

Chapter Ten - Trilby's Piano

My principle characters are established, and so is the territory in which they play out their lives. Up in the ether I am not subject to the constraints of earthly time. I can see backwards, to my own childhood and to that of the three glorious children I saw begin to grow up, but also into the future. Despite my fear, amidst meditational machinations in my endless curves of space, that I am a lost soul, I know what fate will befall the trio. One might be tempted to believe that I have, as I look benignly and perturbedly at the trio, lived their future out. The book Leila found on Damoo's shelf was one I had given him years before. *The 36 Dramatic Situations*. Struggling to solve the endless riddles of drama, plot, denouement and moral conclusion we had pored over it just as the three children now did. Had I lived their future out?

Several years after my humiliations in 1993 at the hands of Ruth Streeting my world and that of *Glass Household* conspired to collide when Gabriel purchased my house at Cleeve. It was round 2004. But he and I met then just briefly, and I played out a role in Gabriel's life similar to that played in mine by Henry Silverman: I confronted him with trick questions and obduracy as I headed for the mental hospital. I have not lived out the future of these three young, gifted people, though there will be moments when they themselves might be persuaded I have. For you see, put plainly, our little trio are destined to live a life I myself should have lived.

'I gave that book to Damoo.'

I looked at Gabriel, beads of sweat on his face. His hands shook slightly as he opened the book flipped through it.

'You mean "...been there! Done that!....."'

He turned the book over in his hands affectionately.

'That's what we called it'.

He allowed himself to weep for a moment, then shook his head and smiled. The boy wanted something I felt I might be unable to give him. I am not a good counsellor for those in trouble in love.

'May I?'

I took the book from him and he scratched his underarm, looked hot and cold at once. In withdrawal?

'Love and Life Sacrificed to a Cause.'

'Been there, done that,' he laughed.

'Self-Sacrifice For The Happiness of One's People, or a Loved One.'

'Been there, done that, for the crowd, for the show.....', he laughed again.

'Power Ruined by Passion.'

'Isn't it just always the way?'

'Destruction of Honour, Fortune and Life by Erotic Vice, or any other Vice.'

'A bit of erotic vice never hurt anyone,' it was my turn to smile.

'Is there *nothing* we've missed?'

Gabriel retrieved the book and found another category.

'It feels as though every bloody heading describes something I've just been through'.

'Rivalry of Two Who Are Almost Equals, Complicated by The Abandonment of One.'

'They're not *all* amusing are they?' I spoke grimly.

'The Rivalry of the Mortal and Immortal.'

Gabriel seemed to have completed his list. I shook my head. When we take on the gods we can get into trouble. In the old English Musical Halls of the turn of the century the 'Gods' were the cheap seats right up in the highest, hottest part of the theatre. The most earnest performers always played to those seats, to those least comfortable, most likely to lose interest. We played to the Gods.

‘Ray, we did it all,’ said Gabriel. ‘We have lived it all out.’

I was tempted to cry out at his arrogance, false modesty, disingenuousness, vanity, absurdity. But Gabriel looked so frail I found it difficult to be as hard on him as Silverman had once been on me.

‘There is one in there you have missed,’

I searched through, fumbling.

‘It became the seat of all my ravings and ranting about what is now the internet, the matrix, the Grid, uploading, downloading, streaming and screaming. I found it sometime after I had my apocalyptic vision of the web becoming a conduit for the physical and the mechanical as well as data. Damoo didn’t help, he was convinced ‘Beam me up’ was a probability’.

I couldn’t find the heading I was looking for.

‘The heading you have missed in this strange little book is the one that gave me real hope, it transformed me from a dystopian to a utopian, a pessimist to an optimist.’

‘And now you don’t care,’ Gabriel looked at me searchingly.

‘I have no power Gabriel,’ this was a sad truth. ‘I must sell this house, I must go into a home, I am old, I am frail and I can’t seem to keep my mind here in reality. I need daily help. I have no choice.’

Gabriel, perhaps feeling stronger for a moment as I confessed my weakness suddenly remembered the heading he had missed, this most essential paragraph that I couldn’t seem to find.

‘Was it that one about the theatre?’

‘That’s right. I think it’s the thirtieth or so,’ I directed, as he flicked through again.

‘Ah! Here. *Conflict With A God*’, his face lit up. ‘I had forgotten it mentions the Book of Job. That story troubled Josh so much when he was young.’

