

## Chapter Fourteen - The Method

In a modern, neat suburban white bedroom, a pretty young girl sat in her clean white night-dress and contemplated her computer screen. She typed her name.

‘Hello Victoria,’ said her computer in a kindly, quite youthful voice. ‘Please say something.’

Victoria looked around her. Her head was obviously empty; she had not expected an inquisition.

‘Sing something,’ offered the computer, helpfully.

The girl cleared her throat as if to sing, but she stopped before she began.

‘Would you like something to read aloud?’

The computer offered a ‘Yes/No’ option. She gratefully hit ‘Y’ on her keyboard.

‘Good,’ said the computer.

‘My name is Victoria,’ the girl’s voice was even and theatrical. ‘I am taking part in the Method. I am providing material that will be processed and used to establish an accurate impression of me. That impression will be transformed into my own unique music. The music will belong in three equal shares to me, to Glass Household, and divided among the various agencies that provide the Grid. I am one of a number of participants in this process. In the future I will hear my music combined with the music of all the other participants. I do not know what to expect.’

Victoria sat back, pleased with herself. At BBZee studios, in the control room, Gabriel – curious – searched to see if the girl had a webcam. She did.

‘I need a rhythm for you,’ the computer program continued to run. ‘A beat. Please bang your table or something to hand any number of times.’

Victoria banged the computer desk about twenty times, slowly at first, then faster, ending in a furious but ragged drum roll. She burst into laughter. It was fun.

‘Good,’ said the computer. ‘Very good.’

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How different it was for the three than it had been for me to become famous. I seemed to lose all my power as I rose in prominence as an artist. But, hold hard! Can I continue to subscribe to this pretension? An artist? I was a rock star. And one who respected and adored pop. Yet I also wanted more, for myself and for my craft. One day, more may be read about my band, the details of our exploits, our rise and fall – but for now I am content to hover here: bereft of purpose, distracted by the past, frightened by the future, and – mostly – unaware of the present. How can such a disenfranchised individual be compared to Leila? In no time at all, or so it seems to me now, she had advanced from a flirtatious, mischievous and precociously glamorous child to a woman surrounded by unwillingly compliant men.

Leila came to control and guide Glass. Gabriel and Josh had believed that Leila could fly. Leila knew that she had been able to fly, and having done so once – and known in full consciousness the rapturous joy of angelic remembrance – felt certain not only that she might one day fly again, but that she could one day teach others to fly.

Her pragmatic, practical, scientific mind – that brooked no distortion of established fact or principle, no metaphysical or jingoistic deception – knew somehow, despite her solid roots, that childhood flight had unhinged her. She was a Muslim. Mohammed had called her, if the poetry of the Koran could ever be taken literally, to destroy all those who followed other faiths. And yet as a scientist, by desire if not by practice, she knew that there was but a single line, a solitary moment of creation. Thus, she believed, it must be that faith upon faith, religion upon religion, had been founded on the fresh entreaties of teacher upon teacher, each requiring, urging – or, at worst, demanding - obedience above love. Leila had accepted Mohammed as her link to that One who had begun all this. But she had been able to accept her family's faith partly because she had been able to fly. What appeared real was not so. What seemed simple was evidently complex. What was deemed to be false; fantasy at worst – was true. She could fly. There was a God. There had been a Big Bang. It was all poetry.

Leila sang beautifully, but she could not compose. Instead, in the active Glass quintet she concentrated

on conceptualising. Somehow, while Gabriel and Josh emulated – like the Bloke-men they were – me and my wayward, impetuous and anarchic musical and artistic excesses, she had seen the logic of my original idea. She knew too that I had created nothing of my own. I had been tutored, distracted by audio miracles and had then fried my mind. Thus I had been led to the blank wall of the future. What had been for me a frustrating narrowing cul-de-sac was to her a sweeping plain of technological promise. What had not been possible yesterday would be attainable tomorrow.

In the first major record deal negotiated for the Glass Household, it was Rastus – my old manager, now a wrinkled senior-citizen of rock, an auteur himself, a TV pundit, and major shareholder in PlusBond, the exploding ‘Grid’ satellite and Metabandwidth cable network – Rastus it was who recognised Leila’s extraordinary combination of self-belief and hard-nosed capabilities. He had written into their contract a condition that – should their first album sell more than five million copies – she would be given editorial control of the pop-music content on the Grid. Their album had sold six million and thus, with all the spin-offs, grossed over one hundred million dollars. Leila took the job. Her most significant act was to radically attack the very industry that embraced her, and that she used as a mouthpiece. She was insurgent, but inspired.

In an early experiment at BBZzee they began simply by combining their own images and voices.

‘You fit together really well you two,’ said Josh.

He was gazing at the melding images on screen as Gabriel and Leila met and fused via software machinations.

‘Really, really well.’

Josh’s face fell slightly as he watched his two friends – his best friends – as they reached out to one another, hands connecting.

In the end of course, Leila had to choose. And she chose Gabriel. They got married on the reconstructed set of Trilby’s Piano at BBZzee studios. Their entire family was present. The noise in the room was dreadful. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. Cockney, Jewish and Iranian accents all blurring together in an awful cacophony. The rumour that buzzed around the room was that Leila was carrying Gabriel’s child, and that soon, all this silliness, this career woman nonsense would end. But Leila was not pregnant, though perhaps if she had have been she would not have carried her inspiration quite so determinedly.

