

Chapter Twelve - Fragments

In a shower of cheap confetti, the uneven, clattering chaos of peeling bells, another young woman caught a bouquet.

‘Oh fuck,’ cursed Leila.

She was eighteen years old and - apart from her knee-jerk swearing - still an example of extreme high-Muslim style in a tailored grey suit with black trousers and – according to the practice of hijab – a head scarf.

‘I caught Trilby’s posy. I really didn’t mean to do it.’

‘That’s you next then,’ laughed Josh.

‘I remember,’ scoffed Myrna. ‘You blew up poor Hymie in the play. My poor Morry! That was how he went – a bomb. It was such bad taste. You were awful children. Who taught you such nonsense?’

Trilby came to calm her.

‘Weren’t they awful?’

She hugged Myrna, the two were now the greatest friends.

‘But they were just kids Myrna. I knew nothing about it I promise you. None of us did.’

‘Damoo did!’

Myrna could never change her view of the Iranian as her nemesis on that day.

‘They just wanted to bring all our families together. Damoo too. Be happy for us Myrna – it’s all turned out for the best.’

Tuna salad again. Fresh coffee. I begin to descend, down through the planes, down, down. I cannot embark on such an adventure because I am too old now, and I am here. Here. Not trapped, not imprisoned; free indeed, but powerless to do anything but fly upwards through the top of my own skull

into the ether. The damned ether.

Sometimes when I descend to feed my mortal body I crash rather further than I would wish. Distractions sometimes deflect me, like the appearance of Gabriel in his gross Vox-Box like some kind of parody of Dr. Who, but, on the whole, fail to completely ground me. But, as images and sounds of the marriage of Trilby and Hymie envelope me, and – from my timeless post in the ether – I watch with anxiety the uncertain future of the newlyweds, I feel echoes of my own marital negligence. The constant interruptions are depressing me. A male nurse in a white coat – yes, the men in white coats had come to take him away – restrains me, and another nurse gives me an injection.

My life has not been a great success. It has to be conceded of course that it has been materially successful; I have been famous, and was respected just as long as I didn't attempt to stray from the tried and tested; I accepted the business of being a fall-down, pop-back-up-again sixties rock star; that was who I was allowed to be by generous public and press alike. Renaissance man, visionary, thinker, future-philosopher; these were not roles in which I was easily permitted to indulge. But indulge I did. And it was in these divergences from my central career as a musician and songwriter, these tangential inspirations marred by artistic pomposity and pretentiousness, that I failed. My dreams failed. It was not just that failure in these areas – my greatest and latest enthusiasms – hurt me, it was that failure in itself was a condition for which I had never been required to become accustomed.

Ultimately, I know that I myself have sabotaged my own credibility. The ideas I have been inspired to develop, grew organically and serendipitously from the uniquely fertile ground of my art-school training and scientific precocity, and were expressed musically. Many of my most popular works have never been properly deconstructed: their true genesis is unfathomed. Simple rather than complex, the chaff obscures the wheat, the wood itself rather over-shadows the trees. As a young man, in a world of young men, I was rapidly empowered to amplify both my howling guitar and my creative gifts. If I had trusted the music, just the music, perhaps I'd have succeeded. In an era when pop music itself was as yet a phenomenon to be analysed, I attempted to explain it. In so doing I elevated it, and by that act of over enthusiastic impudence appeared to be exalting and dignifying myself rather than the medium for my work. Is Pop art? It seems to me and, on occasion to most people, to have its sublime moments. Pop does not generate or cause such moments and give fragrance to an otherwise sullen instant; pop is somehow infused with the energy of the audience, penetrated and forever permeated by some truly grand perfection that otherwise only seems intrinsic to great jazz, blues or serious orchestral

composition. From this pre-eminence as a pop songwriter, I fell into the undistinguished penury of the fashionably previous; as for the eccentric, who claims innovation for having worn this season's zaniest outfits the season before, no quarter is allowed. I fell from the perfect moments of pop here - into the eternal black hole of ideas that are out-of-time. Nothing is less accessible than the asynchronous visionary who still lives. And so, in order to give my version of futuristic insanity a chance to breathe, I have – in the normal sense of the expression – ceased to live. For all intents and purposes I am dead.