I am swept up again into the mist. And here I am floating in the ether, up in the troposphere like a lunatic leaf blown by ideas and imagination. Am I triggered by what we found that afternoon? In the

book under the heading *Conflict With a God* it speaks of the *Great Theatre of Brahmanic Legend*. *A Theatre inaugurated long before that of man, in which the Gods occupy the leisures of their eternity*. That great theatre, that enormous proscenium in the sky, was it – quite simply – this life? Is everything we do, everything we achieve and suffer merely a play for the amusements of the Gods? If we fail to keep them amused are we really in danger of falling into conflict with them?

For now I must be content with the planes of paper and two-dimensional characters so abhorred by art-teacher Silverman. For a book constrains and contains the natural chronology of the unfolding story when written in the conventional manner. And, in truth, my ethereal reverie is interrupted not so much by Gabriel crashing into my God-intoxicated longings as by my own vicarious ambition, driven as it is by a curiosity and enthusiasm undimmed by years of incarceration (and surely as we hear the tale we must accept that both Josh and myself are condemned safely to the same institution?) to know how my own mortal life might have turned out had I been born in Gabriel's time.

In 1976, from behind curtains and from doorsteps, neighbours in King Edwards Gardens watched as the Cass family emerged from the house to get into the black limousine that was to take them to Highgate Cemetery for the funeral of Josh's father. Myrna's face was grim, but determined, her firm arm around her son's shoulder conveying what she could not speak: 'Come on pushka, let's get this over and done with.' Hymie followed behind, his face betraying a hint of the anger that young men often feel when a loved one is lost; perhaps all of us are guilty of blaming those who die for being too weak or too feeble-willed to stay alive.

'It was a terrible thing that happened to your father.'

The gravel voice commiserates from the Vox-Box.

'Killed by terrorist suicide bombers while sitting in a café in Tel Aviv with an old friend. Trouble was, the old friend just happened to be a pretty woman. It was lucky for your mother that she had Hymie to look after you both.'

On the Thames near Gabriel's favourite boyhood spot on the towpath, later that year Hymie began to woo Trilby. They were, in some ways, hopelessly incompatible as a couple. Hymie was twenty-four, an irrepressibly handsome, unambitious young man content to accept the unconditional adoration of his sister Myrna – ten years older, married at eighteen – but not her attempt to replace their long lost

Jewish mother who would have wanted only one thing for her fine young son: that he marry a Jewish girl. Trilby was older, nearly thirty-five. She had never been a great beauty, so little was lost by her ageing. Her hair was still blonde and naturally, awkwardly curly. She still smoked, her protruding teeth were still slightly brown. When she laughed, some said she brayed. But Hymie loved her, and she – unbelieving of her good fortune – not only loved him in return, but loved life and whichever God it was that fashioned it so that she should receive such romantic grace.

The match, as Josh had predicted, did not please Myrna. She decided Hymie must be persuaded to let Trilby go. The romance had blossomed under her very nose. Gabriel's parents, in the days of one-night stands, before they had begun to tour away from home for long periods, used to ask her and Hymie to keep an ear out for Gabriel in his bed in the apartment below. And although she was aware Trilby had made herself a corner in the ground-floor flat, and had begun to appear more and more regularly to get Gabriel off to school, Myrna had failed to take in the fact that this still relatively young and single woman was living in very close proximity to her otherwise sexually cocooned brother. To Hymie, the sound of Trilby singing in the bath was erotic. And to catch her on occasion, in her dressing gown, as he left for work, and she knelt down to collect and arrange the morning mail, her breasts falling easily forward, nearly opening the folds, was too much for him.

Myrna found it hard to continue to be pleasant to her errant young brother, but she had to battle against her natural urges: she fell back into the flotsam-clogged backwaters of prejudice. Trilby was a *shiksa*. Nothing more. Young Jewish boys always fell for one or two before they eventually succumbed and married a good Jewish girl. She raged inside at her husband for dying, leaving her to manage all this alone. And if Hymie took up with a shiksa, what message would that send Josh? The rage then spread. Triggers of frustration exploded in her as she felt the confusion of blame and shame – scrambled into the familiar psychoses of cuckolded widowhood – that should have been reserved for her disloyal husband, blown to pieces with his damned redheaded American mistress. (That the slut had been a Jewess made it simply beyond agony).

