famiglia. Una notte a Adelaide, quando Julian aveva quattro anni, era sull'auto su cui sua madre stava rientrando con un amico, dopo una manifestazione anti-nucleare, con documenti che smascheravano i test atomici condotti dal governo britannico negli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta nel deserto intorno a Maralinga – test che avevano causato tra gli aborigeni morti, cecità e varie forme

di cancro. Mentre guidavano si accorsero che i poliziotti li inseguivano, Christine cercò di seminarli e il suo amico si buttò fuori dall'auto in corsa. «Guidare così, con un bambino, alle 2 di notte», le disse un agente quando alla fine riuscirono a fermarla. «Lei, signorina, dovrebbe smetterla con la politica, o andrà a finire che le toglieranno il figlio». L'amico riemerse giorni dopo, coperto di lividi, picchiato dalla polizia che gli aveva messo addosso dell'hashish per incastrarlo. Attivismo politico, instabilità familiare, movimento continuo: fu questa l'infanzia di Julian. Ed era solo l'inizio.

Quando aveva nove anni, Christine divorziò da Brett Assange e si mise con un musicista che, scrive Suelette Dreyfus raccontando in *Underground* il passato di Mendax, «gli faceva paura: lo considerava uno psicopatico violento e manipolatore. Un uomo che aveva cinque diverse identità, documenti e carte di credito intestate a nomi diversi nel portafoglio. Tutto in lui era invenzione, persino il Paese di nascita». Soprattutto, il nuovo patrigno di Julian era cresciuto in una delle più famigerate sette religiose d'Australia, The Family, motto «invisibili, silenziosi, sconosciuti»: quando nel 1987 la polizia fece un raid nel quartier generale di Lake Eildon, trovarono 14 bambini che, per ordine della guida spirituale Anne Hamilton-Byrne, erano cresciuti nel più totale isolamento, con i capelli tinti biondo platino e gli abiti identici, devastati dalla dieta poverissima, dai frequenti maltrattamenti e dalla somministrazione di psicofarmaci. In un'intervista televisiva al giornalista Mark Davis, Assange ha detto di avere il sospetto che il suo patrigno fosse in real-

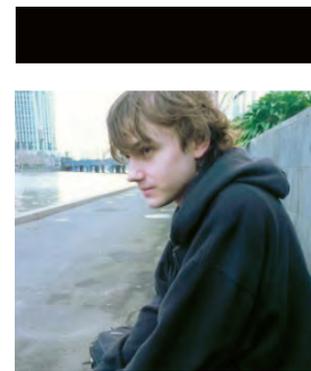
LA MADRE CHRISTINE ANDÒ VIA DI CASA A 17 ANNI, SI INNAMORÒ DI UN GIOVANE RIBELLE E RIMASE INCINTA. MA JULIAN NON HA MAI INCONTRATO IL PADRE



tà il figlio della Hamilton-Byrne. Poi, parlando con Nikki Barrowclough del *Melbourne Age*, ha precisato che né lui né sua madre sono mai stati adepti della setta. Ma quegli anni hanno lasciato in lui un segno profondo. Poco dopo che dalla coppia era nato un figlio, infatti, si era scatenata tra Christine e il nuovo compagno una feroce guerra per la custodia del bambino. Lei temeva che lui glielo volesse rapire, così un giorno annunciò a Julian: «Dobbiamo sparire».

