

Chapter Sixteen - Alcohol and Pregnancy

‘Men want perfection maybe? Women want completion. I want God on one hand, nature on the other.’

‘Nature is what God put together to make sure nothing we mortals do fucks anything up. Women will always have kids. Soon you floppy creatures won’t even need men.’

Josh and Leila conversed; Gabriel disrupted:

‘Now that would be interesting.’

‘Rubbish. Imagine the children you and I would have together Josh. They’d be dark, poetic, beautiful

‘Barmy.’

‘And Gabriel, what babies we will make. Their genes will be flooded with music and art.’

‘And their veins,’ added Josh. ‘Will be flooded with alcohol.’

‘And they will be able to fly. Three of us. Music, words and flight. We will win over the world, and make it laugh.’

‘She’s definitely getting broody,’ laughed Gabriel.

‘Broody like Aphrodite’, added Josh wryly.

In a night-club Leila was drunk. She wore a good-looking man on each arm. She danced, half-naked. In some established Ibiza-esque ritual, migrated to Brixton, the two men moved to huge rolls of polythene hanging on either side of the small dance floor. Leila writhed like a lap-dancer. The men each pulled on the sheets and began to wrap her body in the clinging film. The absurd lights flashed. The absurd music throbbed. The absurd party game progressed. An air of menace descended steadily as some of the club goers, especially the girls who had recognised Leila, urged the men on.

A few hours later Leila lay by some bins in the alley behind the club. She was still wrapped in polythene to the point of suffocation, but was naked from the waist down. A blue ambulance light flashed, Josh and Damoo ran to her, and began to gently unravel the plastic. As they did so, they began to see that Leila's body was bruised and battered, despite the protection of the layers of sheet around her.

'Gabriel is a fucking drunk,' she sputtered. 'Why can't I have a bit of fun too without this shit fucking happening?'

'She's been beaten up,' whispered Josh.

'Raped,' corrected Leila through her bleary emergence to consciousness. 'I was raped.'

And then, just before she spat out a glob of blood and passed out, she added a muffled:

'While flying'.

Gabriel was driving too fast. The girl beside him was weeping.

'Too fast for you?'

He leaned over and touched her arm. She shook her head. Gabriel had no sense of what the women around him might want from him. Sexually he was an addict: anxious to maintain his supply. When he began to drink in earnest, at about sixteen, he discovered that alcohol was not precisely the medicine he craved. Marijuana was pleasant, women tended to relax when they'd smoked; but even 'puffing', as his friends called it, seemed tinged with threatening emptiness because it was dangerous to hold too much 'gear' at one time. Alcohol and orgasm. That silenced the mental orchestra.

He looked at his passenger. She had dried her eyes and was trying to smile at him bravely. She had cried last night too, her pretty face screwed up in self pity, after he had come inside her. Gabriel was still too sexually self-obsessed, or maybe just too inept to know – or notice – that Angie had merely been unsatisfied. And now, as they sped back to London, he could not see that what she feared was that

he would now politely dump her. Unsatisfied.

He flipped on the radio. It was with neither surprise nor vanity that he heard the name of his band almost immediately.

‘Glass,’ said a syrup-voiced critic. ‘Too much art – not enough music? We look at why this controversial new band seems to want so much more than simply to be rich and famous. Here to discuss the phenomenon are John Richards of Mambo magazine, Celia Simpson from Vargus and’

Gabriel pushed a button. Another station.

‘Glass,’ this time a less patronising voice. ‘Their special shows on the Grid sell out in milliseconds. The interconnection events promised by Leila Irani of the band, have been made possible through her recent appointment as creative director at BBZee-Grid, the tie between her father’s production studio and the global networks. She has the power to book whatever Metabandwidth time she needs, and dedicates a good bit of it to the continuing Method experiments that form part of Glass’s latest project. There are complaints from other artists that they don’t enjoy these kind of expensive privileges.’

Gabriel flicked off the radio. His passenger pulled up her knees, leaned her head against the window, and went to sleep.

How useful it would have been for Gabriel, when he had begun to lose sight of reality in the burgeoning delights, excesses and terrifying pressures of seventies’ stadium rock, to have been able to speak to me, as I had once gone to my own mentor – the redoubtable Silverman. But Gabriel would not have found me, not then. I was already gone. At some time in the mid-eighties a science fiction writer had swept up every strand of cybernetic theory, as it had been applied to art by Silverman, and turned it into a cult novel. Thus, what I had been taught would one day become real, had been turned into some American book publisher’s popcorn. Words like ‘Matrix’ and ‘Cyborg’ became short-lived buzzwords for a fantastical and shallow notion of inter-planar role-play. Life as a video game.

