

## Chapter Fifteen - Driving

Later, Gabriel sat in the dark at the studios and watched Victoria nude, as she practised putting on her make-up before a mirror. He gazed at her in secure adoration; safe, because he would never know her better than this. His eyes half closed. Perhaps he would sleep in the studio tonight. He shuddered awake as he saw a new movement in Victoria's room. A man about five or six years older than Victoria. Why did she not cover herself? Gabriel could not avert his eyes, as Victoria sat naked on her bed before her cousin, who unzipped his trousers, dropped them to the floor and threw his head into the air as the girl – acting out a discomfoting but long-established ritual – tossed the young man to a rapid and explosive climax. Gabriel felt as though he had been cheated on. She was a woman, he could never be 'the first'. She was alive and sexual without him.

Gabriel could be found an hour later standing alone in the middle of the studio floor. On one side was a giant stack of amplifiers. On the other, yet another giant stack. As he pummelled his guitar until his fingers literally began to bleed, the building shook.

Next morning he was, in the grandiose metaphors of the merely hungover, still only 'half-alive', the surface of his skin exuding alcohol, and slightly cold and damp to the touch. On the video screen in some sixties scene I slammed at my guitar. Colour. Rainbows. Targets. Chevrons. Medals. Noise. Destruction. Someone, Leila perhaps, had looped many of my performances into salient, required moments. Swirling, transforming, guitars, a howling voice. Gabriel's ears rang – he had brutalized himself last night.

That evening Leila, Josh and Gabriel sat before the screen.

'Let me hear mine,' said Leila suddenly urgent, like an aroused lover breathing to be taken.

'I want to hear it now.'

Josh gave a signal and somewhere in the studio an engineer must have pushed up a fader. The images on the screen began to steady, they became serene and slow, but like the slow motion power of lava pouring down a volcano. The room was filled with orchestral sound, rippling. Leila's beautiful face appeared on the screen, fractured into hundreds of colourful pieces, a psychedelic image like one of the magical cats drawn by the asylum inmate Louis Wain.

‘What do you think?’ Gabriel leaned in, obstructing Leila’s view of herself. She could smell alcohol. ‘Is this you? Is this what you expected? Do you feel it’s right?’

‘It’s bizarre. It is having the most peculiar effect on me.’

‘Let me show you yours Gabriel,’ offered Josh, making another signal. ‘But let’s leave Leila’s in the mix. Let’s see if they blend.’

A guitar riff blasted out, machine-gun-like, and began to rise through the orchestral sounds. It oscillated regularly, pulsed through some kind of Ring-Modulator.

‘It’s perfect,’ laughed Gabriel, throwing back his head, imagining Victoria pulling expertly at his cock. ‘I love it.’

On the screen the image of Gabriel laughing is being captured – grabbed and processed. Something of his lascivious thoughts seemed to generate something in the computer; layers and echoes began to appear, showers of liquid. Orgasm. Gabriel’s eyes on screen began to sparkle, his teeth shone, his laughter began to turn into slivers of colourful shards of ice. The screen seemed to implode into deep, sensuous colour – purple, flesh, blood.

Josh looked at his friend. The last time he had seen Gabriel’s face filled with such joy, and such sexual ecstasy, was many years before, as he had told of what had happened on the boat, and subsequently in the showers.

I knew that soon that joyful face would be well known to the wankers out on the Grid. In the ether the Vox-Box rumbles. Old-man Gabriel’s slow gravely voice echoes across the wilderness of my lonely, empty ether.

‘I did love it Josh, the music I mean. I loved watching Victoria too. But Josh, you must understand, I would never have touched her. I just wanted to connect my abused child with hers. Victimhood. Terrible thing for someone who loves a drink. The music though, the images that Leila’s Method software produced were so beautiful. I felt I was seeing what you often heard. Strange, that such incredible sound-images

should be something you had to medicate out of your mind just so you could walk in normal society. I could never understand why we couldn't just let you be crazy. We were a rock band after all. But you weren't crazy were you? You were angry. We were all angry. Underneath it all. Our parents? The war? They were all shut down. So afraid. So accepting. So fucking damaged. Oh, today pundits snigger at the word. I don't mean psychologically damaged, I don't mean they had trouble with damned self-esteem. I mean they were fucking well and truly damaged. Like war veterans. Blasted. Annulled. Silenced. That video, that music, Leila, you, me and Damoo, we worked miracles, you know that?'

'Let's hear yours Josh,' Gabriel slugged on his beer. 'Come on.'

Josh made his signal and at first nothing changed in the sound. The developing music was still firmly rooted in the loop of the old guitar riff. Over the surface, Leila and Gabriel's themes splashed a generous and proper counterpoint. The first sign of some feedback from Josh was a texture that seemed to modulate the images already on screen. It seemed as though some liquid was running over the surface of the screen, the rippling in certain aspects of the music reflecting in the visual shimmering.

'Oh God,' muttered Josh. 'This is really, really weird.'

For a moment it looked as though the images on the screen were going to transform perversely into the fractal writhings of a million, colourful grubs. Then Josh's face burst onto the screen, holding his head. He was smiling, handsome, captivating; his eyes calm and kind. As his music began, his face transformed slowly into streams of numbers running down the screen like water. But this was not the data streams we'd seen in various sci-fi films in the past. The streams of numbers came in and out of focus, they expanded and contracted in size in a random, arrhythmic pulse. The numbers and letters were each carefully drawn by hand. In amongst the chaos were flashes of intelligibility, certain words, never repeated in the stream. Josh's 'music' was actually a wash of hundreds of voices merging one by one, each one chanting numbers and letters in an apparently random sequence. Then it became clear that some of the characters were being spoken in a particular, unique way; in a particular rhythm. Some of the numbers appeared to be represented by certain notes, that then began to be sung.