E sparirono: dagli undici ai sedici anni di età, Julian Assange visse in costante fuga con la madre e il fratellino, nascosti nei luoghi più sperduti del Paese, co-

Nel 1989, appena maggiorenne, Assange sposò una sedicenne introversa ed emotivamente fragile – neppure la sua identità è stata mai rivelata – che un anno più tardi lo rese padre. Ma ben presto lo lasciò, portando con sé il piccolo Daniel. Fu proprio quello il periodo dell'arresto, e l'inizio di una durissima e dolorosissima battaglia per l'affido. Alla fine Julian vinse, e toccò a lui crescere il figlio. Anche lui dotato di un'intelligenza precocissima: si è iscritto all'università a 15 anni, a 16 ha scritto una tesi sulla ricerca del genoma. «La cosa che più mi è piaciuta di lui, co-



ANCHE DANIEL, IL FIGLIO VENTENNE, HA UN'INTELLIGENZA PRECOCISSIMA: SI È ISCRITTO ALL'UNIVERSITÀ AD APPENA 15 ANNI

perti da un cognome sempre nuovo e sempre falso, nel timore che gli adepti della setta aiutassero il musicista a trovarli.

Fu durante questo periodo «alla macchia» che Christine Assange comprò a suo figlio un Commodore 64. E subito si accorse del suo straordinario talento nell'usare il modem per infiltrarsi in altri computer. «Sembrava fuso alla tastiera, come un pianista con il suo piano», ha detto a Kieran Campbell, un giornalista del quotidiano locale di Noosa, la città del Queensland dove vive.

A 17 anni Julian, ormai traslocato stabilmente a Melbourne, già hacker esperto e membro degli International Subversives, lettore di biografie, saggi politici e volumi di scienza e matematica, scappò di casa perché aveva ricevuto una soffiata: la polizia stava per arrivare a lui. Cancellò i dischetti compromettenti, bruciò le stampate e scappò. Gli agenti arrivarono una settimana più tardi, e gli sequestrarono il computer, ma non trovarono nulla. Il futuro «uomo più ricercato del mondo» se l'era cavata.

me padre, è che non mi ha mai trattato, dal punto di vista intellettuale, come un bambino», ha detto Daniel nella sua unica intervista, al sito indipendente *Crikey.com*. «Mi parlava come se volesse spingermi ad afferrare il concetto nella sua pienezza, senza semplificarlo. Questo mi ha aiutato molto a capire la realtà».

La guerra per la custodia del bambino, all'inizio degli anni '90, mise Assange non solo contro l'ormai ex moglie, ma anche contro il tribunale dei minori. Assieme a Christine, Julian diventò un attivista dei diritti dei padri, fondò un'organizzazione. Ci vollero più di trenta udienze per arrivare infine a un accordo con la madre, e l'esperienza fu per lui devastante. «Era come un reduce di guerra», ricorda Christine. «In un certo senso, ha sofferto anche lui di disturbo post traumatico». Fu in quel periodo, dice inoltre, che i capelli di Julian, un tempo castano scuro, diventarono bianchi. (Assange ha invece raccontato in un'intervista che il cambiamento improvviso di colore è avvenuto a 15 anni, quando è esplosa un tubo catodico che aveva costruito a scuola).

Quando suo figlio è stato abbastanza grande, Julian è tornato a soddisfare l'innata abitudine al movimento. Ha attraversato il Vietnam in moto. Ha passato una settimana da solo nelle foreste della Tasmania. E poi la Georgia, l'Islanda, e tanti posti ancora. Si è iscritto all'università di Melbourne assieme a Daniel, fisica e matematica, ma poi ha smesso, disgustato dal numero di ricercatori che lavoravano per le forze armate statunitensi. E ha concepito l'embrione di quello che, nel 2007, sarebbe diventato *Wikileaks*. Ha passato gran parte del 2006 barricato in casa a lavorare come un posseduto, con formule matematiche scribacchiate su muri e porte, e solo lampadine rosse per replicare la luce debole dei falò primitivi.

Pochi mesi dopo, sarebbe iniziato il flusso costante di documenti riservati che hanno fatto la fama di *Wikileaks* e reso la vita difficile al suo fondatore – scampato, non si sa per quanto, all'estradizione per un'accusa di stupro che sa tanto di vendetta promossa dai governi «sverognati» – e ai suoi familiari.