I had been her inspiration. In the early seventies I had seen something peculiar coming in the computer-future, fretting it might become nightmarish.

‘I work in the industry,’ she retorted.

It was one of the regular arguments the three would have when they were otherwise trying to make music. Phil strummed an acoustic guitar in the background, and Dotty extemporized quietly on her violin.

‘You run the fucking industry,’ replied Gabriel.

He helplessly belched; he loved to drink when he worked.

‘Domestic entertainment has been used to covertly brainwash people. This is almost what Ray High predicted. We don’t have Experience Suits or Life Programmes, but people don’t want to move any more.’

‘If they’re young,’ said Josh. ‘They’ll move.’

‘Some of the time they’ll move, yes. Holidays. Beaches. But to relax, they fall into a heap.’

‘Read a good book.’ Gabriel took a swig of brandy.

‘They would’ve watched TV in our time. Now they’re silent. Each experience on the Grid is a construct. They believe it’s life. It’s an addiction that plays into addiction. It plays into the very nature of the human psyche.’

‘Read, wank, drink, puff.’

‘A fucking nightmare.’

‘I wouldn’t say that.’ Gabriel drank again. Deeply this time.

‘They listen to music,’ Josh seemed to be clutching at something. ‘They still identify with

songs. They want music as music. They travel with music, dance to it.’

‘Exactly. They listen to music and they move. We need to get them to move. We want them to leave the safety of the Grid and show up. We need a huge, festival event. A Woodstock. A Glastonbury.’

‘Mud?’ Gabriel’s eyes opened and closed slowly like a bemused sloth.

‘If necessary.’

‘Drugs?’

‘If necessary.’

‘Drugs and mud,’ said Gabriel, by now resting on his forearms still clutching his brandy bottle like a cherished children’s toy. ‘A bit old hat. How do you really get them to come?’

‘We give each of them something unique and precious,’ said Leila. ‘Their own music.’

Victoria’s bleached-modern bedroom was filled with sound, generated by her interaction with the BBZee computer that Leila with Damoo’s help had programmed to allow Method subscribers to jack into the Grid. Leila had written the brief for the Method software. Had she been able to see Victoria she would have been gratified to find the girl laying back smiling, music that was beautiful to her wafting over her. She was almost, it seemed, in sexual ecstasy. Leila would have respected Victoria’s privacy despite her ever-open webcam and firewall-less computer rig. Gabriel, constantly now tipsy and salacious, found it harder to resist. Why did he only feel so alive when he was half-drunk? It was then that the unsolicited music he heard was relegated. It was only when he was drunk that he could make love to Leila, whose powerful sexual appetite frightened him, her drive to have a child overwhelmed him and made him feel like a male tool rather than her lover. But in any case, drunk or sober, Gabriel was a watcher, he preferred not to approach too closely the matter of sex. He had been thus schooled: observing his own first orgasm years before from the heights of ecstasy. And ecstasy begat ecstasy. Ecstasy required ecstasy. Gabriel – twenty-seven years old, a pop star so longed for he could if had wanted to be deliberately unfaithful to Leila have had his pick of a hundred thousand pretty young girls

like Victoria – preferred to observe her private ecstasy as he had observed his own. His role as celestial witness had been reduced – transmogrified like the prince into the frog – to voyeurism.

‘Josh, Josh. It’s me Gabriel again. You knew I watched her. I wouldn’t have done it if I’d known I would fall in love with her.’

It was this kind of electronic, cloistered voyeurism I had seen coming. Somehow I had sensed that the Grid of the future would start a battle between divination and damnation; it would operate without valueeommercial, artistic or spiritualin the massive, cluttered sweep of information and entertainment confection that lay between good and evil.

‘Gabriel. Gabriel. Let’s Google “Gabriel”.’

Now I can see damning evidence from my high chair: Gabriel’s Sea Scout tormentors photographed him as they toyed with himhis face alight still with the memory of the glorious music he had minutes before heard on the riverand it will not be long before every pervert in the world (and many hapless souls with no prurient intent at all, searching for music, the sea, information and scouting) knows his face, and who he is, and what it was they want to believe he enjoyed while the photos were taken.

‘I was looking for Victoria. But I found myself. You understand how terrible that was for me?’

I know what it was he had endured. I can forgive him. But will the woman he will one day marry?

‘Do you remember those days? But we three – the cosmic trio – how we loved to theorize, to argue, to talk about what great music would do once we had unobstructed free access to the Grid; what it had done for us all when we were growing up; what it might do in the future, in a world where everyone could be contacted, searched, reflected, deeply, accurately. Like Victoria, one of our first successes. Leila had an idea that once people heard their own music – they would be like clay in our sculpting hands.’

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‘Now we have to put it all together.’ Leila was excited. ‘When people hear how well they fit, deeply, maybe superficial differences won’t matter any more.’

‘What?’ Jews, Gentiles and Muslims – all playing cricket together?’

‘Playing music together.’

‘The music of the spheres?’

‘The music of the sky and sea,’ teased Gabriel. ‘Or Michelangelo’s angelic ceiling perhaps?’

‘The music of our audience. If each of our audience are truly fragments, then – like the man said – this music could add up to something which would be a reflection of something much bigger.’