‘This is me.’ Josh smiled. ‘This is me I’m afraid.’

He looked at his friends with a shy smile of apology and they threw their arms around him. The screen behind them was a beautiful blitz of colour and movement. The sound was disturbing, but full of energy and transitions. I was very proud of my faithful and determined acolytes.

‘It’s astoundingly beautiful Josh,’ said Leila, holding his face in her hands. ‘Just like you.’

‘Listen to that,’ Gabriel gasped. ‘We three really do fit in perfect harmony.’

From the Vox-Box up in the ether, old man Gabriel recalls that day.

‘It was a truly magical thing Josh. I wonder now whether it was a magical accident. Or a miracle. Or whether we had really generated reflective images and music that truly matched each of us. It all seems too neat now, looking back. But I suppose it wasn’t that complicated. From each of us all that was needed was a note, a rhythm, a mood, a tempo, a musical instrument, a colour. That screen behind us – it was hard to credit that what we were seeing was ourselves.’

‘Are we driving,’ Gabriel had shouted. ‘Or are we fucking driving?’

‘This is what he.....’

.....she meant me of course.

‘.....must have dreamed about: everything changing, moving, transforming. It feels right. It feels true.’

Leila slumped back into Gabriel’s arms as though her job was done. The three lay in front of the screen and luxuriated in the sound and sight of their own data being endlessly and algorithmically processed into a single theme, a phrase, a note, then finally a breath. A spot of light.

‘My God,’ breathed Josh. ‘We add up to nothing. The end. The beginning. Silence.’

At the height of their career Leila was the central focus for much of their public relations. The editors-

at-large of the most glamorous magazines adored her. She seemed to have everything. Being a Muslim in the mid-eighties did present difficulties; London had been the preferred leisure waterhole for hundreds of rich young Arabs and their retinues. Their open displays of wealth, their gold-badged AMG Mercedes and electric-gated compounds in the most expensive districts, belied their determination to remain aloof. Leila was different. She was British for a start, and although she spoke openly about her faith, her roots and her family, she was obviously making many of her own rules. There were though, even in such recent, liberated times, many in the Muslim community who were ready to forgive a Sultan for filling his Jacuzzi with champagne and pretty young nouveau-prostitutes, but were aroused beyond hope to outrage and titillation by the sight of Leila, bra-less in her white T-shirt.

At high-gloss photo sessions, supported by low-gloss generic interviews, Leila did what was expected of her.

‘That’s it dear,’ the sharp, indifferent, poof-photographer would entreat. ‘No! More pout! That’s it, head up. Gorgeous. Good. One more. OK, new roll please. Now. Turn, that’s it, tits out. NO!! Not out. Pull down your shirt woman. God, she’s eager. I meant push them out. That’s it. Shameless.’

Meanwhile, in the background, a poof-publicist on crystal methadrine would bark down the phone.

‘They’re just called ‘Glass’ now. They were ‘The Glass Household’, but most people just call them ‘Glass’. No sweetie. The ones who call them ‘The Household’ are getting it wrong. Sounds like a sit-com. Leila? She looks fantastic in these pix – really.’

Later in the pub the two poofs would reveal their dark secrets to each other: first, they were not ‘poofs’; second, they both desperately wanted to fuck Leila Irani. In that respect they joined an ever-growing line.

‘Glass have taken New York by storm,’ Jocks on radio tended to cliché. ‘They’ve sold out five nights at The Beacon, then they’ve got another three at BAM. Later, they move upstate, sadly Leila Irani goes with them – what a doll!’

‘Leila Irani posed for some sexy pictures for Rolling Stone this week,’ another Jock, another station. ‘But she’s a Muslim. How does this fit? I spoke to her earlier this week and

this is what she said'

'I know how to rock. That's all that matters. The religion of my childhood grows with me as I grow. I don't worry what my father thinks – I care, but I can't afford to worry. Or his friends. He's always been a rock fan – fifties stuff. Buddy Holly, Elvis, Eddie Cochran. I'd like to think he is behind me in all this, but he has his own beliefs. I just happen to think some of his ideas are old fashioned. I am not just interested in being sexy. I want to be respected. I want to be powerful. I want the entire music industry to know who I am. The entire media industry.'

Gabriel got dragged in sideways.

'Gabriel Pirelli comes out of the cabin! He spoke of childhood abuse in the boy scouts. Oh, poor boy. That's why he's such a mess.'

'I am not really gay,' Gabriel was caught emerging from a gay night-club. 'I wish I'd never spoken about that boy scout stuff. I erupted in anger after that picture of me was found on the Grid. For Gods' sake, I was just a kid. They were fucking stupid pretend sailors. But I don't want to offend any of my gay friends – especially not those who think that, because I let them lick my asshole when I was high and delirious on Mandrax-Mickies they slipped me, I must love them as much as they love me. I just love having my ass licked. I'm a rock star. That's what we like.'

Gabriel was learning to fall while Leila tried to rise. And Josh couldn't open his mouth in public without appearing insane.

'My songs are inspired by voices from the other side,' he said.

Did he – they wondered – need a straightjacket?

'I have always heard voices. But the content, the words, the ideas – must come from my brain. I look at what I write, after hearing what I hear, and a lot of it is genius. I am not trying to attribute that genius to someone else, to some spirit on the other side. What I'm saying is that this stuff I hear helps me to feel comfortable with the idea that there is – in fact – another side.'

On a TV screen dozens of young faces appear in quick succession, it is dizzying. Each one seems younger and prettier than the last, each saying how much they love Glass. An effervescent song is heard. A Young People's Summer song.

*'Are we breathing out,  
Or breathing in .....*