Daniel ha ricevuto minacce dagli ambienti di destra americani, la sua casa è assediata dai media, sostiene di non avere contatti con suo padre da tre anni «perché il nostro rapporto si è allentato» (ma il sospetto è che suo padre stia alla larga per non esporlo ai pericoli). Christine, che gestisce un teatro di marionette, non parla più con nessuno. Questa è la cronaca della nostra conversazione.

Signora Assange?

«Mi dica».

Chiamo da *Vanity Fair* Italia.

«Prima di farla andare avanti, le dico che non do interviste».

Ma non potremmo...

«Non voglio sembrarle scortese, ma sto per riattaccare il telefono».

È possibile almeno...

Clic.

«Tutti voi pensate che io abbia solo una vita», ha detto Julian Assange, anni fa, al regista australiano Richard Lowenstein. «Ma io ne ho tante. E preferisco che ognuna non sappia che cosa stanno combinando le altre».

tempo di lettura previsto: 20 minuti

By DAVID LESER

Nearly two decades ago in the hills outside Melbourne Julian Assange would go to sleep in the early hours of the morning dreaming of police raids. He would hear footsteps on the driveway gravel, see shadowy figures hovering near his house, and imagine armed police bursting through his backdoor at dawn.

He was often paranoid and exhausted, mainly because he'd been up all night hacking his way into Australian and overseas computers. His lack of sleep compounded his paranoia. He believed the police were watching him, tapping his phone and about to raid his house.

He was dead right about that.

In late October 1991, this 20 year-old computer wizard was a key member of an elite underground movement in Melbourne known as International Subversives, arguably the most sophisticated hacking group on the planet.

Comprising three brilliant, obsessive young men from dysfunctional family backgrounds – they met initially on computer bulletin board systems, not in person - the group had managed to break into some of the most secure networks in the world, including NASA, the Naval Surface Warfare Centre in Virginia and the Pentagon itself.

We know this because Julian Assange was to tell us himself six years later in a book called *Underground: Tales of Hacking, Madness and Obsession on the Electronic Frontier*, published to international acclaim in 1997. Written by Australian post-graduate student, Suelette Dreyfus, with Assange's close co-operation, *Underground* lifted the lid on the exploits of this rogue sub-culture operating out of Australia's second largest city.

Their maxim was: "Don't damage computer systems you break into (including crashing them); don't change the information in those systems (except for altering logs to cover your tracks); and share information."

The book, in part a ghost-written autobiography of Assange's early life, never actually revealed the names of the Melbourne hackers, but rather online nicknames such as Phoenix, Electron, Prime Suspect, Trax and Mendax.

Court documents and biographical details on the Wikileaks website would later show that Mendax was none other than Julian Assange. He'd chosen his moniker from Horace's *splendide mendax*, meaning "nobly untruthful."

By October 1991 International Subversives had come under Australian Federal Police surveillance. Two years earlier the US Space agency, NASA, had been attacked just as the Atlantis space shuttle was about to be launched towards Jupiter. On its vast network system, stretching from America to Europe to Japan, NASA workers had turned on their computers one morning to find a digital display of a giant word staring them in the face. The word was "WANK," an acronym for "Worms Against Nuclear Killers."

Underneath the word was the following declaration: "Your System Has Been Officially Wanked," and then a couplet from a song by Australian rock band, Midnight Oil: "You talk of times for peace for all and then prepare for war."

Although the cuprits were never found, *Underground* revealed that the worm had emerged from the shadowlands of this Melbourne hacking community and was, in part, a typically Australian act of defiance against large institutions.

In the last week of October 1991 International Subversives realised it was being tracked by the Australian Federal Police. They had already hacked their way into the American military-industrial complex, as well as the Australian National University, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Telecom (Australia's government-

owned telecommunications system) and the giant Canadian telecommunications manufacturer, Northern Telecom (Nortel).

“I have taken control,” Julian Assange told the Nortel administrator one evening when he realised the administrator had signed on. Assange was speaking with characteristic sardonic humour. “For years,” he continued, “I have been struggling in this greyness but now I have finally seen the light.”