It was 1983, a year after the wedding, and there was still no sign of a serious suitor for the nineteen year old Leila, despite the fluke of the posy. In a gentle but absolute expression of rebellion she had finally abandoned her constant head-covering. She had allowed her hair to grow long, and it was cut to frame her face, and the effect was greatly flattering. Like Josh and Gabriel, she now wore the unconsidered clothing of the artist as she sat in the BBZee studios watching old videotapes with her friends and collaborators.

What was on the TV monitor generates mixed feelings in me. It is me on the screen, thrashing at my guitar in some decrepit venue in the sixties. Around me, my band perform their various roles with shades and variations of arrogance, imperiousness and disinterest.

‘So,’ said Josh. ‘Why did they fail?’

Gabriel began to mimic Mick Jagger.

‘What happened to the dream?’

‘What happened.....’

Phil too loved to impersonate the old stars, this time it was ‘Keef’ Richards.

‘To all that lovely, hippy shit?’

‘I think,’ Leila was serious. ‘They failed because there was no method. They had no real plan.’ Dotty nodded.

‘They always followed their fans in those days, followed their next idea as it happened.’

‘Pop was fast. Tumbling.’

Leila looped her fists in a monkey roll.

‘You know, bands like that grew old very quickly. Overnight.’

‘Each artist had time to do one, two or three big things. Then they would fall aside.’

‘You had to be quick in those days.’

Old men. Punching out rock like demons. The trio once came to one of our last anniversary gigs. We were billed by Rastus and Ruth Streeting as “Ray High and The Ray – Back”. A tumultuous riff, the drummer’s rolling phrases seemed to be endlessly looped – at any moment he might drop dead with exhaustion. A single word repeated incessantly, in a wearying dirge. They were close enough to the singer’s face to see the pain of an aged voice being forced to reach adolescent high notes. Closer, closer, until they could see beads of sweat extruding with each gasped lungful of air. Suddenly a man crashed past them in a Mosh-pit action. A dense crowd of people in half-darkness looked at a stage bathed in white light. We are behind the three as they looked up at the bleached silhouettes above them. They looked at each other; confirming, affirming; what they saw and heard was right.

‘The sound is too loud,’ Josh shouts, holding his head.

‘It’s perfect,’ laughs Leila. ‘It moves me. I feel as if I’m moving.’

‘The stage is coming steadily towards us, crushing everything in its path.’

The band mercilessly pummel the riff over and over. People press against the crash barrier and are pushed backwards. The stage is – in this nightmare – moving forward through the audience. Some of those in the very front are falling and being crushed. Others push back in a futile attempt to stop the stage.

Back on the huge screen in the main, largest studio room at BBZee, the three are watching a piece of news footage. Somewhere in the U.S.A. seventeen fans had been crushed to death or trampled in a stampede to get the best seats at a rock concert a few years before. Leila had tracked the footage down after they’d seen the band at the club. The tragedy had occurred four years earlier. A camera slowly

swept the scene outside the coliseum, where bodies had been laid out, each tended by paramedics. Then, one by one, the full-face photographs of each of the eleven began to fill the screen. Until they were all there. Seventeen beautiful young people.

‘Fragments. That’s what we are.’

Josh was relieved no one could see his tears in the darkened room.

‘It’s almost as though – when the three of us are together like this, talking, arguing, laughing – we add up to something more than just three different souls. I get the feeling of something a lot bigger.’

‘God?’ Leila breathed the word.

‘Maybe.’

‘Sounds like Big Bang theory to me.’

‘We sometimes seem to be an explosion ourselves,’ Gabriel added. ‘I think this is just what happens when you’re young, and you realise that you are going to make it. You’re going to become famous. Nothing can stop you.’

‘It feels like magic.’

‘Look at us, we’re just three kids from West London. Things have fallen into place for us. My parents are working musicians, your father owns this studio, Josh is a pin-up. It’s easy to be blasé. It’s luck.’

‘I’m sure,’ Josh thought nothing of his looks. ‘There’s more to it than that. We are inspired. Pulled. Driven. By something

‘God?’ Leila asked again.

‘Watch it! It’s OK to claim to be divinely inspired if you are painting angels on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but when you’re playing Shepherd’s Bush Empire with me, Leila,

Phil and Dotty you won't get away with it.'