One day she was polishing the banister rails at the top of the stairs when she heard Trilby pick up the hall telephone below her. She heard the silly woman say something that would stay with her for the rest of her life, if only she could see that far ahead. That day, the words merely infuriated her.

‘There's only one Hymie,’ she heard Trilby say. ‘Really, if it isn't him, then it is no one.’

*Only one Hymie
No one else on earth could ever blind me – like this
Or even find me – such bliss
If you were gone
You'd still be here
Only one Hymie
That's me (Hymie sings)
Why can't they accept that life excites me
This boy ignites me
His family fights me
But he's still here.*

Myrna went nervously through the door of BBZee studios. Held wide as it was by the ingratiatingly bowing Damoo, it seemed to her to beckon via a portal to some kind of hell. By what monstrous, careless and unfeeling aberration had those children happened upon the idea of celebrating her birthday here? Six months had passed since her husband's death – she could not bring herself to use the word 'murder' or 'assassination'. She had survived, and recovered quickly, by hardening her heart. Hymie, by her side, held her arm gently, and led her through the reception area towards the hall, where some great surprise awaited her.

Myrna was thirty-four years old. The benevolent genetics behind her brother's beauty had not worked for her: she was built quite heavily, wore her hair cut short and carelessly permed, and used make-up incompetently. And she was not what might be called a handsome woman. But she was attractive; her forceful personality enticed men, they were engaged by her. And she did not only attract the passive; several self-possessed male friends had asked her to dinner, but she had pretended grief as an excuse to decline. In truth, she was sick of men; she was appalled at her husband's deceit and disloyalty, most of all by the fact that he had betrayed her in Israel. She had very mixed feelings indeed for the Palestinian suicide bomber - and he had been one of the very first of his dedicated and apparently insane persuasion - who had transformed her husband's suffocatingly nauseous tête-à-tête with his mistress into bloody carnage. She put her own hand in Hymie's as Damoo greeted them. He was a Muslim of course. Like the suicide bomber. But the very first Palestinian to blow himself up in public had been a Christian. She wasn't sure she could reconcile her own bitterness at men everywhere, with the feeling

that at least this man seemed gracious, and kind; his exaggerated manners seemed, to her, appropriate in the circumstances, an apology of sorts. Well no apology was required.

She had never before set foot inside the studios. Once or twice recently she had collected or delivered Josh here with Gabriel, and she had found out they were up to something when she telephoned Damoo's mother and tackled her. The old woman would only say that the children were preparing something surprising, something grand, and other than that she knew as little as Myrna. As she entered the hall Myrna nodded at Damoo's mother. How strange it felt for Myrna to be celebrating her thirty-fourth birthday in a room with a dozen Muslims present.

The hall was quite small, and thus seemed packed. At least half of the area had been curtained off, and seats were arranged before the drapes. Myrna took the seat Hymie indicated for her come and looked around. There were a few of Josh and Gabriel's friends, and some of Leila's from school. Donnie and Connie, for once in their self-obsessed and busy show-business lives, had cancelled an engagement to be present and were behaving like beneficent visiting celebrities come to bless the occasion. They kept whispering to each other and pointing knowledgeably at the curtain, and some of the various lights and other equipment in view. Myrna's heart was pumping. She knew that the children were eccentric and smart in the extreme. She also knew that it was unlikely – and this made her a little sad – that Josh alone had initiated this business. More likely Gabriel was the architect, with his grandiose ideas about music – or Leila, who seemed to Myrna to be torn by all the conflicting traditions and modern vogues she seemed to happily embrace, despite Damoo's attempts to keep her focussed. And yet Damoo must have helped engineer all this. After greeting her he had muttered something about being needed backstage and hurried away.

The audience settled and quietened as the lights dimmed. Everyone in the hall knew that BBZee was a highly advanced and technically capable broadcasting facility. They all suspected that whatever was behind the curtain, it would probably involve some considerable amount of technical tomfoolery. Many present settled back smugly, content in the knowledge that something was sure to go wrong. And when it did, the true entertainment would surely begin. The three children walked onto the stage and stood confidently before the curtain.

‘We present,’ Josh announced grandly. ‘Trilby's Piano.’

‘An opera,’ added Gabriel.

‘With special effects,’ Leila said proudly. ‘By Damoo Irani. My Dad.’

The curtains suddenly swept open, and Myrna gasped at what she saw.