There was no response.

Assange sent another message: “It’s been nice playing with your system. We didn’t do any damage and we even improved a few things. Please don’t call the Australian Federal Police.”

On October 29, 1991, there was a loud knock at Julian Assange’s door. Assange was in the middle of reading, *Soledad Brother*, the prison letters of black American revolutionary George Jackson, who was falsely accused of murdering a white prison guard in 1969. Speaking to the theme of oppression and marginalisation it was one of Assange’s favourite books.

“Go away,” he yelled, thinking it was a friend.

“Police. Open the door. NOW.”

Assange did as he was told and there at the door was his nightmare made manifest: a dozen plain-clothed policemen. “I don’t believe this,” he told them. “My wife just left me. Can’t you come back later?”

Assange’s eighteen year old wife had, indeed, just left him a few days earlier, taking with her their infant son, Daniel, as well as clothes, furniture and the CD player she’d given him a few months earlier for his twentieth birthday.

Julian Assange was heartbroken and had barely slept or eaten for days. While he’d been reading he’d also had his telephone connected to his modem and computer and, in turn, wired to his stereo speakers. His modem had timed out and the phone was beeping off the hook. Assange had been listening to a busy signal all day long. He was quite clearly a nervous wreck.

“I think you’ve been expecting me,” Ken Day, the head of the Australian Federal Police’s investigation task force, told him at the door.

Normally Assange kept his hacking disks in a place no one would dream of looking – inside a beehive. An enthusiastic apiarist, he enjoyed observing the highly intricate ways in which bees socially interacted. He also thought that if he was ever in the possession of stolen computer account passwords – which he was – including the Pentagon’s United States Air Force 7th Command – no one would find them there. Assange had actually trained the bees not to attack him when he replaced his floppy disks each day. He’d managed to do this by collecting sweat samples from his armpits, putting them on tissues, then soaking the tissues in sweetened water and feeding the solution to the bees. The bees would associate him with flowers, rather than their natural enemy - a bear.

(In subsequent years he would also employ the same technique for attracting women - that’s if his his now-defunct personal domain site, iq.org is any guide: “I’ve always found women caught in a thunderstorm appealing,” he wrote. “I found myself loving a girl who was a coffee addict. I would make a watery paste of finely ground coffee and surreptitiously smear this around my neck and shoulders before seducing her so she would associate my body with her dopaminergic cravings.”)

On the night of the police raid, Assange’s disks, thirteen in all, were not in the beehive but rather spread around his \$700 Amiga computer. A fourteenth was sitting in the computer’s disk drive. They were full of encrypted and cracked passwords, modem telephone numbers, stolen userlists and various documents revealing the

security flaws of various computer systems around the world. They also contained details of the Australian Federal Police's own investigation into Assange's hacking activities. In other words Assange had hacked into the police investigation of his own hacking.

Julian Assange spent three and a half hours with his interrogators that night and then waited five years to finally answer 31 counts of hacking and related crimes. He pleaded guilty to 24 of the charges, was placed on a good behaviour bond and ordered to pay A\$2100. In describing to the court Assange's almost unlimited access to computers, the chief prosecutor said: "It was like God Almighty walking around doing what you like."

Assange replied to the judge: "Your honour, I feel a great injustice has been done and I would like to record the fact that you have been misled by the prosecution."

Ken Day, the man in charge of the police investigation, told *The Australian* newspaper's, Richard Guillatt recently that Assange "was not motivated by money. He was opposed to Big Brother, to the restriction of freedom of communication. His moral sense about breaking into computer systems was: 'I'm not going to do any harm, so what's wrong with it?' But that's a bit like a burglar saying: 'I'm just going to wander through your house, but I won't touch anything.' It doesn't quite cut it." Australian criminal lawyer, Paul Galbally, confirmed to *Vanity Fair* this week that he had represented Assange during that legal battle and found his client to be a "very young, idealistic person with great intelligence.