'Do you remember though,' Leila turned up the lights. 'When we were kids, we used to say we wanted our music to 'drive'. Like those sixties' bands. They really did seem to drive the stage through the audience.'

'Bad acid.'

'Drugs opened doors didn't they? Thousands of other people in the crowd had an identical experience.'

'We are fragments,' Josh returned to his theme. 'We are coming closer together. Momentum. We are fragments of one consciousness. Don't you feel like fragments?'

'Of what?'

'Life. Consciousness. Universal thought. Quantum power.'

'This is all very Schrödinger's cat.'

'Or Schrödinger's kitten?'

'He did have a kitten.'

'Suddenly.....'

Josh was not going to be distracted. His face was flushed. He spoke anxiously, eagerly, like a schoolboy.

'I feel like the fragments in the explosion have stopped exploding. They've stopped moving outwards. They've stopped expanding. Suddenly, we're all drawn back into the centre. We're still for a moment, then we start to travel back to the source. It's like we've gone far enough away from each other in this Big Bang – we know we are separate now, in fact that's all we know – now we need to be reunited.'

‘What happened,’ teased Leila. ‘To all those second-hand oceanic analogies of yours?’

‘We are drops of an ocean. We came from the sea. We will go back. And when we do we’ll remember where we came from. We are not separate at all.’

‘Pop musicians aren’t allowed to have brains.’

Gabriel could not hide his sudden and unexpected impatience.

‘We could get into trouble today even if we claimed we just wanted to entertain. The press would call us arrogant. Or disingenuous. And there’s no irony possible for us. No wit. Sarcasm and cynicism belong solely to the critic, to comedians or to those bands who take the piss. I want to be serious about what we do. We are artists in a society that needs to rise above sectarian politics and globalisation, above cynical commerce and oil-driven capitalism, greed; we have to find some way to get closer together. All we are here on this planet to do is try to live together. When we three are at our best, and by that I mean when the music is working – fuck the conceptual; fuck the idealism; fuck Quantum physics – that’s what pays the rent

Leila cut in:

‘..... the audience you mean? The people who pay the rent? You sound confused to me. Angry. Frightened. Why can’t you just call the audience the audience? Call them ‘punters’ if you like. You want to call them ‘fans’ but you haven’t got the guts. What you mean is that you are an artist. But you’re afraid to call yourself an artist, afraid to come out publicly. As a band we just bring people together as fans, at the Shepherd’s Bush bloody Empire. They’ll get drunk. You’ll get drunk Gabriel.’

‘We bring people together. That’s enough.’

‘It’s not enough. I know what you mean. I know what frustrates you. They bring us together. Keep your focus clear – we are a secret society, we have a secret mission; they will feel precisely what we feel.’

‘They will already be feeling what we feel,’ Josh heard his friends patronize their fans.
‘They will have a feeling, a good feeling, of being still. Still. They will then begin to be aware that they are not moving away from each other, but towards each other.’

‘Do we feel this though, because the audience feels it? Do we lead, or do we follow?’

‘Scientifically this is nonsense. If the fragments of the Big Bang came together, they could become a Big Nothing again. Everything and Nothing. They would come together to create a solid mass so dense it would weigh more than God Himself.’

‘Leila,’ retorted Josh. ‘It would be God.’

‘It would be rock.’

‘Very heavy rock,’ Gabriel laughed.

‘So heavy that its mass would cause it to collapse back into itself.’

‘A Black Hole?’

‘Precisely.’

‘I can hear,’ Josh was suddenly shaken. ‘A voice.’

Little of this is new anyone who loves rock, but the three were debating in 1983. I, with little scientific evidence to back it up, came to the same conclusions twenty years before. And thousands of years before that Greeks, Egyptians, Phoenicians and Turks all framed their own expressions of roughly the same stuff. And longing for conclusive solution, in the multicoloured Vox-Box, Gabriel is still trying to reach his old friend; straining transmissions over the ether, yearning for connection and response.

‘Can you hear me Josh?’

Gabriel is almost barking.

‘Do you remember what I said to you then? God, He was just

over there outside the Black Hole- still is, I have a message....'

Gabriel pulls back the curtain over the door of the Vox-Box and points into the distance.

'....He doesn't want to go back into the Big Black Hole! We must help Him to never forget where He's come from, what He's been through. He can never be 'nothing' again. He's gotten too used to being Everything.'