‘It’s irrelevant,’ snapped Silverman, pouring me a whiskey. ‘You have no right to sulk. You deserted your field. You went off in pursuit of glory with an electric guitar. Science Fiction writers will always appropriate the inevitable to support the improbable.’

‘But this book subverts our view of the future, it’s dangerous.’

‘You have become dangerous Ray. You want to hold onto the ideas we passed to you fifteen years ago, and as we speak – everything is changing.’

‘But Henry, surely it must be clear to you that as an artist what I fear most is not that I lose my art but that it has no audience.’

‘There has never really been an audience, not in the sense you mean. Let’s look at this: you say that your nightmare is that the spiritual progress of the individuals in your audience could be accelerated, distorted, perverted – simply by virtue of entertainment (what quite a number of idiots alive believe they have a right to call art) becoming more lifelike? Is that it? If my entertainment becomes too lifelike I will start to lose the ability to differentiate between my life – my given destiny – and the changes that occur in my makeup when I go off onto what your cursed Sci-Fi writers call their ‘Matrix’? I was changed by the paintings of Jackson Pollock; by photographs by Paul Strand; jazz by Charlie Parker – what’s the difference?’

‘We need to be guided’

‘If guides are needed, won’t they appear? I don’t believe in homogenous consciousness, I am a Jew but I have no faith. For me there is no God, but there are brilliant teachers and messengers who – any good biblical scholar can tell you – knew how life worked, how people could be directed towards better action.’

‘I believe the message is truthful but have no faith in the medium. Every story under the sun can be told, every piece of music can be heard, every variation can be explored. There can be no accepted notion of saturation.’

‘Ray, this is not your fucking destiny. I am content to work with the most childishly inept computer plotting devices, where an entire barn filled with triodes delivers me a random sketch a two-year old could better. I am patient. I have seen the future. I revealed that future

to you. What is it about you Ray that makes you so desperate to jump into the waiting place? Why can't you live here, in the present, work with the tools that are available, accept the limitations of the age? What is it about you that makes you want death more than life?

'I don't want to die.'

'But don't you see, if you are unwilling to live in the moment – this moment – you consign yourself to the infinite and uncertain wasteland of industrial and technological revolution.'

'You sound like you have faith; you sound like a Buddhist. All this guff about the present.'

'Ray, you've chosen pop music

'I'm a rock star.'

'Rock. Pop. Whatever. You've chosen. Nothing could be more concerned with, more dependent on the acceptance of, the present moment.'

Silverman had sat back in his chair. He was quite magnificent. I poured another whiskey for myself. Almost half the age of my supercilious tutor, I felt like a derelict indeed. Fury rose in me. What was the point of vision, what was the value of ideas, if one could not act on them? And wasn't what I foresaw important? If spiritual influences began to fall into the hands of a mere broadcaster, a frustrated journalist, or a pornographer, wouldn't there be established the most evil new church since the Inquisition?

Soon after the last of these interviews, I had been forced to desert the 'present' once and for all. In so doing, in that most ironic twist of life, guided no doubt – as Silverman had sarcastically suggested – by vigilant and heedful angels, I found the stillness here of the first bend in time. In the ether, confronted with separation from my beloved – whom I had not known I had truly, sincerely wanted – I am finally content, at last, to wait.

Gabriel stopped the car outside Angie's apartment building in Kensington. He opened the car door for her, and kissed her goodbye. She ran into the block without looking back. Her flatmate would listen

again to the beautiful young woman's anxieties, and soothe them. And she was right to do so. For though it was true that the pretty girl's chest was deeply cleaved by a large disfiguring scar from open-heart surgery that had saved her life as a baby, it was also true that while fucking her Gabriel had not noticed it. Indeed, as he was driving to the studios that night, he found himself wondering why it was that sex with this particular girl, this rather likeable, accessible, ordinary faery-blond doll, was without question the most perfect he had ever experienced. He also wondered why, if that was true, he would not call her again. What neither of them could know was that in nine month's time she was going to bear Gabriel's only child.