"I was struck by his sincerity and genuineness," he said.

Richard Guillatt, the first journalist to actually reveal Mendax's true identity as Julian Assange, believes Assange to be possessed of a zeal not readily apparent to outsiders. "Beneath the cool, cerebral veneer is the self-belief of an evangelist," he told *Vanity Fair*.

In the years leading up to the court case Julian Assange fell into deep depression. Two weeks after the police raid he was admitted briefly to hospital before checking himself out and, literally, going "walkabout." ("Walkabout" is an Aboriginal rite-of-passage term for disappearing into the wilderness.)

Assange slept occasionally on river banks and creeks on the outskirts of Melbourne, but most of the time he made his home 40 kilometres east of the city, in the Sherbrooke Forest of the Dandenong Ranges, known for its giant eucalyptus trees and its population of rare "Superb" Lyerbirds.

In winter the temperatures plummeted and in summer the mosquitos nearly ate him alive. He would wake to find his face disfigured from bites. "Your inner voice quietens down (at times like that)," Assange told the *New Yorker*. "I don't want to sound too Buddhist but your vision of yourself disappears."

Today the vision of Julian Assange appears everywhere. Until being remanded into custody last week (December 7) by British police he was arguably, along with Osama bin Laden, the world's most infamous – and wanted - man.

He faced alleged sexual offences in Sweden (one of which included "pressing his erect penis into a complainant's back") and possible extradition to America where the leaking of thousands of secret diplomatic US cables onto his Wikileaks website had prompted politicians to call for his trial under a century-old espionage law. Some commentators and political figures, including an adviser to the Canadian prime minister, Stephen Harper, were even calling for his assassination.

Meanwhile his own government in Australia had all but abandoned him. The Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, labelled his actions "grossly irresponsible," and described the

leaks as illegal. Her Attorney-General, Robert McClelland, asked the Australian Federal Police to investigate whether Assange had broken any laws in publishing the cables and also said he was considering cancelling the 39 year-old Australian's passport.

Assange retaliated by accusing the Australian government of "disgraceful pandering" to the Americans. In an article published in Australia's national newspaper, the *Australian*, just prior to his arrest Assange pointed out that the world's most powerful media figure, Australian-born, Rupert Murdoch, had once waged his own battle with secretive governments.

"In the race between secrecy and truth," Assange quoted Murdoch as saying in 1958, "it seems inevitable that truth will always win."

Assange noted that the young Murdoch was probably reflecting his own father, Keith Murdoch's philosophy of taking on governments. (During World War I Keith Murdoch had exposed the way Australian troops had been "needlessly sacrificed by "incompetent British commanders" on the Turkish shores of Gallipoli.)

"The British tried to shut him up but Keith Murdoch would not be silenced and his efforts led to the termination of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign," Assange wrote. Assange noted also that he'd grown up in a country town in Queensland, in north-eastern Australia, where people always spoke their minds bluntly and resisted government duplicity. "They distrusted big government," he said, "as something that could be corrupted if not watched carefully. The dark days of corruption in the Queensland government (during the 1970s and 80s) are testimony to what happens when the politicians gag the media from reporting the truth."

Trying to find the truth about Julian Assange is a little like shining a torch into a dark forest. There's only so much you can see at anyone time.

Born in Townsville on the north-east coast of Australia in 1971 Assange moved with his mother to Magnetic Island shortly after his first birthday. Named after its apparent magnetic effect on passing ship compasses, this clump of rocks in the Pacific was a tropical, although temporary, idyl for the young Assange.

As he told the *New Yorker* magazine: "Most of this period of my childhood was pretty Tom Sawyer. I had my own horse. I built my own raft. I went fishing. I was going down mine shafts and tunnels." His mother was known to wear green bikinis and hats made out of coconut palm leaves.

But it was not all smooth sailing in paradise. On a return visit in 1976 Julian's mother, Christine, was forced to shoot a taipan in her son's bed, as well as one in the water tank. On another occasion their house burnt to the ground and the rifle cartridges that Christine Assange kept for shooting snakes "exploded like fireworks."

Julian Assange and his mother never stayed in one place for long. By his own account he lived in twelve different locations before he was fifteen, including Townsville, Magnetic Island, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Sydney, plus a string of coastal towns in northern New South Wales. During this period he attended 37 schools, including the tiny Goolmangar primary, close to the counter-cultural centre of Byron Bay. One of his former classmates, Peter Graham, recently remembered Assange as a young boy with compassion. "He was the sort of kid who moved a spider and let it free when the others wanted to kill it," Graham said. "He was always a nurturing sort of fellow."

Suelette Dreyfus, author of *Underground*, told *Vanity Fair* that since first meeting Assange in the mid 1990s she was struck by his humanist streak and strong duty of

care to animals. “He is absolutely the guy who will feed the stray cat that comes to his door, that adopts the bird with the broken wing,” she said.

Dreyfus recalled one memorable day in Melbourne when he actually stopped in the middle of the street to put a caterpillar on a leaf and take it over to a tree. “We’re in the middle of working on a chapter of the book (*Underground*) and there he is rescuing a caterpillar from being run over by a car.”

His mother, Christine Assange, always took a dim view of formal education. She believed it gave children an unhealthy respect for authority and dampened their spirit of inquiry. She knew something of this herself. At 17 she’d burnt her own schoolbooks, sold her paintings and left home on a motorcycle with a tent and a road map of Australia, much to the astonishment of her parents.

After 2000 kilometres she arrived in Sydney, joined a flourishing alternative community and began working as an artist. During this time she met a rebellious young man at an anti Vietnam war rally and fell in love with him. Not long afterwards they had their only child, Julian.

Within a year of Julian Assange’s birth his parents’ relationship had ended and Assange was to never know his biological father. To date, the man has never been publicly identified.

At the age of two, Assange’s mother re-married, this time a fellow artist, Brett Assange, and, according to *Underground*, “what followed was many turbulent years, moving from town to town as his (mother and step-father) explored the ’70s left-wing, bohemian subculture.”

One night in Adelaide, when Assange was four years old, his mother and a friend returned from an anti-nuclear protest meeting with evidence that the British Government had conducted above-ground nuclear tests at Maralinga, a remote desert area of South Australia, during the 1950s and 60s. The tests had been carried out with the co-operation of the Australian government and were to cause death, blindness and various forms of cancer amongst servicemen and local Aborigines.

At 2am the couple, together with the young Assange, found themselves being followed by police. Christine Assange fled into a back lane and her friend jumped out. Assange drove off with the police still tailing her. When she was pulled over shortly afterwards the police searched her car and demanded to know what had gone on at the protest meeting and where her friend had gone. Christine Assange was less than co-operative.

“You have your child out at 2 in the morning,” the policeman told her. “I think you should get out of politics, lady. It could be said you’re an unfit mother.”

A few days later Christine Assange’s friend turned up covered in bruises. He’d been beaten up by the police and planted with hashish. “I’m getting out of politics,” he declared.

This was the mother’s milk Julian Assange imbibed from his earliest days – frontline politics, domestic instability and a life on the run. It was only the beginning.

When Assange was nine years old his mother and step-father divorced and Christine Assange took up with an amateur musician. As Suelette Dreyfus was to write in *Underground* of Mendax (read Julian Assange) “he was frightened of the man, whom he considered a manipulative and violent psychopath. He had five different identities with plastic in his wallet to match. His whole background was a fabrication, right down to the country of his birth.”

Julian Assange’s new musician stepfather had grown up in one of Australia’s most notorious religious cults, “The Family” whose motto was: “Unseen, Unknown and

Unheard.” When the Australian Federal Police raided The Family’s property at Lake Eildon, Victoria, in 1987, they found 14 children raised in almost complete isolation. According to reports at the time Hamilton-Byrne had ordered the children’s hair to be dyed peroxide blonde and for each of them to be dressed in identical outfits. All were subjected to frequent corporal punishment, starvation diets and regular doses of psychiatric drugs.

Earlier this year Julian Assange told Australian television journalist, Mark Davis that his mother’s new partner “seemed to be the son of Anne Hamilton-Byrne.”

He later insisted in another interview with the Melbourne *Age*’s Nikki Barrowclough that neither he nor his mother had ever been a member of this cult. When asked why his own hair had gone white he replied: “I built a cathode ray tube at 15, at school, and connected it backwards. The Geiger counter went 1000, 2000, 3000, 40,000. That was about the time (my hair went white.)”

Christine Assange had a child with this musician but when their relationship turned violent a bitter custody battle ensued. Christine Assange feared the musician would abduct their baby so she announced to the young Julian one day: “Now we need to disappear.”

From the age of eleven to sixteen Julian Assange lived on the run with his mother and half brother, hiding under assumed names on both sides of the continent. They became convinced the cult had informers inside the government and were providing the man with leads on their whereabouts.

While on the run Christine Assange bought her elder son a Commodore 64 computer. It was not long before he started hacking his way into well-known programs, finding secret messages left by their creators. His mother was astonished by his computer skills.

“When you saw him on the keyboard it was as if he was at one with it, like a pianist,” she told Kieran Campbell, a journalist with a local newspaper in Noosa, Queensland, where Christine now lives.

“The way his hands would glide over the keys – it was almost a caress. It was like an artist. You see someone playing a musical instrument or painting and they are just at one with the instrument. The way his hands moved over the keys, the way he navigated ... it was like watching someone dance with technology.”

Julian Assange saw it slightly differently. “The austerity of one’s interaction with a computer is something that appealed to me,” he told the *New Yorker*. “It is like chess – chess is very austere, in that you don’t have many rules. There is no randomness, and the problem is very hard.”

By the time he was sixteen Assange was living with his mother and half-brother on the outskirts of Melbourne, hacking his way into computers in his spare time. He had already joined International Subversives and was deeply immersed in his own eclectic but voracious reading – books on science and maths, biographies, politics, philosophy and poetry.

At the age of 17 he left home after receiving a tip-off that the police were about to raid his home. Assange “wiped his disks, burnt his print-outs and left.” A week later the police turned up and took away his computer. He was never charged.

In 1989 Assange married his girlfriend, “an intelligent but introverted and emotionally disturbed sixteen year old” whom he had met through a mutual friend. She has never been publicly identified.

Twelve months later they had a child, Daniel, but when his wife left him Julian Assange found himself embroiled in his own bitter custody dispute. He eventually won custody and raised his son on his own.

“The one thing I found that I appreciated most was that he wouldn’t treat me like a child when it came to intellectual concepts,” Daniel Assange told Australia’s leading independent website, crikey.com in his only interview to date.

“He would speak to me as though he were really trying to get me to grasp the fullness of an idea,” Daniel said. “I think that really helped me a lot in realising the nature of reality.”

Assange’s custody wrangle for his son in the early 1990s pitted him, not just against his son’s mother, but the Victorian state child-protection agency. Together with Christine Assange, Julian formed an organisation called Parent Inquiry Into Child Protection. “We used full-on activist methods,” Christine has said. In meetings with the government department “we would go in and tape-record them secretly.”

After nearly three dozen legal hearings and appeals, Assange came to an agreed arrangement with his ex-wife but the experience left him scarred. “It was like coming back from a war,” his mother said. “You just can’t interact with normal people to the same degree, and I am sure that Julian has some post traumatic stress disorder that is untreated.”

It was at this moment, she said, that her son’s hair went from dark brown to spectral white.

Assange ended up spending a number of years in Melbourne, working in computer security, devising software programs and looking after his intellectually gifted son. (Daniel Assange enrolled at university at the age of 15 and co-wrote his first scientific paper on genome research a year later.)

He also travelled through China, Europe and Russia as well as motorcycled through Vietnam. He studied physics and pure mathematics at Melbourne University during the same period his son was studying science. Julian Assange never completed his degree because he was appalled at how many of his fellow students were conducting research on behalf of the US defence system.

While raising his son in Melbourne Assange set up a computer consultancy firm and began developing the idea that would give birth in 2007 to Wikileaks. For much of 2006 he barricaded himself in a house near Melbourne University where he began working like a man possessed. He forgot to eat and sleep, wrote mathematical formulas all over his walls and doors, and used only red light bulbs in his bedroom, so as to replicate the faint glow of early man’s ancient campfires. There were beds all through the house, including one in the kitchen.

At the end of 2006 he travelled to a remote corner of south-west Tasmania for a week and ended up trying to cross a swollen river during a heavy storm. He was swept out to sea but managed to swim back, although his passport – which he’d had in his back pocket – was completely sodden. It was not the first river he’d tried to cross with his passport.

“He was dropped off alone in the wilderness,” Suelette Dreyfus told *Vanity Fair*, “and he went hiking. And when he hikes he takes radio interviews of interesting people with him. So I have this vision of him slogging through Tasmania’s wilderness forest listening to an interview with a Chinese dissident on his ear phones. He’s like a religious aesthete, two robes and a pair of sandals.”

At the beginning of 2007 Assange resumed a lifetime’s habit of wandering, heading first to World Social Forum in Kenya, then onto Tanzania, Iceland, Georgia and numerous other places. “Where is your luggage?” the person taking him to Melbourne airport asked him. Assange ran back into the house, grabbed a rucksack and filled it with whatever he could find. Mostly pairs of odd socks.

Within months the steady flow of leaked cables that would become the hallmark of Wikileaks would begin making headlines around the world: secret, unfiltered documents detailing corruption in Kenya, a classified US Government operating manual for Guantanamo Bay, highly sensitive files on the Church of Scientology, "Climategate emails" from the University of East Anglia in Britain, the contents of Sarah Palin's private Yahoo account and, of course, a sensational 38 minute video - "Collateral Murder" - showing an American gunship attack in Baghdad killing at least 18 people, including two Reuters journalists.

All this long before last month's release of the first of 251,000 secret US Government cables now causing uproar around the world.

Little wonder then that Assange's mother and son have been reluctant to talk. Daniel Assange has been threatened with abduction by at least one right-wing blogger in the United States and his house in Melbourne has been besieged by media, despite him having had no contact with his father for nearly three years. The young software designer has described his parting of the ways with his father as "a general decline of relations." (Others believe the lack of communication is the father's way of protecting his son.)

However Daniel Assange saw fit to tweet this week: "I have much respect for my father and his cause, and these ridiculously ill-handled allegations of sexual abuse (in Sweden) serve only to distract from the audacious awesomeness (of what) he has actually done."

His mother, who now runs a one-woman puppet theatre company in Noosa, Queensland, declined to talk when contacted this week by phone.

Christine Assange?

"Yes."

Italian Vanity Fair here ...

"Before you go any further I am not giving interviews."

Could we speak just ...

"I don't want to be rude but I am going to hang up the phone now."

Is it possible to ...?

Click.

At the time of writing Julian Assange was in solitary confinement in a south-west London prison, denied access to books, a telephone or his laptop, and due to appear in court on Tuesday as part of an extradition hearing to Sweden.

Some of Australia's most well-known expatriates have leapt to his defence, including Geoffrey Robertson, the international human rights lawyer and John Pilger, the crusading Australian-born journalist known widely for his trenchant criticism of American foreign policy.

Demonstrations have been held in support of Assange throughout Australia, despite the fact that most people still don't know who the man really is. And that's exactly the way Assange prefers it.

As he told Australian filmmaker, Richard Lowenstein, a few years ago: "You seem to think I have only one life. I have many — and it would be very bad indeed if each knew what the others were up to."

ends